EXPLORER

an expansion for Microscope, by Ben Robbins

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Microscope was dedicated to my father,
Michael Robbins. This book is too…

…and to all the generations of players at
Story Games Seattle who've taught me so much,
week after week, year after year.

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Introduction

The first time I played Microscope was a revelation.

I'd been scribbling away, designing and revising it for months in abject secrecy. As a lifelong world-builder, I was excited by the idea, but I really wasn't sure it would be fun as a game. When I explained it to other players, they seemed skeptical to say the least. I couldn't really blame them: as a game, it seemed pretty out there.

But when we sat down and actually played our first game, it was magical. It felt like we had barely started before our stellar empire blossomed into an epic right before our eyes. Asteroid miners unearthed the "psychic balrog" that drove them mad but also unlocked the telepathic potential of the entire human race, changing the course of history…

We gaped at each other in amazement. We had surprised ourselves with our creation.

I've played lots and lots of Microscope since then and seen countless people around the world have the same reaction—just like releasing the psychic balrog in our game, they opened the book and unlocked potential they did not know they had.

As I've said before, Microscope does not use dice because it uses a much better randomizer: human beings. You are what brings Microscope to life, so this book is for you.

How to Use This Book

When I started working on this book, my goal was to include things that Microscope players would find truly useful. Microscope works great as-is, so rather than replace it, this book is a supplement that expands on the original game. It is designed to make your Microscope experience even better.

There's a lot of different material included, but the book covers four areas overall. First, there are tips and techniques to improve any Microscope game, including ways to overcome common roadblocks and unlock even more fun.

Second, because coming up with a history idea can be challenging and time-consuming, there are tools to help get you started playing more quickly. Seeds give you pre-built frameworks for your history and Oracles let you roll randomly to generate an idea you might never have thought of.

Third, there's a chapter on using Microscope for collaborative world-building. Many groups have had success using Microscope to create settings for other role-playing games. This section gives you procedures and advice for doing exactly that.

On top of all that, the book includes entirely new ways to play Microscope. There are three spin-off games—Union, Chronicle and Echo—along with a collection of experiments you can use to tweak and twist the rules even more.

So whether you just want to improve your game or try something new, there is something in this book for you.

IMPROVING YOUR GAME

I've played Microscope with dozens and dozens of people who I had never gamed with before. Total strangers.

Gaming with strangers is fantastically educational. It brings all your assumptions about play into sharp relief as you explain a game over and over again and see how people react, how they approach the game and how they interact with each other.

Like any game, sometimes Microscope fails. Usually, it's because someone at the table doesn't follow the rules, in letter or in spirit, intentionally or unwittingly. Sometimes the failure is inevitable: that particular group of people at that moment is simply not going to get along. But more often I've sat down at a table that felt like it was doomed, like these players could not possibly find common ground, and then been surprised to see things turn around as the rules did their job. I've seen total strangers overcome their doubts and fears and genuinely have fun making something together.

I wrote Microscope to do this exact thing, but it still astounds me. We sit down as strangers, but by the time we finish we are respected collaborators, old friends sharing a unique experience. There may be hugging. It rekindles my hope for humanity every time. That sense of shared accomplishment is what all games in this field try to achieve. Good rules stack the deck in your favor. Bad rules get in your way and make you weep and argue until you decide to just ignore them.

This chapter is all about stacking the deck even further in your favor. These are things you can do to make all your Microscope games even better.

GOLDEN RULES

MAKE YOUR IDEAS CLEAR AND COMPLETE

ZOOM IN, MAKE PEOPLE, NAME THINGS

NO COLLABORATION

NO CONTRADICTIONS

NO SURPRISES AFTER THE PALETTE

TALK BEFORE YOU WRITE

ALWAYS EXPLAIN LIGHT & DARK

ENFORCE THE RULES

LISTEN CHARITABLY

Improving Setup

Relax & Read Aloud

Every time I sit down to play Microscope, the first thing I do is open the book to page seven, hand it to one of the other players and ask them to start reading aloud. There's usually four people at the table including me, so I have each player read a third of the page before handing it to the next person to continue.

Why don't I just explain the rules myself—me, the designer who wrote the (actual) book on Microscope? That is exactly why: I put a lot of effort into writing a book that explains the game very clearly, so why not take advantage of it? Why reinvent the wheel?

Reading straight from the book will save you a lot of energy trying to summarize the game, plus you don't have to worry about missing some key idea ("Did I mention that no one owns anything in the history? Uh, yeah, that's important"). I strongly recommend it.

Taking turns reading also gets the other players involved. If you are teaching the game, you are going to be doing a lot of talking, so having the other players read gets them participating instead of sitting passively.

And there's one more secret reason: if you are playing with strangers (which I do a lot), it gives you a chance to gauge who you are dealing with. You can learn a lot about someone by listening to how they read and speak.

Clarify & Tighten Your Big Picture

If there is one thing I would change about the Microscope text, it is the suggestion that you should start your history with only a minimal description of the big picture. That's not really the intent. A better guideline would be that you should establish a minimal but *clear* picture of your history. "An empire rises and falls" sounds like a fine summary, but we really don't know what kind of empire we're talking about. Are there swords? Or star cruisers? Or both? Who knows?

Just like when you create Periods or Events, your big picture should include as much detail as you could see from that level of history. You would be able to see if your empire spanned the stars or was trampling its neighbors with chariots (or one and then the other). You would be able to see if your society was populated with humans or blue-skinned aliens. Even one word can make a huge difference: insert "corporate", "stellar" or "ancient" in front of "empire" and you clarify things considerably.

Without establishing that foundation, your only option is to jump in blindly and hash out the facts as you play, which is bad because you have no idea whether you are on the same page. The Palette will expose a lot of these undiscussed assumptions, but you are better off knowing what you are getting into at the very beginning.

Clarifying your big picture also lets you make more focused histories and that's good because tighter concepts are almost always better. The more specific the concept, the easier it will be to get moving and play. That may seem counterintuitive in a game where you are making a history that can span eons, but there is a huge difference between broad scope (thousands of years, entire galaxies) and broad concept (magic and aliens and mutants and zombies). Including a lot of unrelated ideas won't make your history better. It will make it more unwieldy and random. The Palette won't help if you have already included too many different elements in your big picture.

Exclusion is your friend. Tighter and more specific is your friend.

There is a polite temptation to yield to everyone and incorporate everything anyone suggests. You agree to make a history of an industrial revolution, but somebody wants to include sorcery—which could be awesome, but more often it's just wedged in because no one wanted to be the bad guy and say no. If you are facilitating the game and teaching people how to play, you will be the one who guides this process. Don't be afraid to explain why including too many ideas does not make things better. If you can combine different ideas in a solid fashion (and make no mistake, I now want to play an industrial revolution breaking away from sorcerous traditions), then by all means go for it. But if something does not fit, discuss whether you are better off leaving it out. Save it for another game where you can really put it center stage and do it justice.

The Big Picture Is Only the Beginning

The big picture can be intimidating. It is very sensible to think it is the most important decision of your game. After all, you are summarizing the entire history in one swoop. What could matter more?

The truth is, the big picture is only the beginning. Every single step that follows will add detail and make it far more interesting and surprising. Never worry about picking a big picture that is special or unique. Play is what transforms a simple or even boring idea into something amazing.

The trick is to settle on something acceptable quickly, even if it is not amazing, and start playing. The Starting Your History chapter has tools to help you get over that hurdle and settle on an idea.

Bookends: Flint to Fusion

A Microscope history can span drastic changes in society and technology. You could start with club-wielding tribes and wind up with cybernetics and warp-gates. Are there glassy skyscrapers where there used to be brick battlements? Do knights still wear armor or has the rise of gunpowder made it obsolete? Technology is the obvious example, but you could explore social or cultural change as well: Are the thetes treated better or worse now? Do we still believe in the old gods or is it just hollow ceremony?

You can use your bookends to create huge arcs of change in your history. What differences would really drive home the point of your story? Highlight those changes in the bookends. Is your history about how superhero vigilantes undermine the rule of law? Use your bookends to show the difference before and after. Or maybe you want to go the other way and emphasize how some aspect of the world is surprisingly the same: after all that time it is right where it started.

The same is true when you create any Period later in the game: Show the differences from the Periods around it. Show us how the world is changing or staying the same.

If there are elements of your history that you are particularly interested in seeing change, you can tag that in the Palette, as discussed later.

Palette Is a Discussion

Some groups make the mistake of thinking that, if someone puts something on the Palette, no one is allowed to say no. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Palette is a discussion. The whole point is that the players get to talk and come to an agreement about what they want (or don't want) in the game.

If you are adding something to the Palette, do not just write your idea if no one stops you. Ask the other players if they are okay with your addition. Invite discussion. Even if no one disagrees, they may want clarification or to double-check how your idea interacts with other items on the Palette. Ask first, then write.

On the other hand, if someone proposes something for the Palette and you don't like it, speak up! Now is the time to voice your preferences. For the Palette to work, everyone has to be honest. There is a natural and very civilized urge not to want to step on other people's ideas. It is great to compromise and try ideas that are normally not your cup of tea, but it helps *no one* to agree to play in a game that you hate. You will have no fun and that will bring the game down for everyone else too. It is better to play with ideas that everyone is only moderately excited about but can build on than ideas that some people love but even a single person hates. That's what the Palette is for: to surface those disagreements and resolve them.

That is also why the Palette discussion takes place outside the fiction. Since you are talking about concepts instead of actual things in the history, you are not rejecting people's creations. If you were the middle of the game and someone started describing the inner mysteries of the Autumn Moon Cult and you said "Nope, don't want that," you would be rejecting their creative contribution. But if during the Palette someone says, "Hey, I want mysterious religions," and you say no, it is far less skin off their artistic nose. You aren't judging something they created, just rejecting a category. It is an important distinction.

No Surprises After the Palette

Want to introduce something unexpected to the game? Want to take the history in a strange direction or throw in surprising subject matter? The Palette is the time to do that, not later.

A frequent misconception is that you are allowed to make *anything* you want on your turn. The result, the sad story goes, is that one player uses their turn to add some crazy element that takes the whole history in a gonzo direction and ruins it for everyone. And since no one is allowed to object, there was nothing anyone could do about it.

The overarching rule of Microscope is "don't contradict what's already been said." That applies to the big picture of your history just as much as everything that follows. So when someone throws in a weird twist that derails your big picture, they are definitely breaking the rules of the game. They are changing the premise you all agreed to. That's a foul.

There are going to be a lot of surprises in your game, but there is a big difference between surprising events and surprising content. That's the point of the Palette: to get the content of your history out in the open. How each player uses those ingredients might be very unexpected, but you should not be adding strange new subject matter during play.

In the whole wide world of possibilities, there is no way to codify exactly what counts as "expected" or "surprising," but it is usually pretty clear when someone introduces something they shouldn't. Often they have a gleam in their eye because they just thought of some new thing that they think will wow their fellow players. Don't be that player. When you are making your Palette, don't harbor secret surprises to spring later on. Likewise, once the Palette is done, stick to it. Even if you think of a fascinating new twist, accept that the time for that is past. The die is cast. The rules of this history are set. Save it for another game.

If someone else brings in surprising content, don't hesitate to ask them if what they are adding contradicts what has already been said. It is everyone's job to keep the history consistent.

A Palette of Concepts

The most obvious use of the Palette is to include or omit specific things that exist in the history. Yes, zombies. No, faster-than-light travel. But you can also use it to talk about the style, tenor or structure of the game you want to play.

Tone is a very straightforward case. Don't want anything goofy? Ban silly or gonzo content. The reverse is just as valid: ban tragedy or real world political issues if you do not want a heavy game. Remember, there is a big difference between tone in the fiction and the feeling at the table. You can play a very grim scene but have the players cheering at the terrible things happening to the poor characters. The Palette controls the fiction, not the mood at the table.

If you want a history that sticks to real world norms, try adding "No, unreal" to the Palette. If there are certain unreal ideas players do want to allow, they can be added as exceptions on the yes side ("Yes, telepathy"), but by default nothing that would not fit in the real world would be legal. If you wanted to do the opposite and throw the floodgates open, you could say "Yes, wild" to indicate that even the most outlandish ideas that could never exist in the real world are perfectly okay. It's a broad request, but if that is the game you want to play, the Palette is the time to discuss it. You might use wild as a starting point and then ban specific things. And even if wild is the norm, you are still bound not to contradict what has already been said. Make amazing things, but stick to the premise of your history and stay consistent with the ideas that have already been introduced. Also, wild is not the same thing as silly or ironic. You can have an ultra-serious wild game just as you can have a completely silly real world game.

In any history, it is natural to assume things are going to change, but if you want your game to actually focus on change, you could add "Yes, progress" to say you want to see how things develop and advance in meaningful ways. You can even be more specific and flag a particular area you want to see develop, like technology, medicine, civil rights, art, music or magic. With "Yes, progress technology," you might start off fighting wars with pikes and muskets and then see how steam engines change all that. Or play "Yes, progress civics" and show scattered tribes forming cities and developing the first code of laws. And make no mistake, not all change is for the better. Technology and society can erode just as much as it can advance. In some parts of your history, progress might be declining instead of advancing. If progress is on the Palette, it's important to describe how that aspect of the history has changed (or remained the same) every time you lay down a new period. If the player making the period does not describe it, ask.

These are just a few examples of ways you can use the Palette. There are many, many more. I'm using made-up terms like "unreal" and "wild," but you should always explain exactly what you have in mind to avoid confusion.

The buzzwords that make sense to you might not mean the same thing to the other people at your table.

Retroactive Palette

The Palette is done. The die is cast. And yet sometimes you'll start playing and realize there was a critical bit of your premise that you all overlooked—some very fundamental question which you need to answer to be on the same page. In other words, something that should have been discussed when you were making the Palette but which no one thought of.

If everyone agrees, you can pause your game, hop in your procedural time machine and jump back to the Palette to sort it out. Don't worry who took a turn on the Palette and who didn't. Just decide whether this thing is going to be part of your history or not. It's the Palette, so unlike most of Microscope it is a discussion and negotiation.

You should only retroactively modify the Palette when it is clear there was a misunderstanding or oversight that you simply must sort out so you can get on with your game. Do not ask to retroactively change the Palette just because you came up with a new idea. If this does come up, it is likely to be very early in your game.

Improving Play

Zoom In

The simplest thing you can do to improve your game is to zoom in. Make scenes. Play characters. Focus on a person's life. If you are setting the Focus, make it something tight like a person or something very specific that happened. If it's your turn to add history, make a scene and ask a very pointed question.

The sooner, the better. You already know the big picture when the game starts, so the sooner you zoom all the way in and explore specific people in the history the sooner you'll have the whole spectrum of material in your game, from the very, very large to the very, very small. Until you do that, your history may feel abstract and remote. You need to balance that grand scope with the personal experiences of individuals. We can connect to people. We can root for people. We can hate people and want their lives to end miserably. It engages a totally different part of your mind than the grand history does: your story is more satisfying when it addresses both.

If you don't zoom in you're not using the full range of focus on your Microscope, if you'll pardon the extended metaphor. You're only playing half the game.

Make People

This is really a corollary to "zoom in," but it is important enough to bear repeating: When you are making history, make people.

Individuals bring your history to life. Without people, your history may be interesting but remote. It might not grab you. But introduce one person living through your history and, suddenly, it is personal and meaningful. We can sympathize with people.

You don't have to wait until you role-play scenes. Make your Focus a person. When you make an Event, mention a person who was critical to what happened.

How can you be sure someone you are thinking of creating is interesting enough to introduce? Are they important enough to talk about? It's a red herring: individuals don't have to be important in the grand scheme of things for their lives to interest us. Even the simplest character concept is a magnet for story. Other players will start building on them and exploring their lives just because they are there. We will discover what makes them interesting as we flesh out their life.

Paint a Complete Picture

Whenever you add something to the history, describe it clearly and completely. Describe it like you are never coming back and no one is going to add anything to it (that won't happen, but pretend it will). Your description should stand alone as a complete summary.

If someone creates history but leaves it vague, ask them to clarify. After each player's turn, everyone should be able to confidently say, "Got it!" and move on. What you create may raise lots of questions about what happens before or after–and that's fine–but the thing itself should be crystal clear, not hazy.

This may seem like strange advice since the whole point of the game is to let other people add detail to the things you make. But that's exactly why you need to be clear and complete, so other players can build on your idea, not misinterpret it and add things that do not make sense.

The acid test is to visualize what someone described. Can you picture it? Is there some part that is blank or that you are mentally filling in yourself? If so, ask them to clarify. The answer might be simple and obvious. What was the battlefield terrain like? Open plains, you say? Of course! But every now and then you will discover that the creator was visualizing things totally differently than you assumed. "The legions were lured into deep forest and ambushed" is nothing like the open plains confrontation you were imagining. Now is the time to straighten that out.

One detail that is easy to overlook is describing the outcome. Tell us how things end. If the Event is a battle, a summary should include who won and who lost. Did the legions escape the ambush or were they crushed? Don't make cliffhangers unless the outcome is outside the scope of the Period or Event you are making.

How much do you have to describe to be complete? The rule is that you must include what could be seen at that scale of history. But that leaves room for interpretation. If you create a Period of economic prosperity, you might describe the reasons behind the boom if you think it would be obvious and visible ("new trade routes bring wealth to the realm"), but you might also decide that the causes are not clear without deeper exploration. You are allowed to refuse to add detail if it would not be visible. Conversely, you might choose to include details that might not be obvious because they are essential to the concept. If the whole point of your war Period is that it was a misunderstanding, you will probably want to include that in your description even though it might not be visible on the surface.

Name Things

When you introduce something important, whether it's a planet or a city or a cabal of sorcerers, give it a name.

Coming up with proper names can be time-consuming, but even a simple title serves just as well and sometimes better. Calling someplace "Red Harbor" is a lot more memorable than just calling it "the port city" over and over again. If you think of a good proper name later, go back and tack it on. The same is true of people. You don't have to name every character in a scene. Descriptions or labels are often good enough (the rebel leader, the struggling artist), but if someone emerges as a recurring or important character, take a minute to go back and name them or give them a unique title ("That bandit leader? She's known as The Hawk").

As a player, you can use names to your advantage: a name makes your creation more interesting, which means other players are more likely to build on it. The other players might not be excited when you introduce some generic troop of mercenaries, but call it the Fenris Brigade and it's intriguing. We're more likely to explore it. A name helps you sell your idea.

Always Explain Light or Dark

Never let a player say something is Light or Dark without asking them to explain why. This is a rule of the game: you must explain the tone you picked. If you're making history and no one asks you to explain, do it anyway. Even if the answer seems obvious, do it anyway.

I've seen it time and again: a player describes a Period or Event, picks the tone, but when they are asked to explain why it is Light or Dark, they sit for

a moment and think, then they add detail or nuance to their description that puts things in a much richer perspective. They might have already been thinking it and just not realized they had not said it, or the pieces of the puzzle might have come together right as they were talking. Either way, the history they're creating gains whole new depth.

It's almost like a first and second draft. You describe what happened, but when you stop to explain why it is Light or Dark, it makes you think about the implications and meaning of what you just said. The first description is fact, but describing Light or Dark tells us what those facts mean and how they feel. That's where we really connect to the history.

I Don't Know What to Make!

Sooner or later you'll hit the nightmare scenario: it's your turn, but you have no idea what to make. You're stumped and no one is allowed to give you hints and you aren't allowed to pass and oh my god this game is torture.

The good news is that a solution is probably sitting right in front of you: instead of trying to invent something brand new, just find a hole in the history and fill in the blank.

Stop and think about what the last few players made and pick someone or something that was important (the Focus is always the obvious choice). Ask yourself which parts of that story have *not* been described yet:

> **BIRTH**: Their creation or starting point.
>
> **VICTORY**: A high point. A moment of triumph or success, even if we know they fail later.
>
> **FAILURE**: A low point. A moment of defeat or doubt, even if we know they succeed later.
>
> **END**: Their death or destruction.

Pick one and describe that moment for the person or thing you picked. I can almost guarantee that, for whatever person or thing you choose, one of those four points has not been covered. It doesn't matter if the idea seems obvious or if it was already hinted at in the history—if there is no card on the table, you can make it.

Those four points describe the arc of just about anything. Triumphs and failures are particularly interesting when they are counterpoints to what we know happens later. We already know the doctor finds the cure to the terrible plague and it's a happy ending, but what about the part *before* she succeeds, where she is riddled with doubt because everyone is telling her she's on the wrong track, wasting her time? Or when her funding gets cut and her lab is shut down? That's good stuff. Suddenly our simple story has some drama.

For extra credit, here are three more you can use:

> **FORESHADOW**: The situation that lead up to their origin. Show why they were needed in the world or what caused their creation.
>
> **FULFILLMENT**: The moment when they become the thing we know them as or when they achieve their identity (the king is crowned, the city grows into a thriving metropolis, etc.).
>
> **LEGACY**: Memories or repercussions of them after they are gone. How are they remembered? What was their impact?

Even if it feels like you are not adding something important, remember the whole structure of Microscope is about building one brick on top of another. You may be laying groundwork that another player vitally needs. You make an obvious Event, but that allows someone else to make a surprising Scene inside it. Microscope is a team sport. Even if you don't think you hit a home run, you're helping.

Start With Nuking Atlantis

When you are introducing something new, there's a natural tendency to fall back on chronological order and begin at the beginning or when something is at its high point. I want to bring in a chivalric order to protect the beleaguered King, so I make an Event where the Knights of the Tower take their oath to defend the realm!

But a fun alternative is to start at the other end: introduce something by showing its downfall, death or destruction. Make an Event where the Knights of the Tower (who I am just now making up) are lured into a trap and slaughtered, extinguishing their order. A dark day for the realm!

Not only does starting with the fall shake up your normal story patterns and remind you you're playing Microscope, it also lets you cement something's fate upfront, which is a powerful move. You get to work backward and see how they got there. But freed from wondering what happens at the end, you get to focus on *why* it happened.

Talk Before You Write

It is also not unusual to be stuck because you *do* have an idea, or some part of an idea, but you just can't wrestle it into the shape you want. It's there, but it is just out of sight. You don't even know how to start describing it.

That's one reason why the rules say to always talk before you write. You'll open your mouth and the idea will start to evolve as you speak. You may even get part way through your description and then have everything

click into place so that you realize what you said so far was all wrong. No problem: just back up and start over again. Nothing wrong with that.

The other reason you talk before you write is that your audience is not the card: it's the other people at the table. You need to tell them what you're creating and make sure they understand. Writing on the card is just an afterthought.

Enforce the Rules & Watch for Contradictions

The stricter you are about the rules from the start, the better your game will be.

The rules of Microscope are set up to make each person's contribution matter. It may seem harmless to let "illegal" things slide, but if one person is playing wrong, they are usually doing so at someone else's expense, even if it's totally unintentional. They're forgetting the Focus the Lens picked or trying to help a player who seems stumped by suggesting ideas.

No one at the table should hesitate to step in if someone is breaking a rule, even if it seems harmless. If you're teaching the game, be clear about what's legal and what isn't. Soon everyone will understand exactly how to play, and you can all relax and have fun. But if you are lax or inconsistent, you will make it harder for everyone to get the hang of the game. You might think you're encouraging creativity, but you're really creating doubt and making it harder to learn.

It is also everyone's job to watch out for contradictions and point them out when they happen. It may feel rude to point out how someone's lovely new creation clashes with what we already know, but you are doing them (and everyone else) a favor. If some part of the history is broken or illogical, it's hard for other players to know what to do with it. The simple solution is just to avoid it and make history far away, which means no one is building on the stuff you made. Pointing out contradictions means the player can fix the problem immediately and create something solid that other players can build on confidently.

We Never Push!

"We played Microscope and had a great time, but we never used the Push rules." Great! I don't Push a lot either.

Push is an "in case of emergency, break glass" rule. Scenes are the free collaborative portion of the game, but Push is there to give you a way to put on the brakes if you want. In a perfect world you would never need it, but as a game designer part of my job is to include tools to deal with the worst-case scenarios.

But doesn't each player have massive authority over the history when it is their turn? Can't they do things that destroy cities or planets with no veto? Yes. But on your turn you only get to make one piece of history. That choice limits you. But during a scene each player can freely establish detail after detail. There is no limit on what they can contribute except the context of the scene. That can get out of control.

It is also a question of speed. In the heat of role-playing, people can narrate as fast as they can talk. That can result in pretty drastic or sweeping revelations. Push can slow things down and give us a moment to examine whether what was described is really something everyone at the table wants. You may Push and lose the vote, but at least everyone took the time to really think about where they wanted the history to go. Again, Push lets you put on the brakes.

Push Concede

If you prefer what someone wants to Push over your own idea, here's a shortcut to accept the change without a vote:

> **If someone Pushes to change something you said during a Scene and you prefer their idea, you can concede and automatically replace what you said. Play continues without stopping to vote.**

But if any other player prefers your original idea (or has another idea of their own), they can require a vote. If you do vote, follow the normal procedure just as though you had not used the Concede option. If you look closely, you will notice this does not change how the game works at all. It just speeds things up when everyone is agreement, which is nice because you can get back to role-playing sooner.

Legacies Are Mini-Focuses

Like Push, Legacies is another feature that some people look at and wonder, "Hmm, what's the point?" Couldn't you just as easily play without them?

Legacies perform a vital function, but it is a fairly subtle one. At its heart, a Legacy is really just a tiny Focus, except it serves the exact opposite purpose. The Focus gets us all on the same page and keeps us making things that relate to the same facet of the history, preventing us from spinning off into totally unrelated stories. But when you pick a Focus, you commit everyone to that subject matter for a whole loop around the table. You are deciding an important chunk of the game.

Enter the Legacy. It's a break from the constraint of a big Focus. It lets you roam farther afield and flesh something out without committing everyone to exploring it for a full rotation. It lets you build on loose ends or add interesting (and possibly unrelated) wrinkles to your history.

In a longer game, the Legacy also does exactly what you might expect it to do: it provides call-backs to early elements. In a short game, it has an added social value because it lets the person to the right of the first Lens contribute early on, which is good because they will be the last person who has a chance to make a Focus.

You Can Keep Your Legacy

The way the Legacy rules are phrased is misleading. It starts from the point-of-view of a player picking their first Legacy and only talks about what to do if you already have a Legacy farther down the page. Really that should be the first instruction:

> **If you already have a Legacy, you can choose to keep your old one or pick a new one.**

It doesn't come up until you've already played through as many Focuses as there are players, but for long-term play or multiple session histories it matters.

In the "Explore a Legacy" step, you can use any active Legacy to make an Event or Dictated Scene, not just your own. In long-term play, you might build on a Legacy that's been around since the start of the game.

Listen Charitably: We Aren't All Poets

Inventing entire fantasy vistas in your head isn't always easy. But sometimes the real challenge is finding words to communicate your vision to the other people at the table.

When someone else describes something that sounds weird or awkward, remember that they might be struggling to describe something that is actually very cool and interesting. They just can't nail down the language to express it in a way that everyone else in the table can grasp. What comes out of their mouth might sound clumsy or even ridiculous, but that doesn't mean their idea is bad. It might just be lost in translation.

We aren't all poets. We don't all have the gift of eloquence, but that doesn't mean we don't have good ideas.

Give other players the benefit of the doubt. Listen charitably and make an effort to understand what they are trying to contribute. If something seems awkward or out of place, ask questions to clarify rather than dismissing or ignoring their input. You may find that an awkward, rambling description hides a marvelous gem.

Sharing Your History

There Are Two Stories to Tell

You played a great game of Microscope and now you want to share it with the world! Great! But any time you play a role-playing game, two different stories are created. One is the story of what happened in the fictional world: what your characters did, the dragons they slew and the mysteries they explored. The other is the story of what happened at the table: the decisions you made, as players, that created that fiction and how the rules pushed you to make interesting choices, the hours you spent debating whether to trust the prince, that amazing roll that unexpectedly saved the day, Jeff making that one off-hand joke that became a core idea of the campaign.

Normally, these two stories sit one on top of the other, perfectly in parallel. If you were listening to the story of the fiction, you could turn on the director's commentary and hear how the action at the table shaped it. But because you don't play Microscope in chronological order, the difference between the fiction and the play is much, much greater. Something at the end of the history might have happened at the very beginning of the game while something that happened only a moment later in the fiction might have actually been hours later in game. The order of the fiction and the order of play do not match. At all.

When you are telling the story of your Microscope history, it is easy to forget that the way things were created in play was essential to the magic. During the game, it was shocking when a player made an Event where the Black Phoenix command broke their oath and launched a suicide attack against the invading fleet. It only made sense when you jumped back in time and played scenes to learn why they did it. But when you tell the story in nice neat chronological order, it isn't surprising at all because it makes perfect sense, now. Your audience is likely to wonder what the big deal is.

On top of that, almost nothing in Microscope is the creation of a single author. One person introduces something and then others build on it, explore it and refine it. When you describe the finished history, it may seem pretty straightforward. You only see how marvelous it is when you see how it emerged from all the individual contributions at the table. One player introduced the idea of warp-gates allowing people to walk between the worlds. Another added that only living creatures could go through, forcing travelers to walk naked through the gates, colonizing new worlds with nothing but their bare hands. And then later another player introduced the idea of tattooed messengers carrying news and knowledge between all the worlds. It's a neat idea, but it's even more interesting because of how it emerged from all of us.

There's another pitfall of sharing your history: the creative and complicated ideas you arrived at in play may sound strange or even absurd when you try to condense them into a simple summary. What I said earlier about how it can be hard to express ourselves because we are not all poets applies to telling the story of your game afterwards too. But telling how you arrived at those ideas in play makes it easier to show why your game was so interesting.

My recommendation? Tell the story of what happened at the table and how it created the fiction. Talk about the leaps and inspirations and how you built on each other. That's a far more interesting story to hear.

STARTING YOUR HISTORY

The big picture. It is the grand summary of your entire history, yet it is also the very first decision you make. You sit down with a bunch of people, excited to play… and then stare at each other, fumbling for an idea to get you started.

The rules do not give you a lot of guidance on how to actually pick or agree on a starting point for your history. If someone has a concept they want to try and it sounds good to everyone, great! You're ready to go! But what about when no one does?

The variety of histories you could explore with Microscope are nearly infinite, but your game-time is not. This chapter includes three approaches to help you get playing more quickly:

- **SEEDS** are pre-made starting points for a history. Each includes a simple concept and a few questions to help you customize and drill down to the kind of game you want to play.
- Find yourself falling back into the same old starting concepts? Roll on an **ORACLE** to randomly generate a history idea. Each includes a huge range of possible results.
- The third option is to take advantage of existing **SOURCE MATERIAL** like books, movies or even real world history as a foundation for your game. Play and expand an existing setting, or reboot the whole thing and rewrite it the way you like.

These tools are particularly useful when you have a short window of play or a group that doesn't know each other that well.

Seeds

Seeds are the easiest starting point for a history. Want to start playing immediately? Grab a seed and go.

Each seed provides a complete concept for a history, but they are intentionally minimal, providing just enough information to get everyone on the same page plus a few questions to customize the idea and make it your own. You could use the same seed over and over again and get different histories every time.

To use a seed, read the introduction aloud. Then read each question and its answers, and pick a choice together. The last two questions create the bookends of your history so when you're done you are ready to jump straight to the Palette.

Just like in any Microscope game, even after you are done customizing your seed, your history will still only be a simple summary. If your group thinks your history idea looks too plain, read this aloud:

> *Just like with any Microscope game, our history may seem too simple or even a little boring at the start. That's okay. As we play we'll turn this simple idea into our own unique creation. We play to find out the details.*

As you look at a seed, you may think of a way to twist it into an *even better* idea. That's awesome. Just discuss it as a group and, if everyone agrees, run with it. Same with answering the questions to customize your seed: if you think of a better answer than one of the choices listed, use it!

If you have played the same seed before, remember that only what happens in this game counts. Don't expect a seed you played before to turn out the same. Yes, in your last game, Lemuria was an onerous tyrant enslaving the other nations, but that does not have any bearing on the game you are playing now. In other words: abandon your preconceptions, as always.

SWORDS & SORCERY

After Lemuria Sinks

Blood of Monsters

The Dark Lord

From Twilight Lands

Golems of Eden

House of the Dragon, House of the Unicorn

TO THE STARS

Battle of the Planets

Brave New World

The Essence

Humanity Uplifted

The Imperium

Stars Collide

PROGRESS & APOCALYPSE

Boom Town / Ghost Town

Kaiju Century

Legacy of Heroes

Rising Tide

The Round Table

Who Watches the Watchmen?

After Lemuria Sinks

Lemuria, the great island nation, has sunk beneath the waves. Wise and terrible Lemuria, that mighty jewel among the powers of the earth, is lost. Fallen. Never to return. Now the young nations are free to forge their own destiny. Will they thrive or will they descend into barbarism without Lemuria's guidance and tyranny?

What made Lemuria mighty? (pick one or two)

- Sorcery
- Worship of forbidden gods
- Science and alchemy
- Their mighty fleets
- Vast wealth and natural resources
- Blackmail, assassination and treachery

What sunk Lemuria?

- Natural disaster (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves)
- Their own works gone awry (pick a disaster that fits Lemuria's might: magical calamity, civil war, etc.)
- Their enemies joined forces and destroyed them.

What remains of Lemuria?

- The Lemurians are all dead, but some of their knowledge and artifacts have survived.
- A handful of individual Lemurians escaped. They may make their way as counselors to kings, warlords or sorrowful hermits.
- Small enclaves of Lemurians exist, refugees who escaped the doom or colonists who left before the calamity.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Ur-Samar, a young kingdom, dominates its neighbors. It craves to be the new Lemuria.
- Kingdoms wallow in savagery without Lemuria to guide and master them.
- Superstitious fear abounds. Prophets warn that the fall of Lemuria foretells the fall of all nations.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- One empire rules all the land, enforcing peace with the sword.
- Hidden priests of a revived Lemurian cult are behind the throne of every court. Their dark whispers rule the land.
- Barbarian hordes from the wilds pillage the decadent kingdoms. Civilization burns.

This is a classic Conan-esque setting, ready for emerald jungles, blood-stained ziggurats and unspeakable cults. Want to explore Lemuria before its fall? Just move its destruction into the middle of your history instead of before the start.

Battle of the Planets

Earth, Mars, Venus and the moons of Jupiter wage war to control the Solar System. The stars remain beyond our reach, so the planets are the only home we have.

What flavor of science fiction do we want?

- Fairly realistic science fiction.
- Pulp rocket ships, jetpacks and rayguns.
- 19th-century imperialism in space (musket-bearing redcoats sail between planets on ether-powered ironclads in the service of Her Majesty, Queen of Magna Terra).

Are there aliens?

- No aliens. The planets of the solar system were colonized by Earthlings.
- Each world has its own native species (Martians, Jovians, etc.). Some are on an equal footing with humanity. Others are more primitive or more advanced.
- Only humans are native to our solar system, but agents of species from other stars meddle in our affairs.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- The Solar Accord. Peace treaty between all planets ratified.
- Martian War of Independence, rebelling against Earth. (Does Mars win or lose?)
- The sky falls on Earth. Asteroids diverted to rain down, causing monumental devastation.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- The Solar Accord (or a new Solar Accord, depending) brings peace to the planets.
- Cold War in space. Stalemate as planets hunker down and fortify their zones of control.
- Venus burns. Nothing survives. Remaining combatants surrender, ending the war. (Who commits this atrocity?)

Blood of Monsters

The blood of monsters runs through the veins of some, passed from one generation to the next since the deeds that first spawned them. They are mighty overlords, kings… or terrors.

How does a bloodline start?

- Slay the monster and drink (or bathe in) its blood.
- Make a pact with the monster.
- Mate with the monster. Your offspring has the power.

How common are people with the blood?

- There can only be one person for each monster at a time.
- Only a handful at a time. The power may sleep for generations.
- More and more common as bloodlines spread.

How powerful does the blood make someone?

- Not physically stronger, but they have unshakeable will and determination.
- Stronger and more resilient than any mortal.
- Inhuman might, capable of crushing a small army single-handedly.

Do they look different than normal people?

- No visible difference.
- Some telltale signs.
- Blatantly half-monster, half-human.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Exiles seek power to defeat the Overlord. They create the first monster bloodlines.
- Hero defeats monster, gains its power and becomes a mighty conqueror.
- Last monsters of ancient days hide from men, seeking to live in peace.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- One bloodline destroys the others and reigns unopposed.
- Those of the blood are hunted down and destroyed for the beasts they are.
- Blood is so diffused by intermarriage that its power is gone even if its prestige remains.

You might include a wide variety of monsters or only a few. Here are some monsters to pick from: basilisk, chimera, dragon, gorgon, griffon, harpy, hydra, lamia, manticore, minotaur, naga, roc, salamander, siren, sphinx, unicorn, wyvern.

For a twist on a fantasy theme, extend your history into the present. Scions of monsters could be hidden in modern society, fighting an unseen war to control corporations or political parties. Gorgon for President!

Boom Town / Ghost Town

There's gold in them thar hills! When the riches pour in, the community thrives and grows. When the well dries up, the community withers and the people move away. Your community could go through a series of booms and busts, nearly dying and then thriving again when there's a new influx.

Where is this community?

- Frontier of the Old West
- Colonial settlement (circa the European age of exploration), carving profit out of the savage wilderness
- Space station or moon base

What makes the community rich?

- Precious raw material (gold, spices, slaves)
- Energy source (oil, uranium, X-417)
- Perfect location (along a trade route, railroad, warp-junction, etc., or in a critical, strategic location)

What's bad about the community's location?

- Dangerous territory (environment, creatures, other people).
- Remote location. Very hard to get there from civilization.
- Lack of basic resources. It cannot survive without importing essential goods.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Community is small and struggling (boom resource has not been discovered yet)
- Explorers discover the boom resource. Community is built to take advantage of it.
- Community booms as wealth and ambitious workers pour in.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Ghost town. The community has been abandoned.
- The resource is no longer valuable. The community struggles, but it is hopeless.
- Community finds a new reason to exist, escapes the boom / bust cycle.

Your community could just as easily be a military base holding a location whose strategic importance waxes and wanes.

Perfect location and remote location might seem to be contradictions, but it would be easy to have a vital transit point that was in the middle of nowhere or that connected distant countries.

Brave New World

Colonists set foot on a new planet and strive to make it home. Can it grow into a flourishing, civilized world or will the colony fail and be forgotten?

Why did the colonists come here?

- They are bold pioneers expanding civilization to a new world.
- They are refugees trying to escape oppression (political, racial or religious).
- They crash-landed. This was not their intended destination.

What's the ecosystem like when the colonists arrive?

- Earth-like
- Verdant, but the plants and animals are entirely alien.
- Sparse. Poor natural resources.

Is there intelligent alien life?

- No intelligent life except humans.
- Aliens lived here once, but they're long dead.
- Aliens colonize here too. They might already be here or arrive after us.

Are there other colonized worlds?

- This is the first human colony beyond our sun. We are entirely on our own.
- There are only a handful of colonies scattered among the stars. Contact from off-world is extremely rare.
- There are many colonized worlds.

What do the colonists name their world? (pick or make up your own)

- Haven
- Eden
- Green
- Winter
- Crucible
- KJ-427

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- The colonists arrive on the planet.
- The first settlement grows into a city.
- A schism divides the colonists. They separate to two different bases.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- The colony blossoms into a prosperous world.
- The colony is struggling but surviving.
- The world is torn apart by factionalism and strife.

The Dark Lord

The shadow of the Dark Lord stretches across the free lands. Will the realm fall to him or will his threat be ended once and for all?

What is the Dark Lord?

- A creature of darkness from the ancient days.
- A hero of the free lands, now corrupted.
- A title held by a succession of tyrants.

Why is he most feared?

- His vast armies.
- His unspeakable sorcery and monstrous creatures.
- His spies and traitors. He can bend others' minds to his will, so his servants can be anywhere.

Are the free lands united against the Dark Lord?

- Arrogance and pride divide them. It is their perpetual downfall.
- Some fight him, but others would gladly take his place.
- They stand united!

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- The Dark Lord is forgotten or thought a myth.
- The threat of the Dark Lord looms.
- The Dark Lord has conquered all the lands.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Victory. The free folk defeat the Dark Lord.
- Defeat. The Dark Lord conquers the realm.
- The Dark Lord is defeated, but a corrupted hero takes his place.

The struggle could take centuries. There may be great periods of peace when the Enemy is thought vanquished, or times of terrible despair when the free lands seem conquered beyond hope. Your history may spend a lot more time exploring the people of the free lands rather than the Dark Lord and the actual battles against him.

This seed comes straight from *Lord of the Rings* and all the Sauron-imitators that followed, though your history may go in quite different directions.

The Essence

A new drug changes society. Its benefits are so great that living without it becomes unacceptable. It becomes a pivotal point of humanity's future because the only thing worse than a life-changing wonder drug is the lack of a life-changing wonder drug…

What's the setting?

- The far future, a galactic society with humanity spread among the stars.
- Modern society, changed forever.
- Renaissance times. A discovery brought back from the colonies changes society.

What is the benefit of taking essence?

- Incredible health and well-being.
- Enhances intelligence, insight and creativity.
- Upgrades your senses to high definition. Normal sight, taste, etc., are lifeless and blurry by comparison.
- Slows your perception of time. Every moment feels longer.
- Self-control. Perfect discipline and focus, no distractions, depression or pain.
- Makes you more attractive.

What's the downside?

- It's not chemically addictive, but losing the benefits seems terrible if you stop taking it.
- Small percentage of people suffer immediate and permanent harm from exposure.
- Sterility

Where does essence come from?

- It is found in only one place (a single planet or a remote region of the globe).
- It is synthetic and very difficult to produce.
- Once discovered, it is wide-spread and easily harvested (from the sea, common plants or drifting in the vast empty spaces between the stars)

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Essence discovered and used widely. Society flourishes.
- Monopoly controls essence. Access is limited to the wealthy and elite.
- "Nature" movement arises, opposing the widespread essence use that is now common.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Essence is the norm. Civilization reaps the benefits.
- New generations born with resistance to essence's effects. It stops being effective for all but a few.
- Revolutionaries destroy source of essence (or harvesters and stockpiles) to "free" humanity.

This seed is absolutely inspired by *Dune*. He who controls the spice controls the universe.

From Twilight Lands

Invaders from a magical realm transform a once-ordinary land. The world may never be the same, but do the newcomers bring wonder or terror?

Who are the invaders?

- A magical civilization, like elves from the faerie courts or a race of sorcerers.
- A mighty army, like eldritch knights or the dead escaped from the underworld.
- Terrors who prey on men, like vampires or demons.
- Mighty entities, like dragons or titans.
- Beasts or unspeaking creatures, like unicorns or walking trees.
- Changelings or shapeshifters that secretly take peoples' places.

How did they get here?

- A magic portal opened to their realm.
- They traveled for many leagues.
- Their realm was always here, but hidden or slumbering.

What was the land like before the invaders came? (pick two)

- Prosperous.
- Poor.
- Peaceful.
- Torn apart by strife.
- Bound by faith.
- Ruled by strong kings.
- Dreary. Lacking hopes or dreams.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- The land is as it always has been (The invaders have not come yet).
- The invaders arrive suddenly.
- Someone summons the invaders to this land (intentionally or not).

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- The invaders are driven away.
- The invaders rule this land.
- The invaders are defeated and their power used against them.

The invasion could be a dire threat or a slow and almost invisible transformation as their influence seeps into the lands. And instead of conquerors, the invaders could be a potential source of wisdom and lore.

Golems of Eden

Magi fashion artificial servants but inadvertently create a race of living, feeling beings. Are the golems accepted as equals or enslaved and exploited? Are they children or usurpers of Man?

What do golems look like?

- Completely human. They were formed of clay, but magic made them flesh and blood.
- Statues of humans, perfect to the last detail though some are larger and stronger.
- Any shape a wizard thinks to animate: towering giants of stone, carved ivory demons, hammered-brass crabs, etc.

Can golems communicate with humans?

- Yes, golems can speak.
- Golems cannot speak, but some have learned to write.
- No. They understand us, but we can only guess what golems think.

How do golems die naturally?

- The magic that binds golems fades and they become inanimate again.
- Golems erode and slowly fall to pieces, bit by bit.
- Their bodies do not die, but they eventually forget everything, wandering in amnesia.

How are new golems born?

- Magi must make them. Golems are dependent on humans to continue their race.
- A golem can craft another golem, slowly and carefully.
- The spirit of a dying golem can migrate into a newly made body. It is reborn as a new person with no memory of its past life.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Magi discover how to animate golems.
- Realms forge armies of golems to wage war on each other.
- Golems have long-served mages, but now some show free will. They disobey, flee or slay their masters.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Golems enslave humans
- Humans and golems learn to coexist in peace
- Golems march into the wilderness to seek a new home, free of mankind

Questions you might answer in play: Do golems see humans as parents or enslavers? Are golems truly living beings?

This seed is the fantasy analog of humanity creating intelligent robots and examining the relationship that emerges.

House of the Dragon, House of the Unicorn

Two noble houses vie for supremacy. Knights and lords clash beneath the crimson pennant of the Dragon and the argent banner of the Unicorn. What betrayals fuel their bitter feud? Can any deed heal the breach between them, or can only one remain? Rex Alicorn! Rex Draconis!

What is the connection between the two Houses?

- They are two branches of one ancient lineage.
- One is an offshoot that broke away from the original House. (Which one is the original?)
- They each come from different lands, foreigners in collision.

Are there supernatural elements in the world?

- No. There are legends and folklore, but it's just superstition.
- Magic is real but rare. It is mostly a normal world, with mysticism in the background.
- All the magic. There are actual dragons and unicorns.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- A terrible deed starts the feud between the Houses (what deed?).
- The two Houses are locked in bitter war.
- The two Houses are long-standing allies.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- One house finally destroys the other (which one?) and takes the throne.
- Dragon & Unicorn are united in marriage, sealing the peace and creating one House.
- Both Houses have faded into irrelevance.

Your history could include war and politics, intrigue and assassination, star-crossed lovers or all of the above across the centuries. There could even be whole periods where the Houses are united and at peace. It works as a realistic "War of the Roses" style conflict or a mythical, magical saga. You could even stretch your history into a modern era, trading swords and crowns for corporate boardrooms and political parties. Unicorn for President!

Humanity Uplifted

Aliens accelerate the development of humanity. But do they welcome us as equals or are they shaping us into more useful slaves? Do they fear the violence we might unleash if left unguided?

When in human history did the intervention start?

- Modern times.
- Around World War II or the Cold War.
- At the dawn of civilization (ancient astronauts steering the course of humanity).

Did humanity know what the visitors were doing from the start?

- No, the aliens began secretly.
- Yes, the aliens asked our permission.
- We knew, but we were not asked for our consent.

What change are the visitors trying to bring about in humanity?

- Awaken our psychic gifts.
- Suppress our violent urges.
- Give us immunity to a particular galactic disease or danger.
- Instill a range of improvements: smarter, stronger, longer-lived, etc.
- Free us from our self-centered perspective. Enable each of us to see the universe as a whole.
- Breed a human-alien hybrid.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Humanity learns we are not alone. Aliens exist.
- Humans who are forerunners of "the change" have trouble fitting in normal society.
- Aliens begin secretly studying humans.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Humanity joins the galactic community.
- Humanity rebels against this tampering and wages war on the aliens.
- The project fails. Aliens give up trying to change humanity.

The Imperium

The grand Imperium spans ten thousand stars, uniting all humanity beneath the glorious banner of the Omnipotent Astrarch, Emperor of the Void-Throne, Keeper of the Heavens and Sovereign of All Worlds.

What unites the Imperium?

- Security and fear. The Empire protects its subjects, even from each other.
- Trade interdependence. Worlds need what other worlds can provide.
- Religion or strong cultural ties.

The Imperium is human. Do aliens exist?

- No aliens, just humans.
- No true aliens, but humanity has created a myriad of artificial races (synthetics, modified human strains, etc.).
- Three great alien races could rival the Imperium.

At the height of the Imperium, what does the Emperor control that keeps him in power?

- The mighty Imperial Legions.
- Technological suppression. The Empire keeps tight control over which worlds have access to advanced technology.
- The World-brains, huge thinking machines that governments, scientists and markets depend on.
- The Star-Bridges that link the inhabited worlds and allow faster-than-light travel.
- The Sleepwalkers, a secret cadre of psychic spies and assassins.
- Strange powers granted by the Infinity Crystal.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- First Emperor crowns himself, dissolves old Alliance of Worlds.
- 143rd Emperor goes mad, terrorizes his subjects with his insane whims.
- Civil war. Rebel systems try to secede but are crushed.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Imperium rules known space.
- Imperium fades and dissolves. Humanity scattered among the stars.
- Imperium breaks into warring states, none with the grandeur of the old Empire.

Kaiju Century

Giant monsters emerge, crushing everything in their path until no city is safe from the towering leviathans. Does humanity fight back with giant robots or cower helplessly, lamenting our own hubris?

What created the monsters?

- Pollution, radiation and chemical waste.
- They've always been here, slumbering for eons.
- They came from outer space…

How unique is each monster?

- Each is unique. People know them by name.
- There is only one species. They all look alike.
- There are several distinct species.

What weapons does humanity use to fight the monsters?

- Real world weapons only: armies, planes, tanks.
- Near future science, but still basically realistic.
- Super-science! Giant robots, mind-rays, etc.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Industry and development are booming around the world (no monsters yet).
- Researchers observe monsters in remote wilderness. No one believes the reports.
- Sporadic monster appearances and attacks, each years apart. Cities are threatened but saved.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- The monsters are destroyed or driven back to the depths.
- Humanity under siege. Remaining cities are walled fortresses to repel roaming monsters.
- Monsters rampage unopposed. No major cities remain. Survivors scavenge and hide in their shadow.

Monsters make a good backdrop, but people tell a stronger story. Focus on the people to make this history come alive. This history could easily span a century as giant monsters first emerge as a rare menace but then become an incessant danger that threatens to topple society.

Legacy of Heroes

New generations of superheroes carry on the torch of their predecessors, taking up the names and mantles of the crimefighters that came before them.

Do heroes (and villains) have super powers?

- No, they are just people with costumes and, perhaps, training and special equipment.
- Some do, but it is relatively rare.
- Yes, many have superhuman powers.

How common are superheroes?

- Very rare. There are just a handful at any time.
- There are a few in every major city.
- Lots, all around the globe.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- The "golden age" of heroes. The first generation of legends fight and then fade away.
- Early "mystery men" fight crime from the shadows. Many think it is a hoax.
- Crime and violence are rampant. Police cannot cope (no heroes or villains yet).

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- The new Doctor Lazarus, legacy supervillain, terrorizes city. Greatest heroes of the time die defeating him.
- Legacy superhero sells out and gets a corporate sponsor.
- Superheroes and supervillains are a thing of the past. Those that survived hung up their masks for good.

Part of the fun of this seed is seeing the same hero (or villain) being reinvented by each successor. In order to see multiple generations, your history should stretch back fifty or even a hundred years.

Rising Tide

Global warming melts the ice caps. Oceans rise. Cities flood.

Rising sea level changes the shape of every continent, wiping out coastal areas and destabilizing nations. Refugees are forced to seek new homes. Countries fight to keep the land they have or gain the ground they need.

Do we want to explore how to solve the problem?

- No, we want to focus on how people survive and adapt in the face of this unstoppable force.
- Yes, let's see how people try to fix the problem. They may succeed or they may not.
- People may try to fix the problem, but we know they cannot succeed.

What tone of game do we want to play?

- Serious examination of the issues.
- Realistic but dramatic "world in crisis" story.
- Science-fantasy. Floating islands and domed cities.

How quickly does the sea level rise?

- Very, very slowly. Boiling the frog.
- Slow at first but then faster as the tipping point is reached.
- Surprisingly suddenly.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Everything's fine. We don't see the problem coming.
- Everyone hears the predictions, but no one in power does anything.
- A city in the Third World is evacuated as water seeps into its streets. It's the first casualty, not the last.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Civilization collapses. Wandering scavengers and small communities persevere, but the world community is a thing of the past.
- We adapt. The world is different, but we find a way to survive, whether that's floating cities, underwater domes, leaving Earth or just resettling to higher ground.
- We fix it. Cities may be lost, but we stop or reverse the climate change.

The Round Table

An enlightened monarch brings the rule of law to the realm. No longer can the powerful oppress the weak! "Equal justice for all" replaces "might makes right". But is it the beginning of civilized society or a grand experiment doomed to fail?

By default, the rise of the rule of law happens somewhere in the middle of your history instead of the beginning, allowing you to explore the events that led up to it.

Beside the throne, who holds power in the realm? (pick two)

- Nobles (land-owning dukes, barons and lords)
- The Church (or Druids)
- Orders of knights
- Merchants & traders
- Guilds
- Foreigners within the realm (pick one of the previous groups to determine what kind of foreigners, e.g. foreign merchants. It could be the same as your other choice, such as nobles and foreign nobles)

Why now?

- Monarch believes in what is right, ahead of his time.
- Monarch is insane. A good idea emerges from madness.
- A powerful group demands it (pick one you selected).

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Barbarians and marauders roam the land. The throne sits empty.
- Influential groups vie for power (nobles, merchants, etc.), tearing the realm apart.
- An heir to the line of High Kings, long-thought lost, ascends to the throne, ending the interregnum.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Law and order prevail. Society becomes civilized.
- The throne is empty and the law is forgotten. Marauders roam the land.
- The law is twisted to benefit the powerful and exploit the weak.

This seed addresses the very issues of justice and the rule of law that confront a modern society, but you have a freer hand to explore drastic consequences because it is set in uncivilized medieval times. Sack castles and burn down villages, if you want.

The mere idea that "justice is blind" and that every person should be treated equally is a huge leap forward. Do the privileged wage war to stop this new equality? Do the people it helps even understand and appreciate it, or does it seem unnatural even to them? Your society may not be ready for it.

Stars Collide

Three great races span the stars. But as their civilizations collide, can they coexist peacefully and learn from each other? Or can they only fight to dominate the galaxy?

What are the three races like? Pick two if you want to include humanity, otherwise pick three. You can pick the same choice more than once.

- Humanoids.
- Exotic lifeforms (whales, jellyfish, etc.).
- Swarm or hive.
- Plant, crystal, rock or energy species.
- Machine race.
- An offshoot of a race already picked (could be a mutated sub-species or a civilization that broke away).

How big is each civilization?

- Vast. Each controls hundreds or thousands of worlds.
- Just a few planets each.
- All three share a single world.

We'll learn more about each civilization as we play and each may change drastically over time, but for now **pick one truth for each race**. You can pick the same answer for more than one.

- Their race is very old.
- They spread rapidly.
- They are xenophobic, rigid thinkers or true believers.
- Their society is wracked with internal strife.
- Their technology is based on entirely different principles.
- They have strange powers.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- War. A great conflict rages between all three races.
- Domination. One civilization has enslaved another.
- Contact. The third race first encounters the other two.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Coexistence. They learn to live in peace.
- Conquest. Only one civilization remains.
- Struggle. All three still vie for ascendancy.

Inspired by one of our earliest and greatest Microscope games that was itself originally inspired by *Starcraft*.

Who Watches the Watchmen?

The emergence of superhumans changes society forever. Do superhumans answer to the same laws as the rest of us, or do we allow them to stand above ordinary citizens and make their own rules?

This seed tackles two themes: vigilantism versus the rule of law and how a powerful minority might exploit their superiority or be persecuted for it.

What gave some people superpowers?

- Evolution / genetic mutations
- A new technology that irrevocably transforms people
- A unique event like Earth passing through a cosmic storm, an alien virus or a primordial city rising from beneath the sea…

Do superhumans wear costumes?

- Yes, many wear costumes and adopt new names.
- No one dresses up in costumes, but some adopt names reflecting their powers or try to hide their identity.
- No one wears costumes or uses alternate names. They use their real names.

Start Bookend: How does the history begin?

- Superhumans are hidden. Reports of mysterious vigilantes or unexplained incidents are considered to be a hoax.
- A prominent public figure comes out as superhuman.
- The first "supervillain" terrorizes the city.

End Bookend: How does the history end?

- Superhumans rule society.
- Society outlaws and hunts superhumans.
- Vigilante superhumans undermine the rule of law.

Instead of superheroes, you could just as easily use this seed for any minority with exceptional power that could hide among the populace whether that's vampires, sorcerers, godlings or mutant telepaths.

Group Decisions

When you are trying to come to a consensus to start your game, finding out what players dislike is equally important, if not more important, than finding out what they like.

If someone rejects a starting idea for your history, try something else. It doesn't matter how much someone else wants to use that idea: if one player hates the concept, your game will not turn out well. If you are lukewarm about an idea, you can warm up to it as you play and make it your own. But if it's a concept or genre you can't stand, you'll be disinterested from the start. You're likely to check out for the whole game.

It is more important to arrive at a choice that is acceptable to everyone and get started playing quickly than to hold out for a "perfect" idea, particularly in Microscope where the structure of the game is about adding creatively as you go, not inventing something amazing at the start.

Likewise, options are nice, but too many choices are paralyzing. Picking from a short list is much more effective than reading off every possible alternative. That's why it's better to pick a category of seeds first and only read those descriptions.

People are not always good at recognizing the trap of choice. They may ask for more and more options, hoping to see one they'll like a little bit more. But the more options you present, the more likely it is that even if someone finds something *they* like, another player will want something else. The more choices, the more you split your vote and the harder it is to pick one.

Again, the goal is not perfection. It's picking something tolerable to everyone and starting the game. Even the dullest starting idea is made interesting through play, so the sooner you start, the better.

Oracles

Want to shake things up? Want a starting point for a history that surprises you and breaks you out of your same old tropes? Use an Oracle to randomly generate a big picture for your history. An Oracle can get you playing quickly with very little effort: just sit down, roll some dice and see what you get.

There are five Oracles to chose from: **Swords & Sorcery** (fantasy saga), **To the Stars** (galactic science fiction), **Cradle of Civilization** (origins of technology and society), **Apocalypse** (cataclysm and disaster) and **Lurking Darkness** (gothic or Lovecraftian horror). Each has over forty-six thousand possible outcomes, so you can use them over and over again. And even if you used exactly the same result twice, you would probably create completely different histories in play.

Each Oracle has four tables: Trends, Impacts and two overlapping sets of Elements. To start your history, roll six dice and line them up from left to right, then look up the corresponding results. Each Element uses two dice: the first indicates which column to use and the second indicates the row. If you only have one die (or you are using the finger-dice technique described later), it's better to generate all six numbers before looking up the answers rather than pausing after each roll.

When you put your results together, it will read:

TREND + ELEMENT A + IMPACT + ELEMENT B

For example:

rise of + mercenaries + divides + gods

failures of + superstition + impedes + trade

rejection of + cosmic weapons + creates + galactic patrol

You also have the option to swap the two Elements if you prefer, so each roll creates two possible histories for you to choose from. Reversing the Elements might make your result make more sense to you or it might just seem like a more interesting history to explore.

> *Instead of using "the rise of mercenaries divides gods," you could swap the elements and make a history about how the rise of gods divides mercenaries.*

If you roll the same Element twice, it could be a second thing of the same type (e.g. a second pantheon of gods interacting with the first) or you could decide that Element was having an effect on itself.

What does your result mean? That's up to you. The Oracles are designed to create potentially unexpected histories: some results may be entirely

straightforward, but others may read like a puzzle or an ancient prophecy. Interpret it however you like.

If you get a result that looks broken, take a moment to ponder before you throw it out. It might not be obvious, but you may suddenly see a way to make it work. If not, just roll again. Or you may find that the idea you reject inspired some other concept entirely. That's the Oracle's job: to get you going, one way or the other.

EXAMPLE: ROLLING ON AN ORACLE

A group wants to get started quickly, so they agree to roll on an Oracle for their big picture. Looking at the options, they decide to try To The Stars.

After turning their pockets inside-out, they don't find any dice. So they use the finger-dice method to generate six numbers, writing each one down as they go. After they have them all, they consult the tables.

The first number is the Trend. They get "rejection of".

Second and third numbers are the first Element. Looking at the header for Element A, they find the column and then look down to the row. They get "secret society."

The fourth number is the Impact. They get "strengthens."

And the last two numbers show the column and row under Element B. They get "mutations."

Putting it all together, their Oracle reads:

"rejection of secret society strengthens mutations"

They could also choose to swap the elements and use "rejection of mutations strengthens secret society" instead. They decide that idea sounds more interesting.

But what does it mean? Is the secret society formed of mutants who are shunned by the world? Or is it a mutation-hating group that flourishes as public anti-mutant sentiment grows? The group decides and then spells out the big picture for their history.

ELEMENT ROW	ELEMENT A 1	ELEMENT A 2	ELEMENT B 1	ELEMENT B 2	ELEMENT B 3	ELEMENT B 4	ELEMENT B 5	ELEMENT B 6
1	THREE SWORDS OF POWER	MAGIC FORGE	EMPIRE	MAGIC	BLOODLINE	MERCENARIES	SAVAGE WILDERNESS	CULT OF A FORGOTTEN GOD
2	RUNE-SPEAR	STAR-METAL	KINGDOM	A RELIGION	EXILES	WARLORDS	SACRED MOUNTAIN	NATURE SPIRITS
3	STAFF OF LORE	PROPHECY	SISTER-CITIES	GODS	RACE	ORDER OF KNIGHTS	PEACEFUL SHIRE	TITANS
4	CURSED CROWN	OATH	CLANS	DEMONS	ELDRITCH FOLK	ASSASSINS' GUILD	HIDDEN CITY	MONUMENTS OF KINGS
5	SACRED SKULL	PLAGUE & FAMINE	SECRET SOCIETY	CURSE	DRAGONS	SECT OF PRIESTS	RUINS BURIED BENEATH THE SANDS	CROSSROAD OF NATIONS
6	TREASURE HORDE	TEMPESTS, FLOODS OR QUAKES	RUNES OF POWER	FEUD	CONQUERING HORDE	CIRCLE OF WIZARDS	TRADE ROUTE	GREAT WALL

TREND

1. RISE OF
2. DECLINE OF
3. CREATION OF
4. DESTRUCTION OF
5. CORRUPTION OF
6. STAGNATION OF

IMPACT

1. STRENGTHENS
2. REBUILDS
3. CREATES
4. DESTROYS
5. CORRUPTS
6. DIVIDES

TREND □ + **ELEMENT A** □ □ + **IMPACT** □ + **ELEMENT B** □ □

A ROW B ROW

- ROLL SIX DICE, LINE THEM UP
- LOOK UP RESULTS
- SWAP ELEMENTS IF YOU PREFER

SWORDS & SORCERY

Swords & Sorcery

Rise of assassin's guild strengthens prophecy…

Corruption of magic divides sister-cities…

Creation of empire corrupts bloodline…

The Swords & Sorcery Oracle creates histories of bold fantasy. Dragons' treasure hoards, feuding kingdoms, woods that walk, dead gods and runes of power. Druids, sages, princes and thieves. Valor, heroism and terrible deeds. Fell swords, bright spears and terrible oaths that bind your bloodline to ruin.

You could create many flavors of fantasy using this one Oracle, anything from a mythic history of gods, to floating cities, to a grim, low-fantasy history of war and conquest. Some results will lean more towards some styles than others, but for the most part the flavor of your fantasy history will be entirely up to you.

As with all Oracles, you'll get two elements that describe the main arc of your history, but you may add many more details as you play. Want dragons in your history, but didn't roll any? Add them in the Palette!

ELEMENT ROW	ELEMENT A 1	ELEMENT A 2	ELEMENT B 1	ELEMENT B 2	ELEMENT B 3	ELEMENT B 4	ELEMENT B 5	ELEMENT B 6
1	STAR	SPORES	SPACE TRAVEL	ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE	PRIMITIVE CIVILIZATION	HABITABLE WORLD	COSMIC WEAPONS	DRUG
2	DEAD WORLD	UNINTELLIGENT LIFEFORMS	VITAL ENERGY SOURCE	SYNTHETIC PEOPLE	SPLINTER RACE	CORPORATION	ARMADA	XENOPHOBIA
3	BLACK HOLE	EXPANSIONISM	MEDICAL TECHNOLOGY	ARTIFICIAL LIFE	HUMAN AUGMENTA-TIONS	GALACTIC PATROL	AN INSTITUTE	HUMAN EXCEPTIONAL -ISM
4	WARP GATES	ISOLATIONISM	SUPERIOR ALIEN CIVILIZATION	ALIEN ARTIFACTS	MUTATIONS	A RELIGION	SPACE PIRATES	SOCIAL EQUALITY
5	PLAGUE	IMPERIALISM	INFERIOR ALIEN CIVILIZATION	HOSTILE ECOSYSTEM	EMPIRE	SECRET SOCIETY	ARTIFICIAL WORLD	FEAR OF CHANGE
6	SPACE MONSTERS	SPIRIT OF EXPLORATION	RIVAL ALIEN CIVILIZATION	PSI TALENTS	FEDERATION	POLITICAL PARTY	SENTIENT STAR OR PLANET	NATURALISM

TREND

1. CREATION OF
2. DECLINE OF
3. DISCOVERY OF
4. DESTRUCTION OF
5. CORRUPTION OF
6. REJECTION OF

IMPACT

1. STRENGTHENS
2. REBUILDS
3. CREATES
4. DESTROYS
5. CORRUPTS
6. DIVIDES

TREND □ + **ELEMENT A** □□ (A ROW) + **IMPACT** □ + **ELEMENT B** □□ (B ROW)

- ROLL SIX DICE, LINE THEM UP
- LOOK UP RESULTS
- SWAP ELEMENTS IF YOU PREFER

To the Stars

To the Stars

Rejection of human augmentation rebuilds armada…

Decline of expansionism strengthens secret society…

Creation of vital energy source divides superior alien civilization…

The To the Stars Oracle generates interstellar science fiction, packed with warp-gates, alien civilizations, galactic war and humanity's never-ending struggle to adapt to new and strange environments.

This Oracle includes societal issues, like imperialism and social equality, because those go hand-in-hand with exploring our future. But in the wide realm of science fiction, you will have a lot of latitude to pick a style and tone that you like. Your history could be an adventurous space opera, rooting out pirates from their lunar bases, or a much more serious exploration of how technology and life in space impact society.

ELEMENT ROW	ELEMENT A 1	2	ELEMENT B 3	4	5	6	7	8
1	ASTROLOGY	BURIAL CUSTOMS	PRIESTS	DEMOCRACY	CHARIOTS	LAW	FOREIGN CROP	DIVISION OF LABOR
2	CALENDAR	ARCHITECTURE	CHIEFS OR RULERS	TYRANNY	WHEEL	CITIES	FERTILE LAND	CARTOGRAPHY
3	GRAVEN IDOLS	ROADS	HUNTERS	SLAVERY	RELIGION	CURRENCY	MINING	ARMOR
4	PHILOSOPHY	TAXES	FARMERS	SWORDS	SUPERSTITION	POTTERY	HOSPITALITY CUSTOMS	GAMES
5	DANCE	IRRIGATION	CRAFT-WORKERS	MEDICINE	MARRIAGE	FIRE	DOMESTICATED ANIMALS	TOURNAMENTS
6	SINGING & STORYTELLING	GUNPOWDER	MONARCHY	TRADE	WRITING	METALLURGY	SEAMANSHIP	SANITATION

TREND

1. INVENTION OF
2. ADVANCES OF
3. FAILURE OF
4. DESIRE FOR
5. ABANDONING
6. SPREAD OF

IMPACT

1. MAKES OBSOLETE
2. UNDERMINES
3. IMPEDES
4. TRANSFORMS
5. ACCELERATES
6. CREATES

TREND □ + **ELEMENT A** □□ (A ROW) + **IMPACT** □ + **ELEMENT B** □□ (B ROW)

- ROLL SIX DICE, LINE THEM UP
- LOOK UP RESULTS
- SWAP ELEMENTS IF YOU PREFER

CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION

Cradle of Civilization

Advances of singing & storytelling undermines tyranny…

Abandoning writing transforms currency…

Spread of gunpowder creates religion…

If you want to explore the early collisions of society, invention and culture, the Cradle of Civilization Oracle is for you. Tame fire. Invent the wheel. Cultivate the land. Write the first laws. Erect monuments that defy death itself.

But change brings disruption, so this Oracle explores how the old is disrupted by the new, for better or worse. Are the sky-gods forgotten when the tribes unite behind walls of stone? Does the new code of laws bring justice or a yoke for some men to enslave others? And do your new bronze swords and swift chariots keep you safe or tempt you to set your boot on the neck of your weaker neighbors?

Like the To the Stars Oracle, Cradle of Civilization includes societal issues in addition to physical inventions like farming and pottery, so you examine how invention and society collide or inspire each other.

Your setting could look much like the ancient societies of our own history, or you could make a much more unusual setting with strange traditions and exotic ways, all your own. Civilization might take very different turns in your history…

ELEMENT ROW	ELEMENT A 1	ELEMENT A 2	ELEMENT B 1	ELEMENT B 2	ELEMENT B 3	ELEMENT B 4	ELEMENT B 5	ELEMENT B 6
1	CRIME	DRUG	ENERGY SOURCE	WAR	MACHINES	GODS	SETTLERS	GALACTIC FEDERATION
2	DISEASE	CLIMATE CHANGE	FOOD SOURCE	INVADERS	ALIENS	RELIGION	REFUGEES	COLONY WORLD
3	POLLUTION	QUAKES	ECOSYSTEM	A SPECIES	ECONOMY	RENAISSANCE	CITY	ISOLATED SOCIETY
4	STERILITY	METEORS	WEATHER	MUTATIONS	INDUSTRY	TYRANNY	KINGDOM	THIRD WORLD COUNTRY
5	OVER-POPULATION	MONSTERS	ATMOSPHERE	OFFSHOOT OF HUMANITY	TECHNOLOGY	CAPITALISM	TRIBE	DEVELOPING NATION
6	FANATICISM	ZOMBIES	SUN	ARTIFICIAL LIFE	MEDICINE	INDIVIDUALISM	PRIMITIVE CIVILIZATION	ADVANCED CIVILIZATION

TREND

1. SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF
2. SLOW RISE OF
3. CHANGES OF
4. SPREAD OF
5. EXPLOITING
6. IGNORING

IMPACT

1. DESTROYS
2. THREATENS
3. UNDERMINES
4. CORRUPTS
5. GIVES FALSE HOPE TO
6. OVEREXTENDS

TREND ☐ + **ELEMENT A** ☐ ☐ + **IMPACT** ☐ + **ELEMENT B** ☐ ☐

A ROW — B ROW

- **ROLL SIX DICE, LINE THEM UP**
- **LOOK UP RESULTS**
- **SWAP ELEMENTS IF YOU PREFER**

APOCALYPSE

Apocalypse

Sudden appearance of mutations threatens third world country…

Ignoring artificial life destroys individualism…

Slow rise of crime destroys tribe…

The Apocalypse Oracle gives you front row seats for the end of the world. Grapple with plague, climate change, revolutions run amuck, robot-terminators, quakes, comets, elder gods awakening, zombies or good old-fashioned nuclear Armaggedon. Does civilization as we know it fade into the dust, or does something new arise from the not-so-metaphorical ashes?

Apocalypse stories generally come in two flavors. In one we focus on how to solve the problem. In the other we can't fix things: we just focus on what happens and what people do to survive, etc. Which you choose is entirely up to you. The Oracle works either way. You should also discuss what kind of tone you want. Is your history a biting examination of real-world issues or mutant go-gangs prowling a radioactive wasteland?

Your history could explore before, during or after the calamity, or all of the above. Your bookends will be an important part of that decision. Do you start after the collapse and only focus on survival and rebuilding? Or do you spend your history building up to the calamity, seeing what caused it and then utterly destroy the world in the last bookend?

Some Oracle results will specify a setting, like a primitive society facing colonization or a space station in the path of a supernova. If it doesn't, the location is up to you. It could be the modern world, with disaster waiting just around the corner, or something else entirely.

ELEMENT ROW	ELEMENT A 1	ELEMENT A 2	ELEMENT B 1	ELEMENT B 2	ELEMENT B 3	ELEMENT B 4	ELEMENT B 5	ELEMENT B 6
1	CHANGELINGS	SHADOWS OUT OF THE MOON	CELESTIAL ALIGNMENT	OCCULT RITUAL	CITY RISEN FROM THE SEA	MURDERS	PYRAMIDS	INVESTIGATORS
2	MAN-MADE MONSTERS	DREAM-WATCHERS	ANCESTRAL CURSE	TAINTED BLOODLINE	LOST CITY	CULT	BURIED RUINS	LONELY ISLAND
3	HIEROGLYPHS	NIGHT-STALKERS	OATH	MONSTROUS INTERBREEDING	UNDISCOVERED CULTURE	SCHOLARS OR HERMITS	CRUMBLING CASTLE	GRAVEYARD OF SHIPS
4	WRITINGS OF MAD POET	HERALD OF DOOM	PROPHECY	TWISTED EXPERIMENTS	PRIMITIVE RELIGION	ORDER OF PRIESTS	SANITARIUM	OLD COUNTRY
5	DISTURBING PAINTINGS	CREATURES FROM THE UNDERGROUND	OLD GODS	ALCHEMY	PRIMITIVE ARTIFACTS	SECRET SOCIETY	MUSEUM	SLEEPY COMMUNITY
6	GRAVEN IDOL	UNSPEAKABLE ONES	ARCANE PRISON	FORBIDDEN LORE	SACRIFICES	SECRET GOVERNMENT AGENCY	UNNATURAL URGES	REMOTE WILDERNESS

TREND

1. DISCOVERY OF
2. APPEARANCE OF
3. BIRTH OF
4. IGNORING
5. SPREAD OF
6. DISAPPEARANCE OF

IMPACT

1. REVEALS
2. CONCEALS
3. TRANSFORMS
4. CORRUPTS
5. DESTROYS
6. STRENGTHENS

TREND □ + **ELEMENT A** □ □ + **IMPACT** □ + **ELEMENT B** □ □

A ROW B ROW

- **ROLL SIX DICE, LINE THEM UP**
- **LOOK UP RESULTS**
- **SWAP ELEMENTS IF YOU PREFER**

LURKING DARKNESS

Lurking Darkness

Discovery of primitive religion conceals unspeakable ones…

Appearance of graveyard of ships strengthens tainted bloodline…

Ignoring writings of mad poet transforms ancestral curse…

The Lurking Darkness Oracle lets you weave histories of horror, anything from classic Gothic to Lovecraftian terror. Explore ancestral curses, tainted bloodlines, forbidden rituals, unspeakable experiments, slumbering gods and cities buried beneath the sands. What terrible deed brought this curse to life? How did this nightmare start? Go back and see!

Horror can actually be a surprisingly good fit for Microscope. We start off with only a superficial understanding of what's going on and then dig deeper and deeper to expose the terrifying truths better left unknown!

We Have No Dice, But We Must Roll

Forgot your dice? Here's an easy way to simulate an ordinary six-sided die with a group vote.

FINGER-DICE

Each person simultaneously holds out one hand pointing 1 to 5 fingers or making a fist. Don't discuss what you are going to vote ahead of time! That's cheating.

Add up the fingers. Each fist counts as 6.

If the total is greater than 6, subtract 6. Keep subtracting 6 until the total is 6 or less.

You now have a number from 1 to 6. That's your result.

As a shortcut, you can eliminate sets of six as you count fingers. Drop fists or group together fingers that add up to six and drop them as you go, so long as there are still more votes remaining (i.e. don't go down to zero).

This technique works when a random number is desired, but it breaks if we know six is the best result for everyone. If everyone wants a six, it's easy to arrive at that result, but six is the only number that works that way. You could not always get a two, for example, unless you break the rules and coordinate your choices with the other players.

Using Source Material

Books, movies or other fictional works can be a great source of inspiration for any game. Often it is just that: inspiration, nothing more. But sometimes you do not want to play a game *like* your favorite books, you actually want to play *in* that setting or your own version of it. You want to use the actual names, ideas and events from the fiction. You want to blow up the frickin' Death Star or ride a sand worm on Arrakis. Or maybe your favorite fiction desperately needs a reboot. This is your chance to fix it!

You can even use real world history as the starting point for your game. Truth is stranger than fiction. And even though there are a myriad of fictional worlds and only one real one, the real world has a lot more material because a lot more people have been working on it for a lot longer. They never stop.

A third option is to use a setting you created in another role-playing game. Go back and flesh out the history of the world you played your D&D campaign in. All three of those are great ways to use external material as a starting point for a Microscope history:

- Fictional settings from books or movies.
- Real world history.
- Worlds from other role-playing games you played.

The first two are discussed in this section. The third is covered in the World-Building chapter.

It might seem like using an existing setting with Microscope is a total contradiction. Can it work when the whole idea of the game is to see what the players create together? Absolutely. Just like using a seed, the source material will be a starting point, but it will grow in unexpected directions. It will become your unique version of the material you know and love, so don't be afraid to wave your favorite book in the air and shout, "Let's make a history based on this!"

Canon or Reboot

Once you decide to use existing material, your next big decision is: canon or reboot? If you want to stay true to the source, you can stick to the established facts and play to explore areas that were not fleshed out in the original material. Or you can reboot the setting and keep the ideas you like but revise the rest. This is a decision for the whole group, just like picking the idea for the history in the first place. Everyone at the table must be on the same page about whether you are obeying canon or doing a reboot.

If you decide to stick with canon then everything that is part of the source material is automatically true even if it is not on the table yet. All that material counts for the "don't contradict established facts" rule. You may explore gaps very near the known story ("Okay, this is after the Death Star was destroyed but before the Rebels set up their base on Hoth…") or you can explore a part of the history that the source material never discussed, creating whole new Periods to fill in the blanks.

If you decide to reboot the source material instead, you have the rare luxury of keeping the parts of the setting you like and eradicating the bits you don't. That means you're immediately confronted with another decision: what are you going to change and what are you going to keep? It's a potentially endless discussion, reviewing and editing every facet of your history before you even start play. Nightmare.

The best approach for a reboot is to agree on one central concept you want to change and let the other details emerge in play. You should be able to describe your reboot with a concise "what if" statement. What if the elves served Sauron? What if the Cylons invaded and occupied the colonies instead of bombing them? What if the Empire was a reasonable government trying to hold the tattered remains of the Republic together while Rebel terrorists strike from their hidden bases to tear it apart? Your big picture is just that "what if" premise rephrased as a statement and summarizing what happens in broad terms. If there is a particular outcome or consequence you want to explore, include it in your big picture. Even if you don't, the outcome will still emerge when you discuss your bookends.

Don't worry about secondary details of your reboot yet: you can tackle exactly which elements you want to add or exclude when you make the Palette. Just like with any Microscope history, you may not get exactly what you want because the other players may disagree about what constitutes the perfect reboot. They may hate the very things about the story that you love. The Palette is the time to have that discussion and surface those issues. Remember, there is nothing stopping you from playing again and remaking your dream property over and over if you want, so be flexible and see what happens.

Alternate History & Real History

The procedure for using real world history is not that much different from using fictional books or movies. It still falls into the same two categories: canon or reboot.

A "true history" should not diverge from the real world in any substantial way. You will almost definitely invent people and events that are entirely made-up, but they should all be things that *could* be true in the real world. Did buccaneers ever sack a Spanish outpost in the golden age of piracy? Probably. And even if that exact thing never happened, it blends right into

the history we know. But if you describe pirates conquering Florida and turning it into an outlaw nation, you have probably crossed into fiction.

You can also explore the unseen stories behind big moments in real history. Play the scene where Caesar decides to cross the Rubicon. Plot to assassinate President Lincoln. Put a man on the Moon. And remember that small stories are just as powerful as eavesdropping on the meetings of the movers and shakers. Seeing whether one GI makes it off Omaha Beach alive does nothing to change the course of history, but it can tell us a world about what that moment in history was like.

But what if you want to reboot real history and change the world to suit your whims? That moves you into the exciting world of alternate history. Just like a fictional reboot, alternate history poses a "what if?" and then explores how history would have turned out differently. Alternate history usually has a sharp point of departure, a specific moment where history diverges from real world events. What if the Spanish Armada had conquered Britain? What if the tribes of North America were united into one nation before the Europeans arrived? Even a single tiny change can have a profound effect and spawn a world that looks very foreign to us. To finish your big picture, broadly summarize how that "what if" alters history. Just like with fiction, if there is a consequence you want to explore, include it in your big picture ("The Spanish Armada conquers Britain, so the Americas are Spanish colonies instead").

Any time you start from real history, unusual ingredients should be vetted when you make the Palette. An alternate history could get *very* different from the real world ("Thomas Edison's clockwork soldiers storm the trenches, ending the Great War") but only if you agreed to it on the Palette. And as always, the real world's future remains unknown. If your history extends beyond the present, we can only conjecture how events will turn out.

For other approaches to alternate histories, look at Echo and the parallel timelines option in the Experiments chapter.

Establish Landmarks

Whatever your source material, a good starting point is to add some known landmarks to your history so you have a framework to build around:

> **During the First Pass of setup, only create Periods and Events that are in the source material. Don't make anything new.**
>
> **Then do a Second Pass where each player makes a Period or Event that is either a new creation or from the source material (their choice).**

Then start normal play.

Whenever you are making history later on, you can choose to add material that reflects the source material ("Hmm, we don't have an Event for the Battle of Five Armies on the table, so I'm going to add that"). Always declare that's what you are doing so the other players know you are not making something new, just filling in canon.

The Downside: Slave to the Source

Any time you base your game on existing material (whether that's real history or your favorite novel) it is inevitable that some people at the table are going to know more about the subject than others. It's unavoidable.

Knowing about the source material is great. How else can you make a history based on it? But there can also be a terrible temptation to "get it right" and make sure that every detail is true to the original.

Microscope follows two principles: don't contradict what's already been said and don't collaborate or coach. But if the source material counts as part of the history (and it should) and you see that someone is making something that goes against that source material, you are technically within the rules to point out the mistake. Your intentions may be completely good: you may think that by pointing out errors you are keeping the history on track. And when done in moderation, it will probably help. But go too far and it ruins the game. It is no fun to be told you're wrong, even if you are. So what's the solution?

The first step is self-control. If you feel the urge to correct someone about the source material, ask yourself: Is what they're getting "wrong" substance or merely detail? Does it have any real impact on the history? Is it something that *could* be true, or is it something that actually undermines the premise? If you are too aggressive about enforcing the source, no one might want to keep playing.

If that fails, take this as a special case rule: at any time, the group can declare they are breaking from the source and just keep playing. At that point, only what's on the table or what has happened in the game counts. You may still choose to follow the source material, but it no longer counts as established fact. This is a simple, yet drastic, way to end source-policing in one fell swoop. Dropping the source material should be a unanimous agreement. If you can't all agree, it's a sign that maybe you should stop playing.

WORLD-BUILDING: GAMES COLLIDE

So you're looking at Microscope and thinking, "Wow, I want to use it to build a world to play a whole campaign in!" You are not alone.

Making worlds is fun. Unbelievably fun. Before Microscope, I spent decades GMing adventure games. I built worlds constantly. I built worlds for campaigns that never even happened. Play was fun, absolutely, but there was a raw joy in just sitting down and creating a world.

One of the reasons I made Microscope was to share that fun: to crack open the secret vault where the GM kept his (my) treasures and lay it all out on the table so everyone could participate, to make world-building part of play, not a preparation for play, because it deserved no less.

But you can easily go full circle and use Microscope to collaborate and replace the solo world-building that is purely the GM's realm in most adventure games, whether you are playing Dungeons & Dragons or a myriad of other systems. I'll talk about the benefits (and the downsides), how to prepare for your Microscope session and then how to transform the history you created into a world of adventure…

A World Is Its History

Ask anyone about world-building and one of the first things they'll expect you to do is draw a map. Make no mistake: maps are a fantastic tool for world-building, but a world isn't (or shouldn't be) a static picture. It's not a freeze-frame. It's a living, breathing web of cause-and-effect. A world *is* its history.

Look at the world around you, the real world. Stop and really think about it: every single thing about the world that matters is a product of history. Nations, race-relations, religion, art, music, the economy, all fights everywhere—every single one of those things is happening because of what happened before, often going back century after century. Ever wonder why it's so hard to fix all the world's problems? Why can't we all just get along? Because our problems have deep, deep roots. If you don't understand the past, you can't understand what is happening now or have any chance of fixing it.

In the real world, history can be a nightmare we struggle to escape. But for a fictional setting, all that baggage is a wonderful blessing. When you have the history of your world in front of you, the wheels are already in motion. There is action and life and trouble before you even sit down to play. We know those two nations may seem like peaceful neighbors, but they harbor old, old hatreds. We know that respected order of knights has a lot to answer for in its past. And the people that live in that tranquil coastal city? We know the land wasn't theirs to begin with.

With all that history at your fingertips, you'll have a setting practically bursting at the seams before you even sit down. Because history doesn't just give you a nice backdrop, it generates the present. It demands repercussions.

Knowledge Is Power

So history creates a living, vital world, but there's another completely different reason to make your world together: **player buy-in**.

For decades, at the very core of GMing sat one very simple job: to make people believe in something that didn't exist. Believe is too strong. Let's say accept. Buy in to the idea that what the GM said was happening in the fantasy world mattered.

Any campaign GM will tell you that getting the players to buy into the setting is a critical and sometimes painful process. It isn't guaranteed and it isn't instant. When you make a world by yourself and then unveil it to the players, you're inherently putting them in the position of an audience. But that also makes them critics. They are listening and judging. And it makes sense: they weren't involved in the creation process so, of course, they are weighing its merits and seeing if they like what they're hearing.

By making the world together in Microscope, we remove that hurdle. Everyone was involved in the process, so everyone has ownership. Everyone accepts the world as valid and important. The players are interested in the setting before the first adventure even starts. Everyone is in.

Furthermore, familiarity with the world equips players to play better. Because they understand the world before the game even starts, **players can make characters that truly fit the setting**.

In adventure games you often see players make characters who don't really connect to the world—a bunch of exotic tourists, instead of natives. Even if the players desperately wanted to make characters who belonged in the setting, they have no way to do it because they don't know enough about the world. So you get a bunch of misfits and edgy loners, or generic concepts that don't clash with the world but don't really connect to it either. And even if you did help the players make characters that fit the setting, the players would not know the first thing about the world around them. Your characters may have been born and raised in this world, but as a player you are still a total stranger. Your character knows more than you do.

That lack of world-knowledge is a hurdle to overcome. One solution is a massive info dump: just provide the players with reams and reams of reading material. But who wants to read a pile of homework to play a game you aren't even invested in yet?

But the world you created together with Microscope? Yeah, you probably already have a raft of ideas for characters that would fit perfectly. You know exactly where they belong in the world. And when you describe your character and where they come from, the other players are going to know what you're talking about. They'll understand why it matters that your taciturn loner isn't just some bandit: she's secretly an outcast from the Red Guard. They may just be jealous they didn't think to play that character first.

The Downside

There are potential downsides to making a setting together, of course. As the GM, you might also shy away from collaboration because you really enjoy crafting worlds by yourself. That's how I am when I GM. But as a change of pace, collaboration is a great way to flex your creative muscles.

On the player side, not everyone wants to look behind the curtain and see how the world is made or know things their character would not know. Some players may want to believe in the world as a genuine entity separate from themselves. Getting involved in the creation may spoil their fun.

If you want to test the waters, play a normal game of Microscope with no intention of making a game world or connecting it to your adventure game. I've seen lots of people who thought they wouldn't enjoy a game like Microscope be pleasantly surprised. If your group is hesitant, maybe they'll change their mind after they give it a try. Maybe they won't. If they don't, respect their preferences. Making people play games they don't like is a recipe for disaster for everyone.

Pre-Game: Setting Goals

Before you play Microscope to create your world, you should sit down as a group and discuss your goals. This is the foundation for building a successful world together: make sure everyone is on the same page about what you're trying to do at the very start.

The first question you should discuss is:

> **Is there a rule system we want to use or a style of adventure we want to play?**

If there is a specific adventure game you want to play, now is the time to decide so you can make a history that works with it. In some systems, the GM has to do a lot more work with the rules than the players, so it may be fair to give them more say about the system they will have to deal with. That's up to your group.

Even if you don't have a particular rule system in mind, you might agree on a genre like fantasy or space adventure. Within those broad categories there may be a specific style of play you are interested in. Political intrigue? Mythic quests? Dungeon crawls? Lots of your history might be about other things, but by deciding what kind of adventure you want, you can make a history that provides an appropriate setting.

There is also nothing wrong with just playing and seeing what happens, and then deciding afterwards what kind of adventure game would be the best fit for the history you made. You might get something that surprises and excites you more than anything you would have planned.

Since you are now mixing the normal authority of the GM with a collaborative process, you should agree exactly where the new boundaries lie. The other question to ask is:

> **Will the GM decide how to translate our Microscope history into a setting for our adventure game by themselves, or will we do that together?**

The old school approach is for the GM to take all the cards and abscond to their thought-cave, forging the world in secret on an anvil of fire until the game-day comes, but you could also continue to collaborate for some or all of the conversion process, as discussed later. The important thing isn't to hammer out every detail but to come to a general understanding of whether the GM will be in charge or whether the group will share that authority. The goal is to surface potential disagreements or misunderstandings now before you create a history that you care about and want to protect.

There's another question you might think to ask: Does the GM have special authority to veto or influence things *during* the Microscope game? I strongly, strongly recommend against doing anything like that. It will break

your Microscope game and defeat any purpose of the process. As I discuss later, if you wind up with a setting you don't like, you can just try again, but giving one player veto power during the Microscope game will frustrate everyone.

Just Play Normally

Now comes your actual Microscope session. The good news? You can just play normally. You don't have to do anything special.

Your Palette will be an important step. Remember that the Palette is a discussion. It's a great time to double-check that your history fits your goals. If you agreed on a rule system you are going to use later, it might have a whole host of concepts to take into account. It might have specific races, technologies or systems of magic. You can agree to aim for a world where some or all of those things fit or just play and see what happens. Yes, you could wind up playing Dungeons & Dragons in a world that had no gods or clerics… or no metal. That could be awesome. But you don't want to paint yourself into a corner and unintentionally rule out elements you actually want in your adventure game. Your Microscope game is also a fine opportunity to explore the quirks and assumptions baked into a particular rule system. Why do elves live so long? Why are robots common but cybernetic implants so rare? Why are spells divided into separate schools of magic?

After that, don't worry about creating history that leads to the adventure game you want. Just by having the discussion and getting your goals on the table, you will have already primed everyone to think of ideas that fit. You may have the urge to jump in and point out how the setting for your adventure game would be perfect if someone else did something slightly differently. Don't. As always, you can point out contradictions, but don't butt in on other peoples' turns to try and optimize the history.

Because you know you are trying to sketch out this whole world to role-play in later, you might be tempted to stick to the big scale of history and not zoom in and make characters or detailed moments in time. Don't. Nothing helps you really understand your history faster than zooming in and exploring people. Even if you are never going to see these characters again–even if they are going to have no importance in your adventure game, zooming in and playing them now will make your setting richer and more real.

Don't GM Microscope

If you are the future GM, it is vital that during the Microscope game you embrace the idea that you are not the GM *now*. You are an equal player just like everyone else.

Do not make the mistake of trying to control the game. Do not try to exert special influence. You will wreck the fun for everyone, yourself included. Just follow the rules and play like everyone else. Be open-minded and see what happens.

It may be hard to bite your tongue and relax, but I'm confident you can do it. If you need a sharp mental antidote, picture this: imagine you are running a game when a random player suddenly starts acting like they are the GM instead of you. Wouldn't that be odd and irritating to everyone? Even if no one said anything, it would be awkward and inappropriate. That is what you will look like if you start trying to GM in the middle of a game that has no GM, like Microscope.

Don't worry if everything doesn't turn out exactly the way you want—it almost certainly won't. But you will have latitude to pick and choose what elements you want to focus on when you convert your Microscope history into an adventure game setting.

Giving up control can be scary, but fortune favors the bold.

If It Fails, Call a Do-Over

You might play Microscope and have a good time, but just not be interested in doing more with the setting you created. If that happens, don't feel obligated to proceed. Just call a do-over and try again. Play another Microscope game and make something you all will enjoy. If you liked the idea you started with but not how it evolved, you could try starting from the same big picture but playing it out differently.

Not every game turns out perfectly. If your group is new to Microscope, you might find that everyone is so eager to push the boundaries and see what is possible that they make things that, in hindsight, even they don't want.

Post-Game: Translating

After your Microscope game is over, whether that's one session or several, it is time to turn that history into a setting for adventure. Make no mistake: you will not have a complete world. You will have a lot of material to work with, but you may have more questions than answers. That's the nature of Microscope.

There are six basic ways you can adapt elements of your Microscope history for your adventure game. You are likely to do some of each.

> **FOCUS**: Emphasize something. Make it central to the adventure game.
>
> **EXPAND**: Add more detail to something in the history, but don't change what's already true.
>
> **CREATE**: Introduce something new.
>
> **IGNORE**: Leave something out. You are not erasing it from the history, but you are intentionally avoiding it in your game.
>
> **REMOVE**: Take something out of the history. It never happened.
>
> **REVISE**: Change something in the history.

Using this nomenclature, you can sit down and chart out exactly how you want to translate your shared history into a game world. These concepts may seem obvious, but it is important that you understand the differences and the consequences each involves. Some are safe. Some require caution.

There are doubtless going to be particular aspects of your history that you want to **FOCUS** on during your adventure game. Garden IV, the struggling colony world, was fascinating, so you decide it is a great place to set your campaign. The Trade Magnates were total jerks, so they will make perfect adversaries to the heroes. Those are elements of the history that you're going to bring into the limelight of your game. You're not changing anything, just choosing what to emphasize.

Likewise, there may be elements from the Microscope game that you want to flesh out more. When you **EXPAND** something, you do not change what you already know, you just add details. In the Microscope game, we saw that the city-states had turned away from their old religion, but we never really got into the details. What was that religion like? Why did it fall out of favor? You decide to fill in those details and make them part of the game. There may also be entirely new things you want to **CREATE**, things that never came up in the Microscope game at all. There was one major alien civilization in your history, but they seemed a little too friendly, so you

decide to introduce a second, more contentious, alien race on a different frontier.

Expand and Create are really just like continuing the Microscope game except you are playing by yourself. You are not contradicting what already exists, just building on what is there or contributing new stuff. It's only dangerous if you create so much that you effectively supplant what the group made together. You could burrow so deep into one corner and create so much new material that what you created together did not matter anymore.

On the other hand, there may be something in the history that doesn't interest you that you would rather **IGNORE**. It exists, but you don't want to bring it into the game or deal with it. Of course, it would be hard to include every single aspect of your Microscope history in your adventure game, but this is something that you are actively trying to exclude. But even if you want to leave something out, remember that a player might want to bring it in. Maybe they want their character to be a survivor of the Midnight Purge, something you don't even want to address. If you really want to leave something out, you have to make sure the players know it.

The more extreme option it to **REMOVE** something entirely. You edit the history so that it never happened. There was no Midnight Purge. There are no eagle-riding gnomes. Or maybe you are not against the idea entirely, you just don't like how it played out. Instead of cutting something, you can **REVISE** it, effectively rewriting that portion of the Microscope game to suit your purposes. Yes, there were telepathic spies during the Cold War, but they were the product of drug experimentation, not mutations.

Removing something may seem drastic, but it's often far less disruptive than keeping something but changing it. It is easy to overlook something that is not there (unless it was fundamental to other aspects of the history: "Uh, you took away the warp-gates? The whole All-World Alliance was connected by the warp-gates?!?"). But something that is included yet different may be a constant reminder of how the final setting doesn't match the Microscope game. And when you Revise something another player made, you are overriding their contribution. This is possibly the most dangerous move in the list since you are taking their idea and turning it into something else. Even if you are changing something you yourself introduced in the Microscope game, you are impacting the contribution of anyone else who built on your idea. If you Revise something and then Focus on it, think very carefully about what you are doing. You're making something that does not match what the group made together a central pillar of your game.

It's a good idea for the group to discuss whether it is even okay to Revise or Remove things from the history, particularly if the GM is converting the history solo. Different groups may have very different preferences about how much revision is okay. If you do Remove or Revise things, tell the

players what you are changing, even if they already said it was okay. If you are determined to keep your new version a secret for some dramatic reveal ("Surprise, superpowers are caused by the Elder Gods awakening, not genetic mutations!"), at the very least, warn them that parts of the history will not be what they expect. If you don't, you are asking for a train wreck.

If you make a note of each choice you make, you will have a tidy overview of your adaptation. As you play you will Create and Expand more and more (and possibly bring other elements of the original history into Focus), but your initial list will give you a sense of how much you are diverging from the setting you made together. As a GM you may even find it valuable to show the players your entire list of changes, even if your modifications are not drastic. It keeps the players connected to the setting you built together.

When in doubt, ask yourself: Am I taking advantage of the material we made? Does the adventure I'm making feel like it takes place in the setting we made? If it does, you are probably in good shape.

EXAMPLE: TRANSLATING YOUR HISTORY

After playing a history about strife colonizing the stars, the GM sits down to translate it to a setting for an adventure game. She wants to set her game in the "outlaw smuggler" period right after the colonies lost their bid for independence.

focus: veterans of the colony wars

focus: pure human gene line

focus: cybernetic mods

revise: cybernetic mods can only be implanted in people with certain genetic traits (they don't work for everybody)

remove: nanotech

ignore: alien contact

ignore: worship of the New Star

create: smuggler gangs / organized criminal syndicates

revise: some colonial governments collaborated with AllianceGov

expand: colony wars were about controlling precious planetary resources

expand: soldiers in colony wars were given experimental cyber implants

Polish & Place

Even if the GM is going to have sole control later on, it is valuable to take a "polishing pass" of the history as a group. Sit down after your Microscope game and discuss which elements you are interested in exploring or if there are things that don't really work for the game you want to play.

Use the six options outlined above—Focus, Expand, Create, Ignore, Remove, Revise—with all the same caveats. That terminology will help make it clear to everyone what you are asking for. "I'd like to Focus on that Period of invention." "Can we Remove that bit with the alien capsule? I don't think it really fits." You're likely to get new ideas as you hear the suggestions the other players make.

There is also one singularly important decision confronting you: **where and when in your history will your adventure game take place**? It's critical since the time and place you choose will decide what aspects of the history come to the forefront and what is (by omission) ignored. Whoever makes this decision, whether it is the GM or the group as a whole, has immense latitude in shaping the adventure.

Often this will be the very first thing you discuss—maybe before you even finish putting the cards away: some part of the history is just too exciting to pass up. Everybody wants to jump in and play the corsairs of Skull Beach, at least before the Inquisitors come to wipe them out. The best spot for the adventures you want to play may not even be the most developed part of your history. You may wind up setting your game in a corner of the history that is more implied than explored, which is perfectly fine.

Embrace Your Destiny

When you're placing your adventure game in the history, it's wise to take into account how close you are to the known future.

It might seem like knowing the future would absolutely destroy the fun of an adventure game. And it might—if you knew *everything*. But you don't. Broad strokes are not the same as specific knowledge. You may know from your Microscope history that the Empire is crumbling because the aristocracy is converting to the Moon Cult, but that tells you nothing about which noble is behind the plot to assassinate the prince here and now.

The farther your game is set from known milestones in the history, the less of a problem it presents, obviously. But you also increase the risk the more the plot of the game hinges on a known future. If the doomed Empire is just a backdrop to the action, it's not a huge problem. But if the crux of the story is the heroes trying to secure the Empire's security or (even more on the nose) weeding out the influences of the insidious Moon worshippers, some players are going to wonder whether what they do really matters since they already know how the story ends, on the grand scale at least.

But this is also something you can turn to your advantage. Just like in Microscope, knowing the future frees you to explore the why and how of the present instead of obsessing over the outcome. If we know our Order is doomed, if we've already played out the Microscope scenes showing our sanctum consumed with eldritch fire and our legacy forgotten, we all know that's not what we're playing to decide. Our characters may worry about the future (or be blissfully ignorant of the danger), but as players we already know when the axe will fall. Instead, we are free to focus on why it happens and what it means to us. We can enjoy the last days before the fall with the dramatic awareness that our characters are heading towards doom.

Bringing some of that "explore the middle" sensibility from Microscope into your adventure game can let you have a very different role-playing experience. If you don't think your group will embrace it, the solution is simple: just choose a spot for your adventure game that is far away from known outcomes.

Expand an Existing World

Instead of building a world from scratch, you can also use Microscope to expand your existing game world. The most obvious application is to flesh out the past. Create a history and explore how your world got to where it is now.

But you could just as easily explore the future. If you want to introduce a big change to your game world, you can use Microscope to jump forward to a desired end-point and see what unfolds in the years between.

Another option is to use Microscope to create an epilogue for a campaign that is finished. Play to uncover how the world turns out as a result of what happened during your adventure game. Explore the legacy your characters left behind and how the whole world was changed, for better or worse.

In some ways this can be harder than making up a new world with Microscope. If it is a world you created, giving up control and letting other people contribute their ideas can be a scary thing. It requires some bravery and trust. But remember that, no matter what happens, you have a lot of options. Just like building a world from scratch, if some elements do not fit, you can edit afterwards (but definitely afterwards, not during the Microscope session). And if it goes totally awry, you can declare a do-over, or simply consider the whole thing a grand experiment, an alternate "what if" universe that is interesting but does not change your existing world. Hopefully you won't have to do any of that, but knowing you have those escape routes might make you more comfortable giving it a try.

The Hero's Journey

I've been talking about using Microscope to flesh out the background of your world, but why not take things one step further and use it to outline the actual campaign? Chart the lives and achievements of the characters in Microscope, from humble beginners to legendary heroes, then jump in and run adventures at different points in their careers.

Each adventure can take place anywhere in the timeline. One session you might play the characters as seasoned veterans and the next jump back years earlier to when they are green amateurs, bravely going out on their first real adventure. If you are playing an adventure game like D&D, the beginning of your history might be when the player characters are low-level or even during their "normal" life before they answer the call of adventure. By the end, they might be powerful high-level characters. Or dead.

Which brings up two major issues: death and leveling. In many adventure games, having your character die is a real concern. But if we've already established that a character is around later, then one unlucky critical hit can't change that. You could say that any death that contradicts the history instead results in being grievously wounded and spending weeks or months recovering. If Raise Dead is available, that's an even easier solution. The bottom line is: if death is not an option because the history says you will live, then making death a threat is meaningless. Don't even try. Focus on other challenges. Do the adventurers save the village? Do they steal the jewel they covet? And so on.

The problem with leveling is that, in adventure games with complex character progression, going back and forth trying to "fill in the blanks" and rewrite your character at multiple points in their career can be a burden. You may find it easiest to have everyone start by making their characters at three or four agreed upon power levels (e.g. start, end and one or two points in between). Adjusting up or down from one of those anchors should be relatively easy. You can even tie that character level directly to your Microscope history ("during this Period where the party is robbing the tombs of the wizard-kings, they are around 10th level…").

I'm using fantasy as an example, but that's just one option: Rookie superheroes becoming guardians of the entire globe? Scruffy smugglers growing into respected leaders of the rebellion? Those all work.

There's another question I skipped right over and that's deciding how your history (and your heroes) end. Because it's Microscope, you are going to know broadly where your characters wind up as soon as you start. You could decide to end with them doing great deeds, saving the world, etc., but you could just as easily take a darker turn and agree that they become failures, fallen idols or turn corrupt, seizing power with an iron fist. Or does it end with a total party kill, like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid?

When you know the ending all along, the interesting part is seeing how you get there. How did the idealistic priest morph into a cynical, calculating politician? How did the selfish thief grow into a caring, loving husband? And how did the wizard lose his eye?

Adventure Ouroboros: Back and Forth

A while back I wrote about mixing Microscope and classic dungeon crawl adventures ("The Dungeon Ouroboros"). The idea was that, instead of just using Microscope to create a setting, you could keep going back and forth, alternating between the two: play Microscope to flesh out the history of a dungeon, then play a session adventuring, then switch back to Microscope to reveal the roots of the things you had encountered, ad infinitum.

The beauty is that every stray detail that emerges during the adventure feeds the world-building in Microscope. You fight some wandering troglodytes and don't think anything about it, but when you switch back to Microscope, another player starts to fill in their ancient civilization, croaking tyrants ruling the deeps and raising graven ziggurats to their unspeakable gods. This constant reintegration means that even the simplest dungeon crawl suddenly gains meaning and depth because even if the adventurers don't know the history the players do. It's also "treasure tells a story" inverted: instead of the things you find revealing facts about the world, you create stories and lore to give meaning to what you encountered.

There's no reason you couldn't step out of the dungeon and run an entire campaign this way. Embroiled in a political drama? How much more complex and entangled will all that scheming be after you spend a round in Microscope to flesh out the centuries of feuding, friendships, oaths and betrayals that led up to this point—not to mention the benefit of the players having a deep understanding of all the sides involved. The GM is still creating the adventures and choosing what elements to focus on, but during the Microscope phases, everyone at the table is adding detail and creating more material for the GM to work with.

Does this constant player participation ruin a GM's opportunity to spring some surprises? Not at all. Knowing the past does not mean you know what people are up to in the here-and-now. Sure, the players know from the history that the Queen comes from a questionable bloodline, but history did not tell them that she recently became a secret follower of Zomat the Destroyer. You can even set the end bookend of your Microscope history far enough before your adventure game that your history is all background, not current events. Hail, Zomat!

NEW WAYS TO PLAY

These spin-off games give you three new ways to play Microscope. Each uses the same core principles as the original game, but applies them in new ways to get very different experiences at the table:

UNION branches the Microscope timeline into a family tree. You go back and explore the lives of the ancestors whose unions brought each new generation into existence to see how the past makes us who we are today. Union creates a tight web of characters, bringing their lives and personal decisions into the spotlight.

CHRONICLE focuses and streamlines Microscope, narrowing the history to the story of a single thing, such as a city, a political movement or a ring of power. It also brings individuals to the forefront with anchor characters whose lives are intertwined with each chapter of the history. It's a simpler, more personal Microscope.

ECHO brings time-travel and alternate history to Microscope. Don't like how the future turned out? Go back and tamper with the past to change it. See how the changes you make echo forward, reshaping your reality or utterly destroying it. The winners may write the history, but in Echo, the losers can go back and change it…

Chronicle is very easy to pick up, and Union plays more like an entirely different game, but Echo is the most complex and challenging of the three, not least of all because of the complexity of time travel. It's the only one I don't recommend playing unless you are already experienced with regular Microscope. They are all adaptations of the original game, so you will need the normal Microscope rules to play.

microscope
UNION

Each of us is created by those who came before us. We are the result of countless unions: our parents bring us into the world and shape us, just as each of them were brought into the world by parents of their own, and so on, and so on.

Without every one of our ancestors, we wouldn't be here.

This game is a spin-off of Microscope that explores family and ancestry. We'll make the end of our history first, creating a hero who did something noteworthy, like curing the plague, slaying a dragon or founding a city. But instead of spending the game examining this hero and their achievements, we'll go back and put their deed in perspective by fleshing out the ancestors who made the hero who they are.

We'll jump back and forth across the generations to explore the lives that interest us. We may roam around the entire family tree or focus on just a few people that capture our imagination: that's up to us.

The life of each ancestor and how they came together to make the next generation is a story of its own. As we play, we should live each life like it's the center of our story. Some of these unions may be happy, some sad. Some triumphant, some tragic. Some long, some terribly brief.

But without each of those unions the hero would not have been…

(take turns reading this page aloud)

What You Need to Play

Union is an adaption of Microscope, not a stand-alone game, so you need the Microscope rules to play. You'll also need:

- Two to four people, including yourself
- One to three hours
- Index cards, at least twenty or thirty. Use normal 3x5 cards. Smaller cards won't have enough room.
- One token to sit next to the Focus card (any small, distinct object works)
- Pens or pencils

Setup

We'll start by describing the end of the history, the hero who is the result of all these unions. Then we'll go back to flesh out the world they lived in and the ancestors who created them.

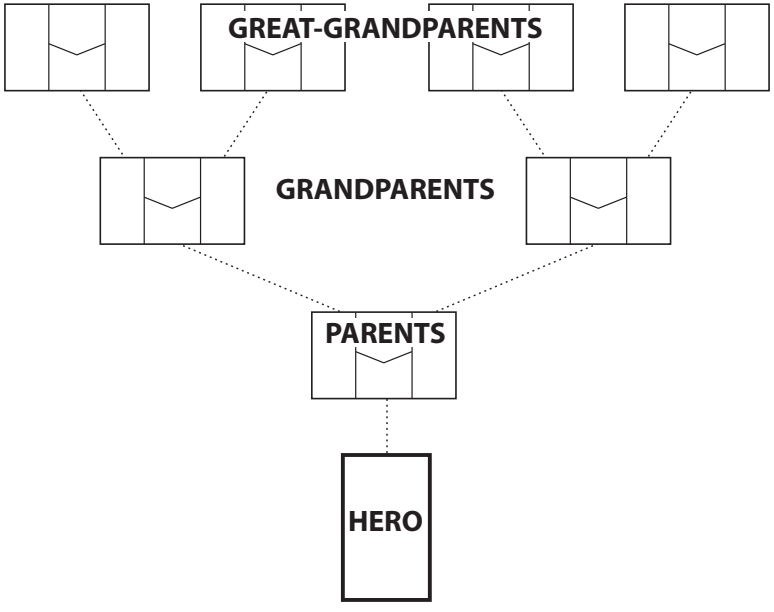
Step 1: Family Tree

Lay out cards for the family tree with a separate row for each generation:

- One card (vertical) to represent the hero
- Directly above the hero, one card (horizontal) for the hero's parents
- Above that, two cards for the hero's grandparents
- At the top, four cards for the hero's great-grandparents

Each card above the hero represents a pair of ancestors and the different parts of their lives, together and apart. Draw lines to divide each of those cards into four sections, as shown.

Each person is descended from the pair of ancestors on the card above them (as shown by the lines of the diagram below).



Step 2: The Hero's Deed

What was the hero's deed? What did the hero do that was so important that we want to explore how they came to be? Something simple and obvious is best. Brainstorm an idea or pick one:

Cured the Plague

Slew the Great Wyrm

Created a great work of art

Colonized a new world

United the Five Kingdoms

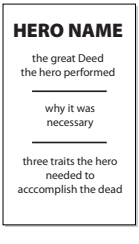
Led the civil rights movement

Made peace with the machine AIs

After you've picked the deed, discuss briefly how the hero accomplished this feat (just a short summary). We're not going to explore what the hero did during play, so make your description complete and clear.

> *We picked "slew the Great Wyrm" and then described how the hero led a united army to the dragon's lair and defeated it after days and nights of war. We could have just as easily described the hero sneaking in alone and slipping a cursed jewel into the beast's horde, causing it to wither and die.*

Name and describe your hero. Write the hero's name and deed on their card, as shown.



The deed could just as easily be personal instead of epic. The "first family member to get a college education" would make a perfectly good history. And don't let the name fool you: the "hero" of our story could be a villain. Their deed could be something terrible, like assassinating the President or enslaving an entire race. Or maybe it's ambiguous. The family history we explore will help us understand what it means and whether we should cheer or curse them. Either way, we'll call them the hero, for now.

Step 3: The Necessity

Why was the hero's deed necessary? It may be obvious from the description of the deed, but state it clearly.

The Necessity tells us about the world the hero is in, the situation that drove the hero to act. Discuss the world and why the deed was necessary, and then write a brief summary on the hero's card.

> *The God-Emperor's deed was to give up his humanity to become an immortal tyrant and rule mankind for centuries. It was necessary because the human race was beginning to scatter among the stars. They would have dwindled and died out if they weren't forced to unite. We write "necessity: humanity scattering to the stars" on the card.*
>
> *Another hero's deed was slaying the great wyrm. It was necessary because the monster was a menace. Every few years it would issue forth from its cave to burn field and city alike. We write "necessity: dragon terrorizes realm" on the card.*

If the hero did something terrible, the "necessity" might be a situation that most people thought was fine.

> *Elizabeth's deed was releasing a virus that caused millions of deaths and toppled society as we know it. It was necessary (some would say) because the world had become stagnant. Total collapse allowed the survivors to build a new world, free from the shackles of the past. We write "necessity: stagnant society" on the card.*

If you want to get started playing quickly, here are some seeds you can use to create your hero.

OATHBREAKER

Sorcerer who unlocked the forbidden rune of power, destroying the foundation of magic and unraveling spells across the realm.

necessities (pick 1)

- magic was stale; nothing new was being created
- the magi were too powerful and controlling
- overuse of magic was close to unleashing a doom upon the world

traits (pick 3)

- magi
- has the Second Sight
- outcast
- knows the ancient tongue
- possesses the key that opens the rune's hiding place

PEACEMAKER

Colonist who won the settlers their independence and ended the war against their homeworld.

necessities (pick 1)

- the world had been ravaged by war
- colonists were losing their will to fight
- a third threat loomed that they could only resist united

traits (pick 3)

- knows lying gets you nowhere
- military strategist
- spiritual
- has never seen another sky
- went to the stars and came back

TRANSHUMAN PIONEER

Scientist who successfully translated her consciousness out of her body, beginning the next stage of human evolution.

necessities (pick 1)

- humanity was stagnating
- disease and genetic disorders were rising
- people die; they always will

traits (pick 3)

- brilliant scientist
- terminal illness/lifelong disability
- fears death
- questions everything
- antisocial

Step 4: The Hero's Traits

Brainstorm three essential traits the hero needed to accomplish their deed. Without these traits, they could not have gotten the job done, or it would have been a lot harder.

> *Resolute, Cunning Strategist, Sorcerer Adept, Vengeful, Compassionate, Blood of both Elf and Man*

Traits are usually virtues, but they could just as easily be things about the hero that were dark yet necessary to accomplish the goal (e.g. vengeful, unforgiving, outcast).

As you come up with each one, discuss briefly why that trait was needed.

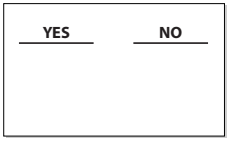
> *One of Viktor's traits was compassion, which made him care about all the people suffering from the plague, driving him to find a cure.*

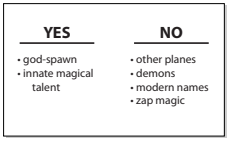
Traits show you what the hero might have learned or inherited from ancestors. As you explore the family history, you'll start to see how these traits emerged or came to be.

There is still a lot we don't know about the hero. That's okay. In some ways, the hero is going to remain a mystery: the center of the story, but someone we only see from a distance. Instead, we're going to explore the lives that led up to the hero. Those stories will show us who the hero is and why they did what they did.

Step 5: Make Your Palette

Follow the rules from Microscope to make a Palette to flesh out your world to avoid surprises or disagreements later on.





Step 6: First Pass, Make Ancestors

Each player takes a turn and creates one ancestor of the hero. You can go around the table or contribute in any order, as you wish. After each player has created one ancestor, stop.

1) Choose any empty left or right section of a card (ignore the middle sections). If the other side is already filled in, you know you are creating the person who will be the other parent of their child.

2) Name the ancestor and summarize their life *before* they meet the other parent and have a child.

3) Say whether this ancestor's early life was Light or Dark. Explain why.

You can place either parent on the left or right side of the card. The card above each side represents that person's own parents, so the side you pick determines their relationships to the other characters in the family tree. Creating ancestors' history is described in more detail later.

> *A player fills in the left side of a blank card: "His name is Landers. He doesn't have a lot of prospects on Earth, so he leaves to try his hand in Planetary Survey. It's Dark because it's a hard and lonely job, and he's always struggling to make ends meet."*

Play

At the start of the game, pick a player to be the first Lens. If you're teaching the game, it should probably be you.

1) Lens picks the Focus card: Choose any ancestor card except the hero. This is the part of the family history you will explore this round. Place a token on it as a reminder.

2) Make History: Each player takes a turn, starting with the Lens and going around the table to the left (clockwise).

   On your turn, pick a section of the Focus to explore:

   PARENT (either one)

   UNION

   FATE

   OFFSPRING (the parent section of the card below)

   If the section is blank, fill it in. If the section is already filled in, make a scene in that part of the history.

   You cannot fill in the Union or Fate until both parents have been created. Unlike normal Microscope, the Lens only makes one thing on their turn, not two.

3) Lens Finishes the Focus: After each player has taken a turn, the Lens takes another turn.

4) Explore a Legacy: The player to the right of the Lens explores a Legacy the hero inherited.

5) New Lens: Player to the left of the Lens becomes the new Lens. Start again at the top.

The entire game takes place before the hero accomplishes their deed. Even if you play scenes that include the hero, those scenes must take place before the deed.

Live each life like it's the center of our story. Even though we know the ancestors' lives are building up to the hero, they do not know what the future holds. When we explore their lives, they are our main characters.

Family History

Each ancestor card is divided into four sections:

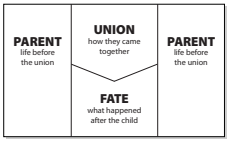
- The left and right sections are the early lives of each **Parent** before their Union.
- The top middle section is the **Union**, the first part of their relationship when the parents come together and create their offspring.
- The bottom middle section is their **Fate**, what happens to the parents after their offspring and how their lives turn out.

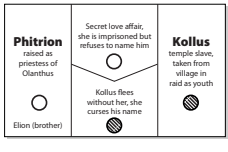
The person on the card directly below is the **Offspring** of these parents. The offspring counts as part of the Focus of the card above, allowing you to talk about the early life of their child.

To fill in a blank section of an ancestor card:

1) Describe the person or summarize what happened during this time in their lives in a few sentences.
2) State whether it is Light or Dark and describe why. Write a brief overview and draw a Light or Dark circle.

Never talk about a section that is blank unless you are filling it in. Don't drop hints about a parent we haven't seen yet or allude to what happened in a blank Union when making the Fate. Likewise, you cannot fill in the Union or Fate until both parents have been created since you have to know who they are to talk about their lives together.





Characters are biological parents of their offspring by default. If you want a character you are making to have a different connection to the offspring, declare it when you create the first parent on the card. Describe their relationship as simply as possible (foster parent, mentor, teacher, etc.), but do not go into more detail since you are not filling in the Union yet. Only the player making the first parent gets to decide: anyone creating the other parent or Union later on must honor the relationship that was specified.

No one can describe a parent dying until the child is conceived or born since that would break the family tree. Parents can die in their Fate (since that is after the offspring) and could even die during the Union so long as the offspring is already born/conceived.

Scenes

If a section of a card has already been filled in, you can use your turn to make a scene in that part of the family history. Scenes let you explore the ancestors' lives in more detail or learn more about the world they live in.

- Declare which section you are making the scene inside (one of the parents' early lives, the Union, the Fate or the offspring's early life).
- Follow the normal scene rules in Microscope, but your scene must take place during the section you chose and must relate to it, even if the ancestors are not present.
- Scenes can be played or dictated.

Summarize the scene on a card as usual. Note in the upper right which part of the history contains it (parent's name, Union or Fate). Put the scene card under the ancestor card, stacking earlier scenes on top of later scenes.

> *The Fate of Nathan and Belle has already been described: he goes out into the fields one night and disappears, taken to the stars by the lights in the sky he saw long ago. Belle is left alone. A player decides to make a scene within their Fate, asking whether their son Clay believes his father abandoned them.*

As in Microscope, questions can be about the characters or the world. You could even ask questions that are about characters from other parts of the family tree if the current characters have some way of finding the answer.

> *Did Belle love someone else before Nathan? Did Zanis cheat to win the duel? Are nobles subject to the laws of the realm? Why are sorcerers unable to foresee their own deaths, only others'?*

Once all the sections of the current Focus are filled, your only option is to make scenes. That may seem limiting, but don't worry: making and playing scenes is what you do in most other role-playing games. It's just unusual for Microscope. Remember that you can always dictate instead of playing out a scene, which lets you narrate some detail of that person's life. Even if you spent the entire game playing scenes on just one card, you still have a whole lifetime to explore (two lifetimes, actually).

Legacy

In between each Focus, one player gets to roam more broadly and explore how the ancestors made the hero who they are or how the world made the deed necessary:

1) Pick either one of the hero's three traits or the necessity that drove the deed.

2) Make history that relates to that trait or the necessity you chose. Pick any ancestor card (not the hero), and then fill in a blank section or dictate a scene in a section that is already filled in.

   As always, you cannot fill in a Union or Fate until both parents have been created.

If you explore a trait, you might show how that virtue or vice was passed down to the hero. If you explore the necessity, you can show what the world was like and what the deed was intended to change.

The Hero in Play

The hero is the end result of all the lives in our family history, but the game is about exploring what created them, not their life directly. You may rarely see the hero in play.

Everything in the game takes place before the hero performs the deed we described at the beginning. If you create scenes with the hero, they must take place before the deed. If the hero's parents are the Focus, the hero's card is their Offspring and is part of the Focus, so you could make scenes in the hero's life before the deed.

Generations & Siblings

A normal generation is at least twenty years, so a good rule of thumb is that what takes place in the great-grandparents time is probably sixty years before the hero's adulthood. The actual length of a particular Union or Fate is up to you: some parents may stay together for decades while others might be ships passing in the night. That's for you to decide when you fill in that section of the card. Depending on how long characters live, you could easily create situations where ancestors who are generations apart are in the same scene.

If an ancestor has siblings that come up in play, you can write their names at the bottom of the parent section. These brothers and sisters are not direct ancestors of the hero, but they may be an important part of the story.

Ending the Game

Just like in normal Microscope, there is no set end to the game. Even after you fill in the whole family history, you could keep playing scenes to find out more about all of their lives. Or you may find you don't fill in all the ancestors because you are more interested in some aspects of the past and ignore others. That's okay.

If you know you need to stop soon, it's best to agree before you start a Focus that it will be the last round so everyone knows to wrap things up. End with the Legacy.

To pack up your cards, just start in the top left and pick up each ancestor card with all of its scene cards, then put the next stack beneath it, going from from left to right before moving down to the next row. The hero card will wind up on the very bottom. That way you can easily deal them back out later.

Afterword

Nature & Nurture

Life is complex. There are many more possibilities than just a mother and father giving birth to a child together: adoption, foster parents, same-sex unions, etc. And that's not even considering all the possibilities science may bring or the inventions of fantasy.

What makes a parent? If a child is descended by blood from one person but taught and raised by another, who do you put on the card? That's up to you. It depends on who is important to the story you're trying to tell. But whoever you name as the "parent", that is the person whose past you are going to explore, whose contribution to the family tree you are going to follow.

> *Ector raised the future King Arthur as his own, but it is Uther and Igraine whose ancestry make Arthur who he is, so those are the characters we wrote on the card and whose ancestry we explored. But in another story, the reverse could be true, and a foster parent far more important than the biological one.*

The game puts this decision in the hands of the first player to create a parent on each card. Whatever decision that player makes, respect it and build on it.

Child of Two Worlds

It is a conceit of the game that we only explore the Union of two parents even if blood and adoption mean a child really has two sets of parents (or more). If you want to experiment and try a more complex family tree, just spread out your index cards and add cards for each set of parents you want to follow. Every additional set of parents doubles the tree above them, so the closer to the hero you create this split, the more ancestors it creates.

If you want to really explore the division between nature and nurture, you can try the "Child of Two Worlds" option. Give the hero two sets of parents, one birth and one foster, but make the foster parents from a very different background than the birth parents (a classic example would be Superman, who has parents on Earth and Krypton). Then put two cards above each parent card to show the four sets of grandparents. To keep your family tree manageable, skip the top level entirely (no great-grandparents). That gives you two different ancestries to explore but only six Unions, not that much different from the usual seven.

Adventure Games: Tell Me About Your Character…

Want to learn more about an important character in your adventure game? Play Union to create their background. It could be a major NPC or you could even take turns exploring the history of your player characters.

Rise of Nations, Evolution of Ideas

Instead of using Union to show the ancestry of a person, you can substitute nations, companies, religions or schools of thought. Explore how movements evolved, collided, merged or were absorbed.

> *The Farhome movement was bitterly opposed to the "dangerously conservative" views of the One Worlders, but from those conflicts and debates emerged the more nuanced philosophies of the Concordians. Even though their "union" was trying to destroy each other, a new movement arose as their offspring.*

Not all Unions have to be equal. The "union" of two nations might be one invading another and enslaving its people. An offspring might still keep the name of one of its two parents but be a very different place because of the new influences the other parent introduced.

> *The Empire conquered the border tribes. As the offspring of the Union of the old Empire and the tribes (the two parents), the new Empire now lords over foreigners and keeps them in line with military might. It is technically the same nation as the old Empire, but annexing the tribes has changed it in profound ways.*

microscope
CHRONICLE

In Chronicle, you explore the history of a single thing: how it changes over time and how it impacts the lives around it.

Your Chronicle might be about a place, an organization or even an object. You could explore a struggling colony, that spooky old house on the hill, a radical art movement or a fabled sword that unites the realm…

But we won't play in chronological order. We'll decide how the story begins and ends at the very start, then jump back and forth to explore the parts that interest us. Each of us can zoom out and make broad chunks of history or zoom all the way in and role-play together to explore the lives of the people who are part of our Chronicle.

And even though we'll know from the start how the Chronicle ends, each of us will have vast power to shape the story along the way. We'll explore the how and why that brings our history to life. That's what we'll play to find out.

(take turns reading this page aloud)

What You Need to Play

Chronicle is a version of Microscope, not a stand-alone game, so you need the Microscope rules to play. The changes are simple enough that you should be able to pick up and play Chronicle very easily if you are already familiar with Microscope.

You'll also need:

- Two to four people, including yourself
- One to three hours
- Index cards, at least twenty or thirty
- Pens or pencils

Setup

Chronicle uses the same setup as normal Microscope except as noted.

Step 1: Your Chronicle

At the start of your game, pick the thing you want to Chronicle and then summarize what happens to it in the history. That's your big picture.

Your Chronicle is going to be the center of your whole game. When in doubt, pick something simple and let the detail emerge in play rather than choosing something complex that you are not sure you understand.

> *Our history is about the Battleship Orion. She's a tough old warhorse that served in the Colonial Wars before being retired.*
>
> *In another game, we decide to make a history about a dour metropolis that struggles with crime and corruption–your basic Gotham City, complete with vigilante heroes. We name it Grace Bay.*

Write the name of your Chronicle on a tent card, folded long-ways, and place it above the other cards to remind everyone what your history is about.

Step 2: Bookends

When you make the Bookends, highlight how the Chronicle has changed (or stayed the same) from the beginning of the history to the end.

Step 3: Palette

Follow the normal Microscope rules to make your Palette.

Step 4: First Pass

Each player makes a Period or Event, as usual. But if you make the first Event in a Period, you also create the **Anchor** character for that Period (as described below).

If you need some ideas to get you started quickly, here are a few Chronicle seeds you can use:

> **INVICTUS**, the legendary sword of kings and conquerors.
>
> The **RED CROW**, a galleon in the age of pirates, privateers and New World gold. Over time she could be a merchant ship, a buccaneer raider or a sunken wreck.
>
> **GRACE BAY**, a city that has wrestled with organized crime and political corruption. Where the rule of law failed, can masked vigilantes succeed?
>
> The **FABE-CALLINGER DRIVE**, that promised to revolutionize space travel and bridge the stars. But was that dream only a fantasy?
>
> That old haunted house on the hill, **GIDEON MANOR**. Of course, your history could start long before it became accursed and explain the terrible things that happened there…
>
> **STARFALL**, weapons-smiths to the galaxy, whose arms have no equal in known space.

Wait, isn't Starfall a seed from Kingdom? Absolutely. Anything that would make an interesting Kingdom would make a great Chronicle. The two games play very differently, which means you can choose to explore the same subject matter in entirely different ways depending on which game you choose.

You can also start with almost any normal Microscope seed and just pick one particular thing that you want to examine.

> *We are interested in a seed about how the invention of artificial food changes society. To play it as a Chronicle, we decide to explore the story of the research institute that pioneered this new technology.*

Play

Chronicle plays exactly like normal Microscope but with two important differences:

- The entire history is about the subject you chose to Chronicle. Everything you make must relate to the Chronicle (as well as the current Focus or Legacy).
- Each Period we explore will have an **Anchor** character that is directly connected to the Chronicle. They are touchstones that bring the history to life and give us a personal connection to what is happening. All Events and Scenes must also relate to the Anchor of the Period.

Otherwise, follow the normal order of play: pick a Lens, establish a Focus, take turns making history, then build on a Legacy, etc. The rule changes are small, but they alter the focus of the game considerably.

Making Periods

When you create a Period, describe how things are different from other Periods. Show how the subject of your Chronicle has changed or how its situation is different from the past or future.

> *In our Grace Bay history, there's a Period on the table where the city is crime-ridden and corrupt, but now a player makes an earlier Period where the city was still booming, yet starting to become overcrowded and run-down with careful development pushed aside for growth and profit. Later another player makes a Period between those two, describing a time of political scandal when the Mayor's office and Police department are exposed as taking bribes which erodes public trust.*
>
> *In another history about a legendary sword, a player describes a new Period where the sword sits buried in a king's tomb, forgotten. In a previous Period, the sword was used by a warlord to conquer the realm. The sword itself has not changed, but the situation has.*

Making Events & The Anchor

Each Period we explore will have one Anchor character. Anchors make the story personal and bring our Chronicle to life.

If you are making the first Event in a Period, you first create the Anchor character before you describe your Event. Making the Anchor is part of the same action as creating the first Event–you do both on your turn:

1) Name the Anchor character, then describe them and their connection to the Chronicle. Write it on a card (oriented wide) and put that card above the Period. Write the Anchor's name in big letters so it's easy to read.

2) Make your Event. All Events must relate to the Anchor character of this Period.

Everything in the Period must relate to the Anchor, so each Anchor has a strong influence on your game. Make a character who reflects the issues you want everyone to explore and who connects to the things you think are interesting in this Period of the Chronicle.

> *After years in service, the battleship Orion is deemed obsolete and retired from service. She is dry-docked in an orbiting naval shipyard. The Anchor character for this Period is Muwen, a retired Gunner's Mate who served aboard the Orion and can't put the war behind him. He visits the shipyard to relive old memories.*

Anchors are just like any other character in the history: you can play them in Scenes, they can die, etc., but they remain the Anchor for their Period no matter what happens to them.

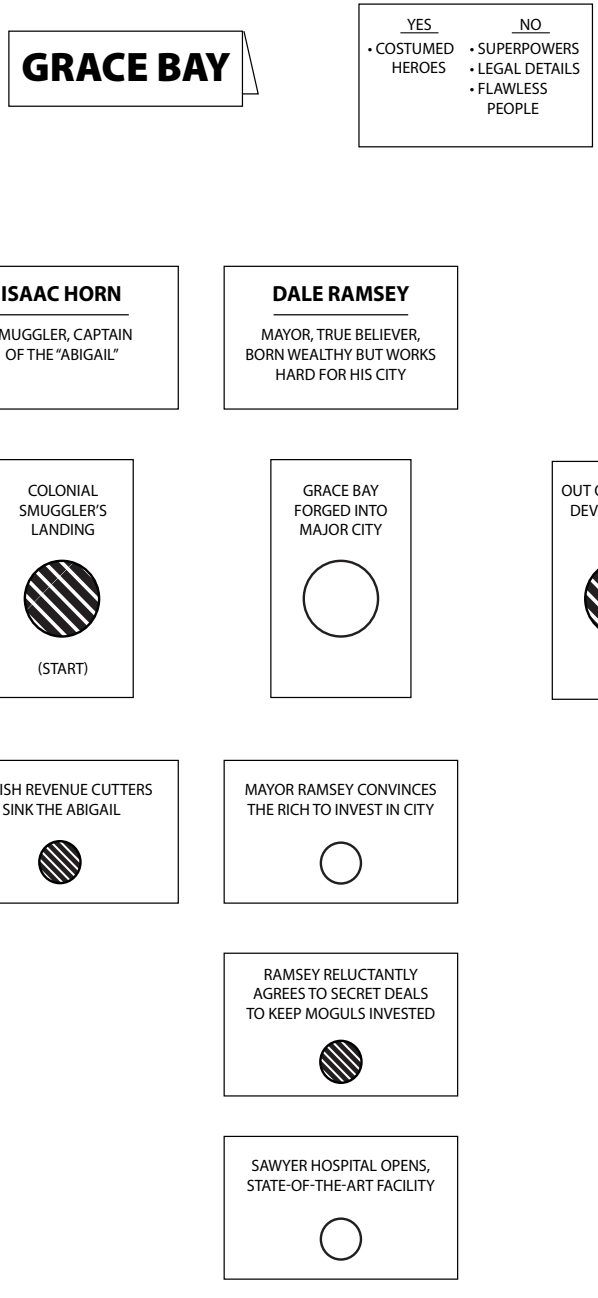
You only make one Anchor for each Period. Don't use the same Anchor for two different Periods. Periods with no Events will not have an Anchor, yet. Since the Lens can make two nested things, they could make a Period and then make an Event in that Period which means they would also make the Anchor character.

Making Scenes

Just like Events, all Scenes in a Period must relate to the Anchor character, but the Anchor does not have to actually be in the Scene unless the current player makes them a required character, as in normal Microscope.

> *The Orion is recalled from the scrapyard to suppress riots on a colony world. The Event never mentions the Anchor character directly, but since they are serving aboard the ship when it happens, it certainly relates to them.*

Chronicle in Play: Grace Bay



FOCUS

1) THE OWL, MASKED VIGILANTE

2) MAYOR'S OFFICE

SAWYER HOSPITAL

(CAT)

TRIAL OF MOB BOSS SEGRETTI

(ADDIE)

"DUTCH" BARRY

CONSTRUCTION WORKER, OWES MONEY TO MOB LOAN SHARKS

KAY WALLER

POLICE LIEUTENANT, GOOD COP IN A BAD TOWN

SCANDALS ERODE PUBLIC TRUST

VIGILANTES FIGHT CRIME BOSSES, LOSE

CITY CLEANED UP, FRESH START

(END)

DOES THE

NEW MAYOR INAUGURATES COMMEMORATIVE RAMSEY BAY BRIDGE

NO, IT'S A SCAM

IS THE VERDICT

MOB BOSS SEGRETTI ACQUITED IN COURT

NO, THE FIX IS IN

DAILY SENTINEL BREAKS STORY REVEALING CONSTRUCTION BRIBES

DOES WALLER

POLICE ARREST THE OWL, TIPPED OFF BY MOB

THE OTHER WAY

CHRONICLE

Afterword

Focus vs Freedom: A Tighter Microscope

Chronicle makes only a few changes to the procedures of regular Microscope, but those changes alter the game considerably. Play is more focused than normal Microscope which provides many advantages but also sacrifices some of the virtues of the original game.

On the plus side, it is easier to stay on target. You pick a subject and everyone knows that is what you're exploring and fleshing out. Combine that with the Anchor characters and you are more likely to wind up with a tighter, more personal story than normal Microscope. The exact same thing *could* happen in ordinary Microscope, but Chronicle stacks the deck in your favor.

The trade-off is that you lose freedom. You're dealing with one subject for the entire game, so you can't leave it and jump to something else if you get bored or if you dislike what others have done with it. You still have room to jump around to other parts of the Chronicle, but you can't leave the Chronicle. That's not merely an artistic concern: in Microscope, that freedom is a social steam valve to balance the unlimited power of each player. Chronicle limits individual power by tightening the subject of the history but also loses some of the safeguards that made that creative power work.

Why Doesn't the Period-Maker Create the Anchor?

Many people ask why the player creating the first Event makes the Anchor character instead of the player making the Period. There are two reasons.

First, if you create the entire Period and also make the Anchor, you are establishing a lot of material without another player getting to build on what you made. Chronicle is designed so one person makes the broad Period, but a different player (probably) gets to decide what kind of person would be an interesting spotlight for that time.

Second, characters are defined by seeing them in action, so the first Event featuring an Anchor character is when we really see who they are. If one player defined the Anchor, but then a different player made that first Event, the Event-maker could easily misinterpret the Anchor or take them in a totally different direction than the creator intended. Building on someone else's idea is great, but misinterpreting a concept because you only had a minimal description to work from is not. Combining the creation of the Anchor with making an Event that showcases them avoids that pitfall and ensures an Anchor will have a clear and revealing introduction.

microscope
ECHO

This future is not what we wanted. But we have the power to change it.

We can go back and alter the course of history with our own hands. Even the smallest nudge, at the right time and place, can *echo* forward and change the entire course of history. A chance encounter interrupted, a tiny malfunction averted, an untimely death caused or prevented—these can have a monumental impact on the years that follow.

Can we predict all the consequences of our actions? We may tell ourselves yes, but the truth is no. It is impossible to foresee all the tangled repercussions of what we do, the echoes of all our actions. But we must try if we are to forge the future we want.

And we are not alone. Others want a different future than we do. They will twist the past to their own ends… if we let them.

In this version of Microscope, we'll create a history together and then explore how competing factions try to change the past to make it turn out the way they want, whether that's preventing an apocalyptic war, saving a species from extinction or planting the seeds of a more enlightened society.

But every change has unexpected consequences. After a player describes how a faction tampers with history, another player describes how that change echoes forward and causes something else to turn out differently. And enemy agents may go back and try to counter the changes the other faction made, causing even more echoes.

We may change history a lot. But if we change it too much, the past might become so different that it no longer leads to the original future at all. If we push too hard, our past could spin off into limbo, destroying the future and both factions with it…

(take turns reading this page aloud)

What You Need to Play

Echo is an adaption of Microscope, not a stand-alone game, so you need the Microscope rules to play.

In many ways, Echo is a more complex version of Microscope, so I recommend you only try Echo after you are already comfortable playing normal Microscope. Familiarity with the original rules will make it much easier to tackle the added twists of Echo.

You'll also need:

- Two to four people, including yourself
- Two hours or more
- Index cards, lots of them
- Tokens of some kind (e.g. pennies), twenty or so
- Pens or pencils

For two-player games, use the alternate rules in the back of the Microscope book to extend each Focus.

Make Factions

To start a new game of Microscope Echo, first you decide on what the people from the future want to change, then you go back and make a history which created that situation. That may seem backward, but picking the thing you want to change first ensures that the crux of your game is something that interests you, instead of something random that emerged from your history.

Step 1: The Goal

What does the faction want to change? Describe how the history turned out originally and the outcome this group wants instead. They may want to prevent something or make something happen.

Pick something clear and specific. Simpler is better. It must also be something that has distinct success or failure: later on it must be obvious to us whether the faction achieved their goal.

> *War devastated the globe. Prevent it!*
>
> *Dying species destabilized the ecosystem. Save them from extinction!*
>
> *Humanity joined the galactic community, but were overshadowed by mighty alien civilizations. Make humanity a major stellar power!*

The goal should change the outcome of the history, not just be something that happened in the middle. It should be something that is not easily fixed in the future, something that is worth going back in time to change.

If you need an idea to get you started playing quickly, here are a few seeds you can use to create your history.

LAND OF THE FREE

An ultra-patriotic, crypto-fascist political party rose to control the most powerful nation in the world…

- The Resistance (faction) is a secret rebel group, hunted by the government police. Goal: prevent the fascists from taking over.
- The Minutemen (faction) are loyal agents of the party, bent on preventing this sabotage. Goal: maintain the party's control (status quo).
- Radical discovery of the Vollen-Haas Field allows an individual to leap back in time for short stints, but the other weapons and tools time-travelers possess are not substantially better than those of the past (method: ordinary).

OLD ONES AWAKEN

Rituals awoke the unspeakable elder gods, engulfing the world in madness…

- Witnesses (faction), a handful of surviving sane psychics and mystics. Goal: prevent the Old Ones from awakening by stopping the rituals that roused them.
- The Yellow Hand (faction), adepts of forbidden lore. Goal: bind and control the elder gods when they awaken.
- Psychics and mystics can project their consciousness back through the veil of years to temporarily possess people in the past. Once there they could hypnotize others or use magic rituals (method: extraordinary).

THE BLACK SWORD UNBROKEN

The Dark Lord forged the Black Sword, a weapon of terrible might. But so much of his power was invested in it that when the sword was broken so was he, freeing the land from his shadow forever…

- Thralls of the Dark Lord (faction) lament the fall of their Master, skulking and hiding from their enemies while they plot to undo the great victory. Goal: avert the destruction of the Dark Lord so his reign continues.
- Dark Rangers (faction) are steadfast wardens who have not been lulled by the siren call of peace like the other so-called guardians of the land. Goal: ensure the Dark Lord's destruction (status quo).
- The shards of the Black Sword are so potent that they can cut through time itself, but they are evil beyond compare. The Dark Rangers risk terrible corruption using the weapons of the Enemy, but it is the only way they can travel to the past to counter the Thralls (method: pick ordinary or extraordinary, depending on whether you want the Thralls and Dark Rangers to have magic).

Step 2: The Opposition's Goal

There is a second faction from the future that wants a different outcome. They might want to protect the current future and prevent the changes the first faction is trying to cause, or they might want another future entirely.

The second faction's goal *must* be incompatible with the first. Both sides cannot get what they want.

> *Our first faction's goal is to prevent the royal line from being polluted by intermarriage with witch-blood. The second faction wants a certain exiled line of witch-blooded nobles to marry into the throne instead of the ones that reign in the original history.*

During play, we are not committed to a particular side, so on your turn you can choose to explore whichever faction interests you.

Step 3: How Can You Change History?

What can the factions do to tamper with history? Once they travel back in time, are their agents normal people or do they have tricks up their sleeves? Pick one of these three options for your game:

ORDINARY: Agents can only do what a normal person could do. They have no special abilities or tools. To change history, you have to describe what a normal person could do to cause that change.

> *An agent sneaks into the garage and cuts the brakes on the ambassador's car.*

EXTRAORDINARY: Agents can do seemingly impossible things. They might use magic or super-technology to affect people or things in the environment.

> *An agent uses a spell to walk through the wall of the crypt and steal the crown jewels.*

OMNIPOTENT: A faction can change the past without any direct interaction. They simply warp reality and make things turn out differently.

> *A faction alters history so the dragon defeats the brave heroes instead of being slain.*

These options are ordered from hardest to easiest: as a player, it takes much more effort to explain how an ordinary person could change history than to just rewrite the past at will.

> *You want to describe a faction keeping two characters in the history from falling in love so their child is never born. If you picked the "omnipotent" option, it's easy: you just say it happens and reality is rewritten. If you picked "extraordinary," you could describe agents using mind control or hypnosis to make them dislike each other. But if the agents can only do what a normal person could do, you have to describe how they could reasonably keep the two lovers apart.*

When in doubt, Extraordinary is a good choice. It gives you latitude to make seemingly impossible things happen without too much explanation.

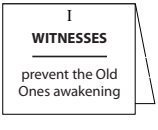
Step 4: Describe Factions & Future

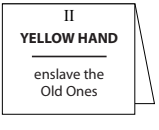
Now that you know their goals, describe the two factions a bit more. Explain who they are and give them names. Discuss what gives these factions the capability to send agents back in time: Is it a magic ritual? A new invention? An alien artifact?

Describe the future where these factions exist in just a few sentences. The factions' goals should already give you a good idea of how their world turned out. Don't get caught up discussing details: just make sure you include the situation they want to change.

> *In this future, the elder gods have awoken. They're not visible, but their influence spreads madness across the globe. There are riots, wars and fanaticism, but only some know these atrocities are caused by the presence of the Old Ones.*
>
> *The psychics and mediums who are trying to go back and prevent the awakening of the elder gods call themselves the Witnesses. They are among the few who understand what is causing the madness that has ravaged the world. They can project their consciousness back through the years and temporarily take over the bodies of people living in the past.*
>
> *Their opponents are the Yellow Hand, cultists who wish the Old Ones to awaken but only once rituals have bound Them as omnipotent slaves of the cult. They use the same psychic techniques as the Witnesses but also possess magic spells and occult secrets.*

Fold two index cards in half so they stand up. Write each faction's name and goal on a card in big letters so you can easily reference them during play. Write a Roman numeral one at the top of the first faction's card and a Roman numeral two at the top of the second's.





Make History

Now that you know what outcome the factions want to change, you make the past that led to that outcome. This is the *original* history before the factions intervene and tamper with it.

Follow these steps to build your history. They are almost identical to a normal Microscope game:

Step 1: Big Picture

Summarize what happened to get to the outcome that the factions want to change. Don't include the factions or the future that you described earlier: the big picture is the history before their time.

Step 2: Bookends

Your history could end with the situation that the factions want to change ("War engulfs the globe"). You could also end your history earlier, in which case your final bookend should clearly point towards that situation arising. Again, don't include the factions or their future within your bookends: that happens later.

Step 3: Palette

Follow the normal instructions for making your Palette. Group decisions are over after you finish the Palette.

Step 4: First Pass

Focus on describing the incidents that created the situation the factions want to change. The more we know about what caused that outcome, the easier it will be to describe them trying to change it.

Then add one more step:

Step 5: Second Pass

Each player gets to add a single Event to the history. This is just like the First Pass except you can't make Periods. Again, focus on making history that shows how the situation the factions want to change came to pass.

Play

As you play you'll add detail to the history and show how the factions change the past to try to get the outcome they want. Play follows the same pattern as normal Microscope except you can also make two new types of Events: Interventions and Echoes.

You can create an **Intervention** Event to describe how a faction goes back in time to tamper with history. The time travelers are temporary visitors: they appear, interfere, and then return to their own time to observe the result. As a player you are not committed to either side, so you can act for whichever faction interests you at the moment.

But every change will have repercussions. After each Intervention, another player will create an **Echo** Event to show how those changes altered the history that followed. They may describe a totally unforeseen consequence or something that fits perfectly with a faction's plan: that's up to the player. And players are free to create additional Echoes later on or even Echoes of another Echo.

Interventions and Echoes can describe new Events that we had not seen in the history before, but you can also use them to revise Events already on the table. You'll cross out the old card and stack the new card on top. From now on, that new Event is what happened—the cards underneath are moot. You'll also put down **contradiction tokens** to keep track of cards which haven't been replaced yet but which could no longer be true because of how the history changed.

The factions may struggle to undo each other's work, but they can't fight each other directly: time travelers cannot return to an Event that is already an Intervention. Instead, if you want to stop an Intervention, you have to go further back and do something that will overwrite that Event with an Echo.

At the end of each round, one player will **update a Period**, replacing the old description to reflect the changes we've seen. Then you'll pass **Judgement** on your history and decide whether either faction is succeeding in achieving the outcome they want or if the past has become so different that it doesn't lead to the original future anymore, dooming both factions to failure and destroying their reality.

But the factions are immune to the changes to their future until the game ends, so even if you destroyed the world, you can go back in time and try to fix it in the next round. You could destroy and repair the past over and over until you get it right…

To start play, pick the first Lens. Then follow these steps:

1) Lens Declares Focus: All history must relate to the Focus the Lens picks.

2) Lens Makes History: The Lens can make two things so long as they are nested (e.g. a Period and then an Echo Event inside it). Choose from this list:

   PERIOD

   EVENT

   INTERVENTION (Event)

   ECHO (Event)

   SCENE

   The exception to making nested items is that if the Lens makes an Intervention as their first action they can make an Echo of that Intervention as their second action.

3) Remaining Players Make History: Each remaining player takes a turn, going around to the left. If the player before you made an Intervention, you *must* Echo their Intervention (even if the Lens made their own Echo). Otherwise, choose from the list above.

4) Lens Finishes the Focus: Lens can again make two nested things but cannot Intervene. If the previous player made an Intervention, the Lens must Echo it.

After all players have addressed the Focus, we take a step back and see how these changes to the history have altered the outcome.

5) Update a Period: Player to the right of the Lens revises a Period description to match the changes we have seen.

6) Judgment: Vote to decide if a faction has achieved its goal or if the history has collapsed.

7) New Lens: The player to the left of the Lens becomes the new Lens. Repeat.

Intervention (Event)

When you create an Intervention, you describe how a faction tampers with history by revising an existing Event or making a new one. If you create a new Event, you are effectively making the original Event and revising it all at once—it was something that was already part of the history, we just had not seen it yet.

A faction may Intervene earlier to change something much later in the history, so we may not know if their plan worked until we see the Echoes.

> *To prevent the signing of the peace treaty, a faction goes back to the childhood of the key negotiator to try to change her beliefs.*

To make an Intervention, follow these steps:

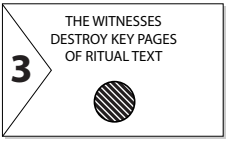
1) Declare Intent: Say which faction is going back in time and what they want to accomplish.

2) Choose Event: Pick the Event the faction tampers with. Pick an existing Event or describe how a new Event we have not seen yet originally turned out. You cannot choose an Event that is already an Intervention. If there is a contradiction token on the old Event, remove it.

3) Describe Intervention: Describe what the faction does and how that makes the Event turn out differently.

4) Mark Contradictions: Put a token on any future Event or Period that could no longer be true because of this Intervention. If a card already has a token, do not add another. If this Intervention makes something that was already contradicted possible again, remove that token.

Write your Event on a new card. Draw a triangle on the left and write a number inside it one greater than the last Intervention (1 for the first Intervention, 2 for the second, etc.). If you revised an existing Event, cross out the old Event card and stack the new card on top of it with any old scenes beneath the old Event card.



Once a faction has Intervened, you cannot return to that Event and Intervene again: it is closed to time travelers, for now. If you want to change an Intervention, you must go farther back and use an Echo to overwrite it first, then you can Intervene in that Event again.

EXAMPLE: MAKING AN INTERVENTION

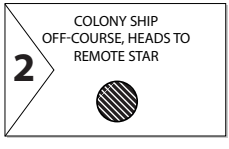
For our game, we decided that in the future the human gene pool is dangerously stagnant. Our first faction is the Oro, a benign race of aliens who want to go back and save the human race by preserving their genetic diversity.

On a player's turn, she decides to make an Intervention: the Oro want to change history and split humanity into two separate societies so it never becomes a single gene pool.

We already saw how, during the "Slow Exodus from Earth" Period, vast colony ships first set out for the stars taking decades to reach their destinations. The player describes an Oro going back to just before the launch of one of these ships and reprogramming the navigation system so it heads to a different planet. By the time the crew discovers the error, it's too late: they don't have sufficient fuel to correct the massive thruster burn.

The new destination is a habitable world, but it's so far from the other colonies that it is completely isolated. The Oro hope this settlement will prosper and become the seed of a separate human society over the centuries that follow, but we won't know if it works until we see the Echoes.

This is the second Intervention of the game, so she writes a two on the card and places it beneath the Period.



Another player asks which planet the ship was supposed to go to originally. The current player decides it was Prosperity, a major planet cited in several Events later on. We mark those Events as contradictions because in this new history Prosperity was never settled, at least not as far as we know.

Echo (Event)

When you make an Echo, you describe how an Event has changed because of a previous Intervention or Echo. Every Intervention has at least one Echo, but there is no limit to the number of Echoes that can arise from a single change to the history. As the repercussions ripple forward, you could have an Echo of an Echo of an Echo…

To make an Echo, follow these steps:

1) Declare Cause: Say which Intervention or Echo is causing your Echo. If the player before you Intervened, you must Echo that Intervention.

2) Choose Event: Pick an existing Event or describe how a new Event we have not seen yet originally turned out.

   You can choose an existing Intervention or Echo Event so long as the number on the cause is higher than the number on the card you want to change. If there is a contradiction token on the old Event, remove it.

3) Describe Echo: Describe how this Event turns out differently because of the previous Intervention or Echo.

4) Mark Contradictions: Put a token on any future Event or Period that could no longer be true because of this Echo. If a card already has a token, do not add another. If this Echo makes something that was already contradicted possible again, remove that token.

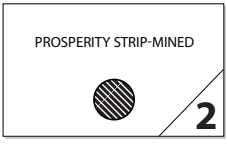
Write your Event on a new card. Draw a slash across the lower right corner and write the same number as the Intervention or Echo that caused it. If you revised an existing Event, cross out the old card and stack the new card on top of it with any old scenes beneath the old Event card.

Your Echo must be later in the history than the Intervention or Echo that caused it. A new Event could be something that was already in the history, but we had not seen it yet, or something that is only happening because of the changes to the history.

If you are changing an Event that was an Intervention, do not include the agents or their actions in your new description. Your Echo pre-empts their visit so it never happens.

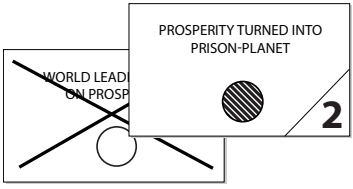
EXAMPLE: MAKING ECHOES

After the Intervention redirects the colony ship, the next player must create an Echo. They make a new Echo Event describing how, since Prosperity wasn't settled, all the neighboring colonies exploited the world for their own growth, stripping the planet of its natural resources. There are no additional contradictions since most of the cards about Prosperity are already marked.



Much later in the game, the Lens decides to Focus on Prosperity. He goes back and makes an Echo of the "Prosperity strip-mined" Echo. He replaces an Event from early in the game where Prosperity hosted a conference of world leaders. Instead, the now-barren Prosperity is turned into a prison-planet, used jointly by the nearby worlds as a dumping ground for their undesirables. The player describes how the convenience of having a whole world for exiles makes it far too easy for governments to dispose of anyone inconvenient. Civil liberties suffer.

They look for more contradictions but don't see any. The next Period is a time of egalitarianism and prosperity in this part of the galaxy. That doesn't seem as likely now, but it isn't definitely wrong, so they don't mark it.

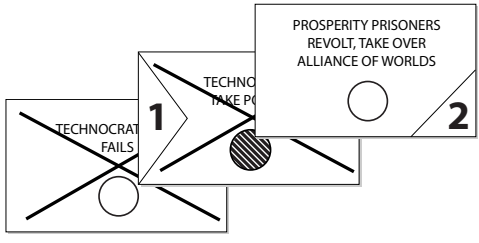


There was a Scene in the "world leaders meet" Event where a progressive reformer tried to persuade colleagues to act. That goes under the old crossed-out Event as well. The Lens uses his "nested" action to dictate a new version of that Scene where, instead, that same progressive leader is being brought to Prosperity as a prisoner. Dark times!

The next player is still working with the Prosperity Focus. In the original history, after the colonies had grown into one vast nation, wealthy technocrats tried to undermine the republic and seize power, but they were thwarted. Early in the game, that "failed technocrat coup" Event in the "Alliance of Worlds" Period was replaced when the other faction (who want to elevate humanity into a new, superior species) made the first Intervention and engineered the technocrat's success, putting the Alliance in the hands of the ambitious few.

The current player replaces that old "technocrats take power" Intervention Event with an Echo of the prison planet Echo. Instead of technocrats, the rebels are the oppressed exiles of Prosperity, throwing off their shackles and leading a revolt that overthrows the government.

It's an Echo of an Echo of an Echo of an Intervention.



This Echo can overwrite the "technocrat" Intervention because it has a higher number, meaning the Intervention that caused it happened later in the game. Because the Echo overwrote it, the old Intervention never happened. The technocrats never took power. The players look over the history that follows and start grabbing contradiction tokens…

None of those Echoes said much about the Oros' original plan of splitting human society, but that's okay: the consequences are out of their control, so we just explore the repercussions that interest us. Other times you might stick very closely to what the faction was trying to accomplish. On your turn, it's up to you.

Period, Event or Scene

You can also make normal Periods, Events or Scenes, but there are some specific things to watch out for.

You cannot create **Scenes** in Events marked as contradictions since we don't know anymore what happened in that Event. Someone must first Echo or Intervene to update the overall Event. Then you can make Scenes to explore the details.

You can make a Scene inside of an Intervention or Echo Event. Explore the details of what the agents did or how things changed. You could even make a Scene to replay a previous Scene after an Event has changed. Maybe the starting situation is different now, or maybe it starts the same but may turn out differently when we play.

If you are creating an **Event** and anything about it was caused by an Intervention or another Echo, it must be an Echo instead, not a normal Event. Likewise, if you want to have a time traveler appear in an Event, it must be an Intervention, by definition. Time travelers cannot appear anywhere in Events that are not Interventions (and that includes Scenes that are not in Intervention Events). Even if the time traveler does not cause any change, their presence is a deviation from the original history.

You may create new **Periods** that are part of the original history or which have been influenced by the changes caused by the time travelers, but unlike Echo Events, you don't mark Period cards to show what Intervention influenced it. Instead, you'll decide which Periods have changed because of time travel at the end of each round.

Overwriting Changes: High Numbers Win

When a faction tampers with history, changes happen immediately, but we may not see all the repercussions until players make Echoes. It's just like in normal Microscope: the details of the history already exist even if we have not seen them yet. And we may not see all the impacts until much later. You could wait until the very end of the game and then go back and make an Echo from the very first Intervention.

But even though you could wait until later in the game to show the impact of an early Intervention, it could not overwrite an Intervention or Echo that happened later in the game because they were not even part of the history when the earlier Intervention took effect.

To keep track of how different changes overwrite each other, the numbers on Intervention and Echo cards show when each change took effect on the history. The cardinal rule is:

> **You can only replace an Intervention or Echo if the new number would be higher than the old one.**

If you are making an Echo and the number on the card that caused it is lower than the card you want to overwrite, your Echo came earlier, so it couldn't overwrite something that changed the history later on.

To put it another way, later Interventions always trump earlier Interventions, and Echoes are part of the Intervention that caused them.

Rules of Time Travel

Time travel can get pretty tangled. Echo keeps it relatively simple by allowing only people from the future—beyond the end of the Microscope history—to move through time. The game is really about seeing how the changes you make would cause your history to turn out differently. It's a game of "what if". The factions are just a tool that lets us do that.

The rules also prevent direct conflict between enemy agents. Once a faction Intervenes, that Event is closed to time travelers. If the other side wants to counter what their rivals did, they have to go back farther and do something that overwrites that Event with an Echo. The factions are also at least temporarily immune to consequences of their tampering, even if their future isn't, so nothing can take a faction out of play until we decide to end the game.

During their visits, you can have the factions Intervene in any way you want to change the past—you can give atomic weapons to cave men—but small, subtle changes may be much more effective than drastic ones. At the end of each round, everyone will judge how all the changes have impacted the history, including the possibility that the past is so different now that it no longer leads to anything like the original future, causing both factions to lose. If you describe changes that other players think are too extreme, they are likely to vote that the future you knew has ceased to exist entirely.

The layout of the cards is also designed to remind everyone that there is always only one history in existence: the current history showing on the table. You always work with the cards you can see right now, not the cards that have been replaced and covered up. Those are just kept for reference, though you are welcome to try to turn things back to how they used to be. History changes. It doesn't branch or split into alternate realities.

Marking Contradictions

When an Intervention or Echo makes another Event or Period impossible, we mark those Periods and Events with a contradiction token as a reminder that they are out-of-date or different than first described. We will not see exactly how the marked Periods and Events have changed until a player revises or replaces them. For now we just know they are wrong.

Only mark literal contradictions, places where the current description of an Event or Period is now impossible.

> *A player made an Intervention where an agent went back in time and assassinated Cardinal Xeles, but there was already an Event later in the history where Xeles declared the President a heretic. If he is already dead, he could not be in that Event, so we put a contradiction token on it. If a player makes an Echo to replace that contradicted Event, it may turn out that a different Cardinal did the exact same thing or something totally different happened instead: we don't know yet.*

Only put one contradiction token on a card. Once it is marked as a contradiction, you do not need to mark it again. When you update a Period or replace an Event with an Intervention or Echo, the token is removed. Likewise, if later Interventions or Echoes undo a contradiction in the history ("The Cardinal's assassination never happened!"), remove the tokens from the Periods and Events that are no longer impossible.

Contradictions are reminders to help us keep track of grey areas in the history. You are never required to address them and you are not limited to only changing parts of the history that have contradictions. The only mechanical impact is that you can't play scenes in contradicted Events.

Update a Period

At the end of the round, the player to the right of the Lens picks a Period to update. Revise the Period description to take into account changes we have already seen in the history. The new description must fit any existing Events (including Interventions and Echoes) unless they are already marked as contradictions.

This is a powerful opportunity to show how all the individual changes to the history have added up and had a major impact. But if it feels like nothing has changed, feel free to say so and leave the Period the same.

Cross out the old Period card, then write a new one and put it on top. Remove any contradiction tokens from this Period card, but not from Events in the Period. The new Period must match what we know about the history, so it cannot generate new contradictions.

Judgment

At the end of each round, you judge whether either faction achieved their goal. Was the history altered so that it now leads to the future they wanted?

But tampering with history is not without perils. Drastic changes can have unpredictable consequences. If the alterations to the history are too extreme, the past may become so different that it no longer leads to the factions' future at all. It may spin off into a new, totally-unrelated future, erasing the world they came from, resulting in utter failure for both factions.

To decide, we vote. Remind everyone that no outcome, no matter how dire, will end the game unless we want it to. Do not discuss what you think the outcome should be ahead of time. Read the options below, then everyone holds out one hand and votes simultaneously. The Roman numerals at the top of the faction cards match how many fingers to hold out to vote for them.

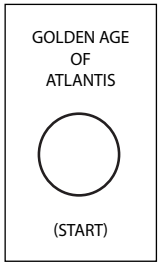
> First faction is achieving their goal: *one finger.*
>
> Second faction is achieving their goal: *two fingers.*
>
> History is broken: *thumbs down*. The past is so different that it no longer leads to the factions' future at all. Both factions lose.
>
> No change yet: *open hand flat*. The past is not different enough to meaningfully alter the future.

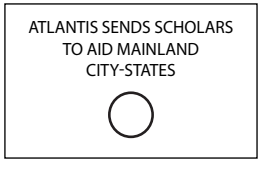
If the second faction's goal is simply to maintain the history's original outcome, do not include the "no change" option since that would be the same as voting for that faction. Only include the first three choices.

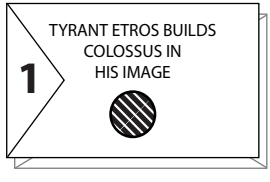
The choice that gets the most votes is how the history turns out. It does not have to be a majority of the votes. If there's a tie, we can't see the answer. We haven't explored the new history enough to understand the consequences. It could go either way.

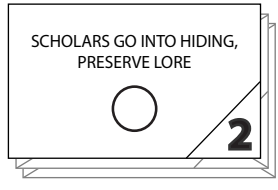
If one faction achieved their goal, briefly describe what the future is like now. But even if one side wins or the history is completely destroyed… well it's time travel, right? You can keep playing and go back to try to fix it. The factions themselves are insulated enough that nothing in the past can unravel them before they have a chance to do something about it. Even if their present is erased, they can still go back and try to save things unless the players have decided to end the game.

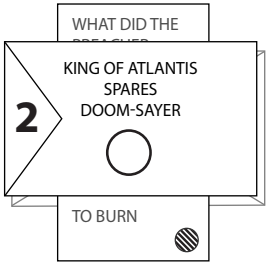
Echo in Play: Fall of Atlantis

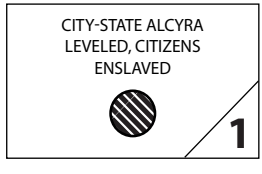


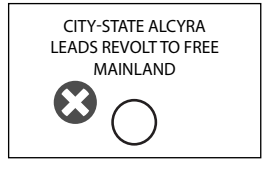


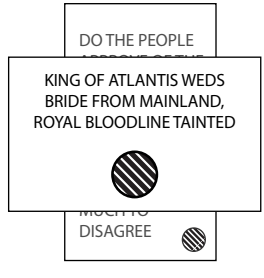












YES	NO
• SCIENCE	• GODS APPEAR
• SLAVERY	• REAL MAGIC
• SUPERSTITION	

FOCUS

1) KING ETROS
2) THAUMATURGES
3) BATTLE OF THALAMAS

RETURN OF VIRTUOUS RULERS

THAUMATURGES UNLOCK MYSTERIES

ATLANTIS SINKS

(END)

3

BATTLE OF THALAMAS, REBEL SHIPS DEFEAT CRAVEN KING

DO THE THAUM-ATURGES LIE

KING OF ATLANTIS SEEKS SECRET OF IMMORTALITY FROM THAUMATURGES

HE WANTS TO HEAR

MASSIVE BLOOD SACRIFICE IN VAIN ATTEMPT TO APPEASE GODS

COLOSSUS TORN DOWN

3

COLOSSUS TOPPLED BY ANGRY MOB

1

KING OF ATLANTIS EXILES THAUMATURGES

3

MAD KING BURNS PALACE DOWN AROUND HIMSELF

ECHO

Ending the Game

Like other Microscope games, it could never end. The factions could keep tampering with the past indefinitely. But also like normal Microscope, in the real world the game is limited by the time you have to play.

It is best to decide that you are going to end your game at the start of a round, when a new Lens begins, so that everyone knows this will be their last turn and they can go for broke.

Your last Judgment decides the ultimate outcome of the history. If one faction wins, they overcome their enemies and get the future they desired. And if the past becomes so different that it no longer leads to their present, then the factions and their future are lost forever. Your final vote decides it all.

If you put away your cards to continue later, just stack them the way you would a normal Microscope history. When you deal them back out, any crossed-out cards sit underneath the card above them.

Afterword

There are two particular challenges to playing Echo compared to a normal Microscope game. The first is identifying or imagining critical moments in history that would change the future if they turned out differently. The second is thinking of ways an agent could physically intervene and alter those events. Both are really tests of a player's fluency with cause and effect. What could a single person do to change the course of an entire empire? If you can't work backwards and think of an action that would generate the outcome you want, you will have a hard time playing Echo.

No Status Quo

Because time travelers cannot return to Events that a faction has already Intervened until they've been overwritten with an Echo, there's no neat and clean way to stop the changes the other side has made. You can't go back to right before a time traveler shoots the King and stop the assassin. Instead, you have to go farther back and make a change that will ripple forward and alter the situation before they even interfere. But that also creates more unpredictable consequences.

By removing the option to just cancel what the other side did, the rules remove any easy route back to the status quo. The situation and the history always gets more complicated, not simpler. That's entirely by design.

Who Needs Time Travel?

Want to just tinker with history and do "what if" experiments? You can remove the concept of time travel entirely and just use the Echo rules to see how things turn out differently when you make changes to history.

It's an easy switch: instead of making factions, just pick two goals you are interested in exploring. Then use the "Omnipotent" method so you can just describe parts of the history turning out differently without anyone causing it. No other changes are necessary. The "no time travel" option is particularly good for exploring alternate real world history. What if General Lee had called off Pickett's Charge? What if Hannibal had not been politically unpopular in Carthage and had gotten the reinforcements he needed to conquer Rome?

But you don't have to limit yourself to just the past. Are you worried about the future? Think you have a good about idea where we are all headed? Climate change, financial collapse, corporate take-overs or one world government? Make that the end point of your Echo history and then explore what would have to change to avoid it. Again, skip the factions and the time travel. Start with real historical events and then turn things around—if you can. Explore what society would have to do differently to change that outcome.

Echo, the Adventure Game

It is surprisingly easy to combine Echo with a regular adventure game. You can run adventures where the player characters are the agents of one faction going back in time to change history ("We've got to stop the Venusian ambassador from signing the treaty!"). Then you jump back and use Echo to see the repercussions, which spurs more adventures to deal with the fallout. Piece of cake.

And that's before you even throw in the enemy faction sending their own agents to sabotage the past. If you want some good old-fashioned time traveler versus time traveler combat, break the normal rules and run adventures where both sides (player characters and their enemies) go to the same Event and fight to make things turn out the way they want. Instead of one side deciding the outcome of the Intervention, you play the adventure to see what happens, which could make the resulting Echoes even more unpredictable. After the session is over, that Intervention is closed to further time travelers as usual.

Disco Must Die

"Hey, where's the comedy time travel?!? I want to go back in time and prank a rival fraternity!"

Most of the settings I talk about are serious, but there is no reason you couldn't use Echo for much lighter fare. Go back and prevent Disco from taking over the world. Bring back bellbottoms. Help goldfish win World War II.

You don't need to change a single rule to play Echo as a gonzo game of time travel hijinks. Just agree that this is the kind of game you want to play at the start.

The Unexamined Life

Want to get personal? In every person's life, changing the past is the one thing you absolutely never get to do. You will never know how things would have turned out differently—if.

Instead of the epic scale of history, use Echo to examine one life—maybe even your own life. Will it change your past? No, but it might tell you something about what you want out of the future.

EXPERIMENTS

If you want to experiment and push your Microscope game into unexplored territory, here are some variations you can try. Some are the creations of brave Microscope players who decided to push the envelope, and there are probably many more I have never even heard of.

The experiments I describe here are just a few examples of what's possible. Some change the premise of the history or are based on a particular concept, like a history that describes a voyage and uses Periods to represent locations as well as the time the travelers spend there. Others are purely mechanical shifts that you could use in any Microscope game, like showing how threads of Events are related by lining up the cards a certain way beneath the Period.

But a word of warning: the Microscope rules are very carefully tuned to balance creativity with consensus and let everyone have fun in the process. Seemingly small changes can have sweeping impacts on the play experience. Unlike Chronicle, Union and Echo, these experiments have not been carefully tested. Some have never even been attempted. Gamer beware!

Reincarnation

Death is not an ending. We've met before and we'll meet again, in new lives and with new faces. Our fates are intertwined.

A reincarnation history centers around a small cast of characters who keep crossing paths in one life after another. The characters may know nothing of their past lives, but the players get to witness how their tragedies and triumphs follow them from one existence to the next. They could be star-crossed lovers meeting lifetime after lifetime or bitter enemies trapped in an endless cycle of vengeance. Or both. You can also span very different eras in your history to put their lives in sharp contrast: your rival once cut you down in a gladiator arena, but now you're facing off in a corporate boardroom.

The main challenge is that, initially, you know nothing about the characters who are going to keep returning. What do you call them? How do you keep track of who's who? A simple solution is to assign the characters abstract labels that identify them no matter what life they are now living. This also lets you establish how many characters you are following. Shuo Meng, Pat Kemp, Marc Hobbs and Caroline Hobbs came up with the idea for the reincarnation history and when I played it with them we used card suits to identify our four primary characters: Heart, Diamond, Spade, Club.

As abstract as those symbols are, they influenced the way we thought of the characters and their relationships to each other: the red suits, Heart and Diamond, were romantically involved and were generally seen as the protagonists while Spade and Club often had darker stories unfold. And since we knew there were four characters, we knew whether or not there were characters still unintroduced in each lifetime. More than once they were brought in unexpectedly, casting the situation in a very different light. No one had introduced Spade yet in this life. Was she the jilted lover of Diamond? Or the killer lurking outside Heart's window?

Following the same reincarnated characters across the entire history contradicts the usual advice to avoid immortal characters in a Microscope game, but it works if the characters have no knowledge of their other lives. They can turn out to be very different people in different parts of the history, and the players have a lot of freedom to change the situation instead of being stuck playing the same characters over and over again.

You can play a reincarnation history in any genre without ever exploring why it is happening, or you could make the cause part of your story. In a fantasy setting, they might be chosen ones, blessed (or cursed) by the gods to return to the mortal world until some deed is accomplished. In a science fiction setting, there might be technology that grants this strange form of immortality, translating dying essence to a new body without all the burdens of memory.

Divided History: Now & Then

Archaeologists unearth a hidden tomb, but instead of the royal sarcophagus they hoped to find, there is only a jumble of bones littering the floor. Then we jump back thousands of years earlier and see the new Pharaoh condemn his rival brother to be buried alive, sealing him in the chamber that their father prepared for both of them…

A divided history is much like a standard Microscope game except that, instead of exploring the entire timeline, we limit ourselves to two eras separated by a gap that we skip over. There's a future and a past, and we ignore the middle. The game revolves around the differences between those two distinct eras and how they influence each other. In the example above, one era would be ancient Egypt, when the Pharaohs walked the sands as living gods and the great pyramids were raised, while the other is the time when colonial archaeologists first plundered their tombs and unearthed their ancient secrets.

Each era is almost like its own history. Each has a start Period and an end Period, and everything thing you add to the history has to be within one of those two eras. The gap between the end Period of the first era and the start Period of the later era is left vacant and cannot be explored during play.

A divided history works best when there is a clear connection between the two eras but also a distinct difference between them. The discoveries that the modern archaeologists uncover have a direct connection to the events that unfold in ancient Egypt, but at the same time the two eras are unmistakably different. In one we have priests and god-kings erecting immortal monuments and in the others we have academics and treasure hunters standing on the very same ground, sifting through the sand to understand the past or plunder its treasures.

The advantage of the divided history is that you are driven to create sharp connections (and contrasts) between the two eras you have chosen to explore because you leave out all the material in-between. If you create a divided history exploring the early days of space exploration and the height of the galactic federation it established, you are more likely to examine whether or not the outcome was what the original explorers intended, how the pioneers were remembered by their descendants, etc.

Parallel Histories

In one history, soldiers burn the temple to the ground. In another, cooler minds prevail and the tragedy is averted. How does that one pivotal event change all the history that follows? Does destroying that one temple inspire holy wars? Does saving it prevent them?

Before I made Echo, I experimented with ways to explore alternate histories by playing with two parallel times instead of one. The cards of the second timeline sat as a mirror image above the first, the rows of Periods next to each other and Events in the top history stacked up instead of down, etc. On their turn, each player could opt to add to either history to show how it was the same or different.

J.C. Lundberg came up with an even better approach: you start with a normal history, but then you decide on a point of divergence, something important enough that it could change the history if it turned out differently. You describe two different outcomes, and from there on the Periods split into a "Y", with one timeline before the incident but two different futures afterwards, each the result of one of the outcomes. On their turn, players are free to make history in any of the three sections of the history: the undivided early history or either of the two alternate futures.

Territory Not Time

At its heart, a Microscope history is simply a three-level outline, generated by a procedure that ensures that players contribute independently but also build on each other's ideas. Players have experimented with using that same structure to make other things, like building geography instead of history.

Lowell Francis created a clever adaptation of Microscope to build a city with his players as a setting for an adventure game. Periods become neighborhoods of the city. Events become places, things or notable people within specific neighborhoods. Then instead of Scenes players can dictate rumors about one of the places, people, etc.

Later, Terry Franguiadakis tried an unrelated experiment to make a Microscope game that explored a region. In the game I played with him, our "history" was an island, and Periods were locations like the sacred volcano and the sundered city. Beneath the Period level, we played Events and Scenes much like normal Microscope, exploring what happened in each of the locations at different times, creating a mix of history and geography.

Journey

Wandering mariners, cursed by the Gods. A caravan bearing spices to distant lands. A rag-tag fugitive fleet seeking a new world to call home.

In a journey history, your game spans a trip or voyage. Each Period represents a location the travelers pass through, so it is both a place and a time in the journey. If we have a Period where our ship drops anchor at a verdant tropical island, then anything that happens before we leave that island is an Event in this Period. Some Periods might be brief, others very long: we wandered in the desert for years, but spent only a few days at the strange ruins we found. You could make a tight history about a small group of travelers or a vast story covering the migration of an entire population.

If your journey returns to a previous location, you could use the same place for a new Period. A round-trip could even end up exactly where it starts… or maybe things don't turn out that way. If our journey is a mission to Mars, the first location could be the NASA center where the mission is originally thought up and planned, long before a rocket is built. Shall we make our last location a celebration at the same space center where the mission was born, or the surface of Mars where a doomed expedition has no way to return?

Journeys work well with the Chronicle rules since your whole history is about one trip, but you could just as easily use normal Microscope rules.

Micro-Histories

Instead of an epic history, what about a history that spans one person's life? Or a single day? A few years back at Story Games Seattle, Terry Franguiadakis experimented with Microscope games that compressed the entire history into a extremely small timeframe and scope, like a single day in the life of a person.

As I discussed in the original book, a history with lots of room gives you more creative freedom, but that doesn't mean that "micro-Microscope" can't work. It just means you won't have the same flexibility as a normal game. Just like in Chronicle, a tighter concept or scope trades freedom for focus. If your entire history is about one person, then anything a player reveals about that person is going to have a major impact on the game for everyone. There's no avoiding it.

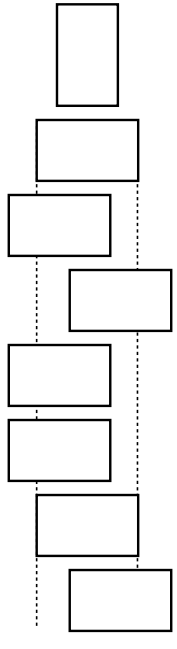
If you start with some mystery or apparent contradiction, you can play your micro-history as an elaborate jigsaw puzzle. It can be a challenge just fitting all the pieces together in a way that explains everything. How did an ordinary day at office end in… murder?! Go back and find out.

Threaded Events

At the far edge of the empire, the horse clans trample city after city into the dust. But far away in the heart of the capital, the queen has been replaced by her twin sister. Intrigue boils!

Those Events are all in the same Period, but they are really describing two different chains of events. If you want to make those connections clearer, you can use Event threads to show how items are related even if they are not right next to each other in time.

To create an Event thread, instead of lining up all the cards directly beneath the Period, shift related Events slightly left or right to make distinct columns. Other Events that are not part of a thread remain in the central column. A simple Period might have only two columns (the default column and one recurring thread) while a complex Period could have several more. You do not need to shift the cards very far. Just stagger them enough to make it visually clear that they are in separate columns (a quarter of a card width or less). Move the neighboring Periods farther apart to give yourself room.

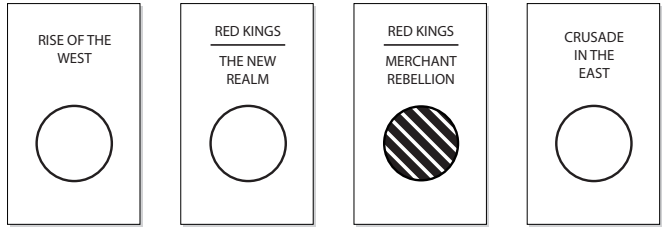


Event threads do not change the rules of the game since all Events are still in chronological order within the Period. They just make it easier to see things that are connected at a glance. You can even start threading Events in the middle of a game if you decide it would make the history easier to follow.

Mega-Periods

Sometimes a single Period is not enough to describe a phase of your history. Instead of creating just one Period, you might want to break it into several distinct but clearly-connected stages to explore all the ups and downs.

But how do you do that? Alexis Dinno asked this very question. Luckily, the solution is very simple: just create separate adjacent Periods and give them all the same title that describes the mega-Period (e.g. "the Red Kings") followed by the individual description that shows what happens in this particular part.



Mechanically, they are perfectly ordinary Periods. The labels just clarify their relationship. And since you would only be able to create one Period on your turn anyway, you would initially only make one part of a mega-Period, but you could declare your intention that it was part of a broader era. Later, you or other players might make more Periods to flesh out the mega-Period, or you might not.

Long Focus

If you want to spend more time digging into each subject, you can try extending all Focuses to two rotations around the table instead of one.

When you come back to the Lens the first time, they take a turn like any other player and you keep going around. When you come back to the Lens a second time, they take their normal end-turn, making two nested things if they want. Then you play the Legacy phase and rotate to a new Lens as usual.

Obviously, this option makes each Focus you pick much more important since it lasts twice as long. In any Microscope game, the next Lens always has the option to repeat the same Focus (or even a Focus from much earlier in the game), but this is different because it doesn't require a Lens to use up their choice to extend someone else's creation. It just makes each Focus longer. Playing with long Focuses is better suited to a longer game (or multiple sessions) where it won't rob other players of their chance to make a Focus.

AFTERWORD

Leap of Faith

In some ways, I am astounded every time someone agrees to sit down and play Microscope. Because until you start making your history, you have no idea what you are in for. You *cannot* know what your game will be about ahead of time. It is impossible, by design.

You're taking a leap of faith, every single time. You are hoping and trusting that you'll sit down with these people and build something together that you enjoy but which you cannot predict. And when you finish, you'll stand up and look on your works and marvel, "Only hours ago, none of this existed."

It's an even bigger leap when you're playing with strangers. Want to schedule a game at a con? How are you going to pitch Microscope? "We're going to make an entire universe together, but I can't tell you anything about what it's going to be like or even what genre it will be because it doesn't exist yet. It can't exist until we all sit down and start talking. But it'll be great! Probably."

Yes, a game like Microscope asks for a lot of trust. But the leap of faith has rewards. Because the fiction doesn't exist until we all sit down, it truly belongs to all of us. We are the authors, together. We're all equals in its creation, so we can all be proud of what we've made, together. We know we made something out of nothing.

Honestly, the mere idea that people are willing to make this leap, that they're willing to take a risk and trust that they can make something marvelous with other people (including total strangers) is nothing short of amazing. It's not just faith in the procedures of the game: it's faith in other people. It's your faith in humanity, and I love you for it.

A Different Future

A while back, I got an unusual email from a Microscope player. They wanted to use Microscope to help save their city. Their real city. Detroit.

Jacob Corvidae's idea was to bring together people in the community to envision a *possible* future for the city—one with difficulties and hardships, no doubt, but a future with a positive ending. The future-history they created in Microscope would be the basis for art installations around the city: fictional landmarks commemorating events that had not happened yet—would probably never happen.

Detroit was facing a lot of problems, but it also had a lot of opportunities to innovate and start fresh. Would seeing an imagined future help someone on the street see their community in a whole new way? Would it inspire

them? Would it challenge them? Would it change the way they think? At all?

We know art can change minds. It always has. But could you come together and use a tool like Microscope to break free of the past and visualize the world and the future you wanted?

I don't know the answer. But I'm blown away by the question.

In an interview, game designer Emily Care Boss said that Microscope "sweeps away blinders of limits we enforce on the medium, which, I hope, will help us better realize the full potential of this form. There is so much more we could be doing."

"There is so much more we could be doing" is exactly right, not just in how we design games, but in what we could be doing with games in the world—in communities, in classrooms, in businesses. Those are not just blinders we put on the medium of games: they are blinders we put on ourselves. How many people are convinced that they are not creative, that they could not make stories themselves instead of only consuming books or movies that others make for them? But what I find when I play with new people is that they surprise themselves. They are more creative than they thought. We all are. But we are called upon to be creative so rarely in our day-to-day lives. We need the tools and opportunity to see it, to prove it to ourselves.

I'm not a teacher. I'm not a therapist. I'm not an entrepreneur. I'm not a community activist. I don't know all the ways we could be using games in all those walks of life to make our world a better place. I'm the wrong person to ask. But since I made Microscope, I've heard from teachers and therapists and entrepreneurs and activists who are looking at games and thinking about how to use them. And that gets me excited.

Microscope is just a game. It can't build roads or feed the hungry. It can't leap off the table and fix Detroit. But Microscope, and other games like it, can help us see that we all have a lot more potential than we may realize. And they can help us think differently, to break free of our assumptions.

And *that* can do a lot.

Thanks

This seemed like such an easy project when I first imagined it: just put together some useful tips for Microscope. How hard could that be? But as I came up with more and more things I wanted to include, it grew into a somewhat fearsome beast.

There are a lot of different bits and pieces in this book and a lot of different people helped me figure them out. They all deserve so much more thanks than could fit in these pages:

My truly tireless editor, Carole Robbins, who made finishing this book possible. And the entire Robbins family for their love, support and keen insight into the end of the world.

Pat for always being ready to hear new ideas (not to mention being one of my favorite people to play Microscope with) and, along with Feiya, hosting so many Make Stuff nights where so much vital work got done. Alex for always fearlessly trying new Microscope ideas. The three of us hammered out important details of time travel in Pat's kitchen while he burned loaded dice.

Mike for braining up the finger-dice, among many other things. Trey for reminding me to steal (ahem, recycle) my own ideas.

Ashley, who demonstrated an unexpected knack for time travel. I suspect a faction sent her from the future to ensure this book got done.

And, finally, thanks to my unstoppable partners-in-game-design-crime, Marc & Caroline, especially for providing essential therapy by letting me rant about their games when I needed a break from my own (Have you tried *Downfall* yet? Go play it!). Guilt Con is where the magic happens.

…and thanks for playing

When you're designing games, bad sessions are often the most educational, but the great ones hold a special place in your heart. It's hard to pick favorites, but these sessions absolutely set the mold for what each of the Microscope spin-off games should be:

Drew and Tim for giving Union a beautiful and poignant start.

Tim, Aaron and Greg for the "Citizen Kane of spaceship stories."

Pat, Erik and Andy for twisting the Cold War until the Star-Spangled Banner only waved on the Moon.

Playtesters

Players are the oxygen of game design. Lots and lots of players have put their valuable time and energy into trying out the new material in this book. My sincere thanks to every one of you:

Aaron Herbert, Aaron Lussier, Adam Drew, Adam Moffett, Albert Bellefeuille, Albey Amakiir, Alex Guerrero-Randall, Alex Motola, Alexandre Capra Fritsch, Allie Baker, Andi Carrison, Andrea Morgando, Andy Michael, Anna Kanter, Anthony Giovannetti, Ariel Gustsack, Ayal Resnick, Brandon Sawyer, Brian Raff, Camila Roa Poveda, Carlos Herrera, Caroline Hobbs, Cassandra Rae, Cathy B., Chirag Asnani, Chris Williams, Clara Warford, Darin Shepit, David Fooden, David Kanter, David Leaman, Derek Smyk, Doug Bartlett, Doug Bonar, Drew Besse, Ed Turner, Eduardo Rodriguez, Eli Hardwig, Elin Roe Ramsey, Elliot Halloran, Emma Clark, Emmy Bates, Eric Levanduski, Eric Logan, Eric Volk, Erik Hamilton, Erin Keeney, Eunice Hung, Evan, Evan Jeshka, Feiya Wang, Flinn Lawson, Garth 'The Shadow' Rose, Geoff Moffett, Geoff Vogel, George Austin, Greg, Gregory Ponto, Gustavo Pinto, Hans Messersmith, Harrison Parker, Heather Currey, Hobbit, Holly Feray, Ivor Moody, J.C. Lundberg, Jacqueline Ashwell, James Glover, James Graham, James Torrance, James Wardle-Parker, Jason Elkins, Jerome Virnich, Jim Hibbard, Joe Iglesias, Joe Wandyez, John Keyworth, John Pender, Joshua Keeney, Kim Motola, Kristian Haugsdal, Lucien Smith, Marc Forbes, Marc Hobbs, Mary Fortune, Matthew Gilmore, Max Hervieux, Michael Paulini, Michael Prescott, Michael Such, Michelle Nix, Mikael Andersson, Mike Carozza, Monica, Nick Marshall, Noel Warford, Nurit Karni, Oren Bernstein, Pat Kemp, Patrick Walsh, Ray Metz, Richard Borland, Richard Scott, Richard Williams, Robert Bruce, Robert Rees, Roger Duthie, Rush Wright, Rustin Simons, Sam Zeitlin, Sarah, Shamus Cassidy, Shaul Katznelson, Shimon Alkon, Stephen Shapiro, Steve Czeck, Steve Nix, Steve Werner, Suzanne Wallace, Taz, Terry Franguiadakis, Tim Bedard, Tim Groth, Tim Madden, Tim Mauldin, Timothy Young, Tod Foley, Tom Cleghorn, Tom Massari, Tony Egan, Veles Svitlychny, Will Chung, Will McGinty, Winston Bunting, Ziv Wities

microscope
EXPLORER

REFERENCE SHEET

This is quick overview of the rules you can refer to quickly, but always follow the complete instructions in the book. For more information about Microscope visit lamemage.com.

GOLDEN RULES

Make your ideas clear and complete

Zoom in, make people, name things

No collaboration

No contradictions

No surprises after the Palette

Talk before you write

Always explain Light & Dark

Enforce the rules

Listen charitably

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE!

Pick something from recent turns and ask yourself which parts of its story have not been described yet.

Birth: Their creation or starting point.

Victory: A moment of triumph, even if we know they fail later.

Failure: A moment of defeat or doubt, even if we know they succeed later.

End: Their death or destruction.

Make the part that hasn't been made yet. Want more options? Try these:

Foreshadow: The situation that lead up to their origin.

Fulfillment: The moment when they become the thing we know them as (the king is crowned, the city grows into a metropolis).

Legacy: Memories or repercussions of them after they are gone.

CHRONICLE

Setup

1) Your Chronicle
2) Bookends
3) Palette
4) First Pass

Play

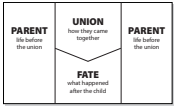
Everything you make must relate to the Chronicle.

If you are making the first Event in a Period, you also make the Anchor character first. Everything in a Period must relate to the Anchor.

UNION

Setup

1) Family Tree
2) Hero's Deed
3) Necessity
4) Hero's Traits
5) Palette
6) First Pass, Make Ancestors



Play

1) Lens Picks Focus Card
2) Make History: Fill in a blank section (Parent, Union, Fate or Offspring) or make a scene in a filled section.
3) Lens Finishes the Focus
4) Explore a Legacy
5) New Lens

ECHO

Make Factions

1) Goal
2) Opposition's Goal
3) How Can You Change History?
4) Describe Factions & Future

Make History

1) Big Picture
2) Bookends
3) Palette
4) First Pass
5) Second Pass

Play

1) Lens Declares Focus
2) Lens Makes History
3) Other Players Make History
4) Lens Finishes Focus
5) Update a Period
6) Judgment
7) New Lens

INTERVENE

ECHO

Take Microscope Farther…

Whole new ways to play Microscope, the fractal role-playing game of epic histories! Microscope Explorer is loaded with tools and strategies to get the most out of your games.

Need an idea for your history? More than a dozen step-by-step SEEDS can get you playing quickly, or use an ORACLE to randomly generate one of over forty-thousand possible histories to spark your imagination.

Want to try something different? Play one of three new Microscope spin-off games. Explore family history with UNION. Tell the story of a single city or a sword of power with CHRONICLE. Or travel back in time and re-write history with ECHO.

There's much, much more, like tips for improving play, techniques for collaborative WORLD-BUILDING, and experimental variants like reincarnation histories. Lots of new stuff for you to try out!

Microscope Explorer: History will never be the same.

Requires the Microscope role-playing game.

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