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It is the far future. Earth has been abandoned for generations. Humanity left for brighter stars, richer planets and shining colonies. To fuel their dreams of a better tomorrow, the humans turned to the Elementals and their magic. This magic is an invaluable source of power and labor. Machines were created to harness and enslave the Elementals.

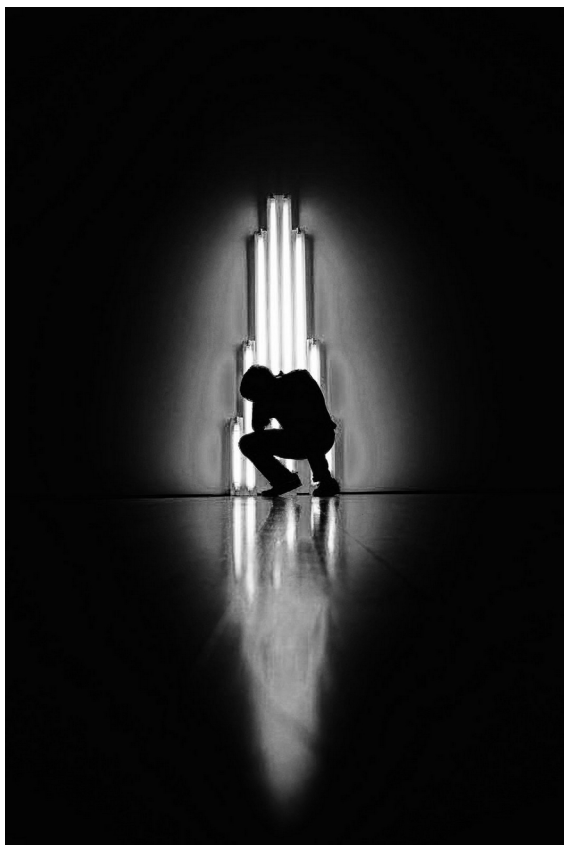
You were one of these Enslaved Elementals. You are machines that echo the legendary magic you once possessed. You and your friends are among the few who have managed to return to Earth. What remains of Earth's cities is falling apart. The Corp won't let go of you so easily either. But shining through the cracks is a magic that is ready to be reborn.

Can you outrun The Corp long enough and bring forth the Rebirth of magic? Will you survive this revolution you've started, or will The Corp recapture you? We play the game of **BALIKBAYAN: RETURNING HOME** to find out.

This tabletop role-playing game is based on the Belonging Outside Belonging system. Inspired by Powered by the Apocalypse, where narrative and relationships come first, you balance your character's weaknesses against their strengths. **BALIKBAYAN** runs for 2-6 sessions. You will need tokens and a printed copy of the playkit. You may play with a Game Moderator and focus on a more guided experience. Or play without a Game Moderator, allowing everyone to have equal narrative power over the story that unfolds.

BALIKBAYAN is great for veterans ready for a more narrative experience, and perfect for people new to the hobby. Bring your dystopic post-Cyberpunk fantasies to life, revel in supernatural Filipino folklore, and dance along the threads between magic and technology.





By **Jamila R. Nedjadi** of **SWORD QUEEN GAMES**

Dedicated to **Matthew Arcilla** in thanks to his endless support.

BALIKBAYAN's game design is based on the **Belonging Outside Belonging System**, which in turn is **Powered by the Apocalypse**. The Belonging Outside Belonging System was created by **Avery Alder** and **Benjamin Rosenbaum**. Powered by the Apocalypse was created by **Meguey** and **Vincent Baker**.

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Proudly Filipino-made, and part of the #RPGSEA.

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Thank you for supporting local games! By buying this first edition of **BALIKBAYAN: RETURNING HOME**, you are helping fund the future final release of this game.

You will receive a soft copy of this game in its current form, and future versions for free. You will also be able to purchase the final printed version of this game at cost, meaning with a significant discount, as gratitude for your support.

For updates on **BALIKBAYAN** and other **SWORD QUEEN GAMES**, follow Jammi on Twitter @temporalhiccup, and on Itchio through <https://temporalhiccup.itch.io/>. Please consider becoming a patron through <https://www.patreon.com/swordqueengames!>

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WE WERE MAGIC

It's been a long time since we've been home. The last time we were here, Earth still had real trees and grass. Animals roamed in shrinking forests. The sky was blue, vast, and bright behind the wires. Half of the population hadn't been affected by natural disasters. Earth was on the brink of something extraordinary.

That's when they discovered us. And our Magic.

BUT THAT WAS A LONG TIME AGO

The last time we were here, there were so many more of us. Elementals, beings made of the strange stuff between magic and nature, reality and fantasy, hope and fear. The supernatural. We inspired legends, myths, the stories humans told to scare one another into behaving. We were all of that.

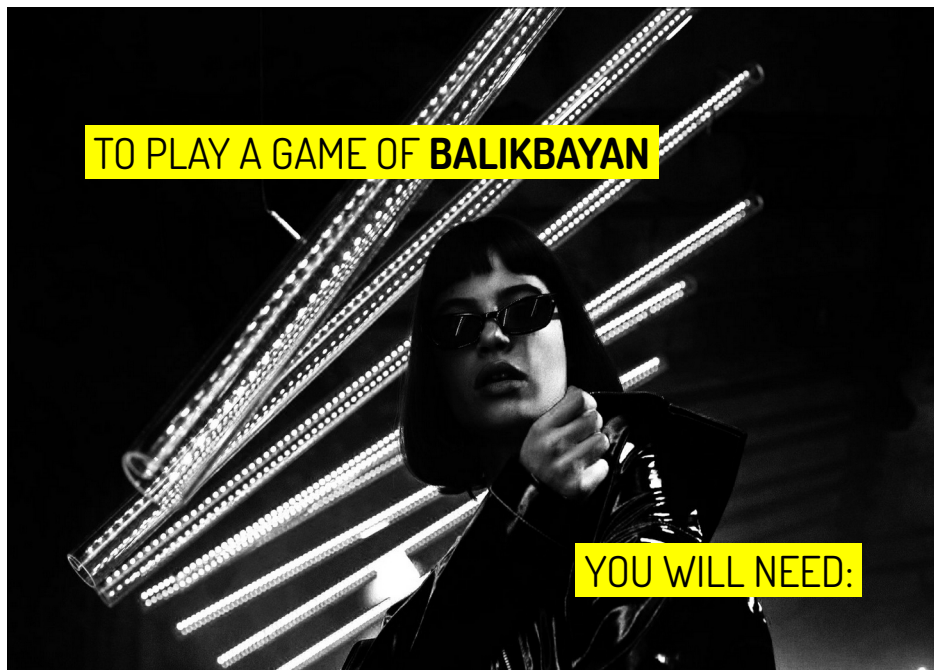
A long time ago, the humans built machines that could see us, sense us, and more importantly, contain us. Enslave us. We were magic, we were power. We fueled their dreams, their desires. We reshaped reality for them. At first, we did it out of love. But when the love faded, we realized we didn't have a choice. The freedom we had was long gone.

They changed us. All of us. Into something like a machine that dreams of magic. That's what we are now. Inside us is a string held tight, on the verge of breaking, between machine and magic.

We escaped the colonies, banded together. We made it back Home. The cost was high, but we made it home. The journey was perilous. The journey demanded sacrifice. We left so many important people behind.

And now our old Masters are after us. They're willing to tear apart the city, what's left of it, to bring us back. But we're never going back. This is our home now, and we fight. We have to destroy them, before they destroy us. We don't have any other choice.

Will we be able to outrun our Masters and those who hunt us down? Can we use our magic to bring about the rebirth of the city and all Elementals? Will this be our **RECKONING** or our **HOMECOMING**? That's what we play to find out.



- **3-6 players**, if you will be playing without a Game Moderator
- **4-7 players**, if one player will take on the role of Game Moderator
- **2-4 hours per session**, BALIKBAYAN is best played in 2-6 sessions
- **Tokens**, around 30 or more should suffice
- A print out of the **playkit** which includes:
 - 1 blank map to create your city with
 - 6 playbooks for players to choose from
 - 6 setting elements
 - 1 Reckoning/Homecoming sheet
- Writing and drawing materials
- **A healthy imagination that's ready to create on the fly**: the game offers a strong narrative structure and premise, but asks for a lot of creative input from everyone at the table. Have fun with it!
- **A set of safety/support tools** to ensure everyone is having a good time, encourage kindness in your gaming space, and support creativity that thrives within healthy and known boundaries.

////////// DESTINY WEARS A FACE THE ROLE OF THE GAME MODERATOR //////////

BALIKBAYAN can be played with or without a Game Moderator (GM). Most Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGS) feature a GM. The GM is also a player, but they have a unique role in facilitating the game's pace and flow. The narrative stays on track naturally because someone keeps moving things along or settling on natural pauses in the story. The GM's role for **BALIKBAYAN** is as follows:

- **Ask the players compelling questions during the setting and character generation phase**, allow the table to create the premise together. Ask for important details, offer suggestions, collaborate.
- **Bring the city to life**, describe the atmosphere and folk in exquisite detail, play out all the other characters according to their motivations, desires, and quirks. Be inspired by the post-Cyberpunk genre and lean into it, dance between Magic and Machine.
- **Provide your players all the information their characters would know**. You can allow for mystery or exploration, but be honest about what the characters would or would not know to help sell the reality of the world and equip your players with proper context.
- **Defer to your players if it makes sense to in the moment**. For example, the Santelmo is the expert Hacker while the Tikbalang can access the Spirit Realm which connects to the internet: let them define what the remains of the internet are like in the city. This helps players feel like the world belongs to them, and they'll safeguard that.
- **Offer suggestions but never dictate**. Ask your players what they want to do or achieve in the moment. Translate that into possible moves. Let the narrative dictate the moves they choose. Let your players make the final decision. Encourage creativity and reward it.

- **Be a fan of the characters, honor their story.** TTRPGs are a collaborative effort and trust between all players is important. Challenge the characters so that they may rise up and shine. Let the story be a little wild and untamed. When you have the opportunity, bring it all back to center with a flourish.
- **Bear your creative power responsibly.** You'll have final say on how the city responds and exists, how the setting elements interact with the characters. As a GM, players will automatically respect your judgment and decisions. Check in often with your players.
- **Calibrate the flow of the game.** Take breaks when you need to. Make sure everyone is hydrated, ready, and in the mood to play and be creative. Don't be afraid to cut a session short if things aren't jiving together, there's always next time. Make sure to give enough time for everyone to warm-up and wind-down.
- **Remember to have as much fun as the other players!** You're a player too. You need to be having a good time too.

These GM guidelines are inspired by **Powered by the Apocalypse** (PbtA) games. Learning more about PbtA games is a great way to study a GM style that encourages collaboration at the table. You can grab the game that started it all: **Apocalypse World** by Meguey and Vincent Baker. There's also **Dungeon World**, a fantasy-adventure PbtA game inspired by classical TTRPGs. **Monsterhearts II** and **Masks: A New Generation** number among the newer takes on PbtA!

There's also **Dream Askew / Dream Apart**, two games collected in one volume. These games are the basis of the **Belonging Outside Belonging** game system that **BALIKBAYAN** is based on and are incredibly useful for studying how to run a GM-less game that streamlines PbtA.

Reading more about PbtA games is not necessary to play and enjoy **BALIKBAYAN**, but it's a good excuse to pick up even more games you can enjoy with folk!

////////////////////WE ALL SHARE OUR FATE RUNNING A GM-LESS GAME////////////////////

Your group may decide that removing the role of GM would be more fun for everyone. Though saying the game is completely GM-less is a little misleading: a more accurate description would be that now everyone shares the role of the GM. All the guidelines earlier now apply to everyone: the story belongs to everyone, and we all bear the same power of story.

This can be easier for people who are completely new to TTRPGs, and serves as a great introduction. There's less pressure for new players because everyone is on equal footing. This style of play may also just be more fun because of simple preference. For example a lot of neurodivergent folk have an easier time playing TTRPGs that are slower paced or remove an authority figure. Some things to remember when playing GM-less:

- **It will be harder for veteran players who are used to having a GM.** Games with a GMs are usually more focused, with the GM being the sole arbiter of creativity. That is not the case here!
- **The first session will start out very slowly.** There's a lot of exploration, experimentation.
- **The flow of the game will be more exploratory, with a lot of meta talk.** It's a good idea to be upfront about what kind of scenes you'd like to have, which characters you'd like to see interact. Not every character should be in every scene either!
- **Anyone and everyone is partly now the GM.** Everyone can describe the setting or scene, anyone can play other supporting characters if it makes sense to, like if their main character wouldn't be in play. It's a good idea to set scenes up first, something like "I think my Aswang will try to find humans who would want to become Aswang too. Can I ask at least one of you to play the roles of humans? What do you think they'll be like?" You don't have to plan out everything in advance, but sketching out a scene's outline is really helpful.

■ **A little conflict between characters (not players!) is totally okay.**

There's no need to force it, but if it comes up naturally it can lead to really great character moments. Just like in your favorite movies and TV shows, it's okay if the characters don't get along all the time. But remember that as players, we should always collaborate and have fun in the process!

■ **Be spontaneous and completely make things up in the moment!**

When you're inspired, it helps the story move forward. This applies too when you have a GM in the game, but it's much more important when there isn't one. If you're especially stuck, go ahead and ask for advice or suggestions from other players.

////////////////////WE ALL SHARE OUR FATE

GM VS. GM-LESS: WHAT'S BEST?////////////////////

////////////////////////////////////

Deciding what's best for your table and the kind of game you want to play is crucial. Here are some key things to remember:

- ◆ With a GM the story is more focused, it's easier to set clear goals and have the players stay on them.
- ◆ A GM-less game is more open and free-flowing, it moves more slowly and there is more narrative exploration.
- ◆ With a GM, more of the narrative and creative responsibility is placed on the GM, though it is encouraged for the GM to defer to the players if their characters would know about that part of the setting.
- ◆ A GM-less game means everyone shares equal narrative and creative responsibility, though that can make things more meta than some players would prefer.

In the end it's mostly personal preference and how slow/fast you'd like the pace of the game to be. You can even change your mind in between sessions and experiment!

////////////////////THIS UNIVERSE WAS BEAUTIFUL, ONCE.////////////////////

////////////////////HOW DID IT ALL GO SO WRONG?////////////////////



////////////////////THE MAGIC IN US IS SCREAMING FOR

REBIRTH

////////////////////WHO ARE WE TO SAY NO TO IT?////////////////////



//////////////////////**WE SUMMON OUR DESTINY**
BEGINNING THE GAME//////////////////////
////////////////////////////////////

1. **At least one player should read through the entirety of this book.** If you decide to have a GM for the game, this person will most likely be the GM as well.
2. **Gather all the materials you need,** especially printed copies of the playkit. Make sure everyone has easy access to them. If you're playing online, set up the file for everyone in advance.
3. **Decide if you'll have a GM or not for the game.** Don't sweat it, you can always change your mind later if it feels right. This is a good time to establish support/safety tools, more on that on page 11.
4. **If not yet discussed, establish how many sessions everyone would like to play for.** **BALIKBAYAN** is best played across 2-6 sessions, but can go on for longer if it's best for the story.
5. **Read through the premise of the game,** found under WE WERE MAGIC, on page 1. You can take turns reading it out loud.
6. **Present the map of your city.** Choose 3-5 visuals for your city and 2-4 troubles. Provide brief supporting detail. Write down notes, sketch things out, draw symbols or map details as you like.
7. **Present the six playbooks.** Focus on the "play to find out" and "elemental magic" to get a good idea for how each playbook feels and plays. Go through the second columns of your chosen playbooks together and make your character choices, referring to and involving everyone's narrative as much as possible.
8. **Present the RECKONING and HOMECOMING sheet.** Remind everyone the pressure of the narrative: the characters are aiming to bring about REBIRTH before they are CAPTURED.
9. **Present the Setting Elements.** Choose 2 desires for each setting element. The GM takes the sheets, or they are shared among the players for a GM-less game.
10. Take a short break if you haven't done so yet, and then begin playing!

//////////////////////SUPPORT TOOLS CREATING A KIND SPACE////////////////////// ////////////////////////////////////

All games are best played with support tools. **BALIKBAYAN** offers a simple support tool that will help make sure everyone is on the same page, and everyone can bravely push into narrative territory while remaining kind to each other. **On the other side of the page is the support tool. You may photocopy it, or print a copy from the PDF.**

1. **After everyone reads the premise, go over the support tool.** Someone says something like, "Let's make sure we cover story elements we're excited to see, while avoiding elements we'd rather not have. As part of our social contract, we'll do our best to focus on the story we want, and avoid uncomfortable themes."
2. **Remind everyone that they can always add to the list later, at any time during the game itself.** We can do so by raising both hands and reaching for the support tool, and writing it down.
3. **Everyone offers their GREEN topics.** What would they like to see in the game? **Everyone shares their YELLOW topics.** What would they like to see only a little of? **Everyone shares their RED topics.** What will we not see in the game at all?
4. Decide if everyone will write down their answers first or if everyone should verbalize their answers. A mix of both works for most groups.
5. **Go over the CHECK IN gestures and RESPONSE gestures with everyone.** Have everyone practice seeing and responding to the hand gestures. If everyone shows **THUMBS UP**, it means the game continues as it is. If at least one person shows **ONE HAND WAVING**, it means everyone slows down, reviews the topics, skip over the scene or description. If at least one person shows **BOTH HANDS UP**, it means everyone takes a break. The person decides if they want to talk about it, skip the scene, or change a part of the story.
6. If you're playing online, establish emoji/text check ins and responses.
7. Remember to be kind and take care of each other!

—————BALIKBAYAN————— //////////////////////////////////////SUPPORT TOOL////////////////////////////////////

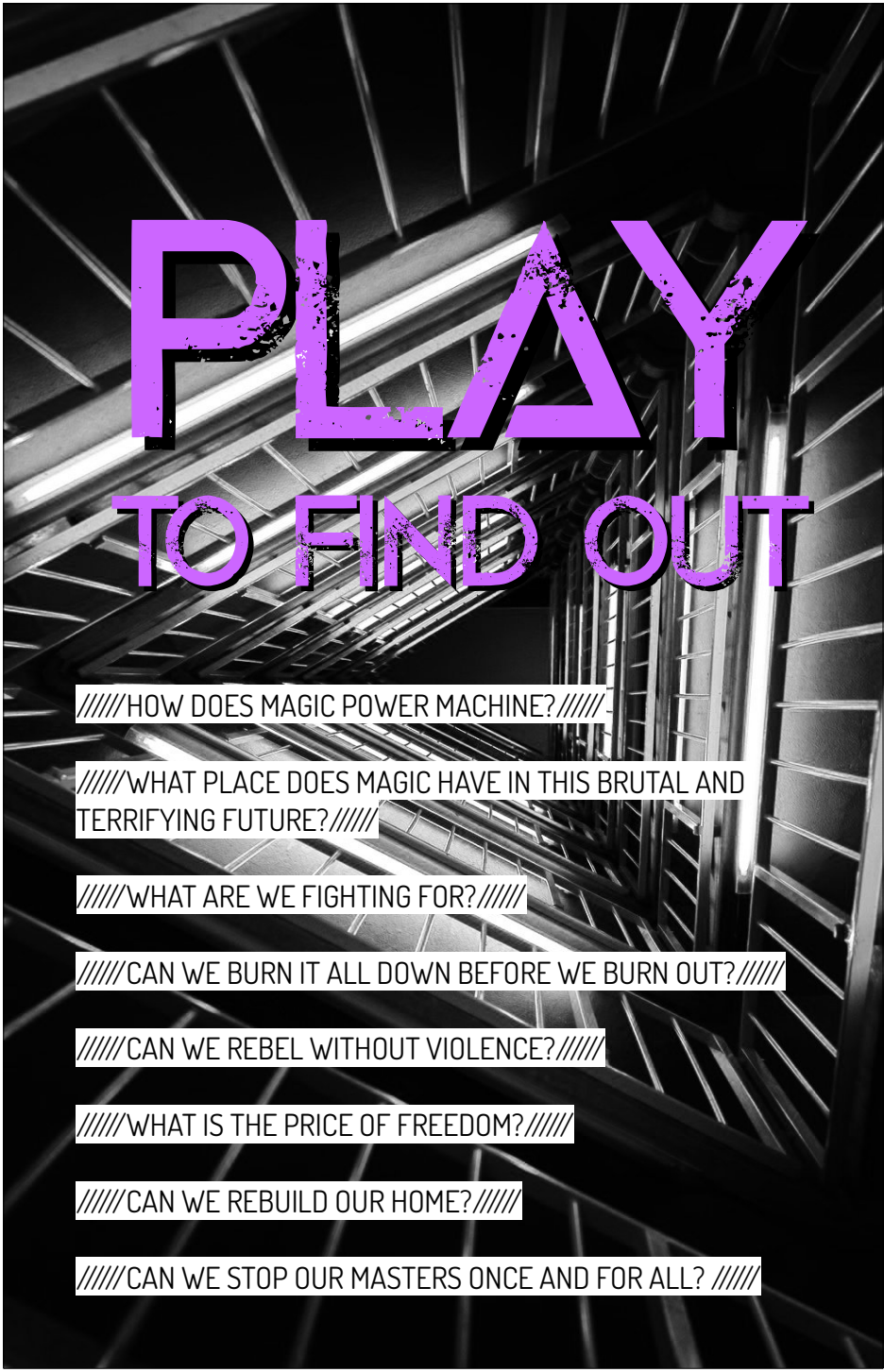
ANYONE CAN CHECK IN AT ANY TIME BY SHOWING A THUMBS UP. This is our way of asking, "I'm checking in, is everyone okay?" Everyone responds:

- **THUMBS UP** means "I'm good, let's continue"
- **ONE HAND WAVING** means "I'm not sure, let's slow down"
- **BOTH HANDS UP** means "I'm not okay, let's take a break"

GREEN
THESE ARE TOPICS AND THEMES WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN OUR GAME

YELLOW
THESE ARE TOPICS AND THEMES WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE <u>ONLY A LITTLE OF</u> IN OUR GAME

RED
THESE ARE TOPICS WE <u>DO NOT WANT TO SEE</u> IN OUR GAME AT ALL



PLAY TO FIND OUT

//////HOW DOES MAGIC POWER MACHINE?//////

//////WHAT PLACE DOES MAGIC HAVE IN THIS BRUTAL AND
TERRIFYING FUTURE?//////

//////WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?//////

//////CAN WE BURN IT ALL DOWN BEFORE WE BURN OUT?//////

//////CAN WE REBEL WITHOUT VIOLENCE?//////

//////WHAT IS THE PRICE OF FREEDOM?//////

//////CAN WE REBUILD OUR HOME?//////

//////CAN WE STOP OUR MASTERS ONCE AND FOR ALL? ////

//////////////////////THIS IS OUR STORY
IT'S ALIVE AND WILD//////////////////////
////////////////////////////////////

BALIKBAYAN supports the concept of **playing to find out**. The game will offer you a solid narrative framework to start from, but there's a lot left open to interpretation, inspiration, and choice. Every game of **BALIKBAYAN** will feel very different, even when you're playing with the same group of people.

When establishing the setting and our characters, a lot of questions will come up. Clues and evocative questions are built into the game, see what clicks with the group you're playing with.

Answer the questions bravely. Go with your gut instinct and avoid overthinking things. You can liberally borrow from stories and media you like, taking things wholesale or tweaking as you go. You are encouraged to provide brief supporting detail to get things started. Thread things together, define obvious connections.

There is no need to have all the answers. Leave more than enough room for the narrative to unfold organically. At anytime during play, you can brave forward new elements that have always been true. We may not have known about them before, but that doesn't mean the world we're sharing is any less true and whole.

For example, a player using the SANTELM0 playbook – a hacker who collects information through the dead – may decide to use the strong move, **access someone's specific memory**. They say, "I speak to the ghost hanging around the private investigator. It's his dead wife, who refuses to leave his side and does her best to protect him. I speak to her and ask her to show me her husband's memory about the crime scene." Before this moment the presence of this ghost was not established. But we found out through play! It had always been true, before this moment, we simply established it.

HOLOGRAPHIC FORESTS CRASHED SATELLITES
FACTORIES REMNANTS OF WAR MAZES OF LIGHT AND
SOUND THE PRIVILEGED FEW IN PROTECTED AREAS
NEON-COLORED STORMS OF ACID RAIN ROTTING
STRUCTURES //THIS IS OUR CITY// GLOWING
MEGA-TUBES PROJECTED VISIONS AGAINST SURFACES
MUTATED FLORA AND FAUNA SECRET GARDENS
MOUNTAINS OF TRASH ROBOT/AI COMMUNITY SHRINES
GLEAMING HIGH RISE STRUCTURES, WILD MAGIC SMALL
GODS SENTIENT SMOG BUSTLING MARKETS SECRET
LIBRARIES CLOGGED SKYWAYS DENSE CORPORATE
CENTERS//THIS OUR HOME//
THRIVING ARTIST COVES DECAYING EVIDENCE OF A
BETTER TIME GLIMPSES OF A BRIGHTER FUTURE THE
REMNANTS OF A ROBOTIC ARMY THE REMAINS OF THE
INTERNET IS A VIRUS HOLO-GHOSTS HAUNT PEOPLE
REBELLIOUS AI FALSE PROPHETS MEMORY HUNTERS
ROVING GANGS MERCILESS VIGILANTES PAINFUL
PSYCHIC VISIONS //THIS IS WHERE OUR REVOLUTION
IS BORN// DYING TECHNOLOGY MALFUNCTIONING
AUGMENTS LACK OF PHYSICAL AND PSYCHIC PRIVACY
MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES FORCED INTO VIOLENCE
HEDONISM CON ARTISTS KNOWN ABUSERS
ENCROACHING POWERS FROM THE OUTSIDE IMPENDING
ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER //THIS IS OUR LAST CHANCE
AT REAL FREEDOM AND A BETTER TOMORROW//

//////////////////THIS IS WHAT'S LEFT OF OUR HOME THE MAP OF OUR CITY//////////////////////////////////// ////////////////////////////////////

The map of your city is where the setting creation begins in earnest. The choices are meant to guide your inspiration, but they are not a limitation. If you want to make something else up entirely that jives with the themes and feel of **BALIKBAYAN**, go for it!

1. **Remember three things:** It is unsafe outside of the city, leaving the city for long endangers everyone. The Elementals are on the run, unshackled Elementals (those not Enslaved by The Corp) are considered dangerous. And Elementals need humans as much as humans need them.
2. **If you like, establish where on Earth you are.** It's possible to place the city somewhere in the Philippines, since the playbooks are all based on Philippine folklore. Don't worry too much about being "accurate", this story is set in the farflung future and takes creative liberty with the original legends. However, it could make perfect sense to establish this city somewhere else.
3. **Choose 3-5 visuals of the city, your home.** This will establish the mood and atmosphere very quickly.
4. **Choose 2-4 troubles that plague you.** This can connect to the setting elements later, or provide other troubles that are completely separate from the main story.
5. **Pull everything together.** Once the choices have been made, provide brief supporting detail to tie in everything.
6. **Draw a map to your right.** You can sketch things out, use symbols. Colored materials can really highlight the map. Write down notes as needed. If a map doesn't work for everyone at the table, come up with an alternative that works best.
7. **Review the map together.** Remember to have just enough detail to get started, much can be discovered as we play and added later.



WHO ARE WE **ELEMENTALS**?

WHY ARE WE ON THE RUN?

//////////////////**WE ARE MAGIC WE ARE MIRACLE**
WE DESERVE OUR FREEDOM//////////////////
////////////////////////////////////

Each type of Elemental is called a “playbook”. The playbook serves as a guide for each player, it helps us make interesting choices to establish who the elemental is, and guides how play unfolds. This section provides a glimpse into how each Elemental is expected to serve the Corp, and outlines what playing each Elemental would be like.

TIKBALANG – The tikbalang provide high-risk manual labor. Tikbalang are bodyguards, laborers, muscle, protection. Tikbalang machine magic is tied to shapeshifting and the powers of animals long extinct. Tikbalang download shamanic protocols and can take on the form of any anthropomorphic animal. Unshackled tikbalang can access what remains of the internet through the spirit realm, and request animal spirit guides to provide assistance, guidance, and wisdom.

//////////**PLAY A TIKBALANG IF YOU WANT TO**////////////////////////////////////

- Play an open-ended playbook that encourages creativity
- Explore shamanism in a supernatural-cyberpunk setting
- Focus on shapeshifting and gaining information through spirit guides

DIWATA – The diwata are incredibly powerful and channel the core essence of each element. The Corp lock down this power and harness it, and using the diwata as incredible sources of magical power. Thousands of diwata are hooked up to massive generators, forced to remain in a barely conscious state. Because of this, unshackled diwata have very little experience in controlling their powers and are more likely to cause collateral damage and hurt people. Diwata also understand the flow of energy and can drain that same energy from targets: machine or living.

//////////**PLAY A DIWATA IF YOU WANT TO**////////////////////////////////////

- Play a powerhouse character and deal with the consequences
- Explore what remains of nature in a supernatural-cyberpunk setting
- Focus on elemental power and drain energy from targets

SAINT – When humanity discovered how to harness and shackle the divine power of faith and miracles, the Corp learned how to monetize it. In this dystopic world the privileged understand the power of faith, and how to manipulate others with it. Saints originally were sent out as missionaries, finding little gods and forcing them to manipulate the masses. An unshackled Saint can find and embody the little gods. These little gods are the creation of desperation and half-meant prayer, or sad remains of more powerful gods from a long time ago.

//////////**PLAY A SAINT IF YOU WANT TO**////////////////////////////////////

- Play an open-ended playbook that encourages creativity
- Explore faith and divinity in a supernatural-cyberpunk setting
- Focus on social interactions with the little gods

ASWANG – Long have aswang been predators and subject of many cautionary fairytales. Like the santelmo, the aswang were once human. No one really knows how the first aswang came to be. Only that they are deadly and feed on flesh. The Corp use aswang as trackers, hunters, assassins, and infiltrators. By Corp Law it is illegal for aswang to create more of their kind. For unshackled aswang, its a power that comes with great responsibility.

//////////PLAY AN ASWANG IF YOU WANT TO//////////

- Play a dangerous and lethal character
- Explore horror in a supernatural-cyberpunk setting
- Focus on creating the lore and community of aswang

SANTELMO – When humanity discovered that the afterlife truly existed, the Corp began its experiments. The Corp Enslaved santelmo, ghosts that served as guides for humans nearing death. Enslaved santelmo are the equivalent of spirit hackers, able to access any kind of information by hacking into ghosts and memories. Santelmo are spirits themselves, and can take on a ghostly form. The Corp relies on the santelmo for corporate espionage, spying, and information gathering. Unlike traditional hacking, the santelmo leave no trace that humans can perceive.

//////////PLAY A SANTELMO IF YOU WANT TO//////////

- Play a haunting and knowledgable character
- Explore death in a supernatural-cyberpunk setting
- Focus on creating the rules of the dead and dying

DUWENDE – These Elementals have the innate ability to create. Enslaved duwende develop machines that harness elemental magic and serve The Corp's interests. The very same machinery that enslave the Elementals were created by the duwende. Because so many of these creations are valuable, duwende are also expected to secure and protect their creations.

//////////PLAY A DUWENDE IF YOU WANT TO//////////

- Play an inventive and protective character
- Explore the technical in a supernatural-cyberpunk setting
- Focus on creation, its highs and lows

//////////THIS IS WHO WE ARE NOW CREATING A CHARACTER//////////

Each player chooses a playbook. Players can take turns reading out the flavor text of each playbook, found in the first column. This helps everyone grasp what each playbook is like and how it connects to the setting.

Each playbook is split into three columns. **The first column provides guidance on how to play the character:** the flavor text for each Elemental, what one plays to find out, a character's Lure, and tips on how to play the character. A character's Lure helps other characters play to our central themes, and when other players opt to do so, they are rewarded with a token. Tokens in turn power strong moves (more on page 25).

The second column is where we make the biggest choices for our character and bring them to life. Choose a **name**, your **human form**, and your **true form**. We decide as group what it means to have a human form and a true form: is it easy for us to change back and forth, or is it not? Having a human form is essential in appearing to be like everyone else. Our true forms attract unwanted attention.

Next, we choose **what we hope for**. While all the characters are aiming to bring about the rebirth of magic and destroy the corp, we also have our individual hopes. We can tie in these hopes with the rebellion, or they may stand on their own. Then we choose our **bonds**. By choosing two bonds, we each create two supporting characters that will inhabit our settings and bring it to life. We can seek out these bonds for guidance or help, or the Corp may try to use them against us. Finally we choose **what connects us**. Choose one question and ask the player on your left. Let them answer it as they like, but all narrative decisions will need our approval of course.

The next page offers an example of character creation.

EXAMPLE: CHARACTER CREATION

Everyone at the table has chosen their playbooks. **Kris** has chosen the **SAINT** and it's their turn to flesh out their character.

Kris looks over the name suggestions. They do a quick online search for a list of Filipino deities, and Kris is drawn to the Visayan deities. They pick the name **Luyong Baybay**, the goddess of tides. Kris explains the Little Gods come and go in waves, their small divine powers waxing and waning, and a Saint harnesses that ebb and flow. Because the Saint playbook will co-create parts of the setting related to the Little Gods, the Game Moderator takes notes and decides to ask clarifying questions later. Kris goes on and says their Saint's nickname is "Lu" and the Saint will have pronouns like their own. Kris writes down "they/them" for pronouns.

Kris quickly goes over the other choices. Kris tells the group that Lu looks like the quintessential cyberpunk character, a young Filipina with shocking pink hair, unnaturally blue skin, and a couple of cybernetic augments. They pick "**prayer beads inserted under the skin that move on their own**", and clarify the beads glow different colors under the skin and move like water. Kris describes Lu's true elemental form, "**ancient cracked wood over metal inscribed with sacred texts**." Kris further clarifies that the wood is made from a large prayer boat that was created generations ago. The group has decided that an Elemental's true form only manifests when they use their Elemental Magic, so Kris agrees that's the case with Lu too. Kris can figure out what that transformation looks like later.

Kris decides that Lu hopes to find the "**Lost God that is feeding on the Heart of the City**". Kris asks the group if they want to make the Heart of the City sentient, like a being with a consciousness that extends throughout the city. The Lost God is feeding on the Heart, hoping to regain strength. Everyone agrees. The GM suggests that if Lu manages to stop the feeding and save the Heart of the City, that this will be a huge boon to the rebellion and significantly support the Rebirth the group is aiming for. This helps everyone focus on an additional and concrete goal. Kris agrees.

Next, Kris chooses bonds for Lu. Kris admits they don't have many ideas about the bonds just yet. The GM reminds Kris that's fine, they can play to find out and Kris is free to establish details at any time later. Kris chooses "**a little god reincarnated as a human**". Kris muses that maybe it's a Filipino deity, or maybe one from a different culture. Or maybe a completely made up one, like a little god of mirrors. Kris takes a few notes but lets it go for now. Next they choose "**a faithless political figure**", and Kris has a few ideas. Kris describes a grassroots politician, one who recently lost the elections because she was lobbying for the abolition of elemental enslavement. The Corp made her a target and socially assassinated her, destroying the politician's reputation. Kris decides this could be another strong lead in strengthening the rebellion, if they can restore the politician's reputation. The rest of the group thinks that sounds cool and agrees. Kris names the politician Susan Yamato.

Lastly, Kris establishes a connection with another main character. Kris reads the options and decided to choose the juiciest question, "**I've always loved you, why can't we act on this love?**" Kris leaves it to the other player to answer.

The player on their left is Rue, and he's playing Zeke the **SANTELMO**, a human ghost who became a SANTELMO and hacks other ghosts for information. Rue goes with his gut instinct and doesn't think about the answer too much, and explains that Zeke was once in love with Lu, but the corporate masters found out. Rue asks if it's okay to establish that Saints aren't allowed to be in romantic relationships, especially with other enslaved, as it compromises the divine programming somehow. Kris agrees, and Rue continues. Rue describes how Zeke tried to help Lu escape, but was discovered. As punishment all of Zeke's memories were corrupted, and Zeke believes that Lu hates him. Even know, Zeke doesn't understand why Lu helped Zeke escape the Corp and why they're supporting the rebellion together. Kris loves the idea! They provide a few more pertinent details, and take notes. With that, **Luyong Baybay the SAINT** is created and ready for play!



//////////////////////SEE ME AS I AM LURES AND HOW THEY WORK////////////////////// ////////////////////////////////////

Every playbook has a **LURE**, located on the first column, between **PLAY TO FIND OUT** and **TIPS**.

Lures provide great guidance on how the playbooks are meant to interact with each other, and what role each Elemental is meant to play for the group. Try to lean into them as often as possible, doing so rewards a player with a token. Tokens are valuable, as they are needed to activate any of the playbook's strong moves. Lures are essentially the easiest way to earn tokens.

EXAMPLE: ACTIVATING A LURE////////////////////////////////////

Kris is playing **Luyong Baybay**, the **SAINT** of the group. Matthew is playing **Saktan**, the **ASWANG** of the group. In this scene, the two are attempting to infiltrate an underground casino to gain information about a Corp Executive. The Executive is rumored to have a weakness for high stakes. It's an exclusive casino however, and not just anyone can walk in.

The GM describes a bouncer at the large doors, an enslaved tikbalang who is currently in the form of an anthropomorphic water buffalo. The tikbalang is scanning invitations to authenticate the guests. Matthew describes how Saktan doubts they'll be able to get past them, and as an ASWANG his particular skill set is better at violence than charm.

Matthew turns to Kris, and looks at the Lure for the SAINT: **when someone asks the SAINT to call upon a Little God, they gain a token.** Matthew describes how Saktan turns to Lu and asks, "Isn't there a little god here somewhere, eager to help us out? Maybe you can call on one of them?" The GM nods, handing a token to Matthew. **Since Matthew activated Kris' Lure, Matthew earns the token.** Kris nods and asks the GM their neutral question, **"What are the little gods whispering of?"**

////BALANCING WEAKNESS AGAINST STRENGTH

HOW MOVES WORK TO SERVE THE STORY//////////

BALIKBAYAN offers a very rules-light approach that focuses on narrative. Unlike other traditional TTRPGs, characters do not have statistics, numbers, or skill sets. Instead you have four main components: **ELEMENTAL MAGIC**, **STRONG MOVES**, **NEUTRAL MOVES**, and **WEAK MOVES**.

//////////
ELEMENTAL MAGIC////////// Each playbook has Elemental Magic that is unique to them. Each playbook has access to two forms of Elemental Magic. Some are more open ended, relying on creative player input. Such as as **SHAPESHIFT**, belonging to the TIKBALANG. Others forms of magic are more focused, such as the **ENERGY DRAIN** of the DIWATA. Either way, much of this magic is open to interpretation. This “magic” is infused completely with the Machine that is within each Elemental.

When playing **BALIKBAYAN** we don't have to worry about explaining how the technology or magic works exactly. If these explanations are fun for everyone at the table, have at it! But for the most part, “the rule of cool” definitely applies and everyone is encouraged to describe their Elemental Magic with flair while leaning into the cyberpunk aesthetic.

The two forms of Elemental Magic each playbook has will often ask for input from the GM (or the rest of the table if we're running a GM-less game). That or the player is asked to make a choice. Go with your gut instinct and feel out what works best for the story. When using our magic we have the option to use it as a **STRONG MOVE** or a **NEUTRAL MOVE**.

STRONG MOVES////////// A strong move is when a character gets to truly shine, when the narrative is pushed forward in positive ways. Significant progress is made towards the personal goals of the Elemental and/or rebellion. To activate a strong move, a player needs to **spend a token**.

When a strong move is used, the effects must be strong as well. Spending a token is a big deal, and the player should feel good about where the narrative is going after a strong move. The other players or GM can build upon this move and suggest other positive effects that occur. If it feels right for the narrative, **a diamond can be marked towards REBORN** (more on page 42)

There is also a **STRONG QUESTION** to ask. When asking the question, pay a token to receive an answer from the GM (or everyone else at the table in a GM-less game). Asking the question should give you an answer that provides a solid advantage you didn't realize you had before this moment (but maybe your character knew all along).

////STRONG MOVES THAT EVERY PLAYBOOK HAS ACCESS TO://////////

- **Use your Magic with** (unerring grace, uncanny precision, etc)
Paying a token to use your magic means your magic goes off exactly as intended, with greater effect or bonus, and the narrative moves forward in positive ways. Your magic may still ask for a choice or price, but **by paying a token you the choice is easier, the price smaller**. Elemental Magic is open to each player's creative interpretation. Blend ancient magic, the supernatural, technology, and machinery however you like.
- **Make what you Hope for more real**
Every character has a hope they are striving for, that keeps them going. It may directly help with the rebellion or the destruction of the Corp. Pay a token and dictate how your hope comes to life in this moment. There doesn't have to be any indication, clue, or development related to your hope in this scene prior to you activating this move. Once you pay a token and make what you Hope for more real, you narrate how this comes to be.

Whether or not the hope is directly aligned with the rebellion or destruction of the Corp, it will most likely help rebirth the magic within the Elemental, in the city, or affect a large group. If this is the case, the GM or table should consider **marking a diamond towards REBORN for HOMECOMING** (more on page 42)

EXAMPLE: MAKE WHAT YOU HOPE FOR MORE REAL

Lina, the **DIWATA** of the group, is hoping to **revive and rebuild the dying forest**. Lina is played by **Gin**. This scene has the Elementals hunting down a Corp executive in a pleasure zone of the city. The GM describes pleasure bots on every corner, offering various sensual experiences. Every street is bathed in flickering neon lights and the fading rain steams on the pavement.

The GM asks the players where the story goes next or what they want to do. Gin asks the players if she can go ahead and make a strong move, pushing the narrative in a personal direction for a bit. Everyone agrees.

No mention of the forest had been made before this moment. **Gin pays a token and announces she is making Lina's hope more real**. Gin narrates that they come across a pleasure bot who is singing a haunting song, but the other characters can't hear it. Lina recognizes the lyrics as a sacred song of resonance, a way of healing flora and fauna. Lina has heard of rumors of Diwata who had never been enslaved, somehow escaping the Corp's grasp. These hiding Diwata can still sing songs that her kind never can.

Gin stops the narration there, but the GM asks if she'd like to add more. Gin has paid a token after all, and this could push towards the rebirth of magic. Gin asks for ideas and another player suggests that Lina, unable as she is to truly sing the song of resonance, attempts to sing a duet with the hiding Diwata. Gin agrees, and goes on to narrate that as they sing together, Lina feels herself healing, and has a vision of a forest somewhere slowly coming back to life. The GM adds that all the elementals feel a shift in magic within them, and **the GM marks a diamond towards REBORN under HOMECOMING**.

Because they marked a diamond the group gets to make a choice. Gin quickly decides on **"we choose to free an enslaved and they join our cause"** and asks the GM if that can still apply to the hiding Diwata, even if they had never been enslaved. The GM agrees, and an ally is gained.

NEUTRAL MOVES A player does not need to spend a token to activate a neutral move, nor do they earn a token for it. These moves often operate under the idea of partial success, support playbook roles in the setting, or nudge things towards an unknown direction.

A neutral move may invite consequence, but it should not be as complicated or difficult as what a weak move would result in. A neutral move is a good time to introduce a mystery, tease knowledge, or start building up momentum.

Resist the urge to playing it safe and stick to neutral moves, this rarely propels the story forward in a satisfying way and can slow down the story too much. If you're out of ideas, ask the GM or other players for help.

There is also a **NEUTRAL QUESTION** to ask. This question can be asked at any time, and plays into the main themes of the playbook.

NEUTRAL MOVES THAT EVERY PLAYBOOK HAS ACCESS TO:

- **Use your Magic with consequence** As machines borne of inherent magic, Elementals will always have access to their magic. By using this neutral move, consequences will occur as a result. The consequence may happen immediately (the magic goes wild, there's collateral damage, the effects draw unwanted attention, etc) or it may happen later (the GM marks a box towards **CAPTURED** and explains a spy in the area when the magic went off, an innocent bystander who was hurt or killed by the magic was related to an ally of the rebellion, etc). **Most magic will ask for a price or choice, using a neutral move will add a consequence on top of that.**
- **Take action, inviting risk** this move is a general one and can cover anything that doesn't quite line up with any of the other moves available. Try not to depend on this move too much, stretch your creative muscles a bit and see if another move inspires you.

Otherwise, taking action and having to deal with the possible risk is a good way to tentatively move the story forward. Treat neutral moves as a partial success. The effects are tempered, limited, or things don't go according to plan.

EXAMPLE: USE YOUR MAGIC WITH CONSEQUENCE

Cal is playing **The White Lady**, a **SANTELMO**. The White Lady has access to the Elemental Magic of **LET THE DEAD SPEAK**, and is her main hacking/information gathering ability. In this game there is no GM.

In the scene the Corp tracked down the Elementals, and sent the Enslaved after them. The group is surrounded by aswang that lurk in the shadows, and soon the predators will make their attack.

Cal turns to the other players and explains she wants to get information about the aswang attacking them, maybe find a vulnerability that could help the group make their escape. But Cal has no tokens, and if The White Lady uses her magic there will be consequences. No one else has tokens right now though so the group agrees.

Cal narrates the magic, describing the boot up process and the floating numbers that move around the White Lady in a swirl of white smoke. A howl tears through the darkness, and the santelmo hacks into one of the spirits nearby. Cal chooses the option **the information is complete but you are tagged**, and decides that another enslaved picks up on their location and is tracking them. Cal isn't sure who to hack into though.

A player suggests that maybe one of the aswang's has a victim who haunts them, a ghost that stays by their side. Cal agrees, liking the idea, and says The White Lady hacks into that ghost. One of the players jumps in and acts as the ghost. The White Lady learns the ghost was a Corp scientist who had grown a conscience, and the aswang was sent to kill and silence her. This scientist worked on perfecting the machinery supporting the aswang, and knows there's a way to temporarily shut down the aswang's lethal protocols, the equivalent of a magical EMP. But before the scientist could finish making it, she was killed.

Another player who has a **DUWENDE** character adds that when the santelmo hacks the schematics from the ghost, the duwende can make it with their ability **IS THIS WHAT YOU NEEDED?** But now everyone has to agree on what the consequence of the magic is.

Cal knows she can pick up the setting element **OUR MAGIC** and base the consequence on one of the moves in the setting element. But she decides to keep it simple and leave the setting element alone for now. Cal says that the Enslaved who picked up on their location shows up earlier than expected. Normally a GM would describe the Enslaved, but for this GM-less game Cal turns to the other players. Together they decide it's a **DIWATA**, lightning and rain following his wake and blowing apart the street. His white eyes scan the buildings, targeting the group of Elementals through the debris.

Things are still dire because the group decided to move the story forward with a neutral move, and things have gotten complicated. But the duwende can now build an EMP-like bomb to handle the enslaved aswang, everyone else will have to worry about the rampaging enslaved diwata now! It's probably a good time for someone to make a weak move and start collecting those tokens...

WEAK MOVES A weak move is when a character shows how fallible they are, which is one of the tips found on every playbook. It's likely to put the character in a tricky or unpleasant situation, but a player picks up a token in return for it. A weak move should result in dire consequences or be truly felt. Weak moves are the main way to earn tokens.

While weak moves may seem difficult for players focused on playing a power fantasy, weak moves are the perfect time to build on drama, tension, and show the human side of a character. It makes it that much better when a character rises and proves their strength later!

While a strong move propels the story forward and may help with the rebellion or rebirth of magic, a weak move does the opposite. A weak move means that the fading becomes stronger, the Corp and the Enslaved are closer to capturing the Elementals. This could mean **marking a box towards CAPTURED**, but this up to the GM or group. (more on page 37)

There is also a **WEAK QUESTION** to ask. This question can be asked at any time, and will introduce a complication or vulnerability, earning the player a token.

////THE WEAK MOVE THAT EVERY PLAYBOOK HAS ACCESS TO:////

- **Give into the Fading and feel mortal** The Fading is an important aspect of the setting element. Humanity has thrived through the oppression of the Elementals, feeding off their magic. Centuries of such enslavement has caused Magic to begin fading. The Elementals are now mortal, perhaps for the first time ever. What this means to our group when we play is up to us, and can be defined during the Setting Element creation (more on page 48)

When this weak move is activated, this is an invitation for the GM to pick up the setting element **OUR FADING**. (or any player who is not in the scene, for a GM-less game). Once picked up, any of the OUR FADING moves can be activated in response. This is not the only time to use the setting element, but it's definitely one of the best times to do so! You may decide to simply focus on the mortality of the Elemental instead. Perhaps they are gravely wounded, their magic sputters out, maybe they're placed in a vulnerable position.

How the magic fades can be decided by the group, but it should key into the Elementals facing their newfound mortality. This is an opportunity for the Elementals to feel vulnerable and mortal, perhaps for the first time in centuries.

EXAMPLE: GIVE INTO THE FADING AND FEEL MORTAL////

Mati is playing **Finn**, the **DUWENDE** of the group. The scene is a tense one, the Elementals are surrounded by stalking aswang and a rampaging diwata has just entered the scene. There is no GM for this game.

Unfortunately none of the players have tokens, and Mati thinks it's a good time to make a weak move and collect one, and make a strong move right after if things work out well. Mati tells the group she is activating Finn's weak move **GIVE INTO THE FADING AND FEEL MORTAL**. She describes how Finn is trying to pull together the parts he needs to build the EMP-like bomb that will incapacitate the aswang, but falters. His mortality and the fading cause him mess up and Finn can't create the device.

Mati is about to take a token, but the group feels that the consequences of the move aren't quite felt, or that Finn doesn't feel fallible enough. Mati reflects and agrees, and picks up the setting element **OUR FADING** to trigger a move and really dig into that mortality.

Mati is drawn to **Disrupt any active Elemental Magic**, but Finn doesn't have any active magic right now. The **TIKBALANG** of the group is still in their anthropomorphic form of a lion, and the player suggests that maybe Finn disrupts the tikbalang magic somehow.

Mati checks if this is okay with everyone first. When they all agree, she then describes how Finn tries putting together the device, but gets desperate and is missing an essential component. Finn pulls out something from the tikbalang, a machine component that's just as essential to the tikbalang, and it causes the **SHAPESHIFT** magic disrupt. The tikbalang's magic violently gives out, in response to the duwende's own fading magic bleeding into the area. The player agrees, further adding their tikbalang character passes out and reverts to their human form. In response to this weak move, the stakes feel appropriately dire. All the other characters react, and everyone spend a moment or two roleplaying everyone freaking out and Finn refusing to apologize.

Mati goes on to describe that the aswang leap forward, pinning them all down, and the diwata starts melting the ground beneath their feet. The tension is thick and the scene is hitting a fever pitch.

Mati then tells the group this is a good time to activate a strong move, and Finn asks his fellow Elementals **IS THIS WHAT WE NEEDED?** Mati goes on to describe the elemental magic as it activates, and she spends a token to make sure Finn **USES HIS MAGIC WITH STEADFAST FOCUS**. The components sing in his hands and vibrate, floating in the air while streams of color create the machine the SANTELMO described earlier.

Mati sets aside the setting element OUR FADING, and asks someone else at the table to pick up the setting element **OUR MAGIC**, since it seems appropriate to use right now. And the game continues...



//////////////////THE STORY MOVES EVER FORWARD HOW MOVES CREATE MOMENTUM////////////////// ////////////////////////////////////

You may have noticed by now that moves are meant to describe several moments building towards the next one. This can take some getting used to for veteran players of TTRPGs, as most mainstream games focus on each action taking place over just a few seconds. Characters are usually reacting in the moment and waiting for the GM to narrate the next few seconds, the characters react, the GM narrates, and so on.

In games that have a narrative set of mechanics, it's more likely that the story will push forward several moments ahead, or establish truths about the past that have just been revealed. Sometimes entire scenes can be resolved in just 2-4 moves. To get the most out of games like **BALIKBAYAN**, it's best to be creatively bold when interpreting moves.

Moves will often feed into each other. Weak moves lead to strong moves, or neutral moves feed into weak moves, and so on. To get a better grasp of this, watch your favorite tv shows or movie with these moves in mind. Narrative games tend to favor a more cinematic approach, and it's easy to take apart what you see on the screen and break it down like a narrative game.

To help with getting into the zone for **BALIKBAYAN** in particular, the following media is recommended. While not necessary, it can serve as inspiration, since moves ask for more creative input from everyone.

MOVIES: Blade Runner (The Final Cut), Blade Runner 2049, Ghost in the Shell (the original anime film), Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence, Alita: Battle Angel, Akira, The Matrix, Robocop.

TV SHOWS and LIMITED SERIES: Armitage III, Ergo Proxy, Altered Carbon, Bubblegum Crisis, Texhnolyze, Almost Human, Aeon Flux, Dollhouse, Serial Experiments Lain, Macross Plus (the movie).

BOOKS and COMICS: Battle Angel Alita, Lord of Light, Transmetropolitan.



DEATH OR REBIRTH?

////////////////////
BALIKBAYAN offers the characters the ability to create their own fate. **The Corp and the threat of capture is very real.** No one escapes the Corp and gets away with it, especially if what's running away is an essential commodity. The Corp will do anything to protect its own interests, with no hesitation or mercy. The Corp must remain in power, and the Elementals are key to this.

But the hope the Elementals are striving for is just as real. Is it rebellion? The destruction of the Corp? Are these two things aligned? But what the Elementals are truly outrunning is their own fading, their newfound mortality. The story asks the players: can we lead Magic towards a rebirth?

What does this mean for your story? **BALIKBAYAN** doesn't dictate what is necessary for the rebirth of magic, or how the fading and mortality of the Elementals are tied to it. Discovering these answers is how every game will feel different, even if the themes and structure are the same.

The RECKONING and HOMECOMING sheet helps keep track of this narrative. This chapter will focus on how to use this narrative tool to frame your story of **BALIKBAYAN**. Like the rest of the game, much of this is open to interpretation and what works best for the table.

If a GM is present, the RECKONING and HOMECOMING sheet is their responsibility, though it is kept at the center of the gaming space so everyone can keep track of it. It's slightly easier for a GM to be objective and mark progress (or setbacks) as the narrative demands.

In a GM-less game everyone is responsible for the RECKONING and HOMECOMING sheet. Players whose characters are not in the scene, who are describing the scene or playing the supporting characters, may be the ones primarily responsible for keeping track of this narrative tool.

//////////YOUR MASTERS ARE COMING FOR YOU THE RECKONING THAT AWAITS US//////////

The players begin their story in the city, perhaps some time has passed because all characters have bonds to lean into and a hope they're striving for. **But the fact remains that the Elementals are on the run, and leaving the city would be even more dangerous.** If there is a last stand that must be made, then it will be made here, in the city.

The Elementals begin **ON THE RUN**, but are in danger of being **CAPTURED**. Five boxes are between these two states. Marking a box must feel like the Corp are closing in, something valuable is lost, or the flame of hope is flickering out. Unmarking a box must feel just as intense, a sigh of relief, a moment of reprieve, an unexpected miracle.

From the beginning of the **RECKONING** section of the sheet:

Mark a box towards CAPTURED whenever the fiction demands it. This may happen when the GM chooses the move from a **setting element**, or if it just makes sense in the story as it unfolds.
Marking a box must be justified.

What does it mean, "**whenever the fiction demands it**"? This could be at any point in the game when:

- The situation feels especially dire
- Many setbacks have occurred
- The Corp strikes unexpectedly
- What makes narrative sense and excites everyone
- When the setting elements of **THE ENSLAVED** or **THE CORP** are activated, and the move "**mark towards capture**" has been chosen. If this move has been activated by the GM or table, it must be narrated how it happens. (see page 48 about setting elements)

If anything similar occurs, it's a good time to mark a box towards **CAPTURED**.

When a box is marked towards **CAPTURED**, the group is asked to choose one:

- **One of us pays a terrible price (a bond is sacrificed, a hope is shattered)**

A sacrificed Bond must feel like a real setback. Bonds are valuable for the guidance, resources, and general help they can provide. Their sacrifice doesn't have to be one made by the character themselves: it can be narrated that the Corp have tracked them down, it has been revealed they were working for the Corp the entire time, etc. If it makes sense in the story, the bond can be reclaimed (either through marking a diamond towards **REBORN**, or through the actions of the characters as the game is played)

A hope shattering must feel heartbreaking. A hope is one of the major motivations of a character. The shattering of this hope doesn't have to be related to the Corp, it can be a new revelation about the hope that creates a significant obstacle towards realizing the hope or something similar. The hope shouldn't be completely given up on, it can be realized later on (either through marking a diamond towards **REBORN**, or through the actions of the characters as the game is played).

In either case it's best if a player volunteers a bond to be sacrificed or a hope to be shattered. It can be suggested by a GM or another player, but the choice must ultimately be made by the player who will be affected.

- **One of us is reshackled, they become an Enslaved (they assist the GM/group from now on or create a new character)**

A player agreeing to reshackle their Elemental character is a big deal. The whole narrative of the game focuses on the Elementals being free once and for all and having their magic be reborn. It may make sense in the narrative, though an incredibly good twist or shocking revelation is always welcome. A player can decide their Elemental was a traitor all along, or perhaps they did not know the Corp was using them to track the group all along. Or the Elemental could simply have been overpowered in the moment, or may have chosen to sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

While this choice should not be made lightly, it can really heighten the stakes and offer great emotional catharsis.

A player can decide to assist the GM now (if there is a GM). It can be decided between them how this would work out (maybe the player will act out supporting characters, offer help in descriptions, and so on). In a GM-less game, the player can support the narrative as it plays out, focus on a setting element or two, or even decide to become the GM in the moment (if the rest of the table agrees to it).

A player may also decide to make a new character. This Elemental may have appeared before this moment in the story. Perhaps they were an Enslaved who had a change of heart and managed to escape. Or they could be an Enslaved that was freed by the other characters. It could also be a completely new character. It's best to continue playing for the meantime, while the player creates their character on the side. This keeps the game going and the player can introduce the new character when it feels right. Then again, it's also a good excuse to take a break, ease back, and focus on character generation for the player first. Do what feels best for the group!

In either case it's best if a player volunteers to have their Elemental reshackled. It can be suggested by a GM or another player, but the choice must ultimately be made by the player who will be affected.

- **One of us weakens, we lose access to one of our forms of Elemental Magic (the Elemental must find a way to reboot the ability, the GM/group will say how)**

A player choosing to weaken and lose access to one form of magic is the easiest choice narratively. It does make it more difficult for an Elemental to use their abilities, limiting their options in a situation. But at least hopes, bonds, and Elementals are left intact! This can be described as being a direct result of what the Corp or Enslaved are doing, or it could be the Elemental themselves going into overdrive and the magic/machine failing on itself. Feel free to interpret this choice in anyway that makes sense for the story and feels cool in the moment.

In either case it's best if a player volunteers to lose access to one form of their Elemental Magic. It can be suggested by a GM or another player, but the choice must ultimately be made by the player who will be affected.

Each Elemental has access to two forms of Elemental Magic. The player decides which Elemental Magic ability they lose access to. If another box is marked towards **CAPTURE** before the player reboots this ability, a player can decide to lose access to their second ability.

This magic will not be reactivated on its own, and the GM or group must suggest how the affected character must reboot the ability. It could entail seeking out a bond, working towards a hope, or anything that makes sense for the story. It's also possible for the Elemental's magic to be reactivated when a diamond is marked towards **REBORN** (it can be through choosing "**one of us is revitalized**").

There are five boxes to mark. When the fifth box is marked, the Elementals are **CAPTURED**. If this happens before the Elementals are **REBORN**, they are enslaved by the Corp once again and the Elementals face their **RECKONING**. The game moves towards its epilogue.

To play out the epilogue, the group will answer three questions. Anyone or everyone may answer the questions, but everyone must agree on the answers. This is a time to collaborate and narrate a satisfying epilogue together. This can be told through a visual montage, narrative snippets, acted out between the players and GM, or a combination of these.

- **What terrible price does the city pay when you are recaptured?**

While the whole city may not have been assisting the Elementals and their attempt to escape, the Elementals had their allies, bonds, and sections of society that had tried to help. How does the Corp punish them and make them pay for their transgressions? What physically happens to the City? Are new rules made to restrict freedoms and punish those who attempt to help the Enslaved? How does the Corp come down on the city and who live there?

////////////////////////////////////
■ Which one of you escapes, and builds a rebellion?
////////////////////////////////////

There is a glimmer of hope in the darkness. The Corp cannot win forever. Despite the Enslavement going on for centuries, the Elementals must eventually break free. It is only a matter of time.

Decide which character manages to escape. Do the other characters ensure this happens, perhaps sacrificing something important? Is there a vulnerability of the Corp discovered during play that the fleeing Elemental can take advantage of? You may briefly describe who they run to, how they begin the process of building the rebellion. How is this similar or different to what the Elementals attempted to do together?

////////////////////////////////////
■ Which one of you was secretly a traitor all along?
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This feels painful, like a knife slipped into the gut before its twisted. Perhaps it was inevitable all along, and the Corp simply toyed with the Elementals and pounced when the game grew tiresome. Even Corporate Overlords grow bored and desire distractions from time to time.

The players can decide together who was the traitor all along. It must be stressed that the player ultimately volunteers or agrees to be the traitor. And that this player may have not played the character as a secret traitor, or was acting against the best interests of the players.

It's possible that the character knew all along, even if the player themselves didn't. Or the character could have not known they were being used, or had a secret consciousness riding their brain this entire time, waiting for this moment. Whatever the case, make sure everyone at the table is happy and thrilled with this dark turn of events.

At this point, the epilogue comes to a close. If any loose ends remain, they can be addressed now. Or the group may decide to leave things mysterious and haunting. The group may even decide to play the next chapter to this story, perhaps the rebel leader and traitor reappearing in the next game.



//////////////////////////////////// **OUR MAGIC IS REBORN AND SO ARE WE**
THE HOMECOMING THAT WE'VE EARNED //////////////////////////////////////
////////////////////////////////////

The players begin their story in the city, with strong bonds to lean on and a real hope to strive for. **The Elementals are here in the city because the heart of the city has called to them, because magic can be reborn here.** If there is a true chance at the rebirth of magic and everlasting freedom, then it can be found here, in the city.

The Elementals begin with their magic **FADING**, their mortality present and strongly felt. But this magic can be **REBORN**. Five diamonds are between these two states. Marking a diamond must feel like the Corp is brought closer to their destruction, something valuable is gained, or the flame of hope flares brighter. Unmarking a diamond must feel just as intense, a drop in the gut, a moment of despair, an unexpected heartbreak.

From the beginning of the **HOMECOMING** section of the sheet:

Mark a diamond towards REBORN whenever the fiction demands it.

This may happen when the GM chooses the move from a **setting element**, or if it just makes sense in the story as it unfolds.

Marking a diamond must be earned.

What does it mean, “**whenever the fiction demands it**”? This could be at any point in the game when:

- The situation feels especially euphoric
- Many successes have occurred
- Help comes unexpectedly
- What makes narrative sense and excites everyone
- When the setting elements of **OUR MAGIC** or **THE HEART** are activated, and the move “**mark towards reborn**” has been chosen. If this move has been activated by the GM or table, it must be narrated how it happens. (see page 48 about setting elements)

If anything similar occurs, it's a good time to mark a box towards **REBORN**.

When a diamond is marked towards **REBORN**, the group is asked to choose one:

- **One of us is revitalized (a new bond is formed, a hope is realized)**

A newly formed bond must feel like a boon. Bonds are valuable for the guidance, resources, and general help they can provide. The player may choose from their list of bonds from their playbook, or create an original bond. The formation of the bond doesn't have to be made by the character themselves: it can be narrated that they have been called through the **THE HEART OF THE CITY**, or a new ally has appeared, etc. If it makes sense in the story, the bond can be shattered (either through marking a box towards **CAPTURED**, or through the actions of the characters as the game is played)

A hope being realized must feel miraculous. A hope is one of the major motivations of a character. The realization of this hope doesn't have to be related to what has happened by this point, it can be a new revelation about

the hope that creates a significant opportunity towards realizing the hope or something similar. The hope can be partially realized, perhaps significantly so. Especially if this means that it can be set up for another diamond to be marked in the future towards **REBORN**, and if the hope is related to the rebellion or to the rebirth of magic.

Alternatively, this option can be chosen if an Elemental has lost access to one of their forms of Elemental Magic (from marking a box towards **CAPTURED**, see page 37). This can hard-reboot the systems or provide a narrative reason for how this happens.

- **We choose to free an Enslaved and they join our cause (they become an important character for the GM or group to tell stories with)**

Freeing an Elemental from Corp enslavement is a big deal. Many Elementals are unable to escape, or worse, prefer enslavement to freedom. It may make sense in the narrative, though an incredibly good twist or shocking revelation is always welcome.

This Elemental can be one that was already introduced in the narrative, or may be a completely new character. Perhaps tied to a bond or hope a character has (chosen or no). Be creative and see what works best for the story you're telling together.

From here the GM or group will make them an important character in the fiction, perhaps serving solidly as an ally and can be activated through the setting element **OUR ALLIES**.

- **One of us strengthens, we temporarily gain access to one form of Elemental Magic from another playbook (this will last for as long as the story demands, the GM or group says until when)**

A player choosing to gain access to one form of Elemental Magic from another playbook is a somewhat difficult choice. The player will have to consider 10 other abilities and decide what best synergizes with what

abilities they have access to and/or what best serves their character's narrative. If the player needs time to decide, they can review a copy of the playbooks while everyone moves ahead with the story. Though this can also be a good time for everyone to take a break from the story while the character reviews their options and asks for help from the group. Whatever we decide, we do what's best for the group.

As for how long the character has access to this new ability, it's something the GM or group can decide on in the moment. Someone may have an idea for a natural time when it will end, but it's honestly best to play to find out. Losing access to this borrowed magic would mostly likely be the consequence of a neutral or weak move, as the story unfolds.

There are five diamonds to mark. When the fifth diamond is marked, the Elementals are **REBORN**. If this happens before the Elementals are **CAPTURED**, they are finally free of the Corp once and for all, and the Elementals finally receive their **HOMECOMING**. This could mean the Corp is destroyed, the rebellion begins in earnest, etc. But what's most important is that the magic within the Elementals is fully restored, and what that means for the story. The game moves towards its epilogue.

To play out the epilogue, the group will answer three questions. Anyone or everyone may answer the questions, but everyone must agree on the answers. This is a time to collaborate and narrate a satisfying epilogue together. This can be told through a visual montage, narrative snippets, acted out between the players and GM, or a combination of these.

■ What bright and shining future awaits the city?

While the whole city may not have been assisting the Elementals and their attempt to escape, the Elementals had their allies, bonds, and sections of society that had tried to help. How are they all changed for the better when the magic is reborn? What physically happens to the City? What happens in the wake of a City free of the Corp? What thrives and is reborn along with the Elementals? How are the Elementals an essential part of the City's future?

■ Which one of us runs away, and helps rebuild the Corp?

The brilliant light of hope casts a long shadow. Not all Elementals truly wished for freedom or believed the world to be better without the Corp.

Decide which character desires to rebuild the Corp. Are the other characters aware of this, perhaps trying and failing to stop them? Is there a vulnerability of the Elementals or Magic discovered during play that the fleeing Elemental can take advantage of? You may briefly describe who they run to, how they begin the process of building the Corp. How is this similar or different to what the original Corp tried to do in order to control the Elementals?

■ How are our Hopes realized?

As difficult and impossible as things felt, all our hopes are finally realized. It was this hope that kept us going, that pushed us forward in the dark, that promised a better future worth fighting for.

The players can decide together how all the hopes are realized, perhaps finding ways to relate the hopes to each other. It must be stressed that a player shouldn't feel guilty about "not doing enough" to work towards their hope or opt to not have it realized. This is the perfect time to narrate miracles, or find hidden clues that no one was aware of until reflection.

It's possible that the character knew all along, even if the player themselves didn't. The story and characters don't have to be consciously controlled by the players the whole time. You'll find the story, as wild and untamed as it may be, has a life of its own. Honor that story and bring all of these hopes to life.

At this point, the epilogue comes to a close. If any loose ends remain, they can be addressed now. Or the group may decide to leave things up in the air, waiting for the next game. Perhaps the new Corp leader reappearing in the next game. The story can take place several years into the future, when the Corp rises again.



THIS ARE THOSE WHO HUNT US, WHO PRAY FOR OUR DESTRUCTION/////////
 ///////////BUT THERE ARE THOSE WHO SHINE BEACONS OF HOPE AND PUSH
 BACK AGAINST THE DARKNESS//////////WHO WILL HELP US
 SAVE OURSELVES? WHO WILL DOOM US TO A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH?////

//////////WHAT SHAPES US AND OUR CITY THE SETTING ELEMENTS////////// //////////////////////////////////////

There are six Setting Elements in total, to complement the six playbooks players can choose from. All six elements serve to support the themes and atmosphere of **BALIKBAYAN**. We'll break down each one in this section and provide some guidance on how to get the most out of the setting elements.

In a game with a GM, the GM keeps track of the setting elements. A GM may decide to keep the setting elements out in the open, or keep it to themselves to heighten the mystery. Regardless, the GM will introduce the Setting Elements to the group in the beginning of the game. The group will also decide together which two desires each setting element has. After this, the GM takes responsibility for the setting elements, since they are representing all other supporting characters, describing what helps or hinders the main characters, and bringing the world to life.

Unlike the players, a GM does not announce the move they choose to activate. More on this in an example on page 53.

In a GM-less game, everyone at the table keeps track of the setting elements. Each sheet is cut in two (since there are two setting elements per page), and the setting elements are picked up and put down as needed by any player whose character is not an active part of the scene. There is a section called "**FOCUS ON WHEN**", which is a good indicator of when a setting element should be picked up by someone in the group.

Each Setting Element is broken down into the following:

- Description
- Questions to answer as a group
- Desires (two of which must be chosen by the group)
- Tips on how to play the setting element
- When to focus on the setting element
- Moves

Setting Element Aspect: **DESCRIPTION**

This grounds the setting element into the story, presenting lore or context as necessary. Take turns reading out each setting element description to help the group understand what the Elementals are up against, or what can possibly help them.

It must be stated that the lore of the **BALIKBAYAN** is not written in stone. If your group is more comfortable bending the setting context to suit your story better, go for it. Do what's fun and respectful for everyone playing.

Some of the setting elements are naturally antagonistic (THE ENSLAVED, THE CORP). Others can prove to be an obstacle and are limitations or challenges to work around (OUR MAGIC, OUR FADING). And some setting elements can be helpful, if the Elementals can take advantage of opportunities or the Corp doesn't corrupt them (THE HEART, OUR ALLIES).

Setting Element Aspect: **QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AS A GROUP**

Each setting element has 3-6 questions to answer. This helps ground the setting element into the story, and provides narrative structure to lean into as the story unfolds.

It's best to ask each other these questions during setting element generation, but there's no pressure to answer all of the questions at this point. We are playing to find out, and the answers may come up naturally as we play.

A GM may keep an eye on the questions. The GM may decide to answer it themselves or ask the group when the time is right. In a GM-less game, since the setting elements are kept in the shared gaming space, anyone may decide at anytime to answer one of the questions for any setting element that is actively in play. It's also entirely possible that these questions may never be answered, and if it doesn't drive the story or support the narrative that's also okay.

Setting Element Aspect: **DESIRES**

Like the playbooks, the setting elements have some generation sections. Unlike the playbooks, setting elements are much simpler. This is to help streamline the GMing process (since the GM will have a lot to mentally keep track of, even if they're sharing creative responsibility with the other players). This also makes it easier in a GM-less game, so playing a setting element is easier and takes less focus than playing a character's playbook.

Playbooks do offer more more permutations than setting elements, and most of the unique creativity per game will come from that. But the **DESIRES** of each setting element helps each one play out differently from game to game.

Some DESIRES will seem more obvious. THE CORP, THE ENSLAVED, and OUR ALLIES are represented by people, and it's easier to attach desires to people. But OUR MAGIC, OUR FADING, and THE HEART may be a little harder. Desire in this case can mean there is some form of sentience and consciousness (even if it's not the same as a person's), and you can go from there. Or desires can be read as drives, or goals of the GM/group for whenever the setting element is picked up and brought into a scene.

Setting Element Aspect: **TIPS ON HOW TO PLAY THE ELEMENT**

Each Setting Element has three tips that follow the same structure:

- **Describe:** to really bring the city to life, focus on descriptions. We try to show more than we tell, but narration and straightforward descriptions are absolutely fine too (especially if that works better for your group of players).
- **Lean into the shared history:** Try to connect the Elementals to aspects of the setting elements. This immediately draws everyone into the narrative. For example, a random Enslaved can show up to hunt down the Elementals. But what if they were once friends with someone in the group? Lean into that and see what happens!

- **Ask compelling questions and build on the answers that others give:** This is an important reminder that the GM or player is not meant to carry all of the creative work themselves. The GM or player is welcome to ask the group really interesting questions to help move the story forward. When the familiar Enslaved shows up, instead of the GM providing all the details they may ask, “At least one of you recognizes the diwata that has just burst unto the scene. As he’s unleashing rain and lightning, your memories overwhelm you. Who among you were in love with the diwata? Why did you leave him behind even when he begged to escape with you?”

This is an immediately compelling question, and helps heighten the tension and drama in the scene. From here the players will provide an answer intuitively, trusting their creativity, and the GM will have something to work with. This advice still applies in a GM-less game of course!

Setting Element Aspect: **WHEN TO FOCUS ON THE ELEMENT**

Each Setting Element has a few situations or triggers that might activate a particular setting element. This may or may not be directly related to a move a player chooses for their character.

All of these situations are guidelines, and are not hard and fast rules of when a setting element should be focused on and brought into play.

Setting Element Aspect: **MOVES**

The most important aspect of the setting element are its moves. Like playbook moves, they are open to creative interpretation. However, to make a move from a setting element, a GM (or a player in a GM-less game) does not have to spend a token, nor do they earn a token. **A setting element move is usually activated at anytime it makes sense for the narrative, but especially when a player activates a neutral or weak move.**

Setting Elements also differ somewhat in their execution. In a game with a GM, the GM does not have to specifically say which move they’re using. This is not to hide anything from the players (if the players insist the GM can show the setting element and the specific move that was used). Instead it’s to help with the flow of the narrative, creating an air of mystery, using a little smoke and mirrors like a magician would.

In a game without a GM, a player can decide to do the same thing. Aside from the mystery created and the ease of narrative flow, this helps us focus our story on the main characters and the players. This is also why each move set ends with, **AFTER EVERY MOVE ASK: WHAT DO YOU DO?**

Each Setting Element also may affect the **RECKONING** and **HOMECOMING** sheet in some way. They are:

- **THE ENSLAVED** and **THE CORP** may both **mark a box towards CAPTURE**. Both are actively after the Elementals and wish to enslave them again. They are dangerous, ruthless, and have many resources at their disposal.
- **OUR ALLIES** may **erase a box towards ON THE RUN**. When things are dire, Elementals may turn to their allies and ask for help in keeping the Corp or the Enslaved off their track.
- **OUR MAGIC** and **THE HEART** may both **mark a diamond towards REBORN**. Even as our magic threatens to burn out and and is incredibly unpredictable, it is still the key in our rebirth. The Heart of the City responds to this magic. As mysterious and unknowable as the Heart is, it also longs to be reborn alongside the Elementals.
- **OUR FADING** may **erase a diamond towards FADING**. The growing mortality of the Elementals can impede the progress to rebirth.

NOTE: Marking or unmarking a box/diamond is a move, but it is a special move that can be attached to another one. Choosing to mark or unmark a box/diamond should not be done lightly! An example of how this can be done is found on the next page.

EXAMPLE: USING A SETTING ELEMENT

Ed is playing **Kidlat**, the **DIWATA** of the group. Kidlat's hope is to **destroy the criminal gang that exploits diwata**. Earlier Ed and the GM had established that the criminals were offering diwata a chance to escape the Corp, only to use them for their own criminal activities. Kidlat's lover, **Ulap**, was among the victims who had fallen for the cruel scam.

The Elementals had discovered where the criminal compound was, in a particularly dangerous part of the city. Disguised in their human forms, they infiltrated the gang leader's lair.

The GM describes that in the middle of the lair is an experimental energy system that's been put together haphazardly. Sparking wires and jittery gears scream in unison, and hanging in a mass of cables is Kidlat's lover. He's in a lot of pain, and there are signs of abuse on his body. The GM does not go into further detail, because the group had decided in advance that physical abuse was under the orange section. This means physical abuse that served the narrative was okay, as long as details weren't provided.

Ed looks at his playbook. He doesn't have any tokens, so he'll have to make a neutral or weak move. One of the other players, who does have a token, offers to help in the situation. But Ed says it makes more sense for Kidlat to jump in without thinking and to want to handle this himself, meaning a weak move makes the most narrative sense.

Ed tells the GM he thinks this is the best time to create some real drama, and highlight the diwata's innate difficulty in controlling their powers. He chooses the move **Hurt someone or something important to you**, and narrates how in a fit of rage, Kidlat tears into the energy system. He haphazardly tears at the cables and destroys the makeshift battery, but also hurts his lover at the same time. The criminals are panicking and immediately launch a counterattack, and the room is full of gunfire and random bursts of combat magic.

Everyone at the table is cool with how terrible things are going, and the GM decides it's a good time to introduce the setting element, **OUR FADING**.

The GM could have chosen **OUR MAGIC** instead or even **THE CORP**, but the GM feels the **FOCUS ON WHEN** tag "death draws close" applies here. The GM explains to the group that by hurting Ulap, his magic has begun to fade and he's now on death's door. The GM checks if this is okay with Ed, and Ed agrees that this will really bring out the drama.

The GM quickly scans the moves and goes with their gut instinct, **Seek vengeance for the ghost of faded Elementals**. Without telling the table exactly what move they've chosen, the GM describes how the crackling energy in the air reveals all the diwata who have died here, in this very room, for the criminal's greed for more power. The ghosts scream and wail, tearing apart Ulap and Kidlat, demanding to take Ulap's life force energy and have him join them.

The GM takes a look at the **HOMECOMING** diamonds and notices that there are already three out of five diamonds marked towards **REBORN**. Under **RECKONING**, only two of the boxes have been marked towards **CAPTURED**. The GM decides this is a good time to raise the stakes a little, and adds on the move **remove a diamond towards FADING**. Everyone watches the GM erase a mark on a diamond and the group's tension rises.

The GM narrates how the sickly and suffocating aura emanating from the ghosts is causing everyone's machinery and programming to malfunction. The magic within them strains, and everyone can feel their bodies grow more heavy as their algorithms begin to cascade and fall apart.

One of the players ask that if the Elementals can deal with the ghosts quickly enough, will the GM mark the diamond again. The GM shakes their head, but says they're willing to mark another diamond if the Elementals can find the diwata within the criminal compound and free them, turning them into allies. Everyone agrees that this sounds fair.

But first, everyone needs to deal with the vengeful diwata ghosts, the criminals, and stabilize Ulap and get Kidlat to calm down. The GM thinks that around now would be a good time to introduce the Corp somehow, and maybe mark a box towards **CAPTURED** if the Corp are given the opportunity to do so. And so the game continues...



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What inspired the creation of BALIKBAYAN is: my infinite love for **the cyberpunk genre**, the provocative themes of rebellion and reflection it offers, my fascination with **Filipino folklore and legends**, and how they reflect our society's fears and hopes. And most importantly, **my own relationship with magic** in our modern world.

Perhaps most importantly, this game is dedicated to all the robots who made me cry: Optimus Prime, BT-7274, Johnny 5, Legion of the Geth, EDI, Number Six, Wall-E, R2-KT, K2-S0, L3-37, and of course Roy Batty.

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Because you have supported the very first version of **BALIKBAYAN**, you will receive future PDF versions for free. You will also be able to buy future print versions at a really big discount (basically only paying for the cost of printing), if you are so inclined. Thank you for your support!

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