

# improv

for gamers



karen twelves

Do you want to be a better roleplayer or GM?

Do you want to encourage spontaneous creativity in your gaming group?

Do you want to create dynamic, compelling characters?

If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” **Improv for Gamers** is for you! Based on the popular workshop series, this book provides a selection of fun and easy improv exercises designed to take your tabletop or live-action gaming group to a new level. Pick and choose exercises to develop a particular skill, or run through a variety of them at random! No improv experience required.

**Improv for Gamers** will help you develop the following skills:

- Smoothly building on the information provided by other participants in the game
- Using one small starting point to build a multi-faceted character
- Building authentic relationships between characters
- Interacting with invisible objects in a way that is believable
- Knowing when and how to end a scene and share the spotlight

Level up your gaming skills with **Improv for Gamers!**



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# IMPROV FOR GAMERS

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### **IMPROV FOR GAMERS**

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# WHAT THIS BOOK IS

*Improv for Gamers* started out as a one-day improv workshop at EndGame, a hobby store in Oakland, California. The goal was to share improv with our local gaming community to show how many of the skills used by improvisers are directly transferrable to tabletop gaming.

We selected exercises specifically for gamers to practice how to encourage creativity in their gaming groups, create dynamic characters, and collaborate effectively and enthusiastically—practical applications of improv’s “Yes, and” tenet to our favorite hobby. Many of these exercises originated from improvisors such as Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, or were picked up over the years from colleagues and coaches. In some cases, we’ve adapted them to better suit the purposes of this workshop.

Propelled by the success of this initial workshop, we started running it at local gaming conventions. Soon after, we added *Improv for GMs* (game masters), which highlights how to direct scenes, share the spotlight, and balance setting versus narrative.

It wasn’t long until we developed *Improv for Larpers* (live-action roleplay), which explored shifting between high and low status, developing relationships, and acting without physical props.

But these workshops don’t just apply to story games and live-action roleplay. They’ll give you the tools for solid teamwork necessary to develop *any* engaging and effective story, be it about the complicated lives of teenage monsters or a lucrative dungeon crawl.

We’ve had a blast running these workshops at conventions and friendly local game stores, and now we get to share some of our favorite exercises with you! We hope you will try out some of them with your friends. Viola Spolin said, “We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything.” We hope that with this book you can put theory into practice. And as Patricia Ryan Madson put it, “An excellent manual on swimming is useless until you jump into the pool.”

So jump in, and enjoy!

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We've picked our favorite exercises from our workshop series and grouped them into categories of general skills. Each chapter starts with low-pressure games and progresses into exercises that may be more challenging.

**Select a few exercises that interest you.** Depending on your focus—whether it's general roleplaying, or something more specific to GM or larping skills—you may find some sections more relevant to your interests. Here's what you can find in each chapter:

**WARMERS** has some quick and easy exercises that involve silly sounds, big physical movements, word association, and other fun stuff to activate your creativity.

**YES, AND** explores the number-one rule of improv—listen to your partner, and add your ideas to theirs—as practiced through collective storytelling.

**CHARACTER** is all about using one small starting point to build a multifaceted character. You'll play around with different mannerisms, ways of speaking, facial expressions, and emotions to make the basic archetypes your own.

**RELATIONSHIPS** connects all those interesting characters together—who are you to each other, and how does that influence your actions?

**STATUS** explores the ebb and flow of power, within one character or among many. Have some fun revealing secrets and playing to lose!

**SPACE OBJECTS** looks at the invisible objects that you might pretend to interact with in a scene. You'll practice creating imaginary objects that have believable weight, dimensions, and details.

**TIMING** focuses on knowing when and how to end a scene. There are exercises for directing scenes by consensus or individually, and for rapidly shifting the spotlight between protagonists.

**SCENework** has a variety of exercises to put everything you've learned into practice, in scenes that range from three lines to a few minutes.

To get started, try one from **WARMERS**. These will get you and your group energized and more comfortable with each other. Also grab an exercise or two from **YES, AND** about getting into a collaborative mindset. From there you can go to whichever skill you'd like to learn more about, and try out as many as sound fun to you. There's no set order for these exercises, though we do recommend saving the more performative exercises—mostly found in the **TIMING** and **SCENWORK** chapters—until the end, as a way to bring together everything you've worked on. Many exercises also have suggested expansions or variations if you want to dig into one aspect a bit more.

**Check in with your group after each exercise.** Ask them: How did it feel? What was challenging, easy, fun, scary? What was something someone else did that was really awesome? What was your favorite moment? Take a minute to share your experiences, and how they might relate to your own gaming experience.

**Review the glossary and appendices.** Starting on page 98, we give a glossary of the improv terms used throughout the book, suggestions for maintaining a safe space, and lists of locations and relationships to help start scenes. There's also a recommended reading list if you want to learn more about improv in gaming, on the stage, and in your daily life, plus recommended games that use many of the improv skills discussed in this book!

**Take what works for you.** There's a time slot for every type of improv—the 7:30 show can indeed be much different from the 10:30 show in both content and maturity level—as well as myriad formats to produce different types of scenes. Improv can be rapid-fire comedy, sometimes even framed as a competition between two teams. But improv can also be measured and serious, with improvisers taking their time to build poignant, dramatic scenes. Similarly, there's a vast array of games that push wildly different narratives. This book is not the definitive guide to either improv or gaming. We're not laying down the law for the one true way to game, but we hope that these techniques will enhance the games you like to play.

## HOW TO PLAY NICE—AND WELL

Having someone in your group with a little improv experience never hurts, but if you're a beginner group, we welcome and encourage you to try out these exercises on your own. That said, you'll still want someone as a facilitator—and if you're reading this book, that's probably you!

As a facilitator you are empowered to introduce the exercises, perhaps model an example if needed, and take some light action where appropriate to give feedback. If someone has gotten off track or misunderstood the point of an exercise, it should be very obvious and easy to course-correct. As long as you're kind, clear, and quick with the correction, your fellow players will appreciate your guidance!

We put in your hands the power to walk people through these exercises and introduce a few ground rules for the group to uphold:

**Be kind.** Improv can seem scary at first. Acknowledge everyone's bravery (and your own!) for trying out something new, and pay attention to how people are feeling.

**Be positive.** Applaud each other's choices and be mindful of giving criticism. You're not trying to train to be better actors, but to discover ways to improve your gameplay—and have fun doing it.

**Be authentic.** Your characters aren't invincible. Encourage genuine responses to whatever challenges your characters face. Let your characters feel their feelings and express their emotions; don't worry about being clever.

If this sounds a lot like advice that a GM would give to their players, it should! Roleplaying encourages the same excitement to be creative while maintaining respect and trust within the group. We want to create a safe and fun place where people can offer a lot of ideas and then work together to make those ideas even better.

# WARMERS

Even seasoned improvisers wouldn't run onstage without warming up a little first. But we're doing more than just stretching and getting our blood pumping—we're getting in the mood to be creative. We want to push past that anxiety of feeling a little silly or the fear of not knowing what to say. We need to shake off that discomfort and, in the words of renowned improviser Keith Johnstone, "step into the fear."

Warmers are a great way to break the ice and establish a welcome playspace to get a little silly as a group. They can also get you back in the zone after taking a break between exercises.

They're often high-energy games that involve explosive sounds, expressive movements, and quick thinking.

These exercises offer a taste of the ideas explored in the later chapters, so there's no need to dive into "lesson mode" with a lengthy critique after each one. However, warmers can be a good opportunity for the facilitator to make some non-judgmental observations while the group warms up together, and they help prevent some of the bad habits that inhibit good teamwork.

Have fun and get warmed up for what's yet to come!

## **BUT WHAT IF I MESS UP?**

Nobody's perfect, and achieving perfection is not at all what improv's about. If you ever flub what you wanted to say, or forget your scene partner's name, or even contradict what someone else just established in the scene, that is simply a hazard of the trade. Shake it off, and jump back in! Your scene partners are here to support you—they may even take that "mistake" you made and turn it into something amazing.

## PASS THE MOVEMENT

Have you ever felt like your group wasn't all on the same page? Maybe you declared that your moody teen just came home after a particularly rough day at school, only for the person playing their parent to chime in, "Get up, you'll be late for class!" Now you have to either scramble to justify what just happened—did you fall asleep and miss a day?—or talk out-of-game to get back on track.

Or perhaps you were larping an intense scene where someone shared their character's deepest, darkest secret, and not ten minutes later you can't even remember their character's name.

When name cards and session notes fail us, we've got to go back to basics and work on listening and paying attention to each other. That's what improv is all about! You can stretch that muscle in this fast and fun game of mirroring physical movements.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Player A turns to the person on their left (Player B) and makes a random movement (or just strikes a pose) along with a sound. It can be any pose, any sound, big or small! It's going to feel silly, but since you're all being silly together, why not go big?**
- **Player B turns to the person on their left (Player C) and mimics Player A. It's inevitable that it will be a little different—in fact, we're counting on it!**
- **Player C turns to Player D and mimics what Player B just did. Be sure that Player C reproduces Player B's offer, not Player A's.**
- **Continue around the circle until the sound and movement returns to Player A, who ends the round by mimicking what their original offer has morphed into. If you like, go a few more laps around the circle before starting a new round, with someone else starting the group off with a new sound and movement.**



## TIPS!

You're not trying to play a perfect game of telephone with the first player's offer, but to pay attention to the person right beside you. This also keeps you from planning too much, so you can stay focused and in the moment.

Stick with sounds and movements that everyone will feel comfortable with, physically and emotionally. This means no gymnastics, and also no lewd gestures. The former could end up getting someone hurt, and the latter is only fun for someone who wants to make others feel uncomfortable—and now the group trusts them just a little bit less. See ground rule number one on page 4: Be kind. Don't put people in unsafe positions.

### *Expansion!*

You can modify later rounds by having Player A start very small, with each person making it progressively louder and bigger, ending with Player A cranking it up to 11. Conversely, Player A can start big, and the group incrementally dials it down.

## OFFERS

In improv, most everything your scene partner tells you is an **OFFER**. Offers might establish the setting, who you are to each other, where the scene could go, or something as simple as their character's name. Your scene partner is giving you the gift of information, and to refuse that gift isn't just rude, it stops the story from moving forward. That's a **DROPPED OFFER**. Sometimes it's accidental—names get forgotten all the time! But engaging in active listening will reduce these mishaps.

Keith Johnstone further expanded the terminology with **CONTROLLING OFFERS** (when you give specific information) and **BLIND OFFERS** (when you leave it open for your partner to define). You can practice the differences between the two in "Giving a Present" (page 70).

## SOUND BALL

This exercise is similar to “*PASS THE MOVEMENT*” (page 6) in that you’re paying a lot of attention to and mirroring your partner. It’s a little silly, but this wild game of catch is a great way to bond with other players.

For this exercise you’ll need to be on your feet and keep focused on the action, because it could be your turn at any time. Just as it’s not cool to tune out and check your phone at the game table, it’s not cool to stop paying attention to your scene partners.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Player A throws an invisible ball at someone across the circle (Player B) while making a random, silly sound. Be in the moment—the game can stall out if you pause to think of the “perfect” sound. It’s much more fun to not know what you’re going to say until you say it!**
- **Player B repeats the sound as they mime catching the ball. It probably won’t sound exactly the same—what’s important is that you are paying attention to your partner, and acknowledging their offer by repeating it as best you can.**
- **Player B throws the ball and a new sound to someone else in the circle.**
- **Continue until everyone has thrown and caught the ball at least twice—don’t leave anyone out!**

### ***Expansion!***

Try “Word Association Ball,” in which Player A says a random word instead of a sound. Player B catches the invisible ball and repeats the word, and then throws a different word, which they associate with Player A’s offer. You could also play a lightning round of this as a lead-in for “*CONVERGENCE*” (page 16).



## TIPS!

Eye contact can feel awkward for many, but it's essential in improv. It's not only a way to connect more deeply with your scene partner—it's practical, too! Your partner won't know for sure if you're throwing the ball to them if you're not making eye contact. Be sure to hold their gaze while you're winding up your sound ball.





## THROWING SWORDS

Which is more fun for you: embracing the glorious death of your character, or being the villain who brought about another character's untimely end? If you said the former, or the latter, or both, you're right! Not everyone enjoys character death, and not everyone wants to play the villain. But a good scene partner is always ready to jump in and be the character that the scene calls for.

A tenet of improv that is often repeated is "make your partner look good." We want to support our scene partners and their choices, so in this exercise you'll get to experience being both halves of an epic death scene.

- **Everybody stands in a circle.**
- **Someone (Player A) throws an invisible sword across the circle to another person (Player B).**
- **Player B catches the invisible sword and holds it above their head, giving a triumphant battle cry.**
- **The players on either side of Player B (Players C and D) give their own battle cries and slice Player B across the torso with their own invisible swords.**
- **Player B gives an anguished yell and in their final moment—don't drag out your death, keep the energy high!—throws their sword to someone else across the circle (Player E). Player E catches the sword, and the pattern continues.**
- **Continue throwing the sword around the circle until everybody has played both roles at least once.**

### TIPS!

Just as with "Sound Ball" (page 8), eye contact and being in the moment are key to this exercise. You never know when the sword might come your way, or when you might need to cut down the person next to you. Make eye contact to confirm the throw, and stay alert to where the swords are flying!



## THREE THINGS

How long does it take you to come up with a character's name? Or to describe what's in a room? (GMs, this is always that one room that you hadn't fleshed out in your notes, but of course the one that the players decide to explore first.) Taking ten minutes to scour name lists may lead to analysis paralysis, and stumbling to come up with ideas off the top of your head while everyone's looking at you can feel awkward.

We've got to face that anxiety and be comfortable with spontaneous creativity. In this "word salad" exercise, you'll limber up your creativity by saying whatever comes to mind, rapid fire.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Someone (Player A) turns to the person on their left (Player B) and asks them to name three things to fit a specific category. (Such as "What are three things you would wear on your head?" or "What are three things that are blue?" or "What are three things in your fridge?")**
- **Player B lists three things to fit that category, as quickly as possible. ("A fez! A bird nest! A fancy wig!")**
- **Everyone in the circle shouts, "Three things!" and mimes beating a drum with their fists.**
- **Player B turns to Player C and asks for three things in a different category.**
- **Continue until everyone has asked and answered at least once.**

### WHY THE HAND GESTURES?

They help punctuate the intensity of saying "Three things!" and gives everyone else a bit of physical engagement, since you're mostly standing still in this exercise. Also, it's fun! You'll find a few other exercises with silly gestures, such as "Yes! Character Building" (page 26), "Animal Secrets" (page 60), and "Classic Cast" (page 50).



### ***Expansion!***

Try “Character Three Things.” As a group, start by brainstorming basic characters (cheerleader, spy, athlete, doctor, vampire, etc.). Then play a round of “Three Things,” but Player A will ask their question in the style of a specific character (“Soldier! What are three things that should not be in your bunk!”). Player B will mimic that character when giving their response. After that, Player B assumes a new character and gives Player C a category, and so on.

You can also switch it up by embodying different emotions (shy, sad, bubbly, strict, etc.). Be careful with regional accents; they can be difficult to master and easily slide into stereotypes.

## **DARE TO BE DULL**

Sometimes your offer may be so utterly bizarre that you didn’t even know you were going to say it until it came out of your mouth. That’s magical. But it can be equally satisfying when someone makes the obvious choice. As Keith Johnstone says, “dare to be dull.” We’re not in a competition to be the wackiest, and what seems obvious to you may be delightfully absurd to someone else.

Go with your gut and don’t focus too hard on finding the “most interesting” idea. Remember the group agreement from page 4 to be positive—your fellow players are prepared to meet your ideas with enthusiasm.

## HEY FRED SCHNEIDER!

Player buy-in can make or break a game. If your GM says, “This is a game about adventures on the high seas,” then there’s an expectation that everyone’s character will have a piratical element. Your mad scientist with a bag of 21st-century gadgets may not be appreciated.

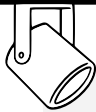
This is a loud and silly game that asks the players to buy into embodying the same character. Specifically, Fred Schneider from the B-52s.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **The group chants, “Hey Fred Schneider, what are you doing?” It should follow the rhythm that you might hear in a B-52s song. (“HEY fred SCHNEIder, WHAT ARE you DOing?”)**
- **Someone (Player A) answers the question in their best Fred Schneider voice. (Such as “I’m WALKing down the STREET, and WEARing my HEADphones!” or “HEATing up a MlCroWAVE DINner for ONE!”) Following a beat can be challenging, so just do your best and bring lots of energy!**
- **The group repeats the chant, “Hey Fred Schneider, what are you doing?”**
- **The person to Player A’s left (Player B) gives a different answer about what they’re doing.**
- **Continue around the circle until everyone has said what they’re doing at least once.**

## WHO’S FRED SCHNEIDER?

You know, lead singer of the B-52s? Their song “Love Shack” had that line, “Hop in my Chrysler, it’s as big as a whale”? If this song isn’t familiar to you and you think the reference might be confusing, it’s okay to skip it and just focus on the stress and meter of the game. The point is to have fun, not to demonstrate your knowledge of pop rock hits from the late 1980s.

Sometimes in scenes, a player will make a reference that you don’t recognize. It’s okay to ask for clarification. You don’t have to know everything to have a good scene, and often your interpretation (or misinterpretation) will become a fun new element!



## TIPS!

There's no linear plot telling the story of Fred Schneider here, just random actions.

Also, if someone ever doesn't know what to say, move to the next person in the circle by starting up the group chant again. Remember the group's promise to be kind, and the principle to always make your partner look good. Don't leave someone in the spotlight if they need to step back!

### ***Expansion!***

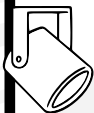
You can play a non-Fred version by naming different professions. Player A asks the question to Player B, but addresses them as a certain profession. (For example, "Hey there doctor, what are you doing?") Player B responds with an answer typical to that character. ("I'm scrubbing down my hands, and prepping for surgery!") Player B then turns to Player C and addresses them as a different profession. But keep using that fun rhythm and meter when responding!

# CONVERGENCE

We often use the term **GROUP MIND** in improv to describe when improvisers are so keyed in to the same idea, the scene falls perfectly into place. These are the types of scenes where people ask you after the show, “So, how much of that did you plan in advance?” If you can tap into that state of flow, your creativity will be effortless. (Group mind is also why couples should never be on the same team in *Pictionary*.)

In this exercise, you’ll practice group mind with word association. And as with “*THREE THINGS*” (page 12), there’s no opportunity to pre-script—the exercise pushes for spontaneous creativity.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Two people next to each other (Players A and B, with B standing to A’s left) make eye contact, count to three, and then shout out a random word simultaneously. You may need to repeat the words so everyone hears them.**
- **Player B turns to the person on their left (Player C), and those two repeat the exercise—but this time they each shout a word they associate with the words said by Players A and B. For example, if Player A said “tree” and Player B said “crimson,” Players B and C might converge with “redwood”! Avoid repeating words that anyone has said already.**
- **Continue around the circle until a pair says the same word at the same time!**



## TIPS!

You’ve only got the count of three to say a word, so don’t worry about trying to guess what your partner will say; just say whatever makes the most sense to you. This is word association, not a logic puzzle. It’s also okay if you never have that magic moment of “winning” the game. Playing this game for too long without a match can be really draining; what’s more important is connecting with your partner. Celebrate those times you got really, really close to the same word, too.

## CHOOSE A CHOICE

You can't achieve group mind if you're stuck in your own head. One of our workshop coaches, Mia Blankensop, has oft used the mantra "choose a choice!" Sometimes the fear of making the "wrong" choice holds us back from doing anything at all. If you're deliberating over taking the tunnel on the right or the tunnel on the left in your dungeon crawl, you're not exploring either tunnel, and the game isn't going anywhere. Just choose one!



# GO

GMs and facilitators have many responsibilities in bringing about a rewarding game, and there's one that, if done right, will go entirely unnoticed: monitoring the players. What are all their characters doing? Who hasn't been in the spotlight for a while? Is everyone having fun?

In this exercise you'll practice the heightened awareness necessary to tap into group mind. Each of you will track many moving elements to achieve a seamless whole. Some improv warmers prompt a simmer of focused attention, rather than high energy and high volume, and this is one of them! It's also largely silent, so you'll be relying a lot on eye contact to communicate.

- **Everyone stands in a wide circle.**
- **Player A points across the circle to another player (Player B).**
- **Player B acknowledges Player A by saying "Go."**
- **Player A starts walking slowly across the circle toward Player B.**
- **Player B needs to get out of the way before Player A reaches them. The only way to escape is to take another player's spot, so Player B will point and make eye contact with someone else across the circle (Player C).**
- **Player C will say, "Go," and Player B will start their slow walk toward Player C.**
- **In due time, Player A takes Player B's vacated spot in the circle.**
- **Play continues until everyone has moved across the circle at least once. There will inevitably be a few people moving at the same time, but you'll be going slow enough to avoid bumping into each other.**
- **Play a second round, in which players must simply nod instead of saying "Go."**
- **Play a third round, in which players may not point or nod, only make eye contact.**



## TIPS!

This exercise increases in difficulty each round, but it's possible that some people will slide into the silent phase early. Just so everyone's playing by the same rules, make sure it's clear how people can communicate each round.

## TELEGRAPHING

A subtle gesture is hard to read; extending your whole arm while pointing, combined with direct eye contact, communicates much more clearly that, yes, you are pointing to your partner. This is a form of **TELEGRAPHING**, where you unambiguously communicate your intentions. It can be physical (like a slow-motion punch, so you know what's coming) or verbal ("I am closing this door on you now, Gerald!" or "Look out, that rope is about to snap!").

At the game table it's easy enough to switch from being in character to out of character to describe what's happening; in larping you may want to use telegraphing so you don't have to break character.

This technique can feel obvious, but without the benefit of a script, it's a convenient way to communicate vital information to your partner. It's the exact opposite of the "show, don't tell" method that's encouraged in acting and writing, and that's okay!



# YES, AND

So what are improvisers talking about when we say “Yes, and”? It combines two basic ideas: accept someone else’s idea, and add to it.

This doesn’t mean you’re literally saying “yes” after every offer. When you accept an offer, you’re acknowledging that your partner has established a fact about the world. Their offer is a brick that you will use to build a story by cementing it with supporting facts (that’s the “and!”). If you drop that offer, you’re wasting a valuable resource.

Here’s an extreme example of a dropped offer: Your partner starts a scene talking like they’re in a 1940s noir film with the line “Never thought someone like you would need to hire a private detective.” You respond, “Yeah I can’t believe they’re holding our corporate retreat in this cave.” You’re not just dropping that offer, you’re swatting it down and stomping on it. Not only is it off-putting to your scene partner, but your scene can’t move forward until you both can figure out what’s actually happening. Accepting the offer would be saying *anything* that acknowledged that you are in the 1940s, they are a detective, and you are a client. The scene can go in a number of directions, but it will always have a steady foundation if you run with the initial offer.

It’s also poor form to **NEGATE** an offer by denying that it’s true. (“You crashed my car!” “What? No I didn’t.”) Now you’re in an argument scene, which is really easy for one person (you just deny whatever your partner says!) but not fun for the person who has to justify their partner’s negations as being true.

“Yes, and” is not a binding contract to accept every idea. Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton have this to say: “With Yes, And, you don’t have to act on every idea, but you do have to give every idea the chance to be acted on.” Some prefer revised tenet “Consider Yes,” which recognizes player agency in a way that “Yes, and” doesn’t. You’re encouraged to be open to every offer, but you have the authority to turn it down—especially if it crosses a line.

Gaming has even more ways to provide safety nets, such as the X-Card (often used in RPGs) or “Cut and Brake” (a larping tool that we discuss on page 101). Gaming also benefits from not having a live audience—you can pause at any time to check in and make changes to the story. So if you need to turn down an idea, do so. And if another player says they’re not comfortable with your offer, listen to their “no” and respect it.

“Yes, and” also doesn’t mean your character has to respond positively. There’s nothing wrong with your character being angry, so what if you tried being angry while *agreeing* with your partner’s offers? The horrible things they’re accusing you of? Totally happened. (“You bet I crashed that car, I hated that pile of junk!”) The story still moves forward.

### ***Gaming with “Yes, and”***

Using “Yes, and” in your game is simple—listen to the other players, thoughtfully consider their ideas, and build on their suggestions. That’s it!

In improv we often **ENDOW** our scene partners, meaning we give an offer that is a specific detail about their name, characteristics, or relationship with our character. (“Hey Bret...wanna go to prom with me?” or “Hey Dad, what’s for dinner?” or “You sure you wanna go sky-diving for your fortieth birthday? You’re super scared of heights.”) Endowing is a convenient way to open a scene with some immediate information.

You can also respond to offers with a justifying endowment. For example, when creating characters for a game, someone might say, “I’m thinking that my spellcaster would be the quiet one, yeah?” You might want to encourage their idea, and could respond, “Oh, totally, maybe they always whisper their spells? And my character never hears them so is convinced they’re not a real spellcaster.”

It feels validating to have your ideas accepted so enthusiastically by your fellow players, and builds mutual trust and collaboration.

You can also tread more lightly when giving offers by couching it in “What if,” or “Do you think it’s possible that,” to give a clearer opening for the player to either say no or negotiate the scene to fit their

comfort level. (“How would you feel if my character tried to flirt with yours right now?” “That’s hilarious, but can they do so really badly?” “Oh totally, this will be a complete disaster.”) Improv is all about being flexible; don’t value a plot point more than the players themselves.

### ***GMing with “Yes, and”***

GMs might use “Yes, and” to offer the players the worst possible scenario. If they’re not inclined to accept that, you can go to the dice to decide. (“And then the spirit shoots lightning at you, throwing you across the room. You will break your back on impact. Or would you like to roll to see if you can dodge it?”) Saying the threat aloud, as if it were truth, is a powerful storytelling technique, but it’s up to the player (and the dice) to see if this terrible fate comes to pass.

Some more advice: avoid blocking your players! Don’t clutch too tightly to your preplanned scenario. If the players are offering ideas, consider the opportunity presented to you—you can say “yes,” which acknowledges your players and makes them feel more deeply invested in the story they helped create. Always check the temperature of the room and adjust accordingly. What are they most interested in, what do they consider the biggest threat? It may be different from what you had in mind, so follow their lead and respond to how they’re interacting with the setting.

Keith Johnstone says that improvisers block when they want to stay in control. Just as gamers often say that the players are more important than the game, as a GM it’s important to ask yourself if it’s necessary to maintain an iron grip on the plot. The players will be excited to see their own ideas come to life!

## THE SLIDING SCALE OF “YES”

Your barbarian fighter swings her great-axe, and...whoops, you needed to meet or beat a 17 but rolled a 2. She misses. Does that 2 say anything else? Is the narrative result of a 2 any different than if you'd rolled a 10?

Your super sleuth has just seconds to crack this safe, but rolls a 5 when they needed a 6. Aren't they supposed to be the best of the best? How do you justify the result “Sorry, nothing happens,” on a near miss?

Many games have mechanics for varying degrees of success and complications, but for those that don't, GMs can always employ their own narrative sliding scale to determine the outcome, by building on “Yes, and” as follows.

**“Yes, and”** is the critical success. You may have also heard of it as “succeeding with style,” or maybe you earn a “boost” or just a “high degree of success.” It's the best possible outcome with a cherry on top. How great is it to find the treasure *and* it's more than you expected? Not only does your barbarian split the orc in twain, but she intimidates the remaining foes so much so that they're shaken and flee! Your sleuth might get out without the guards even noticing, or quicker than expected, or be in a good spot for their next move.

**“Yes, but”** is success with some minor complication thrown in. It doesn't negate your success entirely, but it doesn't give your character everything they want. This is a good way to represent those near misses. Your character may have a minor success, but then face just one final, unanticipated obstacle. Or perhaps they succeeded, but a complication will come back to bite them later. Your barbarian crushes her enemies, but that one orc had friends in high places. Maybe the thief cracked the safe, but the documents they needed are locked in a puzzle box.

**“No, but”** is failure with a silver lining. You didn't achieve your goal, but a minor opportunity opens up. Your barbarian swung too wide, but they see that the orc's breastplate is cracked—one solid hit would pierce it! Your sleuth has never seen this type of safe before...but they know who has. The players might have to rethink their strategy, but not all is lost.

**“No, and”** is the critical fail. You don’t accomplish your goal, and now you have another complication. This redirection can still move the story forward, though. Your barbarian swings wild and spins around, getting a hard thump on the back of the head. She awakes in the back of a caravan in chains. Your sleuth takes so long with the safe that they have to dash out without avoiding the security cameras—now the cops will be coming for them and their crew.

Every option is also an opportunity to bring in another character—to assist, or to be the herald of additional fortune or misfortune. And even if the game doesn’t call for it, you can always narrate degrees of success to give the value of the die roll more meaning than just “yes” or “no.” In fact, the game *Archipelago* by Matthijs Holter bases its resolution mechanic on this sliding scale to determine all outcomes. We recommend some other games that use improv techniques in **APPENDIX D: RECOMMENDED GAMES** (page 108).

## YES! CHARACTER BUILDING

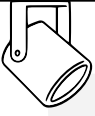
You don't have to literally say the word "yes" to "Yes, and" your partner. Or if you do, your character doesn't have to be enthusiastic about it—but you, as players, should be enthusiastic to each other! If your partner's awkward freshman character asks your popular teen to prom, your character might not *want* to go, but says yes so the scene will move forward. The point of interest to develop now is *why* they agreed and how their reluctance will affect the story.

You may have heard the saying "There's no bad ideas in brainstorming." Using the "Yes, and" mindset promotes a safe space for unbound creativity that can yield amazing results. You can whittle it down to the most tenable ideas later, but in the moment it's a free-for-all.

A prime example of brainstorming in gaming happens right at character creation, when a player may ask for ideas or suggestions. As the group accepts and builds on offers, this takes the pressure off the individual to come up with an intriguing, well-rounded character all on their own.

Let's start by practicing "Yes, and" literally—by saying "yes" with gusto.

- **Everyone stands in a tight circle.**
- **Someone (Player A) starts creating a character by giving them a name. ("His/her/their name is...")**
- **Everyone else enthusiastically responds, "Yes!" and pumps their fists (similar to the movement in "THREE THINGS" on page 12).**
- **Someone besides Player A adds another detail about that character. ("He works at..." "Every morning she..." "Their favorite food is...")**
- **Continue adding facts until the group reaches a natural stopping point and concludes that the character is well defined.**
- **Continue playing more rounds as desired.**



## TIPS!

Resist the urge to start telling a story or introducing secondary characters. Another challenge will be avoiding contradictions—you may have had the great idea that Misha loves cats, but someone else just said that she’s a dog person. It’s okay to let that idea go; what’s most important is validating other people’s offers and maintaining continuity.

## ONE WEIRD THING

A solid guideline when establishing any element of a scene is to stick to just one weird thing, if any. Your character doesn’t have to be gonzo to be interesting. Remember the group agreement to be authentic. Being genuine will resonate more than trying to be the most interesting character in the room, and competing weird things can muddy the plot.

## YES, BECAUSE

When you accept and build on someone's offer, you justify why that offer is true. When you drop an offer, you're not only letting your partner know that you weren't listening, but now the onus is on them to salvage the scene by reconciling their offer and your conflicting offer. This is why we avoid negating.

This is another exercise in literally saying "yes," but it adds the "and" by prompting players to justify the offer with supporting facts.

- **Everyone stands in a circle, with one person (Player A) in the middle.**
- **Player A turns to face someone in the circle (Player B), and Player B will give an opening line, as if starting a scene. It can be completely mundane ("Sure is hot out.") or as heated as you'd like ("You've been embezzling from the company!").**
- **Player A agrees with Player B's line, whatever it is, and justifies why it's true with just a sentence or two. Your answer can be as dramatic or as boring as you like, as long as it's a logical justification. ("Yes, because it's mid-July," or "Yes, because I need to pay for my child's surgery!")**
- **Player A faces the person to Player B's left (Player C), and Player C gives Player A a completely different opening line.**
- **Continue until Player A has justified an offer from everyone in the circle.**

## HITS

A **HIT** is a small idea to start you off. (“My character always wears a red cloak,” or “There’s an old, broken grandfather clock in the corner.”) Your group is there to “Yes, and” your idea so you don’t have to do all the work yourself, and they may make a few leaps of deduction to give your offer a deeper meaning. (“Maybe they’re covering up a tattoo from a rival cult,” or “The clock is stuck at 3:07—exactly the time that the murder occurred!”) As Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton advise, “Bring a brick, not a cathedral.” Start with a small idea and build it out as a group.



## FORTUNATELY/UNFORTUNATELY

While you made a group agreement to be positive and to treat each other well as players, that's not necessarily true for your *characters*. What's most interesting for the story may be to break their little hearts, see their plans go down in flames, or bring about their ironic yet tragic deaths.

Celebrating failure is a tool employed by both improvisers and gamers. A long string of successes for a character can feel great for a while, but players may start to feel restless or bored if the challenges are consistently too easy. Conversely, too many failures can be disheartening and drain motivation. It's important to find a balance, which is what you'll explore in the following exercise. You'll be telling a story together about a single character, introducing various successes and complications along the way.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **One person (Player A) starts a story with a declaration that establishes the main character.** ("Tiara went to the store.")
- **The person to their left (Player B) adds a sentence that starts with the word "fortunately" and furthers the plot in a fortuitous way.** ("Fortunately, she had exact change to buy her soy milk.")
- **The person to their left (Player C) adds a sentence that starts with the word "unfortunately" and furthers the plot, but introduces misfortune.** ("Unfortunately, the cashier was her archrival at her boxing gym, Emilio.")
- **Continue clockwise, switching off between fortunate and unfortunate plot developments, until the story reaches a logical end.**

### ***Expansion!***

Give yourself the freedom to decide if you will add a "fortunately" or "unfortunately" sentence next. This lets the story feel more organic with the rise and fall of the character's fortune. See what new patterns emerge!



## TIPS!

This narrative structure may feel a little forced. That's okay! The goal isn't to tell the best story, but to practice advancing the plot with a mix of good and bad outcomes.

Consider how to add an element to the story without negating what just happened. If something unfortunate happened, let it ride! The character will have to achieve their goals some other way. If something good happened, don't take it away! Let the character have their successes, but throw in a new obstacle.



## I'M A TREE

Dare to be dull! Good improv doesn't come out of trying to be funny, but by connecting to something real and specific. Go with the obvious response to the offers on the table, so you don't find yourself in a scene that's so burdened with wacky elements that you lose control of where it's going. Giving the scene what it needs can feel more satisfying than introducing something off-the-wall, and puts less work on the other players to justify it. So if you're starting a game with a gritty sci-fi setting, you might want to leave your character concept of a winged were-tiger for another time.

This exercise demonstrates how to thread multiple offers onto a single foundational idea and build something as a group. As you're playing, try not to think too hard about the "best" thing you could add. Just add whatever makes sense to you.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Someone (Player A) steps into the center and says, "I'm a tree," while holding a tree-like pose.**
- **Someone else (Player B) steps in and adds a related element ("I'm a squirrel,") and poses next to Player A.**
- **A third person (Player C) steps in and adds a third element that relates to Player B's offer, or ties both offers together. (So, not "I'm an apple on the tree," but "I'm the squirrel's big bushy tail!" or "I'm a nut the squirrel is hiding in the tree.")**
- **Player A exits the circle while taking Player B or C with them (for example, "I'll take the nut!" refers to Player C), leaving the other person in the center, who becomes the new Player A.**
- **The new Player A starts the next round with their previous offer. (For example, if they were Player B before, they'd say, "I'm a squirrel.")**
- **Continue until everyone has participated a few times.**



## TIPS!

You don't have to always start with "I'm a tree," but it takes the pressure off Player A to come up with something to start off the exercise. Also, if you have a great idea but someone else says theirs first, that's okay! Enjoy their great idea. You will no doubt have other great ideas in the future and can step in with those. To come in now might negate the offers already established.

### ***Expansion!***

Advance the game to "Genre Tree," in which the group decides on a film or game genre (science fiction, Old West, cyberpunk, fantasy, etc.) before Player A steps into the circle. This adds the challenge of maintaining the genre's tone and keeping every element relevant to the setting.



# TABLEAU

When you veer too far from group expectations, the other players may find it difficult to justify why your offer makes sense. Don't take advantage of a "Yes, and" mindset by throwing a velociraptor into the cyberpunk heist game. If it can't be connected back somehow to the established fiction, the group's response may be less "yes, that's perfect" and more "um...okay?"

This exercise could be considered a mega-expansion of *"I'M A TREE"* (page 32). It really drives home the idea of the group buying into the setting.

- **Everyone stands on the edges of a designated open space. This will be your "stage," so determine which way everyone should face.**
- **As a group, decide on a physical setting where one would find a lot of different objects. (For example, a park, toy store, garage, etc.)**
- **One player enters the stage and establishes an object in that location ("There is a wingback chair over here against the wall.") and stands in that spot, posing to show the size and shape of the object. There are no people in this tableau, just objects. Pick a pose that's comfortable to hold for a few minutes!**
- **One at a time, each other player enters the stage and adds something new to the room. ("Over here is a fireplace, with dying embers," or "There are thick velvet curtains in front of a window.")**
- **Continue until everyone has added something to the tableau. Give each player a chance to pop out of their spot, view the tableau as a whole, and then hop back in.**



## TIPS!

Try to pick a location in the real world, as it may be easier for people to name items found in a zoo, office, or living room than in a space station or submarine. But you could also add a genre or tone by saying “1960s office, Mad Men-style” or “spooky Victorian parlor.”

As you play, remember a few guidelines we’ve mentioned before: “dare to be dull” (page 13) and “one weird thing” (page 27). If you think the room needs a lamp, be the lamp. If someone already said there’s a femur in the fireplace, that’s spooky enough; you don’t also need mysterious glowing runes on the walls and a time machine in the corner. People will appreciate you coming in as the object that was obviously needed rather than something that’s disconnected from the setting, or that pulls focus away from other fun details.

# CHARACTER

At the start of a game, your character might just have a class (“mage”), a role in the party (“the face”), or a descriptor (“rookie”). The prospect of fleshing that out into a multifaceted character in a short time might be daunting. But gamers have an advantage that improvisers don’t—you can take time to think about your characters, talk it out with the group, even write up whole backstories. Larpers may not have as much time with their characters, but there’s often still time allotted before each game to read your character sheet and understand their motivations, goals, and thoughts about the other characters.

But all this is still just on paper. How does one actually embody their character, or at the very least make one character sound different from the other? How can you throw a little *roleplay* into your roleplaying?

Here’s where improv comes back in. There are lots of tricks you can use to build a character from a single idea. This idea will become your touchstone, which you can always go back to should you ever ask yourself, “What would my character do?”

## ***Start Small***

Regardless of the type of character you’re playing, you can start with a single defining feature. Maybe it’s how you talk (slowly, breathlessly, slightly louder than socially acceptable), a facial expression (squinting, pursing your lips, constantly sniffing), or a physicality (snapping your fingers, wringing your hands, tapping your foot). It might also be a drive (you must obtain the sacred jewel, you believe in finding the good in all people, you want to own a dog) or a personality trait (you laugh easily, you just can’t even deal with this right now, you’re hot-blooded).

Viola Spolin says, “Character is intrinsic in everything we do on stage.” Whatever small mannerism you’ve started with can be the touchstone of your character, and further character development will unfurl from it.

## ***Ask “If That, Then What?”***

In improv, the first few seconds of a scene tells the audience who your character is. If you started a scene tapping your foot, you’ve established that your character is someone who taps their foot a lot. You didn’t know that was going to be your character when you walked onstage, but here you are. Tapping your foot is now your touchstone. So keep tapping your foot, and ask yourself, “If that’s true, then what else is true?” If your character always taps their foot, then what else does that say about them?

These new facts will surface as the scene progresses, and may be influenced by endowments your scene partner might give you. So, consider this example line of thought, coming over the course of the scene: “If my character taps their foot a lot, I must be nervous about something. I’m hiding a secret. I’ve endowed my scene partner as my sister. Maybe I shrunk her favorite sweater? Wait, she just endowed me as working long hours at the bank. Scratch the sweater, I’m planning a bank heist! But I love my sister, so I’m going to ask for her help.”

By asking yourself “If that, then what?” you’ve essentially said “Yes, and” to yourself and started building on your touchstone. You can apply this same method during a game to go beyond what’s written on your character sheet, and discover more about your character through play.

## ***Return to Your Touchstone***

Whether you’re on the stage or at the game table, it’s possible to lose your character and not know what to do or say next. Or perhaps you get so caught up in a moment that you drop your character’s unique voice or mannerisms. In these moments of uncertainty, you can always go back to your touchstone. Start tapping your foot again, and that will bring you back to the solid foundation you laid for your character.

Anything can be a touchstone. In this chapter you’ll play with physical and emotional touchstones, and later on in **SCENEWORK** (page 89) you’ll explore deeper personality traits and beliefs. You can find another character-focused exercise in the expansion of “*THREE THINGS*” (page 12).

# LEAD WITH YOUR BODY

We add physical features to our characters without even realizing it. The high-school queen bee may lift up their nose at everyone. The shy but gifted hacker may hunch her shoulders. By asking yourself, “If that, then what?” you can easily come up with a physical mannerism to bring your character to life.

This exercise will help you remember all the different moving parts of your body that you can use to find a mannerism. You may also discover how one physicality can unlock other ideas about your character.

- **Everyone starts walking slowly around the space, in no particular direction. Maintain your standard, neutral posture. Beware of becoming a circling school of fish; switch up your direction. You can make eye contact if you’d like, or just stay in your own bubble if you’re more comfortable that way.**
- **The facilitator, who can either participate or stand off to the side, calls out a body part for everyone to lead with as they walk around the space. (“Lead with both shoulders.”)**
- **Everyone adjusts their posture to accentuate their movement with this body part.**
- **After 20 seconds or so, the facilitator calls out a new body part to lead with.**
- **Continue until everyone has led with five or six body parts.**

## ***Body Parts***

- **Shoulders (one or both)**
- **Chin**
- **Elbows**
- **Hips (one or both)**
- **Toes**
- **Nose**
- **Knees**
- **Forehead**
- **Ribcage**
- **Ear (just one)**



## TIPS!

When changing up your posture, think about what else your body does to compensate. If you lead with your shoulders, does that mean you're leaning forward a lot? How does that change your speed? Do you become more heavy-footed? Does your expression change?

Also, think about any emotions that might come up. If you're leaning forward and moving fast, are you in a hurry? Does that make you feel agitated, or nervous?

### ***Expansion!***

Physical embodiment isn't just for larpers. Those of us who roleplay at the table have our entire upper body to engage with. Try exploring all the things you can do with your hands and arms, and see how that affects your walk.

- **Keeping your hands on your hips**
- **Keeping your hands in your pockets**
- **Snapping your fingers**
- **Running your fingers through your hair**
- **Wringing your hands**
- **Cracking your knuckles**
- **Crossing your arms**
- **Rolling your shoulders**
- **Hunching your shoulders**

## MOVING IN MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

For a deep dive into physicality, check out “The Eight Efforts” theory developed by Rudolf Laban. He identifies four dimensions in which we move, and how by varying our combination of direction, weight, speed, and flow we create expressive movements. It's some pretty interesting stuff, and is often studied extensively in theater and dance, but being even a little familiar with it can give you a fun way to combine movements to define your character.

## BEEN WAITING LONG?

If your character is an ice-dancer, how would they wash the dishes? How might a window washer hail a cab? How does a university professor wave hello?

In contrast to *“LEAD WITH YOUR BODY”* (page 38), which starts with a mannerism, this exercise starts with a fact about your character and explores what other ideas flow from that touchstone. To make it easier to compare the differences, you’ll see how each pair of different characters exchanges a few brief lines of dialogue.

- **The facilitator gives two players (Players A and B) a defining characteristic about each of their characters.**
- **Player B starts the scene sitting onstage. After a few moments, Player A enters the stage, and Players A and B exchange the following lines:**

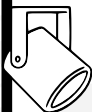
*A: Hi.*

*B: Hello.*

*A: Been waiting long?*

*B: Ages.*

- **Repeat the exercise with new pairs of players and different characteristics until everyone has had a chance onstage.**



### TIPS!

Let the defining characteristic of your character influence how you interact with your scene partner. How do you change your stature? The volume of your voice? Do you make intense eye contact, or avoid it?

Here's a list of some ideas for different characters, or you can come up with your own! You can also use the Character Backgrounds available online at <https://www.evilhat.com/home/improv-for-gamers-downloads/>

- **You're very shy**
- **You're a germophobe**
- **You love nature**
- **You love romantic comedies**
- **You've won the county cook-off three years running**
- **You haven't slept in three days**
- **You're afraid of helicopters**
- **You get tarot card readings on a regular basis**
- **You're very into hot yoga**

### ***Expansion!***

Instead of a four-line scene, players can walk around the room greeting each other with the same line: "Hi, how are you?" The facilitator calls out different characteristics, and the players switch up how they say "Hi, how are you?" accordingly.

You can also expand the exercise with a longer exchange of neutral dialogue, either by adding additional lines to the script given here or making up your own.

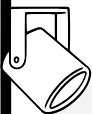
## CONVERSATION TRIO

While “*LEAD WITH YOUR BODY*” (page 38) explored full-body characterization, you can also establish a unique character through just how you speak. You might change up your voice in a particular way, overaccentuate a part of your face, or take on a specific emotion. GMs regularly use this skill to differentiate between various non-player characters, or to make up new NPCs on the fly.

We’ve grouped these exercises together to be played out in the same format. You can choose to do just one, two, or all three! We encourage completing the exercises in the order presented, but you may find that starting with any one of these aspects—voice, face, or emotion—will unlock the other two.

The base instructions are as follows:

- **Players sit or stand in pairs, facing each other, and start a conversation.**
- **After about 30 seconds, the facilitator calls out a new way to speak—we’ve provided some ideas in the lists below. Everyone changes their style accordingly and continues their conversation.**
- **The facilitator will continue to call out new speaking methods for about five or six variations.**



### TIPS!

You can stick to small talk, so you don’t have to think too hard about what to say. You’re practicing how to speak, not performing an entertaining scene. But you may find that when you change to a new way of speaking, you’ll start to develop a character, and the nature of your conversation might change as a result. Explore that change!

All of these variations on speech are also solid alternatives to attempting regional accents, which can be distracting unless you absolutely nail it. And just with avoiding any hurtful stereotypes, be mindful not to stumble into portraying real speech impediments.

## ***Vocal Switch***

You can modulate the way you talk to achieve a distinct voice, which can inform a particular emotion or personality trait.

- You're very breathy
- You swallow your words
- You talk rapidly
- You talk slowly
- You are high-pitched
- You are low-pitched
- You're nasal
- You overannunciate
- You hiss the letter "s"
- You're monotone

## ***Facial Switch***

Even a small change in your face can result in a completely different character. You have your mouth, eyes, nose, and more to play with!

- You purse your lips
- You have very wide eyes
- You suck in your cheeks
- You bite your lips
- You puff out your cheeks
- You look at everyone askance
- You squint your eyes
- You wrinkle your nose
- You don't make eye contact
- You make too much eye contact
- You talk out the side of your mouth
- You talk with a wide mouth
- You keep your jaw clenched
- You blink a lot
- You talk through your teeth
- You smile a lot
- You sniff a lot

## ***Emotional Switch***

If you find that your character is always aloof and unflappable, you can choose an emotion to give your character some quick and easy depth.

- Irritated
- Bashful
- In love
- Incredulous
- Resentful
- Satisfied
- Anxious
- Suspicious
- Disgusted
- Peaceful
- Ecstatic
- Bored

## ***Expansion!***

For each pair, assign one person as Player A and the other as Player B. As you play through this exercise, the facilitator calls out different styles for individual players to switch between. You could also assign each pair a starting emotion and have one-minute scenes.

## GOLDEN GOOSE

**HEIGHTENING** is a way of expressing “Yes, and” by turning up the dial on your partner’s offer. You might raise the stakes of a scene by increasing the impact of the consequences. You might add more information to expand on a theme or deepen an emotion. You might intensify your reactions to everything your partner says and does. Through heightening you can create drama, tension, comedy—whatever your partner’s starting point was, you can amplify and build out from there. This makes for great storytelling, be it in improv or gaming.

If you tried out the expansion of “*PASS THE MOVEMENT*” (page 5), then you’ve already played around with heightening. This time, you’ll practice heightening characters and exemplifying “Yes, and” through a structured (and silly) exchange.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Player A approaches someone across the circle (Player B). Player A assumes a specific character and says to Player B, “I give you the Golden Goose,” while pretending to hand them the goose. Then Player A returns to their spot in the circle.**
- **Player B says, “I take the Golden Goose,” and mimes receiving it in a heightened version of Player A’s character. If Player A were at a 5, Player B would exaggerate their mannerisms, posture, and voice to about an 8.**
- **The two people on either side of Player B (Players C and D) kneel, and as even more heightened versions of the same character say, “They have the Golden Goose!” while gesturing at Player B. They should embody the character to a ridiculous extreme, at a full 10.**
- **The two people on either side of Players C and D (Players E and F) hold out their arms to “frame” the other players, and exclaim, “What a glorious day for the Golden Goose!” Players E and F should crank their characters up to 11.**
- **Everyone drops their characters. Player B adopts a new character and hands the goose to someone new across the circle.**
- **Continue until everybody has had a turn giving and receiving the goose.**



## TIPS!

You can portray an easily identifiable character (soldier, cowpoke, socialite, etc.) or embody a particular emotion (angry, secretive, excited, etc.), or way of speaking as we explored in “*Conversation Trio*” (page 42). You may want to brainstorm some ideas first, as in the expansion of “*Three Things*” (page 12).

If you are playing this game with a smaller group, you can drop the roles of Players E and F.



# RELATIONSHIPS

To quote Mark Sutton, “Nobody in an improv audience anywhere has ever turned to the person sitting next to them and said, ‘Man, I sure hope they fix that bike.’” While the action of a scene can be fun to watch, what drives the action is the relationship between the characters onstage. This is ultimately what captures the audience’s interest; without it, it’s just two people talking about how to fix a bike.

Likewise in games, a vital component of creating characters is linking them with relationships. Some games have rules for linking characters, often completed as a group at the table, and pregenerated characters for set scenarios (especially larps) often come with a list of who’s who and how you know them. Even more fruitful is knowing *what* you think about the other characters, and what you might *need* from them. These motivations will help drive the story far beyond what you might get from “So you all meet in a tavern.”

The danger in letting circumstance throw two characters together is that it doesn’t guarantee a meaningful connection. In improv we often warn against transactional scenes—customer and salesperson, diner and server, hairdresser and client—as the relationship is fairly superficial. In most cases they are strangers. There might be plenty of opportunities for comedy, but building a relationship will require commitment from the players. And even once you do have a relationship, it requires further commitment to take the conversation beyond negotiating and asking questions.

Always ask yourself: how does your character feel about the other characters? And how do they express this? T. J. Jagodowski and David Pasquesi create scenes as defined by “heat and weight.” The “heat” is the nature of the relationship—how hot or cold it is. This goes beyond

just “what are you to each other” to include “how you feel about each other.” A newlywed couple will have different heat from an estranged couple. Water-cooler buddies will have a different heat from an employee and their boss who used to be their subordinate. Adding to this is “weight,” which is the way in which a line is delivered, influenced by the heat of the relationship. A line delivered with a clear weight carries more information than just the words said, and should inform the response.

David Razowsky says that “a scene isn’t over until someone changes.” An emotional transformation must take place in order for a scene to be more than a relationship and an initial premise. Characters don’t change in a static relationship. To be good storytellers, we must express our relationships through both action and dialogue, and create a catalyst in the plot that will challenge the status quo.



# YOU MAKE ME FEEL

The starting session of a roleplaying game often follows a basic structure:

- **Define the world (genre and setting)**
- **Craft you character (class, skills, name, backstory)**
- **Create relationships (shared backstory)**

We often create relationships by asking prompting questions. (Who did you betray when they needed you most? Who have you been secretly watching? Who would you protect, no matter what?) The answers to these questions will justify your characters' bonds and why they feel the way they do about each other.

This exercise explores how to go in the other direction, starting with an emotional link before you even name your character. You can use this as a touchstone. If you're ever unsure how to respond in a scene, ask yourself, "How does this person make me feel?" Then tell them! There's no faster way to connect with your character than saying exactly what you're thinking and feeling. From there you can discover the rest of the scene. In a roleplaying game you are able lay out all that subtext on the table, and then use your knowledge as players to craft meaningful interactions for your characters.

- **Players stand in pairs, facing each other. Each player holds a page with the following script\* toward their partner, so the partner can read it but still make eye contact. Choose one player in the pair to start.**

*Player A: You make me feel [adjective].*

*Player B: You make me feel [adjective].*

*Player A: You are my [adjective] [relationship], [name].*

*Player B: You are my [adjective] [relationship], [name].*

*Player A: We are at [location].*

*Player B: We are at [specific place at that location].*

*Player A: We are talking about [subject, unrelated to location].*

*Player B: You are/I am/We are [action, unrelated to conversation].*

- **Go through the exercise again, switching the roles of Players A and B. You can switch partners if you want to go for a few more rounds.**

\*available online at <https://www.evilhat.com/home/improv-for-gamers-downloads/>

## **Example of “You Make Me Feel”**

*Player A: You make me feel excited.*

*Player B: You make me feel responsible.*

*Player A: You are my charming babysitter, Matthias.*

*Player B: You are the precocious child I babysit, Lucy.*

*Player A: We are at the DMV.*

*Player B: We are in line for license photos.*

*Player A: We are talking about why I want a puppy.*

*Player B: I am constantly snapping my fingers.*

## **Expansion!**

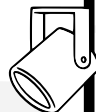
You can use this exercise as a lead-in for a full scene. Once the two players complete the “You Make Me Feel” exercise, they can start a scene *in medias res* in that scenario as those characters.

## **TIPS!**

Player B must listen carefully to Player A’s initial offer. If A says, “You are my fussy granddaughter, Florence,” B could respond with, “You are my overbearing grandmother, Nana.” To negate A would be to say, “You are my high-school basketball coach, Coach Nancy.” Sure, grandmothers can make great basketball coaches, but this isn’t really listening to A’s offer. Stick to the obvious other half of the relationship.

An interesting scene needs variety. A scene about people sitting in a boat, fishing and talking about fish, doesn’t have a lot going on. A scene about an estranged couple stuck on a fishing boat during a team-building exercise, talking about the health of their previously shared dog while one of them keeps checking their phone for signal, has more possibilities.

This exercise sets up a scene mid-action. Just as when setting up a scene at the table, it’s not necessary to narrate walking into the office, saying hello, sitting down, and after some polite chit-chat getting to why you’re here. You can jump to the middle: “...and that’s why I’m quitting this job.”

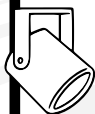


## CLASSIC CAST

Be it in a dungeon crawl, heist, or other team mission, a well-rounded party will (hopefully) have someone capable at overcoming any given obstacle. But a balanced group isn't just important for games with a solid objective (and hopefully lucrative payoff), but also for games that follow character relationships. You'll find ensemble casts in television shows (the sarcastic one, the cool one, the popular one, the oddball, the nerd, the anchor) and movies (the princess, the athlete, the outcast, the brain, the rebel). Each character has a unique defining feature, and often an emotional tie to at least one or two other people in the group.

As a scene unfolds onstage, players may jump in as supporting characters. Or if improvising a longer narrative, they may create scenes highlighting different people in the same world. What's key is that all these characters are believable in the same setting. Even if the stories seem unconnected at the start, it will be satisfying for the audience to see those stories start to overlap.

In an improv show, not everybody is going to be the protagonist. The audience would have a hard time following too many competing storylines. An improviser can provide a perfect addition to a scene with just a line or two. However, roleplaying games have the added challenge of giving everyone equal time in the spotlight. To this end, we build ensemble casts, in which all characters are equally important to the plot.



### TIPS!

Group buy-in is extremely important in making an ensemble cast. To make sure everybody feels like they belong in the setting, keep the oddball characters to a minimum. You really only need one secret agent, robot, genie, sasquatch, or alien in your group.

In this exercise you'll create your own ensemble cast of characters and a web of relationships stringing them together.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Decide on a setting where the characters live or work (bar, space station, school, hospital, fantasy kingdom, small town, etc.).**
- **Someone (Player A) steps forward into the circle and introduces themselves as a specific character, including a name and a detail or two. ("I'm Kayla, I'm a server at the Daisy Diner, working double shifts to pay off my gambling debts. I absolutely love watching MMA fighting.") Person A stays forward in the circle to show they've taken their turn.**
- **Someone else (Player B) steps into the circle and introduces themselves as someone who lives in the same world, including a name, a detail or two, and how they know one of the other characters already introduced. ("I'm Josh, former high-school quarterback. Now I work at the auto shop in town, and I love my job. I have a wicked crush on Kayla at the diner.")**
- **Continue until everyone has created a character. Make sure that everyone has at least one relationship link.**
- **When the ensemble is complete, everyone says, "Classic cast!" Sometimes it's fun to punctuate this with a group gesture, like jazz hands!**
- **You can repeat the exercise a few more times with different settings or genres.**

## WORK/HOME/PLAY

Let's say your character is the witty detective. Or the cranky surgeon. Or the socially awkward inventor. You're the best at what you do, and you've always got great one-liners.

You're also always predictable and, ultimately, a drag. A character who hits the same note in every interaction lacks depth. They're not truly interesting until they go up against someone who challenges the norm. The one criminal who outwits the detective. The one patient the surgeon is always kind to. The one friend the inventor can always talk to. But why stop at just one? A multifaceted character will have different relationship dynamics with everyone they know.

There are three basic realms where you might see a character: at work, at home, and at play. Your witty detective would have a different relationship dynamic with the police chief than with their parents or their bridge buddy. These differences in turn produce a wider variety of scenes.

In this exercise you'll discover how the same character might react in a variety of relationships.

- **Everyone stands in a wide circle around one person (Player A). Player A will be in every scene as the same character.**
- **Someone else (Player B) enters the circle and has a short scene with Player A.**
- **After 30 seconds or so, someone else (Player C) yells "Freeze!" Players A and B immediately pause their scene. Player B leaves the circle, and Player C enters.**
- **Player C starts a new scene with Player A, in a new setting—work, home, or play. Players A and C will have a different relationship dynamic from A and B.**
- **Continue switching partners and introducing new relationships.**
- **Continue until Player A has been in work, home, and play relationships at least twice each.**
- **Run through additional rounds with someone else being Player A, as desired.**

## ***Expansion!***

Try a “Relationship Chain,” in which Player A and B start a scene, then Player C calls “Freeze!” Player C then starts a new scene with Player B, who stays the same character. Player D then calls “Freeze!” and has a scene with Player C. Continue until everyone has gone; in the final scene Player A returns as their starting character.



## **TIPS!**

You might want to start by brainstorming types of relationships as a group and what realm (work, home, or play) they’d fall into. Different relationships in the same realm will have varying power dynamics—someone’s relationship with their boss will be different from that with their coworker, or their spouse versus their mail carrier, or their best friend versus their gym trainer.

Also, these scenes don’t have to have any linear arc or narrative; we just want to see how Player A’s character behaves in different relationships.



# STATUS

When we rate our characters with numbers and discuss actions in terms of successes and failures, it's hard to not get sucked into the desire to "win." To combat this, we may rephrase "failure" as a "complication." A game might reward the player with a bonus when their character does something against their best interest. Or a game's entire premise may be telling the story of doomed characters.

Similarly, *improv* celebrates characters who get into trouble. If you're risk-averse and want to maintain your character's high status, you may find yourself sticking with safer choices rather than interesting ones. When you're low status, you've got nothing to lose—and that's when you start making *very* interesting choices. We encourage you take risks, make bold choices, and accept the outcome with gusto.

Many challenges in roleplaying result in one character triumphing over another. Traditionally the GM plays all adversarial characters, so when a player's character defeats one of them, there's no hard feelings, right? But it can be more difficult when the conflicts are player versus player, and neither person wants to back down. Here again we can turn to *improv*, and to the magic that is playing with status.

We talked in **YES, AND** (page 21) about the perils of an argument scene, and why blocking your scene partner's accusations stalls out the plot. A trick to playing your way out of an argument is to not just admit what you did, but to feel shame, remorse, or otherwise yield your status to your scene partner. Grovel at their feet. Beg for their forgiveness. Offer them a bribe. Shifting the power dynamic breaks the cycle of arguing and allows the plot to continue.

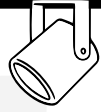
Status can change throughout a scene, as part of the natural give-and-take when building your story. In this chapter you'll play around with characters of different status levels, and explore what happens when those characters change in status.

# ENCOURAGEMENT BALL

A character's failure doesn't have to be a letdown for the player—it can also be a choice. The mindset of “Yes, and” is about celebrating all choices, be they wins or losses in the narrative.

Just as we should be comfortable getting our own character in trouble, we should try to not be overprotective of another player's character. They might be really excited about something that would be just awful for their character, and we should embrace their choice. To practice celebrating losses, in this quick exercise you'll encourage your fellow players no matter what.

- **Everyone stands in a circle.**
- **Someone (Player A) winds up and throws an invisible ball to someone else across the circle (Player B). Make eye contact so Player B knows you're throwing to them!**
- **Everyone in the group cheers Player B on and shouts encouraging things to them.**
- **Player B fails to catch the ball.**
- **Everyone shouts even more encouragement to Player B, who brushes off the failed catch.**
- **Player B picks up the invisible ball and gets ready to throw to someone else (Player C), who will also fail to catch it. Everyone shifts their shouts of encouragement to Player C.**
- **Continue until everyone has caught and thrown the ball at least once.**



## TIPS!

This exercise isn't about physical comedy, so please don't hurt yourself with a prat fall. Let's also leave the old "hit in the crotch" joke out. The goal is not to have the most unique way of dropping the ball, just that you tried but didn't catch it.



# STATUS NUMBERS

Status doesn't have to be shown through actions, such as ceding an argument or failing to accomplish a goal. We can communicate our character's status nonverbally, too.

*"CONVERSATION TRIO"* (page 42) and *"LEAD WITH YOUR BODY"* (page 38) looked at how you can play around with your body, face, and voice to create interesting characters. This time you'll explore the different ways that you can embody status.

- **Everyone walks slowly around the space in different directions.**
- **The facilitator calls out a number between one (lowly) and ten (godlike) that represents status.**
- **Players change their movements and expressions based on the number. You can make eye contact with other players or stay in your own bubble.**
- **The facilitator continues to call out different numbers. You don't have to run through every one; the entire exercise should last just a few minutes.**

## ***Expansion!***

You can play "Hi, How Are You?", which we saw in the expansion of *"BEEN WAITING LONG?"* (page 40). In it, everyone moves around the room and greets each other with the line "Hi, how are you?" to practice how having a different status affects how you say hello.



## **TIPS!**

When changing status, what happens to your posture? Your eye contact? How big or little do your steps become? What do you do with your hands? Additionally, the differences between a one and a ten may be obvious, but what about the subtle difference between a six and a seven? Play around with mannerisms both small and large.



## TIPS!

If you often play characters who are low status, you may find high-status characters to be challenging at first, or vice versa. Trying on characters of different status will help you become a more well-rounded gamer and improviser. It also trains you to shift gears as a character, which we'll practice more in "Status Shifts" (page 64).



## ANIMAL SECRETS

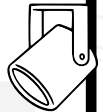
Characters who are constantly high status get boring real quick because they're not relatable; seeing a character's vulnerabilities makes them more sympathetic. Your character's weakness may in fact be a defining feature on their character sheet, and you can return to this weakness as a touchstone if you're ever unsure what move to make next.

You can also use your character's weakness to get them into trouble. Your character may be a goofy high schooler, for example, but they will never back down if someone calls them a coward. With the weakness known, both the players and GM can drive the plot toward that pivotal moment.

Similarly, anyone at the table can poke at your character's weakness to add a little comedy to a scene. Your rugged adventurer may hate snakes, but that's not going to stop her from exploring the cavern—she's just not going to like doing it. Note though that if you're pushing a character's buttons, be sure the *player* is on board. Don't be the griever who enjoys ruining other people's fun—collaborate to get characters in trouble in a way that's both interesting and exciting for everyone.

Vulnerabilities can stem from a detailed backstory, or can be as simple as something personal that the character is afraid of admitting. This exercise is a silly way to explore a character's deepest secrets.

- **Everyone stands in a tight circle.**
- **Someone suggests an animal that everyone is likely familiar with (for example, a zebra over a zebu).**
- **One by one in random order, each player leans forward into the circle and shares a secret that this type of animal might have.**
- **After each secret, everyone in the circle whispers "secrets" and fans out their hands, palms down, wiggling their fingers as if playing the piano.**
- **When the group reaches a natural pause, the round ends.**
- **Repeat for a few rounds, each with someone else suggesting a new animal.**



## TIPS!

These secrets are not connected, and you are not all describing the same individual animal. The secrets can be big or small, funny or serious. It could be related to that animal—for a zebra you could say, “I don’t like stripes.” Or it could be a general secret that’s just funny to hear if an anthropomorphized animal were saying it—a zebra might also say, “I’ve been embezzling from my company for six years.”

## DEATH IN SIXTY SECONDS

You might have a great idea for what could happen next in a scene. It's so good. It makes perfect sense. And someone else just jumped in with a different idea. It's also good. It also makes perfect sense. But it's not *your* idea.

Let's fall back on "Yes, and" to remind ourselves to give other people's ideas a chance. It may require some self-restraint to not tell people about your idea anyways, even if you're agreeing to go along with someone else's. Having a "Yes, and" mindset promotes fluidity and adaptability, as you step aside to let someone else's idea come to fruition.

This exercise plays with in-game negotiation. The group agreement is that someone at the end of the scene is going to "lose" and someone else will "win." Similar to *"THROWING SWORDS"* (page 11), either role can be a lot of fun. But you won't know who is who in advance—you'll have to discover it in the scene. This means listening very carefully to your partner's offers and working together to come to an agreement. If they start pushing in one direction before you can add in your own idea, it's time to "Yes, and" their offer and embrace the outcome, win or lose.

- **Two players start a scene that will last for exactly 60 seconds. The facilitator can give them a relationship or a location (page 103) to help start the scene. Before the end of the scene, one of the players will die. It can be accidental or intentional. Embrace your doom!**
- **The facilitator calls out when the players have 15 seconds left, 5 seconds left, and when the time is up.**
- **Repeat the exercise as many times as there are pairs of people, so everyone gets a turn onstage.**



## STAGE COMBAT SAFETY

This exercise often gets physical—it may come to blows as a small disagreement spirals out of control, or someone may fall out of their chair as they discover their tea was poisoned. Remember that this isn't carefully choreographed stage combat, and we don't want anyone getting hurt. Check out our advice in “*Appendix A: Safety Techniques*” (page 100) to make sure that everybody knows how best to act out physical interactions.

# STATUS SHIFTS

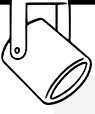
If you've already tried out *"WORK/HOME/PLAY"* (page 52), you saw how status is inexorably linked to relationships. The more fluid you are willing to be with your status, the greater variety of relationships you can develop.

Building on the idea of *"STATUS NUMBERS"* (page 58), in this exercise you'll explore ways to express status other than physically. You might express high status by building yourself up or putting others down—or vice versa for low status, always criticizing yourself and idolizing others.

You can also mix and match the physical with the verbal. Your obsequious minion may in fact be the one calling the shots through flattery and guile. Likewise, your brash and assertive CEO may wield a lot of power with a pen, but constantly asks others for guidance.

Additionally, a person's status can change mid-scene. Just as combat rounds have highs and lows depending on what you roll, some roleplaying games have rules for social interactions, showing changes in status through various "rounds" of a high-stakes conversation. If you're trying to convince your roommate that you two should co-adopt a dog, your status may shift as you make headway or meet resistance. This give-and-take is what makes a scene interesting.

- **Two players pair up for a scene. The facilitator assigns each player a starting status number of one (lowly) to ten (godlike), and can give them a starting relationship or location (page 103).**
- **During the scene, the facilitator calls out a new status number for each player.**
- **The players change their tone, posture, emotion, or the decisions they make to reflect their new status. Don't worry about having the most interesting scene—the objective is to experience the fickle nature of status.**
- **The facilitator continues to call out new numbers, which the players respond to.**
- **After 2 or 3 minutes, the facilitator ends the scene.**
- **Repeat the exercise with different players as desired.**



## TIPS!

Facilitator, calling out status numbers does mean you'll be interrupting the players; be sure to say each player's name (or their character's name, if they have one) so they know whose number you're changing. You can change both players' status at the same time, or switch off. You can jump around the scale or make subtle changes.

You can also pass off the responsibility of assigning status to two players not in the scene. These two will sit off to either side and each will direct one player's status throughout the scene.

Whoever is calling out the numbers should be mindful not to be a puppet master by directing too forcefully or rapidly. The players onstage have many challenges in these scenes—they're listening to their partner, keeping an ear out for when you change their status, and maintaining the flexibility required to adjust as needed. Be kind, and avoid making a game of it at their expense.



# SPACE OBJECTS

Often improvisers don't have props to use in their scene. This brings more challenges—believably interacting with invisible objects, remembering where they are, and correctly interpreting what your partner is doing—and can lead to lots of inadvertently dropped offers. You may be miming peeling a banana, and your partner comes onto the stage to say, “Good job skinning that rabbit!” You and your partner may be building a campfire, getting down all the lovely details of kindling and spindle, and a moment later you cross the stage—right through your roaring fire.

In improv we call these mimed objects **SPACE OBJECTS**, since we are handling and interacting with empty space as if it had weight and dimensions. As improvisers, you aren't expected to be trained mimes, but a little bit of miming can go a long way in selling the audience on what you're doing, and in feeling more connected to the scene yourself.

Playing with an object is also a great way to give yourself some time to settle into your character, or just to have something to do while talking. You can also explore what it's like to be holding something you want to put down but, for whatever reason, can't.

Larps may or may not have real props, and what props are provided may not pass as the genuine article. It's on you to sell that squirt gun as a real pistol, or believably administer first aid on the battlefield without an actual medkit. Even at the table, you can add a little bit of physical roleplay by embodying your character's small mannerisms—adjusting your professorial glasses, raising your goblet to toast at a banquet, or gesticulating while holding your fine imported cigar. These little gestures are immediately engaging, and activate our imaginations by allowing us to both see and feel the action.

# COMPARING OBJECTS

Depending on your style of larp, all your props may be real. Or you may have just a few real props, and cards representing other objects. This makes it tricky to suspend disbelief when you're switching back and forth between the tangible and the invisible. Or you might not have anything, just the expectation that you'll improvise as needed.

Improvisers rarely work with tangible objects aside from a set of chairs on the stage. The rest is entirely mimed. Working with space objects can be tricky—that's okay! It's a fun layer to add to a scene but isn't required. The more that you can visualize an object, though, the better you can sell to the audience that you are holding that cup of coffee, or digging that shallow grave, or driving that taxi cab.

This exercise starts with the basics—holding an object. You'll practice creating various items and giving them dimensions and details, to solidify them in your minds.

- **Everyone stands in pairs, facing their partner.**
- **The facilitator calls out a random object (we've provided suggestions on the next page).**
- **The players mime holding that object. Compare with your partner how you imagined your object. (If you are each holding a book, what type of book is yours? Is it paperback or hardcover? Is it leather-bound? Dog-eared? Is it a steamy romance novel or a sacred tome? Point out the object's various features and describe them to your partner.)**
- **The players practice interacting with their own object, comparing again against how their partner handles theirs. (How do you hold your book while you turn the pages—from the side or the bottom? How heavy is it?)**
- **After about 60 seconds, the facilitator can call out another object.**
- **Continue the exercise for about three or four objects total.**



## TIPS!

Holding your thumb to your ear and pinky to your mouth isn't talking on a phone. Pointing your finger at someone isn't aiming a gun. You must create an empty space in your hand where the object would go, and keep your hands firm, as if you are gripping the object. This will help you maintain its dimensions throughout the scene. It will also keep you from accidentally relaxing your hands, getting caught up in the dialogue, and then forgetting what you were holding—from the audience's perspective, you just dropped your book!

### *Suggested Objects*

- Book
- Coffee mug
- Tea cup
- Glass of water (with or without straw)
- Cigarette case
- Gun
- Phone
- Deck of cards
- Laptop
- Jewelry box
- Bag of money
- Potted plant
- Sword
- Amulet
- Magic potion
- Mask
- Magic wand
- Bio-scanner
- Laser gun
- Action figure
- Watch

## GIVING A PRESENT

Giving an offer is often referred to in improv as giving the gift of information. Granted, opening a scene with a controlling offer like “And here we are at the circus for your thirteenth birthday, Greta, my dearest daughter,” might sound silly and unnatural. Conversely, a blind offer like “So, what do you want to do first?” gives your partner very little to go on unless you’ve already established where you are and how you know each other. With that opener you might *intend* to start at the circus with your kid, but if your partner responds with “Let’s throw rocks at the principal’s car! I’m so glad school is finally out!” then it’s your responsibility as a good scene partner to adjust to the clearer offer.

## QUESTIONS

A question is a problematic offer to give your partner—often it’s not really an offer at all. As Charna Halpern says, “He who gives information is a gift-giver; he who asks questions is a thief.” Starting a scene with, “What are you doing?” puts the onus back on your partner to establish the facts of the scene. A good habit to get into is to answer your own questions. “You’re sneaking out to see Mateo again, aren’t you?” is an offer disguised as a question.

“Play to find out” games, broadly, are games in which the GM doesn’t have a strictly plotted adventure, and instead gives the players more agency to shape the story. The GM in this role is largely reactionary, improvising responses to the player’s choices. But just as in improv, scenes in a game require give and take from both sides. Starting a game session with “So, you’re all in class...what do you do?” may be an easy question for some to answer, but others might find it intimidating, especially if they’re used to more structured play. Consider throwing in some details, not just for color but also to give your players a bit more to react to. “So, you’re in English class, and Mr. Kilgannon has given you twenty minutes of silent, sustained reading. You hear Chan to your right whisper, ‘Psst, want to make an easy fifty bucks?’ Do you respond to her or keep reading?”

In this exercise you're going to practice working with space objects, while going back to the basics of "Yes, and" by literally receiving the gift of information and justifying it with grounding details.

Similar to "YES, BECAUSE" (page 28), this exercise practices justifying offers. It also explores giving a lot or a little information to your partner, and plays around with making your "Yes, and" a positive or negative response.

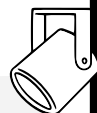
- **Players get into pairs (Players A and B), and each pair works on its own.**
- **Player A gives Player B an invisible box with a present inside. Player A communicates the size and shape of the box. Both players should be very excited about giving or receiving a present.**
- **As Player B opens the box, Player A announces what the gift is. Player B takes out the object and justifies why it is the perfect gift.**
- **Players switch roles; Player B now gives a gift to Player A. It can be a fresh scene or a follow-up to the previous one.**

## TIPS!

The present isn't the only space object in the scene; don't forget about the box! Perhaps it's wrapped with a ribbon. Do you use scissors to open it? Where do you put the box after? Are there packing peanuts inside? Have fun with all the little details.

## Expansion!

See how it feels when you switch from controlling offers to blind offers: first, Player A only gives vague hints about what the gift is. (For example, they could say, "I think you're going to like this..." or "This is a little unconventional, but..." or "Be careful when opening it, watch your fingers!") When Player B opens the box, *they*, not Player A, announce what is inside. Additionally, Player B can decide for themselves how they feel about the gift. Compare against the original exercise—did this expansion feel any different? Was it easier when you knew what the gift was and how to react, or did you enjoy filling in the blanks yourself?



## YES, LET'S!

If you're setting a larp scene in a kitchen, an easy way to get started is to imagine it as *your* kitchen. Where is your fridge? Where are the knives? Where do you keep your cutting board? These objects don't materialize out of thin air, and neither should your space objects.

Unless you are starting a scene *in medias res*—for example, while you're chopping carrots—take your time enjoying your action while you're conversing with your partner, and even before and afterwards. Go to the fridge, get the carrots (in a crisper drawer or on a shelf?), set them down on the counter (do you put a cutting board down first, or is it a butcher block?), get a knife (in a drawer or in a knife block on the counter?), and *then* start chopping. Do you put the peelings in the compost bin after? Do you wash the knife or leave it in the sink? These details will make the scene feel more natural than if you're chopping the same carrot forever.

In this exercise you'll practice taking your time with the details as you move from one action to the next. It's also some good "Yes, and" practice to throw yourself wholeheartedly into an action.

- **Everyone slowly moves around the space in different directions.**
- **The facilitator calls out a suggestion of what the group should do. ("Let's all get ready for bed!")**
- **Everyone says, "Yes, let's!" and starts miming that sequence of actions. (Washing your face, brushing your teeth, etc.)**
- **After 30 seconds or so, someone else shouts out a new suggestion. Everyone drops their current action, says "Yes, let's!", and dives into the new action.**
- **The facilitator can keep giving suggestions, but it's also fun for the players to come up with ideas themselves!**
- **Continue the exercise through a few different suggestions, or until everyone has made at least one.**



## TIPS!

You can interact with other people and be in the same world, or you can be in your own space. You can be silent or, if you're imagining another person there, you can have a one-sided conversation. It will be a little chaotic—that's okay! If you choose to interact with someone else, be sure to acknowledge what they're doing! If you're both at the beach, watch out so you don't accidentally walk through their sand castle.

### *Let's all...*

- Get ready for bed
- Do the dishes
- Get a glass of juice from the fridge
- Dock our spaceship
- Make a salad
- Shoe a horse
- Play at the beach
- Order coffee for the whole office
- Forge our own weapons
- Make coffee
- Drive to work
- Milk a cow
- Clean a window
- Craft a potion
- Write a poem
- Do a load of laundry
- Plant a tree

## TOUCH THREE THINGS

We've talked about how the crux of a scene isn't the objects—it's the relationship between the players. Working with space objects gives you something to *do* during the scene, and another way to express your character. When playing "*BEEN WAITING LONG?*" (page 40), you explored the ways that your character can influence your physicality and how you interact with your scene partner. If you're a deadly assassin, how would you chop carrots? Or go on a blind date? Or train a puppy?

However, it's important in any game to not get so caught up in what your character is doing that you forget about the others at the table. In this exercise you'll practice the skill of paying attention to your partner while keeping track of all the different space objects in the scene. As always, the object is just a catalyst for something more interesting to happen.

- **Two players stand onstage while the rest of the group sits as the audience.**
- **The facilitator gives the pair a location (and a relationship, if desired) to start a short scene.**
- **The scene begins in silence. Each player silently interacts with three objects that might be found in their location before they speak their first line.**
- **The pair continues their scene for about 2 to 3 minutes.**
- **Repeat the exercise with new players, as desired.**



## TIPS!

It's not a race to speak first, so take your time establishing what's there, and keep an eye out for what your partner is doing!

You may not always be able to identify what objects your partner is interacting with, especially in the beginning of the scene. It might be helpful to later announce what your object is so your partner doesn't misinterpret it. You might say "This antique clock belonged to my father," or "I think I look pretty good in this top hat, if I do say so myself," giving your partner something to respond to.

That being said, if the conversation is all about the object, then you're not focusing on the relationship. Consider why you're in this location, holding this object, and how it makes you feel. Or the objects could mean nothing at all—you're just making dinner together. How then does your partner make you feel, and how will you express that in your actions?

### ***Expansion!***

As a variation, start with the exercise "TABLEAU" (page 34) but with just two players rather than the whole group. The players take turns identifying items aloud until they've each named three. They will then exit the space and re-enter to have a short scene in the setting they've created, interacting with some or all of those objects.



# TIMING

In this chapter we'll discuss how to have a balanced scene that's not too long and not too short, and also how to direct multiple scenes happening at the same time.

Often, improvisers talk about **EDITING** scenes. This is when someone ends the scene and starts a new one. If your scene gets edited but you had something else you wanted to say, don't worry. It's okay to be edited. There will be more scenes. We can come back to that character later if there's more to their story.

A good metaphor for editing is channel-surfing or scanning radio stations. You might be watching or listening to something cool, but you want to know what else there is in case something else awesome is happening. So you jump around. In this same way, GMs will shift the spotlight around the table, ensuring that each character is contributing something vital to the story.

Editing can be a challenging responsibility for a GM. However, there's nothing stopping players from editing themselves and indicating when their scene is over—especially if they just wanted to contribute one small element to the story.

## COLOR AND ADVANCE

When you talk about *things* in a scene, there's some good opportunity for physical comedy, but eventually you'll lose the audience if there's not enough plot.

The same can be said for roleplaying games. The GM's description of your surroundings may hold clues, or it may just be added color. But there must always be a balance. There's only so many *oublettes* and random tin cups your dungeon-crawling party is willing to investigate before getting frustrated that none of it unlocks further plot. Conversely, saying simply that your character tries to walk across a bridge does little to paint the danger of the scene. You could note that the bridge is rickety, the gorge it spans is craggy and deep, the winds are whipping across the chasm, and your character's hands are sweating as they grip the rope railings.

Sometimes a scene needs plot, and sometimes we want to enjoy the setting. In this exercise you'll experience the benefits of both sides and practice feeling out when a story needs one or the other.

- **The players face each other in pairs. Because of the length of this exercise, it might be more comfortable to sit rather than stand.**
- **Player A begins telling a short story.**
- **After a bit, Player B interjects by saying "Color," and specifies what they want to hear more detail about. Player A pauses the plot and switches to describing more about that element in the story—what the characters are wearing, what the weather's like, what sounds and smells are around, etc.**
- **When Player B has had their thirst for details sated, they say "Advance." Player A switches back to building the narrative.**
- **As the story progresses, Player B continues to switch between "Color" and "Advance" requests.**
- **Player A continues to tell their story for about 3 minutes. [The facilitator can call time.]**
- **The pair switches roles, and the new Player A begins telling a new story.**
- **Players can switch partners and play multiple rounds, as desired.**



## TIPS!

This doesn't have to be the greatest story ever told, but it should have the thread of a plot. You can talk about everything you did yesterday, tell a completely fictional story, or blend a bit of both. If you're not sure what to say, borrow the plot of a book or movie you're familiar with and make it your own. It's not a race to finish, so don't worry about how far you get.

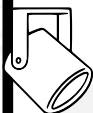
Additionally, you don't have to ask your partner to switch between plot and description a lot, just whenever you're interested in one over the other. Your partner is doing a lot of work by making this story up on the fly, so be their number-one fan and don't turn this into a game of rapid-fire demands.

## HALF-LIFE

Sometimes scenes run long. That's okay! There's no magic number for how long a scene should be. Some improvisers may put on an entire show that's a "mono-scene," a single scene that stays in the same location. Sometimes a scene is just a short exchange of sentences—or one killer line.

In this exercise you'll try out scenes of varying lengths to feel what it's like to say as much as you can in as few words as possible.

- **Two players will have a scene of exactly 2 minutes, timed by the facilitator. The facilitator can give them a relationship or location from page 103 to help them get started.**
- **After this scene finishes, discuss the highlights as a group. Who was the protagonist? What was the main point of drama or interest in the scene? What was something remarkable each player did that defined their character?**
- **The same players repeat the same scene, to the best of their ability, in just 1 minute.**
- **Players repeat the scene again in 30 seconds, 15 seconds, 7 seconds, 3 seconds, and finally 1 second—which should be nothing more than a single word or movement!**



### TIPS!

This isn't a race to repeat the whole scene in less time, or a test on how much you remember. Just keep the same general plot, and try to bring back any good lines.

Afterwards, talk about which version of the scene you all liked best. There's no right answer, though often people will prefer the shorter scenes because by then you've established the basics of the story. Similarly in gaming, you've already got your character, relationships, and setting established before you dive into scenes.



## CLAP CLAP, SNAP SNAP

It's not just up to the GM to edit scenes. Players must be mindful themselves of how often they jump into the spotlight, taking care of their fellow players so everyone has a chance to shine.

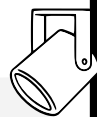
Improv offers a variety of tools to transition between scenes. You'll practice one technique in this exercise, but we've listed a few more you can practice in "*MONTAGE*" (page 96). Before learning *how* to edit a scene, though, it's important to know *when* to edit a scene.

It's often the responsibility of the improvisers offstage to edit the scene in progress. Doing so means giving your fellow players your full attention and waiting for a **BEAT**. A beat might be a punchline, a resolution to a conflict, or a natural pause in a conversation. It may sound difficult to master this instinct, but finding beats is just the result of careful observation.

Beats come and go. If you miss the chance to edit a scene at a beat, you'll be stuck waiting for the scene to reach another. And the longer you leave your fellow improvisers onstage, the more likely that the scene will lose energy. So you may also choose to edit a scene because it's dragging, or because the players onstage are floundering. You might also want to end on a cliffhanger. Or you could spare the audience from seeing something that they already know is coming, especially if it's pushing at people's comfort zones. The safety technique "Lines and Veils," coined by Ron Edwards, was designed for tabletop RPGs and does something similar. You can designate a "fade to black" moment by saying that you "veil" a scene when ending it.

This exercise gives every player offstage the authority to edit a scene, and also gives some good practice on letting your scene be edited.

- **Two players are onstage, while the rest of the group stands in a line behind them.**
- **The two players will start a scene. The facilitator can suggest a starting relationship or location (page 103), if needed.**
- **The players in the line watch the scene and wait for a beat. When someone in the line feels like the players in the scene have hit a beat, they start a rhythm of slapping their legs twice and snapping their fingers twice.**
- **As soon as someone starts to “clap clap, snap snap,” the rest of the players in the line join in.**
- **When a scene is edited, the players onstage immediately rejoin the line.**
- **Two new players jump onstage and start a new scene.**
- **Continue until everyone has been in a scene.**



## TIPS!

You may want to edit because the scene just isn't working—help your fellow players out! It's also okay if someone edited the scene but it didn't feel like a beat to you, or if you just wanted to see the scene continue a bit longer. Once one person has decided to edit the scene, everyone else should support that decision by joining in the rhythm.

When your scene gets edited, resist the temptation to finish what you were going to say! This exercise is about practicing finding a beat, not about having the most interesting or complete scene.

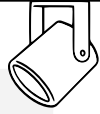
When starting a new scene, the facilitator could give a new suggestion, or the players could start a scene based on their own inspirations. It doesn't have to be connected to the previous scene in any way.

## SPLIT SCREEN

It's never good form to hog the spotlight. An assertive GM can prevent this by identifying a good place to end a scene, and the players can prevent it by keeping a "Yes, and" mindset—in this case, by stepping back and giving their full support and attention to another player. As we've said, managing multiple scenes is like flipping through radio stations—the focus will come back to your character in due time.

The goal of this exercise is to practice editing scenes solo, to manage multiple narratives, and to get comfortable yielding the focus to someone else.

- **Designate an imaginary line dividing the stage into halves. Two pairs of players go onstage, one pair on each side (Pairs A and B).**
- **Designate another player as the director, who will sit at the front of the stage, facing the two pairs.**
- **The facilitator gives Pair A and Pair B a starting suggestion, and Pair A starts the first scene.**
- **When Pair A reaches a beat (or another good reason to edit the scene), the director will clap and point to Pair B.**
- **Pair A freezes mid-scene, remaining frozen while Pair B starts their scene.**
- **When the director sees fit, they clap and point back to Pair A. Pair B freezes and Pair A resumes their scene. They can pick up where they left off or skip ahead in time.**
- **The two pairs continue to play out their scenes as the director switches back and forth.**
- **After a few minutes, the facilitator calls for the end of both scenes. Switch the roles of director and players, and repeat the exercise as needed.**



## TIPS!

The two narratives are completely separate and don't have to relate to each other at all.

Director, you can change up the pace of switching between pairs, but avoid going too fast or too slow. Going too fast can make the players feel frantic, and going too slow can mean passing over good beats.

Facilitator, if you have a large group, you can switch directors mid-scene by quietly tapping the director out and allowing someone else to slip into their seat.



## COFFEE SHOP

An editing technique often found in television and movies is when one scene cuts to another and the dialogue in the new scene mirrors the dialogue from the previous scene. It's a clever way to smooth the transition from one scene to another. This technique of shifting the spotlight is also useful in gaming and improv—and can be achieved easily if everyone's in group mind.

As we mentioned on page 29, an improviser may get a hit to start a new scene. A hit isn't a full-formed story—it's the spark of an idea that you will use to start your scene, and then you and your partner will see where it goes.

This exercise taps into group mind by seamlessly shifting between players onstage, and it's also good practice for finding a hit with which to start a new scene.

- **Everyone spreads out on the stage, seated or standing in pairs.**
- **The facilitator sets the location at a coffee shop.**
- **The facilitator can give each pair a starting relationship (page 103). Each pair is in a separate scene, so nobody from one table should start talking to someone at another table.**
- **The scene starts with everyone talking at once. These can be basic conversations—there's no need for high drama or conflict. After a moment, the players will fall silent so that only one pair (Pair A) is speaking. Pairs shouldn't freeze in place, but continue silently, as if they've moved out of focus. Rather than miming words, do a quiet action, such as checking your phone, reading the menu, or holding (or breaking) eye contact with your partner.**
- **After a few moments, a different pair (Pair B) starts speaking, interrupting Pair A. Pair A will fall silent and yield the spotlight to Pair B.**
- **The scene continues for about 5 minutes, with all the pairs taking turns claiming and ceding the spotlight.**
- **The facilitator calls to end the scene once every pair has had a few turns in the spotlight.**



## TIPS!

Listening to the other conversations is key. Firstly, you want to make sure there's variety in the scenes. If one pair is madly in love, you don't need to see another couple also madly in love. Secondly, keep an ear out for when another pair cuts in. They may have found a hit that would be a good transition to their scene, or they may have heard a good beat to edit your scene on. In both cases your scene needs to pause immediately.





# SCENEWORK

Once you've warmed up and practiced a few specific skills, you may be ready to dive into longer scenes. This is the meat and potatoes behind the question "What do you do?" that comes up so often in roleplaying games.

Of all the improv advice we've given in this book, here are three key points to keep in mind during scenework:

**Cut to the action.** Try opening a scene with the second half of a conversation. ["And that's why I feel I deserve a raise." "You can pick up your things tomorrow from the porch!" "You want to scavenge in *Car Town*? You'll never make it there alive!" "There's just not enough air for three people; drawing straws is the fairest way."] Make your offers specific with foundational details.

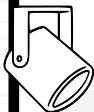
**Make your partner look good.** Your partner is trusting you to build an amazing scene with them, not sell them out for a cheap laugh or make them look bad. Just as in gaming, griefers don't get invited back to game night, so don't be that person whose fun comes from ruining the fun of others.

**Pick just one weird thing.** Avoid overloading a scene with many bizarre details. And if your partner's entire character concept is the "one weird thing," kill them with kindness. Treat them like a hero and a genius. Recycle their weird choices so they work for you. It can actually be fun and quite easy to play the "straight" person, since all you have to do is react to the other person's choices.

## THREE-LINE SCENES

This exercise can be considered a warmup to longer scenes, and illustrates how we build scenes one line at a time. Planning where you want a scene to go is only going to make things awkward. Just as it's less fun when a GM lays down a railroaded plot, it's less fun to force a scene in a certain direction, or fight against someone else's railroading, than to let it develop organically.

- **Players form two lines facing toward the stage. Designate one side as "A" and the other "B."**
- **The two players at the front of each line step forward and turn to face the "audience" of the remaining players. They will have a scene of three lines total (Player A speaks, then Player B, then Player A).**
- **Once finished, they move to the end of the other line (A goes to the B line, B goes to the A line).**
- **Run through the exercise again, so everyone gets a turn being both A and B.**



### TIPS!

There's a lot that can be said in three lines, but it doesn't have to be funny, exciting, or even that interesting. Player A gives an offer, Player B reacts, Player A reacts to the reaction. You'll want to make every word count, so avoid wasting a line with a question. The offer "Where were you?" is much stronger when rephrased as a statement with more information. "You were at the stadium again—don't lie to me!" This gives your partner a lot more to work with.

Also, beware of dropping offers. Instead of starting a back-and-forth of "No I wasn't!" and "Yes you were!" skip to the "Damn right I was! I need to practice marching band eight hours a day if we're going to make the regional finals!"

## ***Expansion!***

Before starting their three-line exchange, each player can decide to adopt a certain voice, stance, or fact about their character.

Additionally, you could start each scene with the same opening line. Every scene will result in a different interpretation as players put their own spin on it.



## BACKSTORY SCENES

Starting out with just one establishing fact can go a long way toward developing your character. This can be something the character is passionate about (either positively or negatively), something about their past, or a sentence about their worldview—something they believe or value strongly.

If you're trying to answer the question "What would my character do?" but feel stalled out or lacking inspiration, try asking yourself one of these questions:

- **What is your biggest regret?**
- **What are you afraid of most?**
- **What is one thing that you hate or love about yourself or your scene partner?**
- **Where do you draw the line?**
- **What is one thing you would change about yourself, emotionally or physically?**

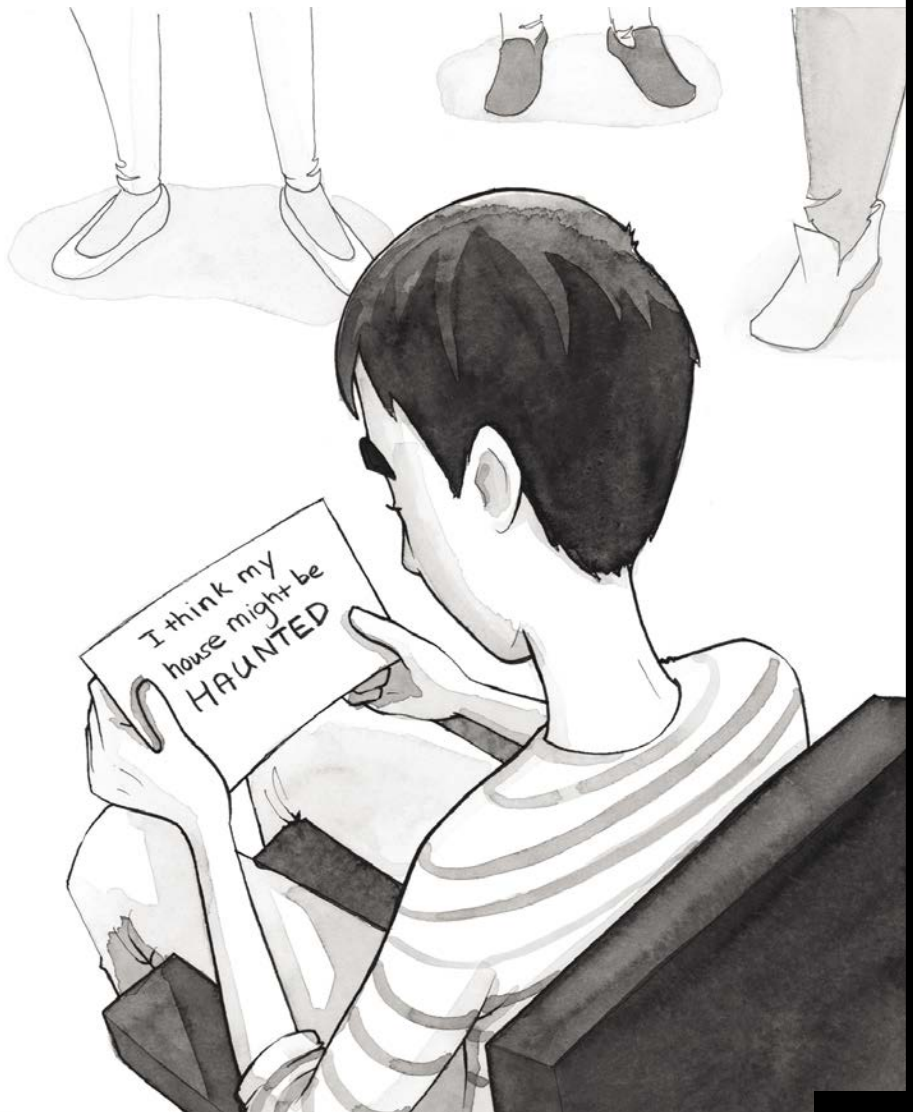
This exercise practices starting a scene with one of these questions already answered, and seeing how that influences your choices. It also puts the "If that, then what?" idea (page 37) into deeper practice.

- **Two players each draw a card with a one-sentence backstory. You can download the Character Backgrounds at <https://www.evilhat.com/home/improv-for-gamers-downloads/>**
- **The facilitator can provide a location (page 103) to start the scene.**
- **During the scene, players will let their backstory influence their actions. ("If I used to be a prize-fighter, how would I react in a driving test?")**
- **After a few minutes, the facilitator edits the scene. Players then reveal to the group what their backstories were.**
- **Repeat the exercise for every pair of players or as desired.**



## TIPS!

Your backstory can be obvious or subtle. Even if it never comes up in the scene, it helps you to have a foundation for your character to build on.

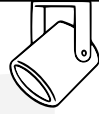


## GROWING AND SHRINKING

Though it goes against our better judgment, sometimes it is practical to split the party. You may need to tackle different obstacles at once, or the GM may want to divide characters up so they can more evenly portion out screen time. Scenes where everyone is together in the same room rarely have evenly distributed spotlight time—eventually one person will fall into a leadership role and direct the conversation.

This exercise explores the ways that scenes change depending on how many people are onstage, and how best to frame a scene with a large group of people so that everyone still feels included.

- **The scene starts with one person onstage (Player A), and the other players standing offstage. Player A can be completely quiet in this scene if they wish, just doing an action or conveying an emotion.**
- **After a few moments, Player B enters and starts a new scene, endowing Player A as a different character. Player A responds accordingly, shedding their previous character and embracing the new scene.**
- **At some point, Player C enters and starts a third, new scene. Players A and B both drop their previous characters.**
- **Repeat until the whole group is onstage.**
- **After 30 to 60 seconds, the last player to come onstage (Player C, in this example) finds a reason to exit the scene.**
- **The remaining players onstage (Players A and B, here) revert back to the previous scene.**
- **One by one, players exit the stage in reverse order, reverting to further previous scenes, until only Player A remains onstage in their original scene.**
- **The facilitator edits the final scene after Player A has had a few moments alone onstage.**



## TIPS!

When there's a large group onstage, consider what types of groups make sense to all see together—perhaps coworkers, classmates, a family, or a sports team. As discussed in “*Classic Cast*” (page 50), ensemble casts can be found in a particular location, such as a bar, a study room, a restaurant, or a hospital.

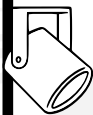


## MONTAGE

A montage is a series of scenes that spiral off a starting suggestion. They might all be tied into the same narrative, or they might be unrelated. There's no need to build a single plotline, and players don't have to return to previous characters.

However, if you were to stick with the same characters the whole time, and follow their story, all you're missing is a rule for resolving actions to make it a roleplaying game!

- **Players get a starting suggestion—it could be a word or short phrase, or a location from page 103 for the first pair onstage.**
- **Players take responsibility to edit the scenes themselves. It may be that one or two characters become the protagonists, while other players come in and out as secondary characters. Alternatively, the scenes don't have to connect into a single narrative.**
- **After 10 minutes or so, the facilitator calls an end to the montage.**



### TIPS!

This exercise is an opportunity to use anything and everything that you've practiced from earlier in the book. Have fun with dynamic, physical characters, a variety of meaningful relationships, detailed invisible objects, and scene edits on satisfying beats!

## MORE ON EDITING

We've already discussed one editing technique in “*Clap Clap, Snap Snap*” (page 82). Here are two more methods that improvisers often use to edit scenes. Both of these rely on someone offstage editing the scene—perhaps the players onstage found a good beat, or maybe they need to be bailed out because the scene is dragging. These tools require players to take care of each other.

**SWIPING.** Someone moves across the front of the stage, normally holding up one hand. This **SWIPES** the scene, as if drawing a curtain across it. This can also be called a wash, wipe, or sweep edit. The active players exit the stage to make way for a new scene. Often the person swiping the scene might have a hit to start the next scene—if they don't, someone else should run out so the stage isn't empty for too long!

**TAG-OUTS.** While Players A and B are having a scene, Player C enters the stage and taps Player A on the shoulder. Player A immediately leaves the stage, but Player B remains. Player B will keep playing the same character, but they're now in a new scene with Player C. Usually, Player C will give an opening offer to Player B as to where they are and how they know each other.

# GLOSSARY

**Beat** A punchline, resolution to a conflict, or a point where the conversation between scene partners has reached a natural pause. It's best to edit scenes when you reach a beat.

**Edit** To end a scene and start a new one. You might choose to edit when the players hit a beat, or the scene is dragging, or the players are floundering. You might also want to end on a cliffhanger. Or you could spare the audience from seeing something that they already know is coming, especially if it's pushing at people's comfort zones.

**Endowing** Giving an offer that has a specific detail about you or your scene partner, such as a name, relationship, or characteristic. We often endow each other as a way to establish a scene while including foundational information.

**Group Mind** The moment when improvisers are so keyed in to the same idea, the scene falls perfectly into place.

**Heightening** Turning up the dial on your partner's offer through physical exaggeration, emotional intensity, or rising narrative stakes.

**Hit** A small idea of how to start a scene. This isn't a full-formed idea, just the inkling of inspiration that can be communicated in an opening offer.

- Negate** Denying the truth of something your scene partner said, or intentionally contradicting them.
- Offer** Any idea or fact that you establish as true during a scene. Ignoring or forgetting an idea your scene partner put forth is a “dropped offer.” “Controlling offers” include specific information, while “blind offers” leave the definition up to the recipient.
- Swipe** A way of editing a scene by running across the front of the stage. Also called a wipe, wash, or sweep edit.
- Tag-out** A way of editing a scene while keeping one person onstage in the same character.
- Telegraphing** Being intentionally unambiguous, such as going into slow-motion to throw a punch or giving declarative statements about objects in the space or about what you are doing.
- Yes, and** Accepting your scene partner’s ideas and building on them with supporting facts.

# APPENDIX A: SAFETY TECHNIQUES

Safety, both physical and emotional, is as important in improv as it is in gaming. While you can modify them to whatever comfort level your group agrees to, we've included the basic community standards that we adhere to in our workshops.

## PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES

There are no exercises in this book that require physical contact. However, players may be propelled in the moment to touch their scene partner—holding their hand, clapping them on the back, or perhaps sharing an embrace.

Before every workshop, set expectations about the level of touch involved. Usually, we go with the ground rule that contact is limited to hands and arms. And if violence enters a scene—which can happen in some exercises!—it must be done in slow motion, with a barrier of an inch or two between the two combatants. This allows players to clearly telegraph their intentions, giving their partner time to react.

## CONTENT CALIBRATION

In roleplaying, we have a variety of tools to negotiate boundaries, and it's a huge advantage to be able to pause at any time to adjust the game's content. When you're in front of an audience, you don't have that luxury, so it requires a lot of trust that your scene partners will take care of you—and that you'll do the same. Fortunately for us, our workshop isn't a show, and given that it's about gaming, we employ a mix of directorial tools and safety techniques often used in larping.

**Brake** If a player ever feels like a scene is getting a little too intense and wants to slow down, they can hold their hands in front of them, palms out, and say "brake." This lets their scene partner know to ease up a bit.

**Cut** If a player ever feels uncomfortable, they can call "cut" to stop the scene. The scene doesn't resume until everyone is ready—in some cases you may need to rewind a scene to remove some information, or just end the scene and move to something new.

**Pause** A player may call "pause" to temporarily halt the scene, perhaps to ask a clarifying out-of-character question. A facilitator may also call "pause" if the scene needs some course-correction.

**Scene** A facilitator may call the definitive end to a scene or exercise by calling out "scene."

# APPENDIX B: LISTS

## IMPROV WORDS OF WISDOM

Step into the fear [page 5]

Dare to be dull [page 13]

Choose a choice [page 17]

Say “Yes, and” [page 21]

Pick one weird thing [page 27]

Ask “If that, then what?” [page 37]

Return to your touchstone [page 37]

Don't make it about the bike [page 46]

Avoid asking questions [page 70]

Cut to the action [page 89]

Make your partner look good [page 89]

# LOCATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

You can reference these lists to easily give players a starting idea for their scene. It's more fun if you don't try to find the most logical pairing, just pick at random! A conversation between two astronauts on a space station will likely be all about space, but what would they talk about, and how would their background affect their choices, if they were shopping in a grocery store, or cleaning out an attic?

## *Locations*

- Abandoned factory
- Adoption clinic
- Ambulance
- Apple orchard
- Arcade
- Art gallery
- Assembly line
- Attic
- Baby shower
- Bachelor party
- Bachelorette party
- Bakery
- Bake sale
- Bank
- Battlements
- Beach
- Beach clean-up
- Behind the bleachers
- Behind the mirror
- Blind date
- Boat
- Bootcamp
- Breakroom
- Bridge
- Bunker
- Butterfly habitat
- Cabin
- Campground
- Car
- Casino
- Catwalk for theater lighting rig
- Changing room
- Child's bedroom
- Classroom
- Clone factory
- Coffee shop
- Colonial reenactment village
- Comedy club
- Comms center
- Community garden
- Crater
- Cruise ship
- Dance studio
- Daycare center
- Department of Motor Vehicles
- Desert
- Designated smoking area
- Detention
- Dock
- Dragon's lair
- Drive-thru line
- Drunk tank
- Duck blind

- Elevator
- Exotic bird show
- Farm
- Fast food restaurant
- Ferris wheel
- Fire escape
- Fire lookout tower
- Food court
- Forest
- Funeral
- Garage
- Gas station
- Golf course
- Gondola
- Grocery store
- Hardware store
- Helicopter
- Hospital
- Hot air balloon
- Hotel room
- Hotel lobby
- Ice cream shop
- Jail cell
- Jewelry store
- Karaoke bar
- Kitchen
- Laboratory
- Laundromat
- Library
- Lifeboat
- Lighthouse
- Make-out point
- Mall
- Marathon finish line
- Mechanic's shop
- Motel
- Mountaintop
- Museum
- Nature trail
- News station
- Newspaper office
- Nightclub
- Night hike
- Nursing home
- Office cubicle
- Old mill
- Outpost 2-817
- Park bench
- Pet store
- Photography class
- Photoshoot
- Picnic spot
- Playground
- Police station
- Post office
- Prom
- Prow of a ship
- Ranch
- Real-estate open house
- Reptile house
- Resistance headquarters
- Restaurant
- Rest stop
- Root cellar
- Salon
- Saloon
- School lunchroom
- School nurse's office
- Sewer
- Shipping container
- Skull-shaped volcano lair
- Spa

- Space station
- Spooky mansion
- Stasis pods
- Summer camp
- Tavern
- Theater concession stand
- Thieves' guild headquarters
- Top of the Empire State Building
- Train tracks
- Tree house
- Truck stop
- Unemployment office
- Used car lot
- Vineyard
- Volcano
- Voting center
- Waiting room
- Walk-in fridge
- Warehouse
- Wax museum
- Wedding reception
- Wyvern's nest
- Yard sale
- Yoga class
- Zoo

### ***Relationships***

- Adventurers
- Academic rivals
- Activist and CEO
- Apartment manager and tenant
- Apprentice and master
- Artist and model
- Artist and patron
- Assassin and target
- Astronauts
- Ballet dancers
- Bandmates
- Baristas
- Bartender and regular
- Best friends
- Bird watchers
- Boss and assistant
- Boss and employee
- Bouncer and club-goer
- Bride and maid of honor
- Burglars
- Celebrity and interviewer
- Celebrity and fan
- Coach and athlete
- Computer hackers
- Comrades-in-arms
- Con artist and mark
- Cops
- Coworkers
- Coworkers' partners
- Cultists
- Demon and summoner
- Detective and informant
- Dentist and patient
- Doctor and patient
- Dorm-mates
- Drinking buddies
- Engaged couple
- Estranged lovers
- Farmers
- Food critic and restaurant owner
- Frenemies
- Gamblers

- Ghost and hauntee
- Graffiti artists
- Grandparent and grandchild
- Groom and best man
- Guru and disciple
- High school senior and minion
- House flippers
- Hunting buddies
- Identical twins
- Kid and imaginary friend
- Lawyer and client
- Married couple
- Mechanic and client
- Mercenaries
- Minor league athletes
- Monarch and court jester
- Neighbors
- Nurses
- Parent and child
- Parent and child's date
- Parking valets
- Partners on their wedding day
- Poet and muse
- Politicians
- Principal and troublemaker
- Rival real-estate agents
- Robber and victim
- Roommates
- Salesperson and important client
- Secret agents
- Secret friends
- Secret shoppers
- Sheriff and deputy
- Siblings
- Students
- Superfans
- Superhero and villain
- Superhero and sidekick
- Survivalists
- Teachers
- Teacher and student
- Therapist and patient
- Tour guide and tourist
- Travel writer and local
- Two sides of a love triangle
- Uber driver and passenger
- Used-car salespeople
- Wizard and minion
- Worst enemies

# APPENDIX C: RECOMMENDED READING

**Improv for gamers:** If you're looking for some advice about how to apply improv techniques to your GMing, check out one GM's personal account of running games without a roadmap, and this fantastic collection of essays by gamers and game designers:

- *Play Unsafe: How Improvisation Can Change the Way You Roleplay* by **Graham Walmsley**
- *Unframed: The Art of Improvisation for Game Masters* edited by **Martin Ralya**

**Improv for theater:** There are a multitude of books by improvisers, for improvisers. Here are a few from the masters to get you started:

- *Impro: Improvisation and the Theater* and *Impro for Storytellers* by **Keith Johnstone**
- *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* by **Mick Napier**
- *Improvisation for the Theater* by **Viola Spolin**
- *Truth in Comedy: The Manual for Improvisation* by **Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson**

**Improv for life:** There's a lot in improv that you can put toward personal and professional development. These books give some useful insights for applying an improv mindset outside of the theater:

- *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up* by **Patricia Ryan Madson**
- *Training to Imagine* by **Kat Koppett**
- *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses "No, But" Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration* by **Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton**

# APPENDIX D: RECOMMENDED GAMES

You can apply improv tools to collaborate, listen, and create good stories in any style of roleplaying game or larp. Here are some of our favorite games that promote improv skills.

## TABLETOP GAMES

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*A Penny for My Thoughts* **by Paul Tevis**

A GMless game in which amnesiac patients strive to regain their memories. It's pure storytelling and a lot of improv. In some scenes players give offers in the form of questions, to which their partner must answer "Yes, and" and justify it. In other scenes players have the ability to choose between two possible offers. Elegant design and endless possibilities. Available at <http://www.evilhut.com/home/a-penny-for-my-thoughts>.

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*A Thousand and One Nights* **by Meguey Baker**

Take turns crafting tales of mystery and wonder, while trying to win the Sultan's favor and stay alive another night. The storyteller will set up a scene and cast other characters to play out the different parts in their tale. Available at <http://nightskygames.com/welcome/game/1001Nights>.

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*Apocalypse World*  
**by D. Vincent Baker  
and Meguey Baker**

This harsh game featuring post-apocalyptic badassess is all about endowing—the GM asks the players questions, the players ask the GM questions, everyone contributes to the world. Also, its “History” mechanic creates backstory between the characters, allows characters to help or hinder each other, and changes as their relationships evolve. Available at <http://apocalypse-world.com>.

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*Archipelago* **by  
Matthijs Holter**

Rather than having a single GM, this game gives each player narrative control over a particular element of the world that they build together. How much more improv crossover can you get when a game resolves situations with cards that say “yes and,” “yes but,” “no and,” and “no but”? Available at <http://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/147623/Archipelago>.

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*Blades in the Dark*  
**by John Harper**

Play up-and-coming scoundrels in a haunted city. Its rules for resolution ensure a sliding scale of outcomes and lots of player agency, and its opening chapters on GM techniques give a lot of improv-adjacent advice. Available at <https://www.evilhat.com/home/blades-in-the-dark>.

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*Capes* **by Tony  
Lower-Basch**

Both collaborative and competitive, this GMless game about superheroes divides up the responsibility of narrating scenes and resolving outcomes. Available at <http://www.museoffire.com/Games>.

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*Fiasco* **by Jason Morningstar**

The quintessential “Yes, and” game. Collaboratively build characters, relationships, motives, settings, and outcomes to situations. This game is extremely versatile, with dozens of setting playsets available online at <http://bullypulpitgames.com/games/fiasco>.

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*Hot Guys Making Out* **by Ben Lehman**

A fun and steamy game about forbidden love during the Spanish Civil War. The pregenerated characters have unique strengths and weaknesses, and play a lot to status disparities. The game is GMless, but each player can play cards to escalate or de-escalate threats to themselves or other characters. Available at <http://www.tao-games.com/hot-guys-making-out>.

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*Microscope* **by Ben Robbins**

Players tell the story of an entire civilization across generations, either zooming out to witness the march of history, or zooming in on characters in a specific time. Not only is the game GMless, but players are fast and loose with their characters, rarely portraying the same person twice as they jump around the timeline. Available at <http://www.lamemage.com/microscope>.

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*Monsterhearts* **by Avery Alder**

A game about the angst-ridden lives of teenage monsters. It’s based on *Apocalypse World*, and its “Strings” mechanic gives characters emotional and social leverage over each other. A very fun game for playing out queer, sexy, horror-soaked, and often tragic stories through a teen fantasy lens. The second edition is available at <https://buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts>.

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*Primetime  
Adventures* by **Matt  
Wilson**

Create and star in your own TV series with a rules-light system. The GM takes player input to set scenes, and each protagonist has a defining internal conflict as their touchstone. Available at <http://www.dog-eared-designs.com>.

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*Zombie Cinema* by  
**Eero Tuovinen**

A masterful combination of board game, card game, and cooperative storytelling game about the desperate choices one must make to stay alive when the dead walk the earth. Available at <http://www.arkenstonepublishing.net/zombiecinema>.

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## LIVE-ACTION GAMES

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*#Feminism*  
edited by **Misha  
Bushyager, Lizzie  
Stark, and Anna  
Westerling**

This collection of feminist nano-games includes some very impactful larps. Games range in length, tone, and gameplay style, but all hit on contemporary feminist issues. Available at <http://storytelling.pelgranepress.com/feminism-a-nano-game-anthology>.

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*Ghost Court* by  
**Jason Morningstar**

A party game for six or more players about finding justice in the spectral legal system. Ghosts and the living bring their cases to small claims court in a silly and performative larp. Cases run fast, so it may appeal to those not comfortable being in the spotlight for too long, and it's just as fun to watch as it is to play! Available at <http://bullypulpitgames.com/games/ghost-court>.

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*Juggernaut* **by Jason Morningstar**

It's July 3, 1950, and the United States government has created a machine that can predict the future. Played at the table or as a larp, players explore the intense and eerie question of free will against the backdrop of 1950s government paranoia. Available at <http://bullypulpitgames.com/games/juggernaut>.

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*Until We Sink...* **by Magnus Jakobsson**

A larp that could easily be played at a table, players draw scene prompts from a deck of cards. Explore relationships, secrets, and motives amongst the staff and guests on a tiny island resort—which is slowly sinking into the ocean. Available in the fantastic book *Norwegian Style* (<http://www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/norwegian-style/5140294>) with many other interesting Norwegian games!