

Hwæt^{/w^hat/}

An Improv Storytelling
Tabletop Role-Playing
Creative Writing
(without Writing)
Cooperative
1+ Player
Game

Request For Comment

DOUBLE † DAGGER

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Request For Comment.

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How to Hwæt

A short story sketches a world, clothes a character, and hints at something bigger just beyond. Using a prompt to seed their imagination, the storyteller creates the story as they speak. The prompt helps with structure, but the detail is all their own.

Here's one to try, for 3-5 minutes:

THE RUSH

In which a character is in a desperate hurry through the place they live, past people who know them, then away by the fastest means possible. At the last moment they see their goal, but as they begin to dare to hope, the event they feared occurs.

Too much of an action movie? How about this:

FINDING

In which a character is trying to find something. They look in different places, at first reasonable, then increasingly strange. They find things, but not what they're looking for. After thinking they have no more places to search, they try one more, somewhere surely it can't be. Something unexpected is there.

Storytelling is performance. Spend a couple of minutes thinking about what you will say, but don't try to find the most literary words or craft the most faultless language. Storytellers sell the *feel* with their voice, with their gestures, with their style.

Prompts get your story started, but they are deliberately flexible. In the story FINDING, what is the character looking for? That's your

choice. Are you going to tell the listeners at all? Where will they look and what will they find, and what does that tell us about that character? Is the unexpected thing what they were looking for, or something entirely different?

Prompts can also be gently subverted. A fun challenge is to interpret the prompt in unexpected ways. In *THE RUSH*, is the character rushing through a physical place? Or is this mental: rushing through their normal daily activities to get to something more important? The “fastest means possible” might be a bus or a pair of shoes, but might be a powerful VR headset or casting an arcane spell. They might “dare to hope” to escape from an enemy or from their own emotional triggers.

Here’s one to try in very different ways:

IN A NATION

In which we begin with an overview of the whole nation and what it’s known for. We zoom in to a region, a district, a location. Nothing is quite as simple as its reputation. Finally we arrive. One place and one character are different to anything this nation is known for.

Will you describe the “zoom” as if a movie, or an archaeologist excavating layers; a tourist arriving, or something else? Is the “nation” a nation, e.g. could it be a religion (the district a sect, the location a temple, the place a single shrine), or a business, or a school?

Prompts usually come with a whole bunch of questions to encourage the storyteller to explore ideas.

A **story** can be a little one-off curiosity. Or a group of **players** can tell unrelated stories. Those are valid ways to play. But a bigger, juicier game can be made by tying them all together into a **storyline**.

Each player in the group takes the role of the **storyteller**, one after another. They tell a short story (3–5 minutes is normal for a prompt, but there are group stories,

<p>Bold words in this section are explained more later with some of their own rules. They are a kind of jargon for the game, but they don’t have particularly weird meanings.</p>

and you may want more time – let’s say a few minutes, then). The stories feed off each other, the plot, the characters, the whole fictional world complicates and thickens: a storyline is formed.

The aim is to collaborate in creating the most amazing storyline, and there are ways of structuring the game for that. But as much as the storyline is the aim, each story is its own piece of art, crafted by one storyteller.

Some stories are **events** told entirely by one person (like the prompts above). In others, the storyteller invites one or more others to join them in a character-based **conversation**. The prompt encourages all participants to role-play, but the storyteller delivers a twist.

A SECRET

A Conversation

In which most characters are trying to have a conversation about something that happened recently. They share rumours, opinions, and inconsistent accounts. But the storyteller’s character seems reluctant, trying different tactics to change the topic or diminish its importance. Suspicion is raised, and they eventually have to confess. They have a deep connection to the event, deeper than anyone expected.

Like the examples above, all stories begin with a **prompt**. And all story prompts, whether events or conversations, have a **problem** and a **twist**. In A SECRET the problem is the tension between one character not wanting to know, and the others wanting to share their knowledge. The twist is discovering why. Problems and twists are almost universal pieces of story writing advice, called by many names: the problem could be the question or the goal, the twist could be a hook, the summit, or a pivot.

For your group to create a storyline, there is a collection of story suggestions for different parts of the whole. Early prompts establish the setting and characters, those in the middle develop the characters and escalate a long-term problem, tension builds towards the ending in a final climax story.

General prompts can be used for almost any genre, any era, any plot. A prompt in which “the character betrays their family for a higher goal” can almost always work. This book has general prompts, but you may also have prompts for specific settings.

Prompts that power a storyline often suggest tight and high intensity scenes. Your group may want a different pace. Some love spending time in the setting they’ve created, or role-playing the regular lives of the characters they love. Some prefer world-building with lots of little overlapping stories. Gentle prompts allow these meanders; prompts in a **bundle** rather than a storyline. Each still has a twist, but it can be deliberately softer.

A NEW ARRIVAL

A Gentle Event

In which a character opens the door to find something unexpected outside. The character is surprised and a little exasperated, but they bring it in, check it, and find a place to store it. As they store it, we find that this is not the first they have received.

Players choose a collection of prompts as they agree on the game. Mix and match genres if you have them (superheroes, romance and steampunk anyone?) You can even create your own, whatever supports the story you’re interested in. While playing, a few choices are offered at the start of each storyteller’s turn. They choose one.

Then the storyteller reads the “**in which...**” from the prompt, and any associated **rules**. A set of additional **questions** are given, but it’s up to them if they want to read some or all out loud. If the storyteller wants even more, they can let players ask their own. They are all questions because it’s the storyteller’s choice.

Finally they can take a minute or two to plan their story (the **prep** in Hwæt jargon).

A quick snack or sip, and the story begins...

Rules (*or really,* Gentle Suggestions)

The last chapter introduced to the game, but also the *feel* that I am aiming for. This chapter explores more of the ecosystem of what makes a game, and rules about putting a game together. Rules are useful for a group of players, but only useful if they are, well, useful.

In collaborative storytelling it is easy for a group of well-meaning players to push each other off the path of peak enjoyment, so “rules” are gentle suggestions to keep things on track. Feel free to find your sweet spot, agree what you’re going to do. And go for it.

Stories

PICK A PROMPT

The first step in telling the story is to choose which prompt to use. This choice should belong to the storyteller, but some influence of everyone else is needed for a longer game.

Everyone has a veto right if there is a prompt they really don’t want to see. The risk is that everything is vetoed until the storyteller gets no choice at all. So vetoes should be rare. For many groups they are almost never needed, because the storyteller can be trusted to massage a prompt in the right direction.

In this “request for comment” version of this game, there is one general series of prompts for a storyline, and a bundle of prompts that can be used anywhere or in a less structured game. Though their genre may seem to nod in one direction, they

Tell A Story

- Pick a Prompt
- In Which...
- Read the Rules
- Ask Questions
- Prep
- Start the Clock
- Perform
- Appreciate

6 – RULES

are deliberately ambiguous, or can be craftily reinterpreted to be almost anything. A prompt that seems to suggest a final battle could be swords, courtroom shenanigans, school expulsion, or a stand-off emotional argument.

I hope that a whole smorgasbord of flavoured genre treats could be created. At the very least, it's possible for your group to create its own prompts for its own story taste. Page 111 has a chapter with advice on making them.

If there are too many prompts, it would take too long to choose one. Feel free to use dice or a digital random number generator to pick, say, three options.

IN WHICH...

The storyteller reads the “in which” paragraph of the prompt.

A title has been chosen to label the prompt, but the storyteller is welcome to rename it or ignore it. If you want to remember your storyline, your group may want to title each story, perhaps with each storyteller beginning their performance with a title. The title of the prompt is largely irrelevant to that.

Some groups may not want to read out the “in which” paragraph for events (stories performed by just the storyteller). In that case, the storyteller has their prep and begins the story itself. That way, the rhythm of play is almost exclusively performance, without peeking behind the curtain at how the mechanics work. The downside is that it makes it impossible to share a questioning phase, which can be a lot of helpful fun: inspiring the storyteller, and teasing the appetite of the listeners.

If a storyteller invites other players to join them in a conversation, they will need to share the “in which” paragraph.

Making a moment out of reading this paragraph can build the excitement. Other players now know what to expect, though the storyteller will hopefully surprise them in exactly how they follow the prompt.

RULES

Some prompts have additional rules. Like all the rules in this section, they can be considered somewhat flexible. But any flexibility is for the group, not an individual: share the rule and decide as a group. Rules are there when a prompt has a solution that would be unhelpful to the overall story.

For example, a prompt introducing a supreme-leader character might be an interesting dimension, but it's fatal if that character becomes just another character, with the ability to make social limitations irrelevant. That prompt will have a rule about how to limit their power, or when they are allowed to be used.

Though a rule might limit how the storyteller crafts the story, it is more common that they apply to everyone for the rest of the game. Read out rules to everyone.

QUESTIONS

Each prompt has a set of additional questions. They are mostly for the benefit of the storyteller, but the storyteller can read them out and see how people react. Unless your group has a particular need to make it compulsory, that should be at their discretion. Some players don't feel the need to read the questions at all, because they have an instinctive idea where the story will go.

On the other hand, some storytellers can find it useful to get more ideas and suggestions. It is up to them to ask everyone for questions before they prep for the story. If you are giving a new question, try to think of good alternatives. "Will you do this cool thing or that cool thing, or something else even cooler?"

I structured these as questions, because questions help everyone remember that the storyteller is in charge. But even as questions, it is easy to phrase it in a very one-sided way. Avoid "will you have an awesome battle on the side of the river, or will you have a boring trapeze back to the castle?"

PREP

Before beginning the story, the storyteller can take a little time to think about what they are going to say.

The recommended time is 1–2 minutes: shorter than the duration of the story itself. Again there is a sweet spot, and this time it can depend heavily on the person telling the story. Not enough prep and the storyteller has no idea what to say. But I think the biggest risk is for someone to plan their story in too much detail. It’s understandable to want to avoid making a big mistake as you perform. Or the fear that many people have, that they will run out of words. But “writing the story in your head” before speaking I think misses the point of improvisation. So you can have a hard-ish limit for the maximum prep time in your group, just be kind – a person wracked in self-doubt might be nowhere, so insisting they start is cruel. It might be worth going back into the questions phase to help them get started.

I suggest that there are two important things to prep. What is the problem, and what is the twist? As we’ll see below, they are the main arteries of the story. If there is a third, it’s to think of a juicy beginning. It’s not a part of most prompts, but it can nicely bracket the story: an enticing beginning and the twist at the end. Make those two or three decisions at an overview level. And begin.

For those who will listen, the prep can build the mood. A silent journey between your game group and the world of your story. Liminal, if you want to be a little highfalutin!

TIME

A story by one person is intended to be 3–5 minutes long. Conversations are role-playing scenes, and can feel better when they are a little longer, 7-10 minutes for three players.

Prompts were created with those timescales in mind, but time isn’t fixed in these rules, because there is a sweet spot for your group. Too short and there isn’t enough *feeling* in a story. Too long and it can become meandering, or filled with “I am out of ideas” ums and ahs. Try starting with five minutes.

To keep everybody’s contributions fair, and to keep the game moving, use a fixed time limit and an hourglass, an egg timer or

an app. There's a simple one I've put together on my Hwæt website (hwaet.oojits.com) with 3-5 and 7-10 minute countdowns, though many more can be configured.

An established group of players who trust each other can be flexible, but I recommend you start by having fixed times.

PERFORMANCE

The whole of this game, this book, these prompts, and all these rules, are a thin crust around what I think is the really tasty inside: improv storytelling.

Most people think it will be much more difficult than it is. Give it a couple of goes.

I don't think it is hard, but it seems like a deep activity. Some people do great or even fantastic jobs, and it is not always obvious exactly why! Part of that is practice, I am sure. When told by a fan how "naturally talented" a virtuoso violinist was, he agreed, and said it was amazing how much more "naturally talented" he became the more he practised.

But beyond practice, here are my guesses.

Storytelling is performance. And performance is interactive. The reactions of those who are listening encourage the teller to create stories they want to hear in a way they want to hear it. The storyteller can *feel* how the tale is being received, burnish the good bits, and keep pushing appreciation buttons.

Listeners also respond when they solve a little hidden puzzle. Symbols work nicely that way (more about symbols and themes below). If you have been developing some symbols throughout a multiplayer game, dropping one into a story often gets a quick group smile.

Another good response is when a story hints at something that will occur in someone else's story, sometime later. That should be a hint rather than a demand, but listeners enjoy feeling the door open into a bigger world, a more interesting world.

There are lots of little things that seem to work. But my biggest advice is not to get caught up on them. If you try to do it all, you'll trip over your storytelling shoelaces. Even with none of these tricks, a story with a problem and a twist is all you need; the more you enjoy the telling, the more the listeners enjoy listening.

APPRECIATE

A standing ovation at the end of every story might be a little OTT, particularly if you're playing the game in the corner of a pub! But nods, yeahs, fingertip drumming on the table, or sign language hand-cheers are welcome. Show your appreciation.

Particularly in a group with some accomplished players and some who are nervously starting out, positive verbal feedback can be helpful. Just be careful to make it both genuine and positive. Damning with faint praise is sadly too easy: "I could see you tried really hard to make that good." – no thank you.

And praise is not constructive suggestions. "You could try to make the character more central to the event" might be helpful to some, but an insult to others.

Smiles, yays, oohs, ahs, and a fingertip drum-roll is a great way to appreciate the performance.

Story Types

Prompts are labelled with the story type. There are two: events and conversations.

If the storyteller performs the entire story that is an event. If multiple players role-play different characters it is a conversation. But in a conversation, a storyteller is still in charge: they direct the conversation, play a particularly significant character, or add events and descriptions to the mix.

Though these are usually separate, there is a hazy boundary between them. Some prompts mix the two.

EVENT

An event is a story told by a single player. It is so much the core of improv storytelling that it is possible to have games entirely made up of events. It is more difficult to imagine a game played purely as conversations.

The convention is to perform an event as if it were a narrated story. Third person, past tense: "She set up her stall and tried to ignore

Tense and Person

Tense and person are common ways of understanding creative writing. They are not a jargon of this game.

Tense represents when the story happens. The slightly more common tense is past tense “they did this.” Present tense is also common in novels or short stories, “they do this.” Writers and storytellers feel that it gives the story more immediacy. Using the future tense, “they will do this,” is more difficult. But I could imagine trying it in a time-travelling storyline.

Person represents who is the main character in the story. If the writer is the character, they will use “I did this.” That is first person. Acting is almost all first person, though occasionally a play or movie might have a narrator. More common in written fiction is a third person story with no prominent “I”: “they did this.” The second person is much rarer: “you did this.” It is very rare in writing, but used here and there in plays when characters talk to the audience.

These categories are fluid because it’s possible to swap between them or blend them together. Often stories get labelled based on which is most notable. Second person or future tense are rare enough that they are called out first. But little dips into first person in a third person narrative is not uncommon.

him...” Often events have a lot of description, but they can have dialogue within. These are usually marked in the same way as a written book with labels (“tags” in the creative writing lingo) such as “he said”, “she shouted”, “they shook their head”.

But as with all conventions, this can be torpedoed. An event could be performed entirely as a first-person soliloquy: “The day it all happened I was late. Really damn late...” Over doing that when others are narrating, I think, sounds a little try-hard. But I can imagine a group making that compulsory, because they want to perform every story in character. Each group might be different. Entirely second-person future-tense? Your call.

CONVERSATION

The storyteller invites one or more other players to perform a conversation.

Prompts will still give structure, so conversations aren't intended to last forever. Like events, 5 minutes is achievable, but even 15 or more might feel more meaty to you – particularly if the group likes to drop in and out of characters to laugh, comment or inspire each other. 7-10 minutes is my default.

When the storyteller invites people into the conversation, they are limited to specific characters. Usually one character per person. If more voices are needed, the storyteller will add them. If you are used to role-playing games, the storyteller is effectively the Games Master for this time, with control over every “NPC”. The storyteller is also the player responsible for adding any description.

For example, in the middle of a discussion the storyteller could say something like “As the volume of the disagreement rose, a crisp wrap at the door sent everyone into terrified silence.” The players in the conversation then respond, in this example by switching to panicked whispers. Outside this game, improv acting can do this with a director or a narrator. It is a similar dynamic and a similarly exciting mood shift.

The storyteller is responsible for introducing the twist, unless they explicitly ask someone to instigate it. Even then, they can nod or gesture when it should happen.

Everyone should enjoy taking part in a conversation, but remember it is the storyteller's story.

PLOT & TEXTURE

A story can develop the plot or add texture to the fictional world. Either or both.

To develop the plot, a story inverts some kind of long-term or previously established balance. This could be the status of a character (a story where a seemingly righteous character sins, for example), or what some information implies (a character might discover that a thief was motivated by finding bread for their children), or how the world changes (like an earthquake turning the fancy part of the city into a

disaster zone). This doesn't have to be large-scale, like destroying part of a city: if that appeared in every story, it would get old very quickly. It can be as subtle as discovering a key hidden in the back of a drawer, where it's not clear whether that will become a major, minor or never-talked-about-again plot event.

Adding texture gives more detail to a place, a character, or a group of characters. Anything in your story can be one-dimensional if its characteristics are exactly what you expect. A one-dimensional character is established from a sentence or two, and even their deepest psychological traits are unsurprising. You meet a thug, and they wake up a thug, go to sleep a thug, brush their teeth like a thug, and watch thug TV. A one-dimensional supermarket sells generic mass-market brands, makes generic mass market profits, and is staffed with generic mass-market employees. Texture adds dimensions, it adds crinkles and shading, it adds unexpected detail.

It can be tempting to treat every prompt as if the plot must change at the twist of the story. A twist can be all about texture. For example: a story might make you feel the dread of a character expecting a bad phone call, but instead the twist is an unexpected message from their close friend, who has themselves received even worse news. That “worried person to counsellor” twist might not be a change in the plot (unless the close friend is a major character or the “even worse news” is a bigger part of the storyline). As texture, it tells you about the character's personality.

Stories can be a blend of both plot and texture. Thinking in terms of plot and texture may be helpful in your prep. In particular it can be useful to remember to add texture. But I would say, don't let it limit you.

HINTS & FORESHADOWING

Particularly early in a storyline, stories can offer a big range of options to later storytellers. An event can mention multiple characters, multiple places, or multiple threats just out of sight. Early stories can imply possible themes or symbols. A casual comment can receive much more significance later, as if foreshadowing the plot.

It may sound like too much work: how can you possibly anticipate everything that will be done with your story? The solution is not

to micromanage. People are amazingly creative with re-interpreting (perhaps even miss-interpreting) things they want to use or creatively abuse. Provide some hints, be gracious in the way they are used, and equally gracious if they are never used.

This is a big part of the early game, like sprinkling bait on the lake and seeing which get nibbled. But, as always, it's possible to go overboard doing this. An event just packed with deliberate hints at the future will probably not be exciting. And good players will often avoid hackneyed suggestions, finding ways to connect to accidental hints. So adding enough possibilities to your event is good, but making your performance a great story is still every storyteller's primary goal.

THE PROBLEM & THE TWIST

Problems and twists are part of the short stories in this game. But they are almost universal suggestions in creative writing. They work for content of any size: an epic multi-book novel needs to establish a problem from the outset, even if they dial it back a little and introduce many other problems that compete for your concern. The first scene in the first *Game of Thrones* book are the violent unknown forces north of the ice wall. The problem is established.

And, like problems, twists work at all scales. They are powerful as ways to end a long story. At the climax of the third *Lord of the Rings* book, a twist has Gollum get the One Ring, his antagonistic goal from the beginning. Then he falls to his death in the fires of Mount Doom. So epic problems and twists, yes, but they are also at the other extreme, even the very short traditional Japanese haiku have a twist, a *kireji*, a “cutting word.”

For maximum impact in a story, focus on making an interesting and surprising twist. But like all these suggestions, it's easy to go too far. A very surprising twist can be clumsy. There is a storytelling cliché, the *deus ex machina*, where the story looks like it is inevitably going one way, and then the twist is the arrival of a superpower, a deity, a completely unexpected overpowered technology, something that could've solved the entire problem from the very outset if the author had bothered to tell us. The opposite of a good twist.

And similarly, if you have a group playing a game, there can be a lot of variety with different problems and interesting twists, but it can

go too far: when every story reinvents the storyline, or every twist is a random 90° turn. Sadly I can't think of any foolproof rule. I think it is probably easier to make boring stories. So more problems, more twists, more variety is better: I'd want to err on the side of texture. It is one of those cases when you know it when you've done it right.

Tying Stories Together

RED LINES

A game starts with the players setting their red lines: topics, character types, genres, plot points, whatever cannot be part of the story. Other players can ask them questions to clarify the red line, but red lines aren't a discussion, and they can't be pushed against.

The space of possible stories is so broad that red lines don't restrict your options.

WHAT GAME DO YOU WANT?

Discuss what kind of story you are interested in. Will it be a mystery, fantasy, steampunk, disaster, interpersonal drama, "let's just go weird" slipstream, or several genres combined? Choose one or more sub-genres (hard science fiction is not space opera, romance can be safe for work), even themes or plot ideas. Then choose prompts.

Find a consensus if you are fixing or modifying any other rule: like the duration of a story, if everyone is using first person present tense, how long you're going to play for, there are so many options. Then the game can begin with the first storyteller telling the first story.

UNCONNECTED STORIES

Although most of this section looks at how to connect stories together, that isn't essential. If your group wants to enjoy a session with a complete mixed bag of stories, there is no need to connect them.

And there is fertile ground between unrelated stories and a single storyline. A mixed session can be made tighter if there are things being reused (like places, characters, or factions), but even those can

be reimagined, only gently related. Common themes or particularly symbols work very well (there is some introduction to that, below). It could be a great session that ranges from science fiction, to hard-boiled murder mystery, to Georgian-era romance, all with stories using thunderstorms or missing pets in interesting ways, from casual mini-mentions to a couple of significant plot points.

Listeners may respond to those obscure connections. The novel *Cloud Atlas* was a bestseller that made a big play of that: sweeping through time with symbols (birth marks, ancient Egypt, hills, snakes) and similar characters (though perhaps a bit obvious when using the same actor in the film).

PLOT

Stories can be tied together by choosing prompts from a pack of storylines. As we'll see in the section below, storylines use an overall structure to make sure a story has the right feel at the right time. Mostly.

Weaving stories together takes effort by the group. There is no way to make that automatic. And, as for everything else, there is a sweet spot. Too little weaving together makes the storyline random. But too much can make the storyline flat, lacking texture: too few characters, too few locations, too few problems the characters are facing, too few strategies they are trying to use.

A good approach is to start broad then narrow down to a more focused plot. This is gradual and democratic. Plot points that keep appearing in the performance of different storytellers, they can appear even more. Something that was mentioned only once can be irrelevant, or it can be brought back once late in the story as a way of tying things together. But if you begin with lots of variety, there's no way to tie up every loose end. That may be a bigger problem if you were writing a novel, but I'd let it happen in a *Hwæt* game.

CHARACTERS, PLACES, PROBLEMS, AND FACTIONS

The same thing mentioned multiple times ties a storyline together. It is even more powerful if it changes as the plot develops, if it is used in different ways, or if we hear more detail, more complexity, more texture.

Characters are the most obvious. They can be divided into three categories: major characters on which the storyline hangs, minor characters who support side plots and appear more than once, and extras, usually mentioned in one story but never again. The major characters are the main focus of the story. But these categories are fluid. Repeating any character can make the storyline feel more integrated. Main characters living on one block, for example, might often pass by the “apocalypse preacher” on the corner. An extra. Their repeated appearance might be a running joke, particularly if different storytellers describe different things on their board each time. Or they could end up being an ironic foretelling. But they are still an extra character, if you don’t want to develop their backstory, their life, their personal complexities.

Places are a collection of stage sets. Like a theatre company, producing an interesting and vivid set is easier to justify if it is reused. Too few locations can be bland. But as for so many things in art, if you want simplicity, make it obviously deliberate: an entire storyline set in one room, for example. As for other connections, try to reuse locations in different ways. A market that is full of early morning shoppers can be revisited in the middle of the night, a statue can be revisited after being destroyed in the uprising.

The available prompts try to give lots of choices for the problem and the twist. Your storyline should use similar problems. The storyline structure begins with variety and condenses down to one major problem. Variety is powerful at the beginning, but towards the end, a story about a nefarious antagonist probably shouldn’t mutate into a natural disaster plot. A problem that combines two ideas is rich (a nefarious antagonist that is only a problem because of the natural disaster, for example) as long as the plot can be unified.

Twists, on the other hand, don’t work so well when repeated. A unique twist for each story keeps it exciting, though it is worth avoiding too many zany zigzag twists.

Characters align with other characters. These groups can have many structures: political parties, ethnic tribes, religious sects, friendships, social clubs, companies, sport teams, and so on. I’m calling them factions here, though I imagine most would object to being called “a faction”! They are useful because they unify characters in a storyline. Mention factions in early stories and other storytellers can

choose which they want to reference. After you have established a faction, linking a new character instantly and easily gives them context. These connections shouldn't be one-dimensional: there are factions within factions. Within factions. Groups may appear to be united when facing off against something, but internally they rarely are. Factions add unity to a storyline, but also texture.

'TAGONISTS

It is very common for a storyline to reach its climax in an “us” versus “them” conflict. Many ways of structuring the story have one faction that is clearly the “goodies” and another that is clearly the “baddies.” I like storylines where it's not so clear, but sometimes ambiguity can feel more clumsy. Some prompts reflect this by talking about 'tagonists: the protagonists and the antagonists, without being clear which is which. If you use these prompts you don't have to define those groups. Within the storyline, you don't have to define them either.

THEMES AND SYMBOLS

Themes are similarities in the plot that are not so obvious. When a character is in conflict with their parents, it becomes a theme when other characters and parents are in other kinds of conflict. The theme of the storyline is then: parenthood, childhood, and the conflict of generations. If different characters are motivated by their long-term reputation, legacy might become a theme.

Themes are a more advanced trick, but a good team will be able to use them, pumping them full of interesting and complicated meaning. A single storyteller can introduce a possible theme, but it is only when they are used at several points by different people, and preferably in slightly different ways, that they become significant.

Symbols are similar, but often much smaller scale. There are very common symbols used in vast swathes of literature, like the weather, or day versus night. Flowers, music, money, clothes, all are often used. Some are more specific: in the movie *Titanic*, emotional highs happen at the front barrier of the ship, emotional lows at the back. The options of what becomes a symbol (instead of just being a plain description) is endless.

It is not entirely clear where the dividing line between a “theme” and a “symbol” lies. In some ways, I use the words depending on how important it is to the plot, or the *meaning* of the story: romantic love might be a theme in a storyline about a group of twenty-somethings adulting, but the weirdly different romances of superheroes might be symbols used to contrast their personalities. Symbols, themes, and what’s between, all rely on teamwork: the same kind of intentional crafty reuse, always impressive but never essential.

CHARACTER OWNERSHIP

There are no rules in this game that force a character to be “owned” by a particular player. They could be used by any storyteller at any time. But the deepest foundation of tabletop role-playing is that each player has one character. In the fictional world, they *are* that character¹. All other characters in the story are controlled by a Games Master. This is blurred a little in collaborative role-playing games or troupe-style games, but many groups want this ownership. I’ve always been a fan of collaborative role-playing, but I recognise that isn’t role-playing for many people.

So a group may choose to own major characters: usually the character they introduced in the settings phase of the storyline. Minor characters should usually be shared, because having too many owned-characters becomes a logistical sink. Extras almost always appear for just one story, so there is no difference. Sometimes a character that was mentioned as an extra can be adopted as a major character in a different story.

Conversation stories are easy to run this way, the storyteller invites the owners of the characters they want to include, and any minor characters can be taken by whoever else. Events are more difficult. An event can concentrate on the storyteller’s character, but it is hard to avoid mentioning other major characters, or giving them actions in the event. One approach is to always use first person stories: every story is told by one character, giving their opinion, or understanding, or memory of the event. It limits the kind of stories you can tell, but keeps ownership. If you are strict, this can lead to contradictions or

¹That is Avatarism if you want to get academic.

disagreements, which have their own rules for resolution. As with so many of these sections, finding a sweet spot depends on the personality of your group.

CONTRADICTIONS / DISAGREEMENTS

It isn't uncommon for a story to contradict something that was told previously. The most significant contradiction is one storyteller saying how one group won and everyone else lost, while others saying exactly the opposite. If the contradiction was intentional, if the players are intentionally thwarting each other, that is a bigger problem than we can solve. Group therapy perhaps? But assuming everyone is trying to participate in the storyline, contradictions can be playful or accidental, even significant contradictions. There can be different understandings, different remembering, not quite explicit expectations.

There are four ways to resolve these, in priority order.

1. **There are no contradictions.** If you need a resolution, tell a story that makes both correct. It is deceptively simple and enjoyable. A character is dead and alive? People can misdiagnose death, “nearly dead” is not permanent. No problem. A building is in ruins and inhabited? A sliver can still be standing, the basement can be reached. Easy. Explaining why there is no contradiction is one of my favourite storytelling games.
2. **Embrace mystery.** Another approach is not to resolve the contradiction. Particularly for a minor accidental disagreement, it doesn't need to be explained. I don't think this is as fun as option 1, but it is equally as useful.
3. **Unreliable narration.** If neither approach above can work, then continue as if one account wasn't quite true. It is easy to upset the storyteller, but not a problem if they freely give their permission. They could say something like “oops my mistake, call it unreliable narration!” If the storyteller made the mistake in first person (a first person event, or their character in a conversation) they can make this option even more juicy: “I wouldn't believe a thing *that* character says!” Unreliable narrations usually don't need their own story.

There Are No Contradictions

Human beings have one superpower. We can create alternative realities to merge together any disparate set of facts, even seeming contradictions. (My hat-tip to conspiracy theorists and creative writers.) This is dramatic irony.

We begin with things we *want* to be true, no matter how incompatible they are. With a bit of narrative flexibility, with a bit of chutzpah, we can create a route between them.

Great storytellers lean into this, creating “contradictions” in their own story, or to seed the storyline for others. Resolving contradictions gives more substance, and more interesting backstory.

- His name is Bill / His name is Bob. → After Bob Sr abandoned the family, Bob Jr was the legal name he hated, so Bill became his every-day nickname.
- She died / She is still alive. → After an accident, first responders were sure she was dead. No breathing, no pulse they could find. She spontaneously resuscitated fifteen minutes later.
- He had three brothers / He only had two sisters. → He longed for a brother. His two sisters married friendly men who became as close to as brothers. One of them amicably divorced, she married again. Three brothers.

4. **Excision: the nuclear option.** The last option, almost always the worst, is to remove that plot point from the “facts” of the story. I’ve added it because it can seem like the most obvious response, but I’ve never needed it, and I can’t imagine a situation where one of the others wouldn’t work. It is the nuclear option. I suppose it might be worth giving the storyteller another turn. Or getting them extra snacks or a drink?

There is one rule I think is ironclad: no storyteller should be interrupted as they tell their story. It may be tempting to point out a mistake, but it is more likely to break the flow. If you are using appreci-

ation time, appreciate the story that was told. No damning with faint praise! Value the story as a story, and weave resolution into the storyline. “There Are No Contradictions” is so powerful, and often so much fun, that seeming contradiction deserves genuine appreciation.

Storylines

To structure storylines, and to allow different genres to work together, there is a “Hwæt way”. This bends storylines towards a movie-style structure, with a definite buildup, and a definite ending. That may not be the fiction that some groups want to create. As we’ll see below, there are also prompts in a bundle with an open ended and rather gentler style. They

3 (+5) Act Storyline			
<i>e.g. players:</i>	2	3	4
1 × Prologue	1	1	1
any × Setting	3	4	5
1 × Clinch	1	1	1
any × Ratchet	3	3	4
1 × Crunch	1	1	1
any × Unravelling	3	4	4
1 × Ending	1	1	1
1 × Epilogue	1	1	1
<i>total:</i>	14	16	18

can be used to make a storyline longer, or as its own long form game.

Storyline prompts are organised into eight parts. To set the mood, a **prologue** begins the game with a hint of what might be. Then **setting** stories establish the characters, locations, and factions. The **clinch** is a single event that makes everyone notice. The plot changes into a storyline about how the characters respond. Stories in this period **ratchet** the tension, but some characters may still try to ignore the problem. Then there is a single **crunch** story, which drives the storyline into its final phase. The **unravelling** sees the characters try to achieve their ultimate goals, culminating in the **ending** story. And at the end an **epilogue** allows the tension to wind down.

This is similar to the “three acts” renowned in screenwriting advice, but tweaked a little for this game. The setting, ratchet, and unravelling are sets of stories taking the role of the three acts. And there are five other sections that tie them together, each as a one off. 3 (+5) Acts.

One-off sections may not be one-off exactly; as always, your group can bend the rules if they want a different effect. For example, you may decide that you want more than one prologue to build the backstory, or you have several threads to resolve in a multi-phase ending.

PROLOGUE

The prologue establishes the tone and the scope, it introduces one or more themes, and hints at the story, without establishing any major character or plot. The prologue is a teaser for what will come.

SETTING

Setting stories spin the threads from which the rest are woven. We are introduced to important places, factions, and major characters. Major characters are the centre of storylines, so most setting prompts introduce one. There can be some that focus only on a place, a faction, or something else, but those things can also be established when a character is central.

CLINCH

Storylines are driven by two things: a problem and the people who face it. Though the problem has been loosely hinted at so far, the clinch is the moment it is made more solid, and in the story its squeeze begins. It is the point where the previous “normal” is fractured, where a problem begins to need a solution.

RATCHET

The ratchet is the second block of the story, when the problem continues to worsen. Characters might begin by ignoring it, but by the end of this block it is inescapable, they have to have a strategy. If not to solve the problem, at least they try to cope.

CRUNCH

The crunch is the second one-off story. It confronts the characters with the true depth of the problem. It shows them that the previous strategy is futile, and forces them to wholeheartedly commit to a solution. This story is now their overwhelming story.

If you are using a 'tagonist structure, then this is when most characters align into opposing groups. If it is not a major feature of your story, you don't have to use the names "protagonist" or "antagonist". But by the unravelling, below, characters will find their goal in the story.

UNRAVELLING

The final block of the story is the unravelling, when characters align to solve the inescapable problem. They largely take constructive actions, but the situation may get continually darker, their strategies may prove less effective, or there may be even worse consequences of their actions.

ENDING

The ending is the last scene in the main plot of the story, when the major characters are in conflict and the result is decided.

EPILOGUE

The epilogue is an exploration of the effects of the storyline and its theme. It rounds out the setting, the consequences, or other individuals affected. They are optional.

It is common writing advice to always end at the ending. I'm not sure Hwæt games (along with J.R.R. Tolkien) agree. It is noticeably more fun to perform an epilogue. Epilogues are also great ways to chain storylines together: the epilogue to one storyline can be the prologue for the next.

Bundles

Bundles are unstructured collections of prompts. You can add them to extend storylines, or use them for a whole set of play.

A gentle bundle allows longer play. None of them are created to drive a storyline through its acts.

Although none are included here, I can imagine a genre-specific bundle or a plot-specific bundle, each would act like an expanded rack for spicing storylines. Or, if a session is intended to have unrelated stories, you could compile a bundle of greatest hits.

In the gentle bundle in this book, there are as many events as conversations. A group that wants to spend more time in gentle stories will often want more conversations. So gentle conversations are the most reusable prompts. An particular event in a storyline would be odd if repeated, but the same conversation prompt can be used several times, in very different ways. Soap operas tell stories for years, even decades, through character conversations: disagreement, scheming, disappointment, revelation; each a few minutes long, and each (in a well written script) with its problem and its twist. At the twist the scene will intensify, invert, or surprise emotions. And the last scene in an episode has the biggest twist – a character begins seemingly seeking help to leave their relationship, the twist: they want to stay – roll credits².

Game Variants

COLLABORATIVE ROLE-PLAYING

Role-playing games are a blend of three activities:

- the GM describes the world and events happening within it,
- players make moves and interactively resolve them (with the GM adjudicator, rule books, character statistics, and dice),
- players role-play their characters (improv theatre style).

²I have never been an avid soap opera follower, but my UK folk-memory runs deep: I can hear the “dum, dum, dum-dum, duddy-duddy” EastEnders credit.

Collaborative role-playing shares the responsibility for the first two among all players.

I've been fiddling with collaborative role-playing since the '90s, and I think one weakness has always been this: players are not given structure. It is difficult for some to know where the story should go and for others to allow it to go there.

You can use this game to give that structure. *Hwæt* doesn't have a rule-book, character sheets, or dice, but you can bring in your favourite tabletop role-playing game to add more complexity. I don't have enough experience to tell you which games work well and which don't, my intuition would be to use rules-light games (but that is my preference anyway). I'd appreciate knowing your experience if you try this.

DESCRIPTIVE EVENTS AND CONVERSATION TWISTS

In conventional role-playing games, many GMs tell little stories. Entering a new location or a new situation triggers a mini-description. Great GMs can make it “movie like” by giving the description structure, or something that is happening. Instead of entering a deserted hall, they follow the movement of bats or rodents, finishing with a twist when a rat is eaten by the beast in the corner.

Hwæt-style storytelling works. If the characters enter a new room in a haunted castle, for example, an improvised story from long ago can tell how the room was used originally, and how it got into this sorry state. Games Masters can perform these stories (a three minute story is no longer than most usual descriptions, in my experience), or they can ask players to contribute.

Great GMs in conventional role-playing games also keep conversations between characters tight by using a twist. Most often this is the occurrence of something in the world. The characters are trying to decide how to sneak past their antagonist, for example, but the GM interrupts them, telling them they have been noticed (after rolling dice a couple of times to hint that they should get a move on!). Or an NPC says something unexpected in the conversation that changes its direction.

This is more rare in traditional role-playing, but *Hwæt* allows a conversation twist to be shared or agreed before role-playing. The

group then works to make the twist more important. It also avoids a problem I’ve played in a lot of role-playing games, where nothing much seems to happen for big chunks of time, or the GM has to work far too hard to make progress.

These are approaches to use events or conversations in a conventional role-playing game.

WORLD BUILDING

The prologue, epilogue and settings phase of a storyline encourage the group to build a fictional world. If those are the bits you enjoy the most, you can build a whole game around it. In particular, jumping around a large area, social group, or chronology can alternate between broad overview and detail.

For jumping around time: one story describes how a monarch wins power, for example, and another tells how generations later their descendant is overthrown by an uprising. This chronology doesn’t have to run earlier to later. If a story describes the machinations of a secret society, the next story might spring back hundreds of years to how that society began.

When I think about this variant, I have to give a huge hat-tip to *Microscope* by Ben Robbins, one of my favourite tabletop storytelling games. *Hwæt* wasn’t designed around *Microscope*, but replacing “writing a note card” with “improvising a story” seems to work well.

CREATIVE WRITING WITH WRITING

Instead of improv storytelling, you can use prompts to inspire creative writing. You can play solo this way, or with a group passing stories backward and forward. Writing and crafting the story takes time, so face-to-face play is probably not going to work well to create a complete storyline. Instead you can use one or two prompts in a writing and sharing session.

Event prompts were created for 3 to 5 minute stories. Assuming stories are read at about 10,000 words an hour, that’s equivalent to 500–800 words. That’s the size usually referred to as flash fiction. If you want bigger or smaller stories, you can aim for that, but be careful.

Prompts can be flabby when used for something too long. And it can take more work to get the problem and the twist into something very short, like micro fiction.

I am a long way from being a practised flash fiction writer. But I have found these prompts interesting to play solo, writing flash fiction size pieces. Particularly when they give additional or alternative perspectives on a diverse fictional world.

There is a style of novel made up only of flash fiction (or even micro fiction). It can be fun to write, but it's unlikely to make your fortune! Hwæt storylines are not built around conventional novels. Good luck if you journey along that road. I'll read your book.

A Storyline of Universal Prompts

This storyline uses the 3 (+5) act structure, highly inspired by screenwriting. Setting stories establish the world. Ratchet stories push characters into a different way of living. Unravelling stories lock the characters into their climactic struggle. Each of these three acts can have any number of stories, the other five are usually one-off, to tie each section together.

The prompts in this storyline try to be as general as possible. It should be usable in a murder mystery, a superhero conflict, hard science fiction, or epic fantasy. With some creative interpretation, it was created to support even romantic comedies, or “demographic litfic,” though there are some prompts here that will be less useful in every genre.

3 (+5) Act Storyline

1 × Prologue
any × Setting
1 × Clinch
any × Ratchet
1 × Crunch
any × Unravelling
1 × Ending
1 × Epilogue

PROMPTS

Prologue: 4 events.

Prologue or Setting: 1 event.

Setting: 10 events.

Clinch: 5 events.

Ratcheting: 5 conversations and 3 events.

Crunch: 5 events.

Ratcheting or Unravelling: 6 conversations, 2 events and 1 both.

Unravelling: 3 events, 4 conversations and 1 both.

Ending: 5 events.

Epilogue: 5 events.

A Hint Ignored

Prologue • Event

In which the fore-warning of a future rot is left to fester. We are given mini-accounts of dark things occurring. There is a connection. It is certainly a problem, but the wider danger is not obvious, and each issue is explained away. Finally we meet the true believers, who are easily ignored, easily ridiculed, but somehow quite correct.

RULES

- This story should influence the problem on which the storyline is based, but it is not an absolute authority. It is a hint. The problem can mutate, show it's true form, or be reinterpreted later in the storyline.

QUESTIONS

- How many mini-accounts will there be? Two, three, four, more? In the time you have, will they be similar, or will some be told in-depth, with the others little more than headlines?
- How is the problem explained away? Are the events entirely denied (because of unreliable reporters, unbelievable details, deeply ignored places)? Or is there a seemingly more obvious and more appealing explanation? Or are the explanations different in each case?
- Who are the true believers? A fringe group? A faction? Journalists, academics, or the intelligentsia? Those who experienced the events, and don't believe the official story? People who predicted it?

Success

Prologue • Event

In which a fringe group achieves a remarkable success. Their goal seems to be reached, their desire for a glorious future seems almost certain now. There are cracks, admittedly, but minor compared to the greatness that has been secured. Any remaining problems will soon be resolved. Surely. Hopefully. Eventually.

QUESTIONS

- What are the group on the fringe of? What is the established group? Are they a fringe because of beliefs, because of who they are (class, caste, race, age, sexuality, disability), because of where they are?
- What would their ultimate goal be? Is the success of this story their ultimate goal, or on the road to it? Are they naive to think the glorious future is almost certain.
- Who would they admit those cracks to? Are they a surprise to anyone outside?
- Is the problem genuinely minor compared to the success? Or are they fooling themselves?
- What are the remaining problems? Are they problems that have worsened? Were they always ignored? Are they partly caused by their success?
- Do they have a plan for resolving the issues? Does it involve the group splitting? Or addressing some external threat? Or do they think it will magically resolve itself?

Arrival

Prologue • Event

In which, a long time before the story is set, the ancestors of the characters arrive from somewhere far beyond. Each wanting their desires to be fulfilled; each wanting to escape from the issues they have left behind. They are not able to achieve either. Not quite.

RULES

- This story tells a story sometime in the past, but doesn't get to define when the main storyline is set. Whether one generation has passed, or one thousand.

QUESTIONS

- Where is the place they left and where do they arrive? Is it "far beyond" physically, or in some other way?
- Why did they make *this* journey? Hopefully? Because of new knowledge, or new technology? Because they had no other choice?
- What are the desires of those who arrive?
- What is the immediate life of those who arrive? Do they need to establish themselves? Do they need to fit in? Do they need particular resources?
- Why are they not able to achieve their desires? What is stopping them? Something here? Each other? Or something they brought with them?
- What was the twist that made them unable to achieve their desires? Did something prove impossible? Was there some breakdown? Did they fall out?

Legend

Prologue • Event

In which we hear the story of a problem long ago, faced by great people, and thoroughly vanquished. It was a triumph from whom many now trace their lineage; people who like to believe they share the same determination, the same ethics, and the same glorious potential. But there are slightly different accounts. It cannot be quite so simple. There are things that don't quite make sense.

RULES

- This story is establishing the legend, not the place or particular details about the people who trace their lineage to it. It is good form to reference it at other times in the storyline, but it shouldn't be required. And should only be central if other storytellers make it so in the stories.

QUESTIONS

- How do you want to divide the storytelling time? A quick legend, and more descriptions of the differences? Or dwell in the legend, and quickly twist by mentioning the disagreements?
- The legend itself is completely open, so what will it be? How long ago was it? How archaic? What was the problem? Who were the legendary people? And what did they do to make it made it “thoroughly vanquished”?
- How many trace their lineage to the legend? Their physical or biological lineage? Or their moral and cultural lineage? Does everyone appreciate it? Or is “many” a select minority? Would others find it offensive?
- What are the alternative accounts? Why are they inconsistent? Are they obviously inconsistent, or does it take particular knowledge?

A Visitor

Prologue or Setting • Event

In which an affluent visitor arrives at the place where our story will be set. We follow their visit, go to places or special events they want to see, and share their naive preconception of what will be found. They absorb the reality they wanted to experience, but we find cracks in how realistic their expectation might have been.

RULES

- If this prompt is used as a prologue, the description of the place is not canonical. It can be treated as the interpretation of the tourist.

QUESTIONS

- Where does the visitor come from?
- Are they here for a vacation, an inspection, to make a deal, to find information? Do others think they have a different reason?
- Are they affluent compared to other people in this location? Or merely affluent enough to make the journey? How important will their affluence be?
- Are such visitors common? Does the local community present a false impression? Do they exploit them?
- What are the places or special events? Are places natural or constructed? Are they used for something else by locals? Are special events based on a place, a specific time, or a performance?
- In what way are they naive? Where did they get their preconceptions from? Do they now realise their naivete? Or is it shielded from them, and only understandable through the story?
- What are the cracks we find? Physical cracks, reputational cracks, social cracks, moral cracks, financial cracks? Problems with the places? Or with the people there?

The Place

Setting: Place • Event

In which we journey through the most notorious place in the setting. There are often visited areas, and those more limited, where only certain groups can be found. There are places with very special purposes, and some unknown to exist by all but a select few. And then we arrive at a place forgotten by all. Where something significant is hidden.

QUESTIONS

- How does the place occupy the setting? Is it a building, or a whole region? Is it delineated by a group of people?
- Why is the place notorious? Notoriously bad, or notoriously wonderful; notoriously inaccessible, or notoriously fashionable? Is it notoriously misunderstood: with one reputation, but a very different reality?
- What is the transition between the “often visited areas and those more limited”? Why are they less often visited? Are visits prevented, are they relatively unknown, or are they less desired? What are the groups that can be found there?
- What are the special purposes? Special purposes supporting the whole place? Or special for a subgroup, to provide services for something outside, or for only a few people who use it?
- Why was the place forgotten? Who used it originally? What was it for, if anything?
- What is the significant thing? Who would it be significant for? What would it change: it’s forgotten status, the place (it’s notorious status or the people who frequent it), the wider setting, or the whole world?

The Faction

Setting: Faction • Event

In which we peel back the layers of a notorious group of people. Those outside may think of them as one: one will, one purpose, one plan. We see the reality is very different. There are factions within the faction, power struggles, and conflicts. And there is a group barely known outside. A group that forms the hub around which everything rotates.

QUESTIONS

- Why is the group notorious? Do they have various reputations: some think they are wonderful, some think they are nefarious?
- What does the group do? What do people think they do? What are the rumours of what they might do? Are there conspiracy theories regarding them?
- Can anyone on the outside join the group? What is required? Is there something required that someone on the outside would find surprising?
- Are the outside and the hub the only layers? If not, how many others will you peel back?
- What are the factions within the faction? What do they do? Are they trying to recruit new people? If so how? Or are some of them aspirational? From the outside (if there is outside knew they existed) or the inside?
- What group is at the hub? Why do the others rotate around them? Voluntarily? Knowingly? Is the fact that they are a hub surprising? If so, to whom?
- This group is barely known outside. How are they referred to? How are they characterised?

Wealth, Influence, and Power

Setting: Faction • Event

In which we discover how the members of a notorious community vary dramatically in wealth, influence, and power. The pattern may at first seem obvious. But, as we delve within, other imbalances appear. Until we reach a surprising core. The most influential characters are those that few outsiders would expect.

QUESTIONS

- Who are the community? And in what way are they notorious? A notorious underclass, or a notorious elite; notorious academics, or notorious alternative believers; a notoriously bland many, or a notoriously dangerous few?
- How do people become members of the community? Do those on the outside want to join? If most people want to join, or want to avoid it, what about the exceptions?
- For the obvious pattern: how are power, influence, and wealth connected? Do the richest have the most influence, and therefore the most power? Or is it more complicated? Do the most influential have the least power? Does wealth buy influence, or do people most respect those who gave all their money away?
- How are we delving within? Is it a descriptive tour around locations? A story of how people interact? Or something literal, like layers of clothes being worn?
- What are the other imbalances? Are the imbalances based on owning something, or being a particular type of person, or thinking in a particular way? Does it import inequalities from the wider community or does it have some of its own? Are there cliques or factions within the faction? Can people change between those groups?
- Who are at the core? Why would so few outside suspect them? Who do people outside think is in charge?

The Almost Other

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet a major character, a prominent member of one established group in the community. They live a typical life, have typical desires, and a typical outlook. Until something happens to force them to choose whether they should change their course completely. They will always be “the almost other”. We learn how that will never leave them the same: in their own mind, and in the judgement of others.

RULES

- This prompt is deliberately early in the storyline, before the problem is cemented, before 'agonists are defined. Unless other storytellers voluntarily run with it, this story shouldn't dictate the plot of the storyline: it introduces one character.

QUESTIONS

- What is the established group? And how are they prominent in it? Prominent to whom? What is the “other” that the character almost was?
- How will you describe a typical life, desires, and outlook? Will you describe them? Or will we journey through their day, or their biography?
- What happened? And what was the choice?
- Who are the others who judge them? If it isn't obvious, how did they find out about the character's choice? What is the effect of this judgement now?
- How is the character's mind affected by their choice? Is it a moral or emotional response? Or did they discover something? Can they not treat themselves the way they would like? Or has it modified their treatment of others?

The Unwilling

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet a character who will become major, but at the beginning seems anything but. We see their significant natural skills, but their commitment, almost passionate commitment, is to do as little as possible. Then there is a surprising event, and they begrudgingly begin their journey to usefulness.

QUESTIONS

- In what way is the character far from major? Are they from an unremarkable group, an unremarkable life so far, or an unremarkable location? Or is it purely their lack of action?
- If they are doing as little as possible, how do we see their significant natural skills? What skills are they? Physical skills, intellectual skills, social skills (generous or manipulative), resources (finances, social status, equipment)?
- What options do they have, and not accept? How might they have use their skills? What effect might they have had? Is the lack of action irrelevant, or immoral?
- Is the surprising event surprising to the character? Or surprising to the average observer? Was the possibility of the event the reason that they did not previously intervene?
- What is their response to the surprising event? Does their action respond to the event itself? Or does it motivate them to treat others differently?
- They begrudgingly begin their journey, will that grudge continue? Or was the difficulty a one-off choice?

The Dreamer

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet a character displaying their moderate skills. Their moderately pleasant character, their moderately pleasing appearance. And through those middling features, we see their exceptional ambition and unbeatable self-belief. Though they have avoided difficult challenges before, a surprising test comes before them, and (to the chagrin of many) they surprisingly succeed.

QUESTIONS

- How will you establish the moderate qualities? Will you describe it directly, or show them interacting with a task or other characters?
- What is the ambition? Do they know? Is it obvious to anyone else? Would it be achievable, even with someone with excellent skills? Do they believe they will soon (or one day) be good enough? Or do they believe they already are? Or do they even believe they are already there?
- How do they show their self-belief? For example, are they ignorant of their failings, do they argue with criticism, do they invent external excuses for their performance, or are the “achievements” middling enough to be reinterpreted?
- How have they avoided difficult challenges before? How can you show that in this story? Do they have a physical record (it could be markings on their identity card, for example, or as obvious as wounds)? Is their reputation displayed by other characters, and did they notice it?
- What is the surprising test? What would it take to succeed? Why is their success surprising?
- Who are those chagrined by the character’s success? How do they show this disdain?

The Engineer

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet a character who makes things happen. We see their tenacity, their skill, and most of all their hard work. Even the most difficult challenge is confronted small piece by small piece. After work we see the wider context, where success cannot be so easily engineered. Their ability to face problems with cool and methodical effort does not work. Their emotions were quieted, but far from silent.

QUESTIONS

- What things do they make happen? How do we know that? Are we told, or are we shown?
- What is the most difficult challenge? And how is it broken down into pieces. Are they able to solve it all? Or just apply themselves to one small piece?
- Is “after work” the end of a work day, or a change of how they use their time, like finishing in the garden, or the last person in a queue of conversations? Is the wider context their home life? Their interaction with the community? How they interact with people?
- What is the problem in the wider context? Why can it not be solved in the same way? Is it the problem that makes that impossible? Or their personality?
- What is the emotional reaction? Something like anger, frustration, self doubt, fear, loneliness? Was it obviously quieted early in the story? Or was it silent when they worked, but bubbling after work? Or does something happen to trigger it now?
- Who sees the emotion? Anyone looking? Only the few that know them best? Or do they keep it entirely private?

The Name

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet a character well known to everyone. At least, a character who many people think they know. We begin with their most renowned side, the things nobody would be surprised to find. But then, behind the public curtain, the reality is... unexpected. The contrast is more complex at first. But also simpler in many ways. There is a different reality behind the name.

RULES

- The storyteller is showing us a deeper layer to the character. Unless this story makes it obviously public, other storytellers shouldn't use that knowledge in their stories, or their conversations.

QUESTIONS

- What is the name known for? Are they known for having a particular physique, a rare talent or ability, political power, social privilege, wealth, moral righteousness, spirituality, or any opposite?
- How are they known? Have they publicised themselves? Has their reputation grown over time? Are they known for a particular event?
- Are the unsurprising actions performed in public? Or do they also behave this way in private?
- How is the private action "behind the public curtain"? What is that curtain? Would there be consequences to behaving that way? Does the character think there would be worse consequences?
- Is the unexpected action routine? Are they always like that behind the scenes? Or are they forced to make a difficult choice? Are they hypocrites? Or misunderstood?
- In what way is their reality simpler? Is it simpler because we understand their motivation? Or because we understand their technique?

The Symbiont

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet a character who at first seems unremarkable, until we come across a major character we have seen before. This new character is connected to them, entirely and deeply. As we see, nothing that they each do is done without the other. This connection is then shown to be more complicated with something not quite as it seems.

RULES

- This prompt can set up a great character, but is difficult.
- Don't tie the characters together so tightly that they are forced to act as a single character in the story (like THE THEM prompt). Allow the characters to act independently, within the constraints of their connection.
- If your group own characters, a) get permission, b) show the connections without puppeteering the other character, c) allow either owner to separate the bond later in the storyline.

QUESTIONS

- What is the other character, and what is the relationship between them?
- What do we see that connects them? Is one supporting the action, or supporting all their life? Are they inspiring the other's action? Authorising it? Funding it?
- Is the relationship mutually beneficial, one-sided, or codependent?
- What is the final complexity? Do they have a hidden cause for their connection? Are they less connected than they seem? Is there exploitation play? Or the opposite: what seems exploitative is the opposite?

The Them

Setting: Character • Event

In which we meet close characters. In their private life, we see their different personalities. We see their interaction, we see their fundamental weakness. Then one character goes to a public space where they are well known. As if all are one single person.

RULES

- This prompt can set up a great character(s), but is difficult.
- Avoid (e.g. a betrayal, a fatality, a conversion) setting up separate major characters. There must be a reason they cannot act independently, and a reason they don't need to use stories to negotiate between them.
- You can make “revealing the truth” a twist in the the bigger story, but it's too easy to make this the whole story.

QUESTIONS

- How many are there? Two, a few, many, an unknown number? Or even one (e.g. one body with distinct personalities, one person with different “magical” clothes)?
- What is the fundamental weakness? And how will you reveal it? Through direct description? A small event in their private life?
- What is the public space? And why did they go there? Would they normally prefer isolation? Or is it recreational?
- How are they well-known, and how widely? Are they known purely because of where they live? Or for their multilayered existence (e.g. weird, otherworldly, broad skills, or knowledge)? Or for an unrelated renowned event?
- Do others know there are different people? If so, why do they behave as if they are the same?

Rebellion

Clinch • Event

In which a character does something they're not supposed to, something that people like them are never expected to. Some of those around are surprised, some would tell you they expected it, but all watch closely for the backlash that will surely follow. It doesn't. The tension mounts.

QUESTIONS

- What kind of behaviour is associated with people like the character? Who are “people like them”?
- What is the rebellious action? Something the character does, something they say, a way they react to a situation?
- How was the action known? Was it seen by others, inferred, or confessed?
- Who are those around them? Other similar people? Or people who have a particular impression of them?
- Who would tell you they expected it? Always expected or only based on the set up? Did they expect it of this particular character? Or all characters like them? In the story how will you represent “would tell you”: will a minor character say that? Or will you report it?
- What is the backlash? Has it happened to others before? Or was it a warning to keep people in line? Or did only a naive few think it was ever possible?
- Who is watching for the backlash? The same who are surprised? Or a different group: e.g. it's a moral question for the first group, but a legal question for the second?
- Is the tension waiting for the backlash, thinking it is surely delayed, but still inevitable? Is the tension waiting to see how the character will behave now they “got away with it”? Or are other groups now changing their behaviour to compensate?

Natural Disaster: Unnatural Response

Clinch • Event

In which something terrible happens, not caused by any individual (though some claim it had darker roots). Most people respond selflessly, to give what help they can. Except one. One who everyone expected to give their support. They act very differently.

QUESTIONS

- What is the terrible event? A weather event? A biological event? A geographical or astronomical event? Or could a cultural event be interpreted as “natural”: an economic or social collapse?
- What kinds of blame are being shared? Some people should’ve known? Some people should have prepared for a similar event? Or there is a rumour that a secret society caused it? Are these rumours definitely not true, or does the storyteller want to leave them as possibilities.
- What are the needs that most people respond to? Are there a few people in terrible situations? Or a vast number of problems? Are those who are “responding selflessly” suffering from their own damage?
- What is the selflessness? Is it physical help, financial help, time, houses or transport, charity or food, or something more obscure, something mystical, something cultural?
- Why is one character’s reaction so notable? Why are they the only one? The only one in a small group, whose reputation is based on helping? Or a person whose reaction is noticeably extreme?
- Why is the action so very different? Are they trying to avoid help, or trying to benefit from the disaster? Do they seem to respond to a different problem: one that most people think is unrelated? Is that response genuine, or is it misinterpreted?

Invasion

Clinch • Event

In which a normal, “every day” is interrupted by the appearance of something new. An appearance that the characters cannot ignore, and none of them (apparently) expected. It’s goals are not yet clear, and there is debate on what that might be. But already it is clear that the arrival upends a long established balance.

QUESTIONS

- Will your story begin with the normal day, or with the appearance of something new? If the former, will the invasion make normality irrelevant (e.g. going shopping for clothes, when aliens invade), or dramatically change that context (e.g. going to work as a police officer, when the local high security prison is busted)?
- What is the something new? The prompt is written with a nod to an invading army, but will you stretch that? A new faction (e.g. a coup by well-known people, an invasion by unknown aliens, sinister conquerors, or desperate refugees), something physically new (e.g. Atlantis rises, the capital sinks), something biological (e.g. a pandemic, the rising of the dead)?
- Why are its goals not clear? What could they be? Is it a metaphor to call them “goals”: so, the goals of a disease might (or might not) be to infect everyone, a worldwide simultaneous volcano eruption might (or might not) be a sign of global geological catastrophe? Or is it a group that claims one motivation, but may have a different goal, like an invading army that claims it is there for “liberation”.
- What is the debate? Which groups are putting forward different ideas? Where is the discussion?
- What is the balance that has been upended? Will you describe this, or show it with a small event?

Problem Solved – Problem Begun

Clinch • Event

In which a character is faced with a modest problem: an urgent problem, a frustrating problem, but not an epic problem. As they go through the process, it leads to a far bigger issue. One that is far more significant than the problem they thought they were facing.

QUESTIONS

- What is the small problem? Why is it urgent? Do they think it is important, at least for them? Or nothing more than an annoyance? Would anyone else notice the problem, or their attempt to resolve it? Would anyone else care?
- What is the process they go through to resolve the issue? Is this the first time? Or is it common? Will you mention that in the story, or imply it (like a character tapping buttons without thought, as if they've overridden the warning many times before)?
- What is the far bigger issue? Is it more significant to them? Or will it affect more people? Does it have a wider scope (e.g. a sticky door reveals the house is settling into the ground), more significant risks (e.g. a fatal disease rather than an itch), or a change in context (e.g. a "charity" wanting domination over society).?
- Does the small problem cause the larger problem, or reveal it was there anyway?
- Will those listening to the story understand more than the character? Does the character even know there is a bigger problem?
- How will your story end? With the revelation of the larger problem? Or with the character's reaction? If they react: Do they panic? Do they ignore it? Do they pretend it didn't happen? Do they try to get help? Do they not believe it? Does their reaction make it worse (a twist within a twist)?

The Curse Of Time

Clinch • Event

In which a major character accidentally happens upon an event they were never meant to know. A few minutes earlier or later, a very different reaction, and everything that will happen in this storyline would've been avoided. The story might have been someone else's story, but now they are inescapably involved.

QUESTIONS

- In what way is the characters action an accident? A pure fluke of time? Or did they attempt to do something different?
- In what way were they “never meant to know”? Was somebody trying to keep it secret? Or does nobody ever deserve to know some tragedy?
- Even if the result is an accident, does the character deserve any blame? Would a different person have avoided the problem, regardless of the time?
- Is the “different reaction” theirs, like never seeing a problem and so never been motivated to resolve it? Or is the reaction someone else responding to them, like the character accidentally arousing someone's suspicion, aggression, or revelation? Or is it a physical reaction, not relying on any particular character, like avoiding a lightning bolt.
- What is your goal for this story? Will you focus on the event, or use the alternative reality for texture (to flesh out the character or develop the setting), or create a more specific, more intricate problem, or will you suggest the after effects?
- How will you establish the alternate reality, if they avoided the issue? Will it be obvious? Or will you describe different events: one or more versions where the problem doesn't occur, and the reality when it does?

The World Beneath

Ratcheting • Event

In which, very near to the world where most characters live, we visit a place where hidden truths reveal a different reality. At first it seems like merely a curious place. Then evidence of the problem begins to grow. Here is the scale of the festering problem; for how long the evidence has been there, undetected. Here is the barrier between normality and its full extent; how thin it is, and how fragile.

QUESTIONS

- Where is the place we visit? Why is it very near to the world, but not exactly the same? Is this nearby geographical, physical (like a secret room or basement), social (like people behaving in a different way, in a different context), or overlaid (like being invisible to normal eyes).
- Is the problem in this location exactly same as the overall problem (from the clinch), or related in some way: physically, through characters, a fraction, or actions?
- Do only the audience visit? Or, if the story follows a character, do they visit deliberately, or accidentally? Can they return to the everyday world?
- How will it seem “curious” initially, but grow as a problem? Will that growth be a growth in scale (like beginning with a tiny crack but zooming out to find the whole facade is crumbling), or a growth in quantity (like a character discovering their bank account is empty, zooming out to find all the bank’s money has been stolen)?
- How long has the problem been there? And why was it undetected? Was it simply not noticed? What is too easy to deny? Were people naive? Was it too disturbing for anyone to expect it?
- Why is the boundary so fragile? Is anyone trying to keep it intact?

Wilfully Ignored

Ratcheting • Event

In which we tour around various cracks that show the problem spreading. We see it having an effect on more different places and different characters. Behind the cracks, an ultimate threat is looming. A threat being consistently ignored. Wilfully ignored. Finally we meet a character trying to engage everyone else.

RULES

- (Advice) The character at the end of the story can be a major character, but be careful: it is easy to force them as the most important character, or the opposite, to “use” them for this one early story. A minor character is easier to manage.

QUESTIONS

- How many steps will you make on your tour of the various cracks? Do you want a mix of quick mentions and more detailed descriptions? Or are they similar events? How varied can you be (without it being nonsensical and random)?
- What is the threat, and why is it looming? Why would listeners understand its significance, but characters wilfully ignore it?
- Why are the cracks being ignored? Because people can't cope with the truth? Because they hold tight to some false belief? Because others are trying to keep them from knowing? Because they are under instructions to ignore it?
- How is the final character being received? Like a truth teller, or a crazy doomsayer? Are some trying to amplify them, some trying to silence them?
- Is the twist the final character's existence, the they are sharing, or a change in their context: like an event proving their predictions correct, or someone stepping in to silence them.

Disappearance

Ratcheting • Event

In which we follow the investigation of one or more missing characters. As we discover more about who they were, and when and where they disappeared, what at first could be an unremarkable “one of those things”, now seems to have a more sinister cause.

RULES

- The missing character or characters should not be major characters: already major or used as major characters later. They may be minor characters, or new extras that you introduce for this prompt.
- (Advice.) Other storytellers can bring back or reference the missing characters later in the storyline: a result of an event, an ambiguous “maybe seen”, or a return strangely changed.

QUESTIONS

- How many missing characters are there in this story? One, few, many? Do they have separate investigations, or one coordinated search?
- Who is performing the investigation? The established law enforcement? Or the major characters? How intensive is the investigation?
- How long have the characters been missing? How many people have been missing them? Has their absence caused any wider problems? Or are they easily forgotten?
- How is their disappearance interpreted as “one of those things”? Could that interpretation be easily checked (e.g. they’ve probably gone on holiday, um, all of them, on the same week)? Has anyone checked it?
- Is the sinister cause it now seems to have correct? Or another red herring?

Commitment?

Ratcheting • Conversation

In which characters disagree how seriously to take the threat, and how strongly to respond. In the end the storyteller's character threatens to act alone.

RULES

- The characters can role-play their reaction to the threat (“No!” “Aah!” Audio-“??!”), but they shouldn't reply, argue, or respond. Leave the story on that twist.

QUESTIONS

- What range of disagreement does the storyteller want? Do the characters disagree on the action? On the severity of the actual problem? On its believability?
- Does every character disagree with everyone else? Or do they group into sides?
- Will the storyteller's character contribute their opinion throughout the conversation? Or will they listen and be gradually more frustrated? Does the conversation change their mind, but in the opposite direction to the others?
- Does the storyteller's character threaten to take the problem more seriously? To go out on a solo mission, even if it is certain to be futile? Or do they threaten to take it less seriously than the others: would that make it even worse (e.g. threatening to report the conspiracy to the authorities, threatening to fling open the door and show there are no monsters behind)?
- How serious is the threat? Is it emotional rather than explicit? Or is it specific? How serious will it seem to be?
- How risky would it be, if carried out? How risky to themselves? How risky to each other? How risky to unrelated people?

Confession: Missed Opportunity

Ratcheting • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character is consoled by others, and told that nothing they could've done would've made the situation better. Reassured by this, they tell more details, and it becomes clear that it is not quite true: a clear opportunity was missed.

RULES

- It is the storyteller's choice how to end on the twist: their revelation of "the opportunity missed", or the other characters changing their reassurance.

QUESTIONS

- What happened to the storyteller's character? Will they give details? Or keep it ambiguous? Why is it unique to them? Or did many people experience it? Was it an event already described in the storyline? A new facet of something already described? Or something completely new?
- Why do they need consolation? Is that obvious (e.g. an event that anyone would find traumatic), or is it specific to their experience (e.g. the loss of a pet).
- What does the character think they could've done differently? How realistic is that opinion?
- Why do other characters tell them it "wouldn't have made a difference"? Purely for emotional support? Or would that action have unpleasant consequences?
- What was the opportunity missed? Was it an opportunity to avoid their consequence? Or an opportunity to avoid the whole problem? How much could they be blamed, by whom? Would the consequence of being blamed be emotional, reputational, legal, social?

Confession: A Sin Committed

Ratcheting • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character confesses to the others that they caused a grave problem, something they claim to deeply regret. More details are asked and shared. While reassurance is given, nobody is quite sure the action wasn't to blame.

RULES

- It is the storyteller's choice how to end on the twist: a final detail of the confession, or the other characters changing their opinion.
- This is a conversation, so avoid the storyteller doing all the speaking, and everyone else replying with empathetic gestures.

QUESTIONS

- What is the confession? Do they think they caused the big problem in the storyline? Are they over inflating their own importance by doing that? Or are they confessing something different? If so, are the characters related to the problem they are trying to own?
- In what way does the storyteller's character show their regret? Do they say "I regret it", or do they tell stories of how they've tried to put it right?
- How will others in the conversation try to convince them? By sharing their own confessions? Or purely by reassuring their emotions?
- Will the storyteller's character push back against the reassurance? Or be oddly eager to accept it?
- What is the final detail? Why does it cause others to change their mind? Does the detail connect the storyteller's character more strongly to the problem? Or is it a more sinful action, harder to justify?

Convince Me

Ratcheting • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character is sceptical of the way the storyline seems to be going. The others in the conversation try to convince them, but there's a way to undermine each point. The approach is frustrating to all. At the end of the conversation, a different approach is tried. Something seems to shift.

QUESTIONS

- Does this story have the storyteller's character believing the truth, and everyone else doubting it? Or the opposite?
- Will the storyteller begin with their doubts? Or will they allow others to discuss the problem, then voice their disagreement?
- Is the scepticism general (e.g. "I don't believe that..."), or do they have specific reasons (e.g. "It wasn't like that, this happened...")?
- Will their responses to each point be the same? Even general, (e.g. "do your research..." or "don't believe them...")? Or will it find an alternative reason to keep believing (that might be harder for some to do live, but remember There Are No Contradictions)?
- What is the different approach? A different way of talking? Different evidence? Different authorities? Different topics? NB: There is an old idiom: you don't persuade someone to change their mind, you love them into changing it.
- What is the shift? Does the storyteller seem to change their mind? Or do the others give up on trying? Or do they start to believe? Or do they agree to a different plan, like a plan to test their theories? Why does it only "seem to shift", is it genuine, or are they pretending to agree to end the conversation?

Shibboleth

Ratcheting • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character tries to convince the others of some important, and disturbing fact. It seems unbelievable. As the conversation proceeds, they seem more convinced that the storyteller's character is faking their knowledge. Until they share something that could not be faked.

QUESTIONS

- What is the important, disturbing fact? Is it inherently unbelievable? Or do they not want it to be true?
- Why is the storyteller's character trying to convince the others? Do they want to feel believed? Do they want the others to act in a particular way? Are they trying to make sure they are correct?
- Why will the storyteller's character convince them they are not telling the truth? Do they have a reputation for that? Or are they just incompetent at expressing themselves?
- How do other characters show their lack of belief? Through explicit expressions? Ridicule? Or by tailoring their questions towards favoured alternative explanation?
- Why did the storyteller's character not tell them the final information at the start? Did it not occur to them it would be a shibboleth? Or were they keeping it secret because it would cost them?
- What could not be faked? Is it a piece of information the others know, but they shouldn't? Or is it something physical? Or can they display some sign?
- How do the characters react? Are they instantly convinced? Or do they have no more obvious objections?

Decimation

Crunch • Event

In which there is a shocking and rapid worsening of the problem that leaves many people damaged. It begins as if it were any other rumble of the problems so far, but escalates and escalates and escalates until it can no longer be minimised.

QUESTIONS

- Do you want this story to focus on the worsening, or the damage it causes?
- What is the shocking event? Is the event itself shocking, or is the effect it has on people shocking? How rapid is its rapidity: a moment, minutes, days, weeks?
- How many escalation phases do you want? For each phase: is it an escalation of the problem, or an escalation of the effects?
- How many people will be damaged? How distributed is this group: a particular section of society, or everyone in an area? Are people who have avoided the problem now targeted? Are the people who will be damaged already “infected” by the problem, or is this worsening when they are first involved?
- Who is trying to minimise the effects, why and how? Is this a group you have established before in the storyline, or a new faction? Are they trying to help damaged people; to combat the problem, as they see it; or to deny that the problem is happening at all? Are they motivated by their job; human compassion; trying to keep control?
- How will you show that it can no longer be minimised? Will the minimisers give up? Will they be overwhelmed? Will they be victims of the same problem?

Bad Advice

Crunch • Event

In which a character gives advice on how to resolve the issue: well-meaning advice, grounded in understanding, easy to believe, and easy to follow. But as it is applied, it becomes clear the advice is the opposite of useful. The problem responds. Immediately and horribly.

QUESTIONS

- Who is the character giving advice? Are they one of the major characters for this storyline? Or a minor character, or someone new in this story?
- Is the advising character the source of the advice? Or are they sharing what they have been told? If so, where did the advice come from?
- How invested is the character giving advice? Are they genuinely trying to be helpful? Or do they have an ulterior motive? Does anyone receiving the advice think there might be another reason?
- Is the bad advice grounded in experience, higher learning, tradition, naive expertise, another agenda, or something else?
- Why is the bad advice easy to believe and easy to follow? Does it match with everyone's preconceptions? Or does the person sharing it have authority, or a trustworthy reputation?
- How does it become clear that the advice is not useful? Is it equally clear to everyone? Or does the advising character still believe they were correct?
- In what way does the problem react? Does the advice directly cause the worsening, e.g. opening the door to check whether the fire has stopped, only for it to rush through? Or does the problem literally react, e.g. an antagonist targeting those who had reported them to the police.

A Different League

Crunch • Event

In which there is a deliberate attempt to solve the problem. It is a well meaning and faithful attempt, and at first it might succeed. It seems. Briefly. It soon becomes clear that is not realistic, the attempt is irrelevant. Once the problem response, it responds with force, and the attempt is shown to be utterly futile.

QUESTIONS

- As the crunch, do you want the problem to be main problem of the whole storyline? Or is it something different, related in style, location, factions, or 'tagonists?
- What is the attempt to solve the problem? Do you want to describe the deliberation before the attempt? Or begin at the attempt?
- Does one character attempt to solve the problem? Or multiple characters? Or a wider group or faction? Whose idea was it to use this attempt?
- If this approach proves to be irrelevant, why does it seem like it might succeed? Does it feel that way because a group of people are taking action now? Or there's some coincidental events they think surely can't be coincidences? Or is there an antagonist toying with them?
- Does the problem notice literally? Or metaphorically? Do their attempts make the problem worse? Or do they understand it better now?
- Is the effect of the crunch mainly psychological: e.g. characters are hurt by their lack of understanding? Or does the failure have a bigger effect: weakening their ability to respond in the future, or hurting far more people beyond those who tried to act?

The Pride Crisis

Crunch • Event

In which a character is challenged about their behaviour: acting as if there really is no problem, everything is under control. When challenged as to why they still take low-grade actions to avoid the problem, they attempt to show that they are confident. Even if they don't do a minor thing, there is surely no real problem! There is.

QUESTIONS

- Is the challenge coming from another character who we know disagrees? Or from a wider group of people? Or perhaps from a reporter or a scholar or a law enforcer, simply trying to find the truth?
- How has the character been acting? Are you going to describe it explicitly, or imply it based on the challenge?
- Are they acting as if there is no problem because they have a reason to think that way? Are they naively optimistic? Or are they trying to avoid acting in a different way, by doing something they really don't want to do?
- What are the low-grade actions they are taking? Do they address the problem, even if in a cursory way? Or are they taking actions to protect their interest, while telling everyone else there is no problem? Or are they using others to “investigate”, but ignoring the results?
- What is the challenge? Is it an explicit challenge? Or do they not react well to being doubted?
- Why does skipping one “minor action” make such a difference? Is it purely a coincidence: like failing to check, at precisely the time when checking would be useful? Or were their actions keeping things together: e.g. a scrap of paper stuck over a crack “for purely aesthetic reasons” was holding the dam together?

Dominoes

Crunch • Event

In which we watch a sequence of problems escalate into an all consuming disaster. It begins with a minor issue, similar to those we've seen already. But that causes a worse knock-on effect, and then another. Eventually the downfall is so broad and rapid that everything has fallen.

QUESTIONS

- How many problems do you want in your sequence? Will you describe them all with the same detail? Or will there be a few mentions, but one receiving much more focus? Is there a particular moment in the escalation that is more important?
- What previous issue are you going to reference at the start of this story? How similar will it be? Will you mutate or reinterpret it somehow?
- Will you introduce the dominoes in the state before the fall, then return to the first and describe how each one falls in turn? Or will you introduce each catastrophe in one pass?
- What escalates? The severity of the issue? The resources required to respond? The number of people affected? The damage of the problem?
- Do the dominoes directly cause each other to fall? Do characters hamfistedly respond to the growing problem, causing the next one to fall? Is someone coordinating the sequence?
- What is the “everything” that falls at the end of the story? Is everything within a particular location? Everything a particular character is trying to preserve? Or simply everything you have established as dominoes in this story?

Betrayal

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Event

In which a character aligns with the other side, betraying those who thought they were one of them. We see their unhappiness with the way their group is progressing: frustrating at first, but not enough to change the course of the storyline. Until only one option is available. They either act, or they put up with their frustrations. They act.

QUESTIONS

- Is the one who betrays a major character or a minor character? What would the average listener have assumed about them before, that this story can build on and tweak?
- Are there sides in the story? If so, which is being left and which is being joined? Or is the betrayal moral? Social? Religious? Financial?
- What are they frustrated about? That people are not agreeing with them? That people not taking equal responsibility? Or that people are using them somehow? How is their frustration displayed?
- Do they knowingly betray? Or are they played by the other side?
- Is the betrayal social (I identify with this group now)? Or emotional? Practical? Physical? Ethical? Something else? Or some combination?
- Why is there no other alternative? Is that genuine? Or do they believe there is no alternative, by their own character traits, or by someone manipulating them?
- Do they think the betrayal will be significant? Or do they think it is a minor course correction? (How significant it will be is decided by the rest of the storyline.) Do they think it is a betrayal at all?

Conversion

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Event

In which a character who so far has sat on the border of commitment, decides where their loyalty lies. At first the choice seems to go one way, to the obvious, the easy side. But then they demonstrate that they are making the commitment wholeheartedly and without the ability to reverse.

QUESTIONS

- Is the one who converts a major character or a minor character? Do we know they have sat on the border so far, or is that a revelation?
- Why is this a question of loyalty? Loyalty to some other group, to their culture, to their own morality, identity, geographic or financial context, or something more subtle?
- Who will feel the change of loyalty, if anyone? How serious will that be? Will there be different people encouraged, or disappointed, on each side? Or is it a “be average or remarkable” choice?
- The prompt asks for a twist from the obvious to the unexpected, so how will you set up the obvious choice? Will it be obvious because that is a synonym for easy (see the next question)? Or will you describe other people who have made that choice, and how similar they are to the character? Or will the character make small choices in the obvious direction?
- Why is one choice easy? Is it the default, a choice they would make if they did nothing specific? Is it a choice that people around them have flocked towards? Is the other choice more physically difficult, more morally difficult, more socially difficult, more financially difficult?
- Why can the choice not be reversed? Has something changed about them? Have they changed their context, and cannot just decide to take it back (like selling all their money, or resigning their job)? Or have they betrayed others, who will not forgive them?

Alternative Reality

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation and Event

In which characters discuss the problem, and how they will respond. Between these exchanges, the storyteller describes events happening outside the conversation. It becomes clear the characters do not understand the whole scope of the problem. The story ends with an event that breaks into the discussion.

RULES

- To allow the story to move back and forth between conversation and events, each needs to be short.
- The storyteller can have a character in the conversation, but should try not to dominate.
- By raising their hand, the storyteller pauses the conversation and switches to storytelling to describe what happens. Raising their hands quickly should cause everyone else to stop immediately, even mid-sentence.

QUESTIONS

- Will the events relate to what is being said by the others? Or will they be variations of the twist at the end?
- What alternative realities might there be? Will they be genuinely held beliefs? Or characters exploring possibilities to try to get the truth? How will the twist surprise them?
- Why is it clear that the characters don't understand the complete truth? Because their opinions contradict each other? Or because they don't explain the events?
- Do characters change their mind over the conversation, simplifying the list of options, converging on a wrong explanation?

Suspicion

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation

In which, as characters discuss the problem, it becomes clear they have suspicions about the loyalty of the storyteller's character. The suspicious character does themselves no favours: with comments and reactions that further confuse the others. Eventually they are confronted.

QUESTIONS

- Is the suspicion already there, or does this discussion create it? How quickly does loyalty become the focus of the conversation?
- What loyalty is under suspicion? Honesty, morality, financial support, or support for a 'tagonist, willingness to act, guilt for something in the past, reliability, or something else? Is it the same suspicion for all other characters? Is the storyteller's character also suspicious of the others?
- How generally sceptical of each other are the characters? Are they surprised to find that the storyteller's character is suspicious? Are they surprised that it's particularly *that* character?
- What kinds of comments will make the suspicious character more suspicious? Will they deny things everyone knows to be true? Or things that everyone should believe? Things that none should know?
- Will their reactions be explicit, like denying other people's claims ("No, that didn't happen!"); or as subtle as a smirk after sad news or a mini shake of the head after an obvious claim?
- What is the final reaction? Do they admit to split loyalty? Deny it strongly, but without convincing anyone? Give a good excuse? Convince everyone, or only some? Or make a vague response and leave the question hanging for another story?

Radicalisation

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation

In which characters begin the conversation sharing their feelings on the problem. At first none of them seems confident it can be resolved. But as the conversation moves on, ideas emerge. These inspire others. It inspires them to feel more deeply and to be more determined that something must be done. At the end, the storyteller's character gives a call to arms.

QUESTIONS

- Will the “call to arms” be a surprise to the others, allowing them to express their reaction on the spur of the moment? Or will the storyteller suggest where the story should end before the story begins, so the others can feed off each other to work towards it?
- Will the storyteller's character be part of the change of mind in this conversation? Or were they always radical, waiting for the others to take a side? Or are their contributions encouraging the others to that radical conclusion?
- How will each character see their ideas develop? Will they become more angry about the situation? More empathetic to those suffering? More confident in their ability to respond? Stronger as a group, where each would be independently weak? More knowledgeable? Better resourced?
- How radical will the radicalisation be? Does the group decide to do something that no one else would attempt or would others seem to be more capable, or more willing? Or do they decide to act in a way few would think *they* were capable of?
- Will the twist reveal the radical core of the storyteller's character? Or is it a twist because they seemed the least radical of all?

Doom

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character is wracked by pessimism and the others rally around them to convince them that there is still hope. At first this seems like an easy job. But they explain more reasons for their sense of doom, including some new nuggets of information, and hope seems more tenuous than ever.

RULES

- (Advice) Your group can choose how it wants to play this, but it can be easy to make things bleak. That can bring the storyline down for everyone. Be careful.

QUESTIONS

- Why does the storyteller's character react with pessimism? Are they simply a "glass half empty" person? Or did something specific happen to them? In either case, do the others know that? Or do they have their own explanations for their pessimism? How will the storyteller's character challenge those explanations?
- Are they pessimistic about the outcome of the storyline? About their character's ability to cope with the problem? About the ability to address the problem? Or are they touring around all those explanations, to find any reason to be pessimistic? Is the problem something deeper?
- What are the new nuggets of information? Will the others deny it, or be shocked? Do they change people's opinion of the character, as well as their opinion of the doom?
- Will the story end with everyone pessimistic? Or with them less optimistic that "things will be alright on their own", motivating them to act, rather than to despair?

Hidden Depth

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character is sidelined in a conversation about something they are thought not to be relevant to. The conversation continues for a while, they begin to add little comments which are brushed aside, until eventually they make a point the others listen to. The character displays their hidden, unexpected, depth.

QUESTIONS

- How is the storyteller's character sidelined? Are they not contributing? Are they not asked relevant questions, preferring to address someone else? Are they interrupted when they try to speak? Or are their points ignored?
- Why is the character thought not to be relevant? Is it prejudice: do people think they are a generally irrelevant character? Is it more focused: e.g. they are talking about something complicated, and this character is not so bright? Or is it a specific issue: everyone thinks that character was nowhere near the event they are talking about?
- What kinds of comments will be brushed aside? Different facts or opinion? Or are they trying to make one single point, adding more specific detail, or arguing their opinion in different ways?
- The twist shows the character's depth: is it the depth of their personality, their expertise, their specific knowledge of a specific event, their connections with a group, their history, or something else?
- What kind of reaction does the storyteller want? Do they want the story to end with the revelation, with expressions only from the others? Or will they deliver the twist a little before the end, and invite the others to express their change of opinion?

Needs For Reasons

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation

In which characters discuss their cooperation and their commitment to remain faithful to each other. Each is hoping to get something they need from the cooperation, but each wants specific commitments from the others. Awash with imagining their own hopes met, they don't seem to take the other requests so seriously.

RULES

- This is an unusual prompt because it doesn't have a specific twist. Don't let the conversation meander: the storyteller should add a twist at the end. Suggestions are in the questions below.

QUESTIONS

- Do the characters understand what cooperation might mean? Or is that part of the disagreement?
- Are they discussing what faithfulness will mean? Or is faithfulness assumed by everyone: it's just the reasons that are out of kilter?
- Does each character want something different from the cooperation (e.g. one wants to remain out of the public eye, another wants to make sure they don't get arrested, another is scared of physical danger), or are they all trying to limit a similar risk (e.g. making sure they are not spending all the money)?
- Does the story end with the storyteller's character escalating their needs? With them realising the mismatch and suppressing their desire? With a suggestion to resolve it, whether naive or not? Or even with the description of an outside event that makes disagreements mostly (but maybe not entirely) irrelevant?
- How will characters show they are "awash with imagining"? Do they suppress their needs, misinterpret someone else's comment as a "guarantee", or allow the group-think to take priority?

Negotiation

Ratcheting or Unravelling • Conversation

In which characters who at the start are far apart, try to negotiate cooperation. What begins as mistrust, mellows as they realise they share some important goals. It seems like some form of cooperation is within reach. Then the storyteller's character makes their true feelings known. The other side takes deep offence.

QUESTIONS

- Why are the characters far apart? Have they previously acted in ways that contradict each other? Are they from different types of people, different factions, locations, cultures, life experiences? Were they previously together, but now commitment requires more?
- Does the conversation need to begin with some truth and reconciliation, or can characters get straight to the point, even somewhat sceptically?
- What are the important goals they share? Are they all clustered around the problem of the storyline, or are there other goals?
- What will the cooperation be? Something general, like a plan to be friends, or work together, or to create their own faction, or 'tgo-nism'? Or purely specific, like a decision to go to a specific place, file a lawsuit, buy a tool, carry out one action?
- Why is the cooperation not trivial? What would they each have to lose if it didn't work?
- Does the twist return the characters to their original disagreement? Or does it introduce a new problem?
- Does the storyteller's character genuinely reveal their "true character"? Or is it the kind of thing someone says without thinking, based on habit, that others will label as "true character", but the character will also be surprised at?

The Rising

Unravelling • Event

In which major characters inspire, incite, and mobilise a group of others, leading them to protest and take action. The reaction takes time to build, but then something happens, and the rise is rapid and severe.

QUESTIONS

- Who are the people that the characters mobilise? Is it a general population, or a specific type of people? Is it a group that they belong to? Do they have power over them, or is mobilisation an exercise in influence?
- The prompt suggests that the characters “inspire, incite, and mobilise” the others. Are they three different actions? Is one of them the main approach: e.g. they only inspire, but others incite and mobilise the crowd?
- Is the effect they have deliberate or accidental? If deliberate, is it exactly what they hoped for, or did they want something else? If accidental, are they happy with the result, or horrified?
- Why does the reaction take time to build? How will you describe that? Will there be a series of small build events? Will the story focus on the last moment, but summarise the build? Or were the characters unaware of the build until the rapid rising began?
- What happens? Does it set up the severity of the twist, or the rapid rise? Is it something the characters do, or is it something external? Is it deliberate, or is it accidental?
- Why is the rise rapid and severe? A severe escalation, or a severe effect? Is the severity something the characters would’ve wanted, or something they would be horrified by?
- Will the twist show the “rapid and severe rise”, or the main characters’ reaction?

Factions

Unravelling • Event

In which characters seem motivated to resolve the problem. But they don't agree how. Groups condense around different approaches, and seem to develop as much animosity for each other as for the problem itself. A character attempts to bring the factions together. The result is significant. But surprising.

RULES

- This is an event not a conversation, so don't puppet the disagreement of other major characters, particularly if your group owns their major characters.

QUESTIONS

- What is the group who disagree? Do they disagree about the real problem, the action to take, how to incite it, how to manage its consequences, a combination, or something else?
- How will you show groups condensing around different approaches? Can that be physical, like attending different demonstrations, joining different factions, or mobilising at different locations? Is it resource-based, like receiving more money? Or is it more social, like a subtle change in the *feel* of a community?
- Why did the groups develop more animosity? Is it new jealousy, long established enmity, frustration, pride or ego, or do they believe that any other approach is effectively "losing to the problem"?
- Why is the twist surprising and significant? Is the content surprising, or is it surprising that any suggestion would be made (by that particular character, or by any character)?
- Will the twist be the suggestion? Or the reaction to it?

Extremism

Unravelling • Event

In which a character acts so strongly that they begin to repulse those around them. At first, the action seems quite reasonable, for someone like them. Then they go further than anyone expects. At first it seems like an unintended overreaction, purely an emotional snap, but then it is not so clear.

QUESTIONS

- What is quite reasonable for someone like them? How will you establish that? Before the action, or in the reaction of others afterwards?
- The prompt identifies two actions: a reasonable one and an extreme one. Will your story focus on that contrast between two events, or will it have more: like a scale of increasing severity?
- Will you directly respond to the actions in the story? Or will you describe the reaction of groups who witness it?
- Are there characters who excuse the action (or would excuse it, if it were public), while others have suspected the storyteller's character all along? How big are those groups, and how will you show that in the story?
- Does the "extreme reaction" cause you to re-interpret the "reasonable action"? Was it seeing whether the extreme version was necessary? Or setting it up?
- In the prompt it is ambiguous, but have you decided how intentional was the "extreme reaction"? Was it planned, a spur of the moment decision, something in between, or will you improvise?
- Do they seem to enjoy acting that way, are they surprised to feel that way, or do they immediately regret their action? If the last, then what is not so clear: the effect, other peoples reaction, how honest they are being, if they are entirely in control?

Powerless Power

Unravelling • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character is pressed by others to act in the way everyone believes they can. At first they seem reluctant, but as the conversation continues they have good reasons: they are not able to do what people think they can. The others try to reassure them, but the reasons are concrete. They are not what others thought.

QUESTIONS

- How do others want them to act? As an equal member of the team: they all plan to do something, so this character should as well? Or does everyone think they have a particular power, like strength, influence, expertise, finance, or location?
- Will their reluctance be shown through quietness, argumentativeness, offering alternative plans, outright refusal, or trying to change the topic? If their initial response is not to give reasons, how will they segue into that: voluntarily, calmly, or will they be forced into it?
- How will others respond? Are they surprised? Confused? Frustrated?
- What kind of reasons will be on the way to the twist? How will they be different, but somehow “good reasons”?
- Were the others right to think wrongly? Had the character lied about their ability before? Or have they assumed something that was never true? Had the storyteller's character traded on the misunderstanding?
- What will the storyteller use as the final twist? A confession: of the lack of ability, or their fundamental lack of will to act that way? A deeper reality? An alternative reality?

Fracture

Unravelling • Conversation

In which characters discuss more than one possible plan, each preferred by some of the group. To a neutral listener, it is unclear which plan is better, but the characters are committed to their preference. The discussion becomes increasingly fraught, and it seems likely that they will fracture and separate. One character delivers the ultimatum.

RULES

- I hope this is an obvious rule: be careful, and allow red lines. Faking a blazing row might be fun for some but not for everyone, and the least likely to strongly object are often the most wary!

QUESTIONS

- Do the players want to discuss plans before the conversation: to make sure all the options are covered? Or will each pick an idea closest to their character and introduce it during the conversation?
- Each character becomes committed to their preference, but is their preference their own idea? Or do they condense into allegiances?
- How fraught is fraught? Will you role-play a full argument, a civilised disagreement, snide comments, or “negging”?
- Why is the ultimatum an ultimatum? Why is it not just another part of the discussion? Is it an escalation (e.g. “I will treat you as the enemy then”), independence (e.g. “you’re doing this with me or I’m on my own”), abandonment (e.g. “I’m leaving unless you do it my way”)?
- Is the ultimatum the twist (delivered by the storyteller’s character)? Or does it set up the twist: they begrudgingly agree to a single plan, or they decide to go in their own direction. Or do they call the bluff of the ultimatum?

An Unpleasant Fact

Unravelling • Conversation

In which the storyteller's character shares some information with the others. It undermines their plan for success. Though the other characters want to deny the news, it becomes clear they will need to face it.

QUESTIONS

- What information would the storyteller's character know that the others would not? How did they discover it: through some action, through their connections, through their unique understanding? Will that be part of this story?
- Will the twist of the story be the revelation, or will the revelation be the problem (a problem because it undermines their plan for success), with the "need to face it" being the twist?
- What is the current plan for success, and why would it not work now?
- What would the implication be if they did change tack? Would it involve convincing others, losing what they have invested already, pride, or hard won hope?
- Will characters deny the news itself, that it is *new* information at all, or its implication for their plan? Does the storyteller want this to be coordinated, or should every character pull in different directions?
- What does the storyteller's character feel about sharing the information? Are they as saddened, or does it vindicate their previous pessimism? Does it demonstrate how powerful they are (e.g. intelligent, well connected, investigative), or does it place all the characters together at the bottom.
- How does the storyteller want to end the story? With the revelation, with a new plan, with a summary of the situation, with a rallying cry, or with an impossible hope?

A Plan Interrupted

Unravelling • Conversation and Event

In which characters discuss their plans for how to achieve their goals. There are disagreements, yes, but there is progress. It becomes clear how they will commit to resolving the issue. As the conversation reaches its resolution, a shocking event occurs. It throws everything into turmoil.

RULES

- The storyteller can have a character in the conversation, but should try not to dominate. By raising their hand they immediately stop the conversation, even mid-sentence, and switch to storytelling to describe what happens.

QUESTIONS

- Are the different plans completely different, with different goals and different strategies? Or are they different emphases, wanting to prioritise different steps along the way?
- How should the disagreements be represented? Specifically (e.g. this is our disagreement, and these are the ways it would change the plan), emotionally, arrogantly (e.g. “do my plan because it’s me!”), practically?
- How does the storyteller want the discussion to come to resolution? Will their character unify disagreements? Or will other characters drift toward some common ground? How will this agreement be scheduled?
- How long will the shocking event be? Will the storyteller tease it for just a few seconds, or do they want to narrate a more meaty story?
- Will the twist totally subvert the plans (this is a story in the unravelling phase, so be careful of rewriting the whole plot)? Just interrupt the discussion? Or something in between, like making their plans more urgent and their discussion more like time wasting?

The Consequences

Unravelling • Conversation

In which characters discuss their plans, but not the impact that their plans will have on others. A character tries to raise the issue, but others misinterpret it to be purely about the effects of the other side. The character presses their point. An outspoken character insists that the group has to face the prospect of all consequences.

QUESTIONS

- Why are characters not discussing consequences? Has it not occurred to them, do they think it is not their responsibility, are they trying to avoid it, aware there may be thorny problems? Do they have a reason for lacking empathy with the affected groups?
- Will the storyteller have their character both raise the issue and outspokenly insist? Or will they choose someone else to raise the issue? If so how will they deliver the ending: by recognising the points that the character was making, or as if it was their idea all along!
- Are the “other side” ’tagonists: so they are imagining how bad it will be for them, if those characters achieve their goals? Or is it the other side of the problem: how wonderful it will be when the problem is resolved? Are there other ways to modify the issues, to avoid dealing with the consequences? Will different characters choose different misinterpretations?
- How forcefully will the character press their point? How will the others react? Will they escalate their objections? Were their misinterpretations accidental?
- What will the twist at the end of the story be? The outspoken character making their point? A suggestion to change their action because of it? Will everyone react, or agree?

A Sacrifice – A Victory

Ending • Event

In which the protagonists face down the antagonists, but everything they do seems futile. Their plans seem to fail. Until they sacrifice something deeply important, something established early in the story. The sacrifice unlocks the final victory. A bittersweet ending.

QUESTIONS

- What do the protagonists attempt, and how does it seem futile? Is it genuinely futile, or do they just interpret it that way (i.e. is there irony because they probably didn't need to sacrifice)?
- Is the sacrifice personally important? Or important beyond the group? Of those things you mentioned in the story so far, what is it?
- Did the antagonists recognise their weakness? Or did they believe they had triumphed?
- Is the sacrifice a surprise to the protagonists? Did they know it was a possibility, but wanted to avoid it; or did the futility cause them to think things that were previously unthinkable?
- How close were the protagonists to defeat, before the sacrifice was viable? Was it always an instant win, if only they knew?
- Did the protagonists feel ready for the encounter? Was it initiated by them? A surprise for everyone? Or instigated by their opponents?
- Is this a private event or a public spectacle? How much of the world will be involved in the conflict? Do the two sides want different levels of publicity?

Deus Ex Machina, Denied

Ending • Event

In which the opposing major characters face off against each other, with no clear winner between them. Until a far bigger power intervenes on one side. There should now be no doubt who will be victorious. The story should be over. But it isn't. Confidence in certain victory allows the other side to steal success.

QUESTIONS

- What is the higher power? Is it something that has been mentioned before, or is it entirely random? How much bigger is far bigger? Far bigger in power, in size, in geography, in number, or something else?
- When will the higher power arrive in the story? Is it at the end: part of the twist, leading to success? Or is it mentioned early, leaving the success as a separate twist?
- Does the higher power act as if it cares who will win? Are they only motivated to end the conflict? Or is their intervention only coincidental?
- Does it act on one side explicitly, or does it only accidentally benefit one side?
- Why should there be no doubt who will be victorious? Who's doubt: those on the confident side, or both opposing sides, independent people on the outside, or listeners to the story?
- Why should the story be over, when it isn't? What would anyone have done to make it over?
- How will victory be stolen? Stolen literally, e.g. an object, a person, a verdict, an idea? Or figuratively, because victory may have gone the other way?

Success By Failure

Ending • Event

In which the opposing major characters face off, with the balance of power swinging from one side to the other. Each commits more strongly, with more costly resources. Until one side seems to suddenly abandon the struggle, allowing their opponents to win. In the final twist, we see they have lost this struggle, but have achieved a far bigger victory.

QUESTIONS

- What is the “face off” situation? Did one of them instigate it, did either try to avoid it?
- How does the balance of power swing from one side to the other? What actions are they each taking to change the balance? Is it a balance of likely outcomes (this side looks like it’s winning now the other side looks like it’s winning), a balance of influence (more people join this side, more people join that side), or even a physical balance (e.g. wrestling on a teetering ledge).
- What are the resources being committed? Are they literally costly, emotionally costly, socially costly?
- Why does the winning side abandon the struggle? Are they giving up on possibly winning? Or changing their strategy?
- Does the winning side realise it will allow them to win, or does that surprise both? Does everyone have the same opinion, or do some on the winning side react differently?
- Who is reacting to the abandonment: the losing side is most obvious, but will you describe the reaction of independent observers, the public? Does the winning side agree with any?
- Is the “bigger victory” different to the one they were trying to achieve? Who is surprised at the result, one group, or everyone? Do the losers think they won?

Unwelcome Success

Ending • Event

In which the opposing major characters face off, and the conflict escalates in severity and consequences. What begins as a conflict between them spreads until it involves many others, over a much bigger scale. Both sides double down on victory, until eventually there is nothing they are unwilling to commit. One side achieves victory. But it is clear immediately, and horribly, how much the victory has cost.

QUESTIONS

- What is the “face off” situation? Did one of them instigate it, did either try to avoid it?
- What are the consequences that are escalating? Consequences for them, consequences for their futures, consequences for the environment, consequences for other individuals?
- In what way will it “involve many others”? Will the consequences involve them? Will the conflict itself involve them? Or will others be compelled to pick a side?
- What is the bigger scale? Is that a synonym for the “many others”, or is it some other scale: e.g. a bigger location, a bigger financial effect, a bigger media catastrophe?
- How will you demonstrate that there is “nothing they are unwilling to commit”? Will they actually commit things? Or will they show their willingness somehow?
- Which side wins? Does it matter? Do those on neither side care?
- Do the winners regret their victory?
- Will the story end with the winners realising the consequences? Or with a description of the consequences? Or with the description of after effects, soon after or a little time later?

The 'Tagonist Flip

Ending • Event

In which the protagonists face down the antagonists. When it seems like the antagonists are on the verge of defeat, they find a new depth of strength, and seem to succeed. The protagonists are defeated. In the final moments, we see the antagonists act in a way the protagonists never would have assumed. There was a hidden fact, and the reality is now revealed: the protagonists were never in the right, the antagonists were the real protagonists.

RULES

- Your players may find it morally, emotionally, or in any other way unacceptable to flip in this way. Everyone should agree to the plot before the storyteller begins. This may take longer than the usual 1 minute prep time.
- (Advice) This story can be compelling, but eye-rollingly random, unless seeds have been sewn throughout the storyline. It is better to decide that this will be the ending early in the storyline.

QUESTIONS

- The most important and difficult question is: what is the “hidden fact” that could make the protagonists wrong and the antagonists right? Did they both have a common enemy, but different strategies: so one was correct because they were more successful, or caused less collateral damage? Were they competing to influence people: but the “antagonists” had more honourable intent, misrepresented in previous stories?
- What could the antagonists do when they succeed?
- How do they act differently? How do people react? Is it surprising to people beyond the protagonists?

A Generation On

Epilogue • Event

In which the the world is both similar, yet bears the fingerprints of those events. Here are places we recognise, but none are quite the same. And there are two characters (new or ageing extras), one who's life has benefited from those events, another who has suffered. There is a hint that, one day, the struggle may resume.

QUESTIONS

- What is similar about the world? Is this story set in the same location? With the same characters, or with the same factions? Or somewhere else, with the same structure (e.g. the spaceship around a different planet, the boat arriving at a different island, a new crime reported)?
- What places do we recognise? Literal places, or metaphorical places (e.g. a newspaper headline, a qualification exam)? What is different? Physical differences, (like a ruined building, or safety barriers around a pit) or structural differences (like different wording used in the newspaper, a specific question on the test)?
- How will you introduce the characters? Do we know their life before, what it was or would've been? Or does that need establishing now? Will you describe their life, or show moments from them?
- How has one character benefited and the other has suffered? Is it obvious, or is there a surprise (e.g. those similar to the protagonists have fared worse than those similar to the antagonists)?
- How might the struggle resume? Will it be the same struggle? Stylistically or symbolically similar? Or is it only related because they are both "struggles": are the details fundamentally different, even the exact opposite?
- How will you hint at the possibility of resumption, without telling the next story?

History

Epilogue • Event

In which a historian of the far future discovers a surprising fact about this event. By their time, the story has mutated into something rather different. Then, one surprising piece of evidence is found. It seems contradictory. The historian stakes their reputation on a new narrative, of what happened and why.

QUESTIONS

- How far in the future is this? Have several similar generations past? Or is this so far later that technology, even the species, is radically different? Will you hint about that far future, in the time you have for this story?
- Why was this story remembered for so long? Was it significant for a lot of people at the time? Was a relative, descendant, or friend on the way to historic notoriety, referring to it as their founding moment? Or did it become a cultural fable: like a story, a painting, or a song?
- Is the historian in a similar location, or somewhere different, even dramatically different? How far has the story travelled?
- What kinds of mutation have modified the story? Will you give specific details? Or is it more of a sense of scope: e.g. a story specific to one location or one faction is now treated as if it were worldwide?
- Does the historian correct some problem: making a corrupted story a little more correct? Or the opposite, do they find some fact, and interpret it even more bizarrely?
- What is the twist to this story: the revelation of the new narrative (e.g. in a conference), or the staking of their career (e.g. going public with something previously secret – “That spiritual being most people adore? Turns out they were entirely human!”)?

To Begin Again

Epilogue • Event

In which a child of the near future is told the story, simplified and largely one-sided. A few older people are trying to keep the memory alive, though to most it feels irrelevant. But by trying so hard to ignore it, the world is becoming more ready to repeat it.

QUESTIONS

- Will you begin by telling the story, as if to a child? Or with the older people trying to keep the memory alive?
- Who are trying to keep the memory alive? Are they linked to the people involved in the storyline? Is it their personal memory? Or does it have other significance? Are there efforts purely egalitarian, or do they have more sinister undertones?
- Why does it feel irrelevant now? Is it treated as a myth (e.g. “it never happened”, “it wasn’t like that”)? As a pathetic failure, even a joke (e.g. “I wouldn’t be that stupid”, “it was nothing to do with us”)? A primitive problem (e.g. “we know better now”, “technology protects us”)? Or a specific change (e.g. “that faction is long gone”, “the city is no longer on the coast”),
- If children find it irrelevant, and a few older people are trying to keep the memory alive, where does everyone else stand?
- Who is trying hard to ignore it? How are they trying: trying to repress the truth, downplay its significance, change the interpretation, create an alternative history, or something else?
- How will you show the possibility of it repeating? A similar rumble of a problem restarting? Or some important safety barrier being removed?
- How will you set up the connection? Things related to the original storyline, or things you will imply by hint, things that may *seem* unrelated?

At The Beginning

Epilogue • Event

In which we skip backwards in time to the very start of the storyline. Here in a place that became important, a character that was almost forgotten has a choice. One option causes the all consuming problem, in the other option it would not. With hindsight, it is obvious, but they toy with both. After considering, they choose what they believe is the best option. Fate is now set.

RULES

- This epilogue cannot trump the rest of the storyline. Do not let it contradict choices or reasons that have been established before.
- The character who makes the choice is usually a new minor character or an extra from a previous story.

QUESTIONS

- The character almost forgotten: were they mentioned in the storyline or were they entirely forgotten? Or was the choice forgotten?
- Why does one option cause the problem? Does it directly cause it, like opening some gate that was always meant to be shut? Or does it miss the obvious solution, like failing to close an open gate that has been accidentally left open?
- How will you show that the outcome would be different? Will it be obvious (e.g. a button pressed or not pressed)? Will you reveal some new deeper cause for the problem (e.g. there was a letter, but a cleaner trashed it, thinking it was meaningless)? Or will you describe two alternative realities with different outcomes?
- Does the character think their choice is significant? Significant for even themselves? Significant to anyone else? Is the action purely convenience? Well-meaning? Selfish?

After The Last

Epilogue • Event

In which the last person with the memory of these events has recently passed away. We see whoever (or whatever) is left picking through their possessions: things they kept from those events, and things from other times. Their things are distributed, and nothing can tell the whole story now. The exact details may be lost forever.

QUESTIONS

- Who was the last person who passed away? Is that a little ironic (e.g. the last soldier from the American Civil War was a Confederate), or was it someone entirely unrelated (e.g. a child who watched Queen Victoria's funeral cortege).
- How recent was their passing? You can take that at face value: a few days or weeks ago, or more loosely: recently being "just one" aeon ago.
- Who or what is left? The descendants of the people involved in the storyline? Different people, even different species?
- Why are they picking through those possessions? Picking through like someone organising their inheritance? Or like a scholar trying to catalogue it? Or a discoverer trying to understand them?
- What possessions are you going to describe, how will they reference the setting, and the events? What other places, characters, factions, or themes do you want to reference?
- Why are their things distributed? Distributed among different interested parties? Sold off? Distributed into landfill?
- Will you describe what is lost forever? Is it the information, or a specific (e.g. evocative, historical, important, protective, valuable) item? Or will you allow the details to be inferred by the listeners?

A Bundle *of* Gentle Prompts

This is a set of prompts that can be used for any game. It isn't organised into a storyline, so many of these prompts can be added anywhere: as setting, ratchet, or unravelling in a regular storyline. Or they can be used in their own gentle games.

These prompts should be general, so they can be used in any genre. Because they are gentle, they might be less useful in a high-octane storyline, but even then it can be useful to take the occasional relaxing breath. The stories are mostly emotional: either revealing aspects of one character, or the social interaction of a conversation.

PROMPTS

10 events and 10 conversations.

On The Edge of Support

Event

In which a character deals with the behaviour of someone they love. We see how they are asked to deal with others' dissatisfaction with their person. At first this conflict is easy to avoid, but then more frustrating events occur. Each time we see how the character compensates, accommodates, and tries to excuse them. Eventually they are confronted with a problem they can no longer ignore. They have to either double down on being a "true believer", or confront their love.

QUESTIONS

- Who is their love? A romantic or spousal love? A child? A friend? An idol (like a writer or an artist, a music or a movie star)? A mentor or an adherent?
- How will you show others' dissatisfaction? Will you describe it? Storytell scenes? Have the character justify their feelings themselves (me-thinks they protest too much)? Will you transition when things escalate?
- Is the problem socially significant, like a spouse accused of a heinous crime? Or a minor disappointment, like a child getting a reputation for being loose with the truth? Or a moral challenge, like discovering their donations are being spent on luxury. Or even amusing, like a "fussy food" pet being fed by others around the village. Tip: You can allow this to be the gentlest of gentle prompts, so don't feel pulled towards a dominating plot.
- Why does the final step confront them, and why can it no longer be ignored? Is it too serious for them to morally ignore? Or does someone not allow them to avoid it?
- Which way will you go in the twist? Will it have emotional or relationship impact, financial or legal impact, or something of only narrative significance?

Reconsideration

Event

In which a character is presented with a simple and rapid choice. They respond instinctively, avoiding any special action or any investment; they continue with their day. They can't ignore their choice. When something random occurs, almost to poke fun at their inaction, they return to make a different choice.

QUESTIONS

- What is the choice? The options are infinite: e.g. a homeless person asking for a donation, a job advert in the paper, a lost ring on the side of the street, a rain cloud that probably won't bring rain, what seemingly trivial choice will the character reconsider?
- What will the instinctive response tell us about this character? A deep foible? A fundamental inconsistency? Or is this character (as we all are, surely) accidentally insensitive?
- Do they initially avoid investing time, money, emotion, risk of disappointment, status, something else?
- Why can't they ignore their choice? Can they not stop thinking about it? Or do events keep making them regret it?
- How unrelated is the unrelated event? For example: they find a £5 note after refusing to help a homeless person, their Junior colleague announces their own better job, they receive a plastic ring in the Christmas cracker, a haywire grass sprinkler sprays them, and so on.
- If the event "almost pokes fun", will that wry humour be aimed at the audience? Or will the character feel it too? Or will they be upset?
- Are they able to make a different choice? Or has the opportunity now gone?

Searching

Event

In which a character is trying to find something. Initially they begin to look, and we understand what they are looking for. At least: what they think they are looking for. They look in various places, revealing other aspects of their life, but their goal is not there. As they intensify their search, more of their normal is disturbed, until they finally discover what they have been trying to find. It is not quite what they expected.

QUESTIONS

- The obvious question: what are they looking for? Something physical, a person, or even something more abstract, like a memory, an emotion or a state of mind?
- Where are they looking?
- What different aspects of their life can be hinted at by their choice of places to look? If they are looking for a something physical, could they search piles of memorabilia, old clothes, or things in the fluff behind the sofa? If they are looking for someone, do they visit places we wouldn't expect them to go? If they are trying to find a half-forgotten website, their searches could be very telling!
- In what way could the search be increasingly disruptive? Is it making more physical mess? Or drawing more unwanted notice from others? Or forcing them to visit things they'd rather be forgotten?
- How is the reality different? Did they find something different? Or did it have different implications for their life? Is that disappointing or beneficial, or both at the same time?
- Will your twist be the revelation of what is found? Or the character's reaction to it? Or, if you describe others, their reaction?

Memento: Then and Now

Event

In which a character finds and interacts with something that is important to them. Time slips back to the past when the Memento wasn't significant. We see the character, in many ways the same, in many ways different. We see them act in a way that might be surprising for those who know them now. We see why the memento is significant. Back to the later time we see their reaction, to the item and to their history.

QUESTIONS

- What is the memento? Is it something they own, like a souvenir or gift, a photograph or postcard? Or is it a particular place, like a scenic view, or a sculpture at the corner of a park – significant to them for a personal reason? Is it valued, like those above, or regretted, like a scar, an embarrassing tattoo, a broken piece of furniture that used to be whole, or the box of something valuable with nothing left inside?
- How will you describe the time slip? A quick set up (e.g. “Ten years earlier...”, “Ten years later...”), purely with present and past tense (e.g. “I open the box...”, “I was in the workshop...”), or do you want to make it a feature (e.g. spending a minute or so reversing time, or the narrative version of a match cut)?
- What similarities and differences will you describe? Physical (e.g. before he was bald, when she wore Emo clothes), or emotional, religious, political, moral, financial, or social development?
- What is their surprising action? Is it the action of acquiring the memento itself, like a surprising tattoo? Or is the connection less direct, e.g. they bought a postcard to remember a dodgy holiday.

Rebellion

Event

In which a character begins the story by living their life normally. We follow them through activities that are part of their every day. But it becomes clear that they are increasingly itching for something different. We see them act furtively, then check if they are being observed, then they act differently. In a way that feels surprising. Not only the action, the result is surprising.

QUESTIONS

- How much time will you spend on their normal life? Just mentioning it, or describing events, so you can set up contrasts? How many activities will you include?
- How does it become clear that they are “itching for something different”? Do they explicitly admit it? Or do we infer it from their actions? Or their reactions to what their normal life demands of them? Or would a listener *know* they must be unhappy (e.g. a victim being bullied)?
- Who, or what, is the action rebelling against? A specific authority? A morality code? Social norms? the character’s resolutions? Or their rules about themselves?
- Is the rebellious action significant to anyone else, like a character suddenly stealing from a shop; or is it more of a character note, like a health-obsessed character buying a cream donut?
- When they check to see if they are being observed, are they hoping to be seen, hoping to be invisible, or somewhere in between: hoping to be caught?
- Who would find the action surprising? Everyone who knows them? Or only themselves?

Changing Friendship

Event

In which a character interacts with someone they know. The interaction begins normally, but as it continues something isn't quite right. The interaction begins to veer in a different direction, with both of them seeming to pretend nothing is changing. Until the change is unavoidable. The character must make a choice. The relationship must change.

QUESTIONS

- This story is focused on the relationship between two characters, so how will you structure it? Will you describe both of their actions (if this prompt is part of a storyline where your group is owning major characters, be careful not to speak for someone else), or will this be a report by one character (e.g. "Here's how my best friend unexpectedly became my lover...")?
- What is the relationship before and after the change? Is the new friendship stronger or weaker than previous?
- Is it as significant as separating from a lifelong spouse, or as minor as realising a childhood friend is no longer "their kind of person." Or is it a change in friendship style rather than depth: like a phone call from a pen-pal, or a letter from a next door neighbour? Or is "friendship" more metaphorical, with the change being more functional (e.g. "my soon-to-retire boss became my drug dealer", "my student became my lecturer")?
- How can the change initially be ignored? What then makes it unavoidable?
- Would the character like to avoid the choice? Can you separate emotions caused by the "unavoidable choice" and the change?
- Will the twist at the end be their choice? Or will you leave it dangling: so the twist is showing that a choice is needed?

Infiltration

Event

In which a character is trying to go somewhere they are not allowed. They begin by using the acceptable space in an acceptable way, gradually paying more attention to the other place. They begin to try to access it subtly, in a way that no one would notice, or detect afterwards. They fail. Ultimately they act boldly and the result is immediate.

QUESTIONS

- Where are they trying to go? Is it a private space, like someone's home, a room, a drawer? Or a prohibited space somewhere public, like the back room of a shop, a hut in a park, a gender-segregated area? Or an exit they aren't allowed to take, like a holiday, leaving behind a wearisome friend, sliding behind a shoplifting scanner? Or is the space more abstract, like an email account, someone's hobby equipment, another language or identity?
- Does the character want to go there from the start of the story? Or does their desire change? Is this a psychological change, or is there a specific reason for wanting to go there (like wanting to use a staff lift, rather than wait even longer for the public facility)?
- Would it be unusual for anyone to want to go there? Do you want to make that part of the intrigue? Does it tell us something significant about the character?
- Who doesn't allow them? Who might object? Or could it be their own morality? Or their opinion about themselves?
- What is the subtle failure, and what is the bold success?
- Is the infiltration deceptively simple? Is the result surprisingly boring? Scandalous or salacious? Or are they forcefully denied and immediately given the consequences of trying?
- Will the twist be the contrast between failure and success, or the details of the immediate result?

Noticed, Unknown

Event

In which the story begins by describing the normality of a location. There are people about their everyday lives and actions that are not unusual. A character enters the space, unaware that they will be significant. They interact naturally. For a while. Then they do something different. Something everyone else will remember. The character leaves, without realising the effect they had.

QUESTIONS

- How will you describe the “normality of a location”? Zooming in from its physical structure to the individuals within it? Or is the physical structure irrelevant, do you want to begin with people?
- How many people do you want to describe? Do you want to describe them individually, or as a group?
- What is the remarkable action? Something they did, like an unreasonably generous or stingy tip (deliberate, accidental, or clueless); a social faux pas (I once put my empty drink glass on a table “sculpture” in a gallery, oops); something other people have been waiting to see (being the millionth customer, buying a product that has been unsold for a decade)? Or something they are, like a vicar who forgot to remove their dog-collar before going in the pagan shop, the first wheelchair user after the space has been remodelled to cope, or asking for a hamburger in a vegan restaurant?
- Why does the character not realise the effect they had? Is the real effect bigger or smaller, e.g. they expect people to be scandalised, but nobody cared; or they accidentally caused a scandal.
- What is the effect they have had? How broad is the effect? Will you describe how people respond?

Diet

Event

In which a character makes a series of frugal choices. Some of them are instinctive, some of them require thought, some a reconsideration of their established routine. Their reaction to each tells us something about their character, and their current situation. And then there is a final choice. It seems simple; obvious. Their response is surprising.

QUESTIONS

- Are the frugal choices limiting cost? Or limiting the effect? Or limiting their social or reputational impact?
- How will you describe and distinguish between choices that are “instinctive”, “require thoughts”, or “reconsideration of routine”? Will you try to imply this in your description? Or is that not important, so will you lightly mention it or not describe it at all?
- How many choices do you want to describe? And how will each be slightly different? Is the difference in how the choice is made (e.g. the “instinctive”, “require thoughts” or “reconsideration” categories)? The choice itself (e.g. frugal food, then entertainment, then transport)? Or their emotional reaction to making each choice (e.g. gradually becoming more annoyed)?
- Is the “current situation” you are describing physical, financial, social, moral, emotional, a relationship, a profession, or something else?
- Why will the final choice be surprising. Is their choice only surprising to the story listeners: did they always intend to make this choice, and the frugal choices were preparing for that. Or are they surprised at their own action?

Bad News

Event

In which a character begins the story by living their normal life. Although not exceptionally good, they are on the better end of the normal range. They receive bad news. The news interrupts their life and changes their state of mind. As the story ends, we see their reaction. It is not as obvious as we expect.

QUESTIONS

- What is the character’s normal life? Would most other people find it normal?
- What is the “normal range”? Will you describe that, imply it, show a range of situations, or assume everyone would know? Is the range individual (like the range of symptoms of their disease) or communal (like the way people in that location behave)?
- Why are they on the “better end”? Is that purely coincidental (most days and most people are normal, a little better, a little worse)? Or will you set up more of a contrast (e.g. it’s been bad, those around or bad, this character is better, usually or just today)?
- Is the bad news catastrophic? Or a minor disappointment? Is it specific to them? Or bad news in general?
- How do they receive the news? Is it something public, even a literal news bulletin? Or something personal, like a message, something they are carrying, or something they feel?
- Will the bad news be the twist of the story (particularly if that change can be used again in other stories)? Or do you want the twist to be the “not obvious” reaction?
- Why is their reaction not obvious? Do we expect a worse reaction and see resignation? Or do we expect a shrug and see something more dramatic?

Reminiscence

Conversation

In which characters share their memories of something they did together. There were elements they all remembered, and features described by one that the others now recall. One character shares a memory the others disagree with. The consensus seems to be that it didn't go that way. But the storyteller shares a surprising reason that their character knows the truth.

RULES

- The storyteller chooses which player will share the controversial memory. Their character will provide the surprising truth: the twist at the end. Usually they will also share the controversy, but they can select a different player to do that, before the story begins.

QUESTIONS

- Do you want to decide what to discuss before the story begins (e.g. “let’s talk about a holiday in the Mediterranean we all had...”) or meander to it as part of the discussion? If the latter, it makes sense of these other questions moot: you will find solutions live.
- The features they all remember: will there be differences? Simple differences like times of day, clothes, weather, music, topics? Or substantial differences (like who was there) that are easily corrected?
- Why will others disagree? Would it reflect badly on them, if it were true? Was it unexpected? Or have they been told something else ever since?
- Why is the reason surprising? Surprising because it changes the group’s opinion of them? Or surprising because others have no idea of their involvement?
- How will the others react? Shock? Horror? Disgust? Humour? Awe? Congratulations?

Layers

Conversation

In which characters have a conversation about something seemingly unremarkable: one has done something quite usual, another has a rather unsurprising reaction. The conversation pauses and the storyteller describes what's going on in their character's head. It is quite different. There are implications to what's been done and what's been said. The conversation then continues. The story finishes with a final description from the storyteller. A description of the effects of that deep layer.

QUESTIONS

- What is the event being discussed? Is it something that has previously been described, told in a previous story? Or will it be revealed in this conversation? If the latter, do you want to agree before beginning the story, or do you want it to emerge from the conversation?
- What responses will each player describe? Can they can be unexceptional for the characters but still add interesting texture for the listeners?
- Do all characters understand the layers? Or just the storyteller's character? Or do they have different subtexts?
- When the conversation pauses, will the storyteller switch out of their character's conversation voice? Or will their character describe what's going on in their head in first person form? Could the other characters hear or infer these revelations?
- What will the implications be? Do the characters understand those implications? Or are they implied by the performers?
- Like the conversation pause: will the final twist be presented by the storytellers character, or in a separate storytelling voice?

Connection

Conversation

In which characters tell each other unrelated mini-stories of something that has happened to them. The storyteller is the final speaker. Their explanation links everyone together in a surprising way.

RULES

- Discuss the connection before beginning the story. It is the storytellers choice, so others should offer their thoughts in question form. Each player then should set up the connection, without being too obvious.
- This is a conversation, not an event. Each character's description should be interactive.

QUESTIONS

- What is the connection? Did they experience the effects of a bigger issue (their individual experiences of a power cut, for example, how they found the stormy night, actors from a broken down theatre bus seen around town)? Or was it a sequential event (a swindler trying to steal their money, one after another, for example)?
- Will each character describe their experience before interaction? Or will it be described in smaller chunks: misunderstandings, questions, surprises, amusement, consolation?
- Have these characters discussed it before? If so, have their emotions changed? Or is this conversation their first opportunity to share?
- What will the final connection be? How will it link them together: physically together (e.g. they were nearby, but didn't realise), together in outcome (e.g. they were all victims of theft).
- What is surprising about the connection? Surprising because they didn't realise? Or is it surprising that it was possible?

Denial

Conversation

In which characters sympathetically confront a problem of the storyteller's character. They describe the issue, make it clear how they are convinced, and that they are not criticising the character. But the storyteller's character cannot accept the problem themselves. They deny it, try to explain it, and give what they think will be their final response.

QUESTIONS

- Does the issue arise gently, becoming more significant as everyone discusses the details? Or is this conversation an intervention: something the characters have felt they needed? If so, for how long? And why not confronted earlier?
- Why are they not blaming the character? Was it obviously nothing to do with them? If so, why might they need convincing? Or would someone on the outside instinctively blame them, but these characters don't want to cause offence?
- Why is the storyteller's character denying the problem? Is it emotionally embarrassing? Or would it have a bigger implication, like legal woes or the need for a break up, things they don't want to face? Or are they incapable of facing the truth?
- What is the final explanation? Could it be true? Does it bury the conversation because it is too difficult to disprove? Can they not admit it to themselves? Or is it so unbelievable?
- Do they end the denial by telling them not to raise the issue again? Or will they keep the problem further hidden? Or will the resolution seek help without admitting the problem ("I am absolutely fine, but I'll see the doctor if you are *that* obsessed with it!" for example)?

Help, or Doing It All?

Conversation

In which one or more characters attempt to help another who is struggling in some way. The struggling character initially turns down their help, but the helpers are so insistent, they eventually accept. Seemingly reluctantly. In the end it is clear that the helpers will do all the work.

RULES

- The storyteller's character can choose to be on either side: the helper or the struggler. In either case, their character should end the conversation, reacting to the acceptance, or the acceptance itself. In either case there should be an interesting emotional twist in their reaction or acceptance.

QUESTIONS

- What is the struggle? Do the characters need to persuade the struggler that they understand? Has a similar discussion happened before?
- How will they be insistent? Emotionally insistent, brusque or forceful, passive aggressive or pleading? Or logically insistent, countering any objection?
- What was the cost to those helping? Is it time? Money? Status? Something else physical? Something else emotional?
- Did the helpers intend to take on all the responsibility? Were they trying to help, but were exploited? Or was it a great success to have the struggler admit their problem?
- Did they end up giving something they didn't expect?
- Did the struggler want this all along: is that obvious or still ambiguous?

Reality Persuasion

Conversation

In which the storyteller's character has a view of reality that is different from the others. They try to convince each other with a blend of understanding and persuasion, plumbing the depths of the disagreement, trying to keep the bridge between both sides. At the end they can only agree to disagree.

QUESTIONS

- What is the view of reality for each character? The storyteller's character will have a different view, but will other characters also differ from each other? Will you decide this before the story begins? Or will the storyteller go first and everyone disagree?
- How broad is the view of reality? Is it a specific account of a specific action: like whether an accident was really a criminal act? Or is it more general: like whether a secret society has infiltrated the shopkeepers of the world?
- How will "understanding" be used to try to convince each other? By logical details, or ego (e.g. they think their understanding is better)?
- What are the depths of the disagreement that can be plumbed? Are there any that no one wants to expose (e.g. "Shopkeeper conspiracy or not, I think we all realise they are *carnivores* !")?
- Will the "agree to disagree" ending cement the views that they had at the start? Or will it be a surprising inversion? Or do they agree not to speak of it again? Or something outside the discussion, like different plans for how each will behave next?
- How will the storyteller deliver the twist? Is the twist the "agree to disagree"? Or does that have an effect, like their character leaving in a huff?

Too Helpful

Conversation

In which the storyteller's character describes a problem to the others. They respond with suggestions: how to improve things, how to solve the problem, how to feel better, how to avoid the issue happening again. They are sympathetic, but practical. By the end, the storyteller's character changes their approach.

QUESTIONS

- What is the problem? Is it significant because the others didn't know? Or didn't they know its scope, or its negative effects? Or have the others been waiting for them to admit it?
- Are the listeners shocked into a response? Or are they happy to be given the chance to be useful?
- Are the suggestions good suggestions? Impractical? Insensitive? Do they address the real need, or demonstrate ulterior motives from the others?
- Whether or not the advice is good, does the storyteller's character need to "feel better"?
- Could the problem be avoided in the future? How useful would that avoidance be (e.g. exhaustive tests cost money)? Or was it bad probability (e.g. a random lightning strike)?
- Do the helpers understand the problem, or misunderstand its real characteristics?
- What is the final change: do they accept the advice (really accept it, or pretend to accept it), do they argue against the advice, do they confront the others with their need for empathy rather than advice, do they give up on the conversation (e.g. walk away, or "it'll be fine, no big deal"), or another twist?

A Joke Falls Flat

Conversation

In which a character shares a fact with the others. They react with surprise and questions. As the conversation gets more fraught, the sharing character admits they were not quite being accurate. The others do not react in the way they expected.

RULES

- The storyteller chooses which character will tell the untruth, and which character will react in the most striking way.
- If the storyteller is not playing the sharing character, they should still choose the why and how of the untruth. Similarly, it is their choice how the reacting character reacts: in general, rather than word for word. For example: “take offence at the lie,” or “be upset,” or “find it funny.”

QUESTIONS

- Is the title correct (it was supposed to be funny, but wasn't)? Or the opposite (it was a serious lie, but laughed off)?
- Why do they respond with surprise? Is the untruth difficult to accept, or are they surprised that this character is sharing it?
- Why will the character get more fraught? Will everyone become more upset as they are shocked by the claim? Or is the teller more emotional as people don't respond the right way?
- How will they admit the truth? Reluctantly? Boldly? Expecting a laugh? Expecting validation?
- Why was the sharing character not quite telling the truth? A joke (it is the title of this prompt, but doesn't have to be funny), they are embarrassed about the truth, they are wanting to deceive, they are guessing?

Making a Plan

Conversation

In which characters make a plan for something to happen soon. Each brings different ideas: some are exciting, some get only faint praise. As the plan seems to converge into a consensus, the storyteller's character suggests a new idea. Radically new. Surprisingly new.

QUESTIONS

- What will the goal be? Will the characters begin the story knowing? Or is part of the discussion turning preferences into a goal?
- How significant is this goal? In a storyline it may be the overall plot, in very gentle play it might be more trivial, like where to go for dinner.
- How soon is “soon”? Right now, next week, next summer, or that soon which means “I promise it will happen, as long as nobody commits to when...”
- What will the response of others tell us about them, and about the pre-existing relationships? Will it be “excitement”, or “faint praise”, as suggested in the prompt? Or other options: like being ignored, suggesting another person's suggestion as if it's their own, laughing, derision, encouraging someone to go further, praise, flattery?
- How will you decide when to converge towards a consensus? Will you set a time, or will the storyteller give a nod, or will you let it happen at its own pace?
- Is the final suggestion a new idea, or does the storyteller's character introduce new information, new resources, a new participant?
- Is the final suggestion surprising because it is exactly what everyone wanted, but didn't think they could achieve? Or because it is so far out of their interests, their social context, or their means? Does it reveal a surprising fact about the storyteller's character?

Arrival

Conversation

In which most characters are having a small-talk conversation. Talking about their lives, their days, their backstory. The storyteller's character enters the conversation, and the mood instantly changes.

RULES

- Most conversations allow two or more characters. This requires at least three.
- The storyteller should choose the “change” at the end of the story. It is their choice whether others can keep the conversation going after the revelation. It should probably not be long, but it is their choice whether they react in words rather than expressions.

QUESTIONS

- With the small-talk conversation be entirely general? Or is there some plot happening? Or, even if this is a one-off story, can a bigger plot be implied?
- How will characters show different personalities in the small-talk? Through what they talk about, how keen they are to talk, or how they respond to each other?
- How will the storyteller's character enter? Physically enter? Or is that a metaphor: they've been participating all along, but now they “enter” the conversation in a different way?
- What do you want the final mood to be? There are so many options, but could the new character be someone they don't appreciate, someone with more or less status/authority, a friend they are worried about, someone bringing much needed information? Or would the mood change be what they say, rather than who it is?

Create Your Own Prompts

Choosing a prompt and tailoring a story to fit are core parts of this game. One of the most fun challenges is taking a prompt and “interpreting it” in a way that fits the storyline, but simultaneously surprises listeners.

As well as those provided, you might want to create your own prompts: prompts that are either tailored to the storyline you want to tell, or for a custom genre or setting. If your group wants to tell stories in the “Dark Souls” mythos, a custom storyline might be fun to create, particularly if not everyone knows the lore quite so deeply.

But you don’t have to create a whole storyline, sometimes just one prompt is all you need. When the storyline is careering towards a particular moment, your group may want to collaboratively create a prompt before it happens.

To create a prompt, start by thinking about a particular story that would work; a story with a specific problem and an interesting twist.

For example:

“On a damaged spaceship, the last astronaut – bruised and desperate – is trying to rescue the ship from a fiery re-entry. Despite broken fingers, they pilot their controls in the crux of their wrists. Then the malfunctioning computer overrides them, its faulty sensors jammed with errors. The only way to avoid destruction is to enter the veto code before it’s too late. Splinted and bandaged, anaesthetised but still painful, their fingers will not type. At the last moment, the astronaut grabs a plastic syringe barrel between their teeth and types with head nods. Success.”

To make the story into a prompt, strip the setting away. You can strip the whole sci-fi genre, if you want a generic prompt: no spaceship, no astronaut, no computer. Make the problem and the twist more flexible by replacing specifics with general ideas. Rather than

broken fingers, the character has some limitations. Rather than typing, they have to confront their limitation. Rather than using their teeth (!), they try an alternative approach.

INABILITY, DENIED

In which a character has a pressing need. Most people would find the obvious action simple, but the character has a limitation. They try to overcome their limitation through force of will. But fail. Then they choose an alternative approach.

If the general prompt seems more flaccid, that is good. It is not the prompt writer's job to force the storyteller in one direction, no matter how interesting. The prompt should give structure and inspire the storyteller to find interesting details. The storyteller is the artist, not the prompt writer.

There may be storytellers who struggle to find ideas. They might appreciate a very detailed prompt. But instead, make suggestions as questions, with alternatives.

To create questions, try to think of different stories that might fulfil your prompt, stories that are as different as possible. Be liberal with your interpretation of any word. In the example above, the "inability" or the "limitation" is the most obvious word with wide ranging options. For example, it doesn't have to be physical like broken bones. It could be social, emotional, limited skill, a phobia, mental health, or habit. It could be beyond one individual, like their demographic, their location, the weather, their equipment. There are other words to interpret. They "fail": fail their attempts, fail the pressing need, or fail more generally? What is "pressing" about the pressing need: it seems like an obvious metaphor, but could it be physically pressing, or could the newspaper presses run?

The more options you can think of, the more flexible the prompt will be. And so, the more fun it will be for a storyteller to use.

STORYLINES AND BUNDLES

The structure of a storyline is well defined to avoid plots wandering off in random directions. The 3 (+5) act model is motivated by screenwriting, because screenwriting is the most well-known structure; it is unusual to find someone who has read more books, even short stories, than they've seen films. A creative writer I used to know loathed the screenwriting structure. They would wax lyrical on the “evils of screenwritingification”. My apologies if that's you. If you go your own way, I would like to hear your experiences.

Until you are confident, sticking to the Hwæt storyline structure is safer. Particularly, there is a risk of players each telling their own storyline. Not maliciously, but it is often easier to excite yourself than to be excited by someone else. Parallel storylines can be fun, and separate storylines can be connected by only characters, problems, places, or symbols. But it would have to be deliberate. It requires a bit more skill than the basic model. And it should still use a specific structure to make sure they end at the same time, to avoid one player wanting to solo for a few hours to get to the end of their story.

To place a prompt in the storyline structure, figure out where it belongs, and how many similar stories might be used. If your genre is a disaster story, a prompt may be the single catastrophe: once and once only. That is the Clinch or the Crunch of a storyline (for example, a nuclear war might be the crunch, the arrival of alien army might be the clinch). But equally a disaster story may be written so it represents a worsening of the story, so “it's getting worse” stories might be throughout the Ratcheting or the Unravelling. As for creating a single prompt, create a storyline with an idea of the plot in mind, then modify it to be as general as possible. When you try to create a very different plot, you will find where more options are needed.

Bundles are a flexible group of related prompts. They are mostly intended to expand any storyline, particularly when a group of players want to extend the game. They are also useful when players want a short or entirely social gaming session. When I have created prompts for a bundle, I have tried to keep in mind that gentle group. I have tried to be more flexible about the scope of the story. But ultimately, bundles are a “grab bag” for anything else.

SHARE YOUR PROMPTS

If you create a set of prompts that may be useful to others, please feel free to share them. I would be very excited to see any prompts you create or hear about how they play. *Any* prompts? Well, okay, so we're in the 21st-century, share them as long as they aren't morally despicable: keep your antisemitic, homophobic, ableist prompts to yourself. Diverse fiction for the win!

My only other caveat is to ask you to avoid making it sound like a "Hwæt set." I am not megalomaniacally expecting improv storytelling to be a phenomenon! (Oh what a fictional world that would be!) But I want to number my prompts without clashing with anyone else. How about channelling TED, with its TEDx spin-offs? HwætX?

THERE ARE NO PROMPTS

It can be tempting to enjoy improv storytelling without prompts, with each storyteller creating the story entirely from scratch. I have never done that in practice. Solo, that's how prompts are written: I start with the story, before abstracting it into a prompt. For solo play, however, prompts feel like a big part of the fun. They make it a game, or a puzzle. They take the story in different directions.

For multiple players, I can *imagine* a fantastic session without prompts, but practically I am sceptical. I think that it takes a good storyteller, a good group, and a lot of collaboration. In particular, even with prompts it can be tempting to tell the story you want, without considering what others will share next. Without prompts:

"My favourite character fights the battle solo and wins, and is given all the adoration and money in the whole world!"

Okay, an exaggeration, but I would be most afraid of the person who thinks "no prompts" is well within their ability. Success would be beyond me.

Appendices

A Request For Comment

This is the first bookification of Hwæt, to see if the idea is interesting to anyone but me.

There are more questions for anyone who goes further with the game. If you play in depth, the detailed feedback is wonderful, thank you. But even if you are turned off by the first chapter, I'd like to know.

- Is the idea of improv storytelling interesting? Were you enticed to give it a go? If so what was your first experience? Is there a way to suggest something that makes it easier? Could there be better “1st try” prompts?
- Do you know anyone else who might be interested? I'm not looking for addresses! My question is: is it the kind of thing that's easy to imagine some friends playing, or is it so rare that building a group would be impossible? If you shared the idea how did they react? What is a hard sell for your friends or gaming group?
- Did your group give it a go? How was it? Will you play it again? If so, what would you do differently?
- Were there enough prompts? If not, where did you run out of usable ideas?
- Were there any prompts you thought were particularly good? Or any particularly bad? I'm particularly interested in “clunks” that just don't work.
- If you played through a storyline, did the structure work for you? Where you able to tell your own story, or was it too limited?

You can send comments to my email: hwaet@oojits.com

The (Sob?) Story

This game is newly written down, but far from new in substance.

As a teenager (mumble years ago) my gaming group repeatedly pushed collaborative alternatives to role-playing (initially because we all wanted to be GMs). We dabbled in wide-games, murder mysteries, and particularly improv theatre on our regular weekends away. My wife and I have always been interested in storytelling. She often tells stories in her teaching career. She teaches children to use “the problem and the twist” from the early years of schooling.

When it works, I think improv storytelling really works. In creating this game, I was trying to create a structure to make the good bits even more regular. I was trying to bottle the lightning.

But my plan is not to launch a Kickstarter and try to make it into a real thing. I don't have the capacity to do that.

I am in the late stage of progressive MS. Voice recognition, a world of online tools, and plenty of awake-in-bed thinking time face off against a dose of aphasia and the inability to *play* the game now. I can't create more content. I can't improve it.

My frank thought is that it is still a way off. My review: three stars, “nice idea, but a little meh.”

To be honest, I assume that this game would just disappear with me¹. It may not be worth more. That's your call. I'll be here in tumbleweed gulch.

If you want it, particularly if you want to make it better, please email me. I am only wheeled in front of the computer for two short periods per day, so setting up a discord wouldn't work. But I can respond to (and get help responding to) the occasional email: hwaet@oojits.com

¹My apologies for the morbid tone. In contrast, I would say that I have been consistently wrong about how long this neurodegeneration would last; being sure that “this is the endgame” for a decade.

Credits

The “Hwæt way” is (crookedly) built on the shoulders of giants. Perhaps the most obvious is the three act structure of screenwriting. I have credited that several times. Three-act true-believers like to find examples stretching back in time, or at least stories of old that can be squinted at so they kind of appear to have kind of the same structure. The name “three act structure” seems to be rooted in screenwriting in the 1970s. To me it feels like screenwriting, it smells like screenwriting.

Although I’m not aware of improv storytelling, improv theatre has a long history. Like three act structures, it can be interpreted all the way back to ancient Greek theatre, but gets called by a name in 16th century Italy: *commedia dell’arte*. It uses improvised scenes built around a predecided plot. Modern troupes performing linked skits often name-check Harold, a way of structuring improv theatre, first performed (or at least first performed by the people who first gave it that name) in 1967. Like Hwæt, Harold can reuse characters, places, and problems, but they are less essential. Its biggest influences here are themes, symbols, and foreshadowing.

* * *

Your name here? Absolutely! Have a look at my Request for Comment on page 116.

