

# UNIVERSALIS



By Ralph Mazza  
& Mike Holmes

# UNIVERSALIS

## UNIVERSALIS IS:

The game where every player is the Game Master

The game where players can create  
and populate the world as they desire—as they play

The game where everything that happens,  
happens because a player wanted it to happen

The game where suspense comes  
from the actions of other players, not from a random roll

The game whose plot evolves as you play  
with no random tables, rail-roading, or scenario books

The game which requires absolutely no set up or preparation time

The game where it doesn't matter  
if all of the players show up on time or at all

Begin play with only sheets of blank paper, pencils,  
ten-sided dice, tokens, and plenty of imagination

**ALL THE RULES YOU NEED CAN BE FOUND WITHIN THESE PAGES**

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Also to Ron Edwards and a large stable of incredible game players and game designers at The Forge. There are an amazing number of truly groundbreaking RPGs being designed and discussed there. Without their pioneering efforts this game never would have even gotten started. Specifically Universalis is indebted to *Alyria* by Seth Ben-Ezra, *Wyrd* by Scott Knipe, and *The Questing Beast* by James West for many of the concepts found herein.

Universalis has also been inspired by games like *Story Engine*, *Once Upon a Time*, and *Aria Worlds*.

You can find The Forge at: [www.indie-rpgs.com](http://www.indie-rpgs.com)

We also want to thank all of those individuals who played Universalis while it was under development, especially those from our playtest forum on The Forge: Abby Buchanan, Lael Buchanan, Chris Chinn, Jeremiah J. Davis, Nadav Gordon, Sarrah Heathcock, Ivan Lindstrom, Pam Lindstrom, and Robert Pickering.

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All of the fantastic art in this book is by David Hedgecock and is used by permission. You can contact David at: [therabbithole@cox.net](mailto:therabbithole@cox.net). Or visit his home page at: <http://members.cox.net/therabbithole>.

Graphic design and layout in this book is by Matt Snyder. Contact him at [matt@chimera.info](mailto:matt@chimera.info) and check out his site: [www.chimera.info](http://www.chimera.info).



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And finally I dedicate this to Ruth, my life partner, whose tolerance and encouragement for my obsession with this weird hobby of gaming is more than I could ask for.

Mike would also like to say that he is very grateful to have been part of this project, and that he'd like to thank his family and especially his wife Marjorie for her patience during the process.

Universalis has come a long way from an initial discussion Mike and I had with Seth about giving players explicit control over setting in Alyria. While he didn't use that idea for Alyria, it got Mike and I started on a year long journey. The initial game of Universalis was nothing more than the framework of an old traditional RPG project I had set aside years ago with an early version of the Coin mechanics added on to give players tremendous ability to manipulate aspects of the game world usually reserved for the Game Master. Gradually over 7 complete rewrites the game morphed (largely on its own) into something that barely resembles what we started with and doesn't even really address our initial design goals. That's ok, because while I think Universalis has become something very different, I also believe it is a much better game than it was. Besides, that original windmill is still there for the tilting should we decide to make another run at it.

Universalis Web Site: <http://universalis.actionroll.com>



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE BASIC CONCEPT

Conceptually, Universalis is a collaborative story telling endeavor in the form of a game. Players begin by selecting what kind of story will be told during that session. No time needs to be spent preparing this ahead of time. It is decided at the table in round robin fashion, using Coins to purchase aspects of the game world as desired. When all players are satisfied that they understand the nature of the game to be played, actual play begins. Players will create all aspects of the setting, including all characters (main and supporting), all locations (and all setting details), and all props (basically anything else, animal vegetable or mineral). They will then use these elements (collectively called Components) to develop the plot; telling the story through events and dialog and through the use of dice during plot complications.

All players have equal authority over the direction the game will go. There is no designated “Game Master” as there is in most Role Playing Games. Technically one could say that all players serve as joint Game Masters with their respective authority being measured and regulated in the game through the use of Coins.

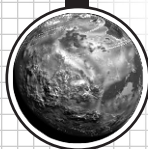
A finished game may be left as a complete project on its own, or players may revisit that same setting with new tales to tell. Future games may gradually build up an entire world or cycle of stories, which reuse existing Components from previous games.

### COINS MEASURE STORY POWER

Coins are the resource that quantifies and regulates how much control each player will have to 1) define the setting by Creating Components and 2) to move the story in the direction they prefer through Events. If you spend Coins, you gain power over the story. Its that simple.

Chapter 4 discusses how these Coins are used to Create Components. Chapter 5 discusses using these Coins to establish scenes and Events.

Stones, tokens, or actual pocket change can be used to represent these Coins. The supply of Coins a player has available to him is called his Wealth. Players will spend these Coins and earn additional ones throughout the game, so a central reserve of Coins (the



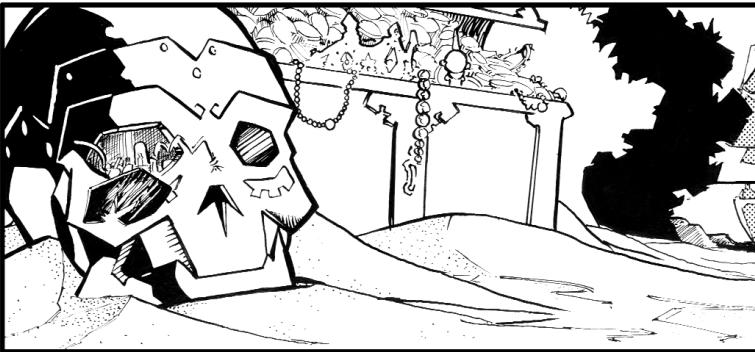
Bank) is required. Players will receive a certain number of Coins at the beginning of each game. How many is up to the individual playgroup to decide.

○ There are two ways to get additional Coins:

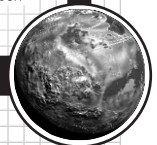
- 1) at the end of each scene, Coins will be awarded through Refreshment.
- 2) by Originating Plot Complications, players will have the opportunity to win additional Coins

The Coin mechanic sets up a miniature economy in the game which functions regardless of the number of Coins involved. However, different amounts of Coins will result in a different feel to play (a Coin rich vs. a Coin poor environment), and players are encouraged to experiment until finding the level they find most enjoyable. In general, a game with high initial Coins will allow players to spend many Coins building the environment in the first scene before getting to the action. A game with fewer initial Coins will require getting to the action earlier because only by starting new scenes and Originating Complications can more Coins be acquired. A game with a low Refreshment rate will encourage players to have more frequent Complications as a way of earning more Coins. A game with a high Refreshment rate provides less encouragement for using Complications in this manner.

It is suggested that initially players start with 25 Coins each and Refreshment be set at 5 Coins per scene, until players become familiar with the rules. After a few sessions, groups can adjust this amount to find a level that suits their style of play. The number of Coins to be



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used must be chosen before the Game Preparation Phase begins.

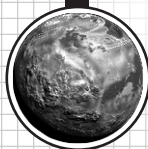
### CONTROL, AUTHORITY, AND SETTLING DISPUTES

There are four mechanisms in the game for maintaining organization and settling disputes between players. The first is the Social Contract which is discussed in Chapter 2. This is basically a pre-game agreement between players about how the game is to be played. Chapter 3 introduces rules for play order and regulations for who gets to say what and when. Chapter 3 also discusses the Challenge mechanic which is how disputes between players are resolved if they cannot be settled by other means. Finally and most importantly, authority resides with the Coins themselves. A player's Wealth is a reserve of potential, but as yet unused, authority. As Coins are spent to gain immediate control over an aspect of the world, the player is simultaneously giving up some potential for control in the future. This dynamic, and the need to replace spent Coins is what drives the game forward.

### FACTS: AS TRAITS, EVENTS, AND TENETS

Facts are a crucial core concept to Universalis. Each type will be described in detail in later chapters, but each has several things in common. Each defines some aspect of the game or story, each costs 1 Coin, each provides added weight to Challenges, and each can provide 1 die to appropriate Complications.

- **Traits:** Facts purchased for Components (described in Chapter 4)
- **Events:** Facts purchased for scenes (described in Chapter 5)
- **Tenets:** Facts purchased for the game itself (described in Chapter 2)



# CHAPTER TWO

## GAME PREPARATION

**B**efore any game of Universalis can begin, players must have some idea of what kind of story they desire to tell. Universalis has no established setting and is not designed with any specific genre in mind. It is a toolbox, which the players use to craft a story of their own liking through play. But before you begin using any tool, you have to know what sort of project you're using it for. Game preparation occurs at the table with all players participating. A series of Tenets will be defined which establish the parameters for the upcoming game.

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### TENETS

Tenets are Facts which define the game, what type of world it will be set in, what type of story is about to be told in it, how players prefer to play, and what special rules may be used.

At the beginning of the game, the starting player is determined by any means desired (age, seat position, seniority, volunteer, etc.). That player must either pay 1 Coin to propose a game Tenet or he must pass. Play proceeds clockwise around the table with each player paying 1 Coin to propose a Tenet or passing. Once all of the players are satisfied with the Tenets that have been drafted (i.e. all players have passed), actual play (as described in Chapter 3) begins. This should only occur after enough Tenets have been accepted to give all players a pretty solid idea about what type of game is about to be played and how they (as a group) have consented to play it.

Sometimes it is enjoyable to plunge into a game with only a minimum of prepared Tenets. This usually leads to a very chaotic and often silly, but sometimes extremely liberating and enjoyable experience. For a more "serious" and hopefully deeper game, players are encouraged to spend as much time as necessary establishing Tenets thoroughly.

- There are 3 types of Tenets that can be proposed: Story Elements, Social Contract issues, and Rule Gimmicks
- Each player may propose one and only one Tenet on any single turn and doing so costs 1 Coin.

This rule remains true for the entire game, so that at any time during the game a player can spend 1 Coin to propose 1 Tenet (and



no more than one) on his turn.

This process is called “proposing” a Tenet because the player’s choice is not carved in stone. Anything a player says or does during the game is subject to being Challenged by another player who disagrees with him or thinks he has a better idea. The Challenge mechanic is explained in Chapter 3. Unless there is a Challenge, however, the player’s proposal is presumed accepted and becomes part of the structure of the game. In game terms each accepted Tenet is considered to be a Fact attached to the game itself. It is possible to propose a change to a previously accepted Tenet, but with the original Tenet serving as a Fact, it becomes easier to Challenge the proposed change and prevent it from being accepted (see Chapter 3 for details).

## STORY ELEMENTS

Story Elements are any aspects about the upcoming story that a player wants to define in advance. They provide direction to all of the players as to what type of story all players should be attempting to tell. Story Elements include specifications about genre, theme, premise, settings, situations, mood (including atmosphere and tone), and degree of realism. They may include using the rules in Chapter 4 to define specific characters or locations that a player wishes to make central to the upcoming story. Defining these items in advance leads to a more coherent story. Having all players participate in their creation and accept them (any Tenet, including Story Elements, can be challenged) helps ensure that everyone is clear about the nature of the upcoming story.

Lets introduce five players who will be part of our ongoing game play examples: Albert, Bob, Christine, Dave, and Ed who are sitting around the game table in that order. Albert starts off.

**Albert:** Lets play a science fiction game tonight. [Albert proposes a genre for 1 Coin]

**Bob:** Ok, but no space ships...I'm sick of space ships. [Bob proposes a limit to the setting for 1 Coin]

**Christine:** Hmmm, I was actually looking forward to something more fantasy tonight...how about if we do sci-fi, but with a real fantasy flair? [Christine is informally polling the other players about how likely they are to Challenge her upcoming proposal]

**Albert:** Like what? [Albert's not sure he likes where this is going]

**Christine:** Well, like that famous quote “Any technology suffi-



ciently advanced is indistinguishable from magic". So we do all of the trappings of sci-fi, but don't worry about all of the actual science making sense, the technology can be more fantastic, more magical, like the people who use it don't really understand how it works. [this exchange is technically referred to as Negotiation in the Challenge mechanic]

**Bob:** So, just like Star Trek then [everybody laughs]

**Christine:** Well...

**Ed:** Yeah, we get it, lets go with that, and see what happens [everybody nods in assent so Christine pays 1 Coin, Negotiation was successful, so there was no need for a full Challenge]

**Dave:** My turn. Lets see, how about we include a lot of animals mixed in with the technology, like how in Star Wars they still ride dewbacks and tauntauns and such. [nobody Challenges, so Dave pays 1 Coin]

**Ed:** Ok, interesting. But here's a twist, the people are all really small, like just a couple inches tall, so the animals they use are just regular size small animals like mice and lizards and such.

**Bob:** What, small like Smurfs?!

**Ed:** Yeah, only really high tech...and not blue with silly hats, of course.

**Christine:** Ok, but not lizards, I hate reptiles. [Its not Christine's turn, so she isn't establishing this as one of the Tenets of the game world. At this point she's signaling the other player's that she's likely to Challenge things involving lizards. She could propose the "no lizards" rule as a Tenet for 1 Coin on her turn]

**Ed:** Fine, lizards can be the enemy then or something [Ed pays 1 Coin for the little people, he can only propose 1 Tenet per turn, so he cannot add the "lizards as the enemy" Tenet on this turn, although he likely will in a later turn]

And so it continues, until the groundwork for the game is completely laid.

## SOCIAL CONTRACT ISSUES

The Social Contract can be one of the most important aspects of the game. It is not always necessary to define each aspect of the Social Contract as a formal Tenet although this may be especially



desirable if playing with a new group. Many established groups have played with each other so long that the major Social Contract issues are automatically assumed, even if they've never been explicitly stated. Other times, for quick pick up games that aren't meant to be serious, potential areas of friction can be largely ignored and basic rules of etiquette relied upon. However, even for the most established groups spending some time talking about the game and how players expect each other to play it, can be a valuable exercise.

Basically, the Social Contract is an agreement between the players as to how they want to play the game. Every play group has its own style of play and every player his own desires for how he enjoys experiencing his games and what he hopes to get out of them. By discussing these in advance and reaching some consensus about what is and isn't acceptable before play starts, groups can avoid many of the conflicts that lead to group dysfunction. By treating these as explicit game Tenets that are proposed and accepted, the players are formally agreeing to certain boundaries in their play. Such Tenets may include questions of pacing, outside distractions, table talk, and how closely players are expected to adhere to the tropes of a particular genre

The group dynamic issues found in the Social Contract are hardly unique to Universalis. In fact, not only do we encourage using this concept in every role playing game, it is one we borrowed ourselves. However, in the absence of a GM to run interference, settle differences and "rule from on-high by GM fiat" it is not just useful but crucial to establish these parameters in advance.

Returning to our example

**Christine:** You know how in that other game we were playing with Steve as the GM he used to raise his hand as a signal for everyone else to get quiet and stop kibitzing. I think that worked pretty well. The person whose turn it is should raise his hand to get everyone's attention, and everyone else has to stop gabbing when he does. [1 Coin for a Tenet addressing Table Talk]

**Dave:** And no cell phones. Bob, last week was totally ridiculous, you got like 1000 calls. Really distracting. I say turn all the phones and pagers and stuff off, and we can check our messages at the next break. [1 Coin for a Tenet addressing outside distractions]



Ed: And no Monty Python jokes...at all...by anyone. [1 Coin for a Tenet that should be in every game ever played]

## RULES GIMMICKS

Rules Gimmick is the term Universalis gives to what are essentially optional rules created on the fly to address a specific game issue or player concern. Should a player wish to develop a situation where no current rule reflects the effects or environment he is after, he has only to introduce a Rules Gimmick to cover it.

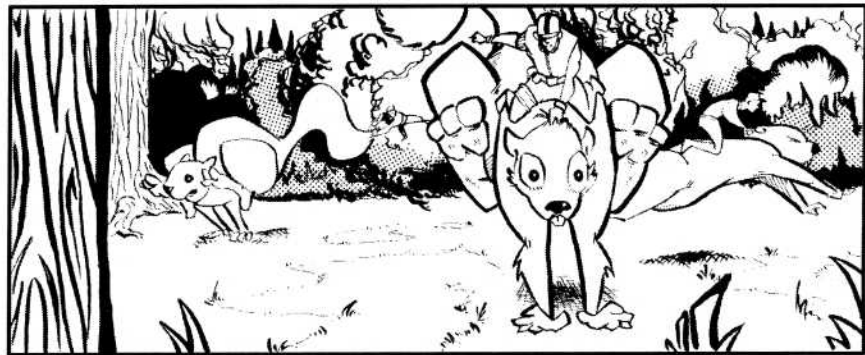
A player may wish to create special effects pertaining to the use or effects of die rolls that aren't covered in the basic rules. He may desire adding more simulative detail than the usual Complication rules include. Rules Gimmicks can be used to accomplish this. Any situation where a player wishes to say "if this roll results in X, then Y will happen" is possible within Universalis using Rules Gimmicks. Other special rules may not involve dice at all, but no matter what it is, if the rule isn't already written, players can write it on the fly as a Rules Gimmick.

Gimmicks are introduced like any other Tenet. Pay 1 Coin to define the Gimmick and if no one Challenges successfully, it's the rule. Players may make suggestions to the rule as part of the Challenge Negotiation process. This can include modifying the way the rule works, asking that it take more than 1 Coin to use, or limiting its use to just this one scene. The proposing player is free to refuse or adopt these as desired, depending on how confident he feels about winning a Challenge.

In our ongoing example of play, several diminutive characters were confronted with a dangerous spider. The pint size heroes manage to escape from the clutches of the dreaded spider, but not without injury. Albert Creates a famous hermit doctor who makes his home in an abandoned squirrel nest high in an old oak tree. Both the doctor and the nest home are Created using the normal rules for Creating Components found in Chapter 4. As the scene nears the end, Albert has the doctor present the group with a medical kit to take with them.

Albert Creates the Medical Kit with the following Traits: Med-Kit, Easily Portable, Requires no skill to use, Heals Burns, Heals Cuts and Scrapes, Heals Broken Bones. (See Chapter 4 for clarification of Traits). Ordinarily this Component would cost 6 Coins (1 for each Trait), but Albert wants the kit to only be able to be used a few times before





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Thinking fast, the team of meadow heroes escapes the raging forest fire by clinging to the backs of fleeing squirrels.

it is gone. Universalis has no rules for limiting usage (as for doses, ammo, charges, or fuel, etc) so Albert decides a Rules Gimmick is in order. For 1 Coin he proposes that each time one of the Healing abilities is used it will remove 1 wound Trait caused by the appropriate source but is itself crossed off (wounds are simply Traits like any other that serve to hinder the injured party). Albert feels this limitation should make the Med-Kit cost only 1/3 as much as it ordinarily would, or in this case 2 Coins. No one Challenges his logic, and so Albert adds 2 more Heal Traits of each type for 2 more Coins (6 total Traits at 1/3 Coin) for a total of 4 Coins.

In another example, Christine has just finished narrating an exciting scene where the heroes are clinging to the backs of squirrels, racing to escape a forest fire. There are a couple more things she wants to do before closing the scene but she's found she's run out of Coins.

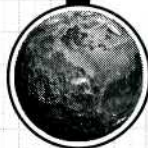
**Albert:** No problem, how many do you need Christine

**Christine:** Oh, about 4 should do it I think.

**Albert:** Here you go.

**Dave:** Wait a minute, you can't give Coins away like that, its not in the rules

**Albert:** Ok, here's 1 Coin for a Rules Gimmick that says you can loan Coins to another player if that player agrees to pay back double next time they receive Coins...any Challenges? Christine you agree to that? Great, here are your 4 Coins, pay me back 8 when you get them.



# CHAPTER THREE

## TURN ORDER & GAME FLOW

Several of the items mentioned here will be described in greater detail in later chapters. They are introduced here to give players a feel for how game play progresses so that the techniques and activities described in those chapters can be put into better context.

All play occurs within scenes. One player will frame the scene which all players will have the opportunity to participate in. Players will narrate the Events and actions of the scene both during their own turns and by Interrupting the turns of other players.

---

### FRAMING SCENES

#### BID FOR NEXT SCENE

When one scene has ended, the player's first receive a small Refreshment of Coins (see below). They then bid for the privilege of framing the next one. Each player (including the player whose turn just ended) makes a secret bid (Coins from Wealth concealed in the hand) which is then revealed simultaneously. Losing bids are withdrawn, the winning bid remains on the table. It is possible for the same player to frame consecutive scenes if they win the bid. In the Event of a tie, the player sitting closest to the left of the player who framed the last scene wins.

If no one bids, the first player to the left of the last framing player (i.e. clockwise) is declared the winner and must then bid at least 1 Coin. If this player has no Coins, proceed to the first clockwise player who does.

Christine ends her scene with the squirrel riding heroes leaping from branch to branch across a river to safety. Each player receives a small Refreshment of Coins. They then bid to see which of them will frame the next scene. Each player secretly selects a number of Coins for their bid and holds them in their hand out over the table. Albert's hand was empty, he bid zero because he didn't have a good idea for a new scene. Bob bid 4 Coins, he has a pretty good idea he wants to try. Christine bid zero because she doesn't have many Coins, just the few she received from Refreshment (and, in fact, owes Albert 8).



Dave also bid 4. Ed bids 3.

Bob and Dave are tied with a bid of 4 Coins each. Dave is sitting immediately clockwise from Christine, so he wins the tie. Bob and Ed both return their bids to their Wealth. Dave leave his out on the table to be spent during the upcoming scene.

### WINNING THE BID:

The player who wins the bid gets to Frame the next scene, he is called the Framing Player. His winning bid remains in front of him on the table and can be used throughout the scene. Any Coins from this bid that are not used before the scene ends are lost to the bank.

The Framing Player must frame a scene as described in Chapter 5. He must Establish a location for the scene, Set the time, and Introduce any desired characters or props into it. He may, if he wishes, simply extend and continue the previous scene. The Framing Player cannot be Interrupted until the location and time are set and at least 1 character is Introduced.

Dave, having won the bid for turn, now sets about framing the new scene.

**Dave:** Ok, the scene cuts and we are now in the central throne room of the Slytheran Queen, sworn enemy of the Meadow People [This Establishes Location and costs 1 Coin. The Slytheran are a race of diminutive reptilian people who serve as the principle villain of the story. Both the Slytheran people and the Queen were Created during earlier play.]

Its shortly after the heroes escaped from the fire [Setting the time consecutive to the previous scene costs nothing].

The Queen, and 3 of her Generals are discussing plans to invade the Meadow [Introducing characters into the scene costs 1 Coin each. The Queen is an existing character and so brings with her all of her existing Traits. The 3 Generals are new. They cost 1 Coin each to Create them into the scene which gives them nothing but a basic Role Trait (currently just Generals #1, #2, and #3). The discussion of plans is actually an Event which itself costs a Coin. The defining of the first Event ends the framing part of the scene, and begins regular play. Dave continues with his turn but can now be Interrupted.]



## ENDING THE SCENE

Only the Framing Player can formally end the scene (although he can be Challenged to get him to do so). He can do this any time on his turn (except while being Interrupted) by simply declaring the scene to be over. The next scene is then bid for as above. Ending a scene costs nothing.

- The player may choose to pay 1 Coin when ending a scene to "Fade to Black"

Fading to Black prevents the next Framing Player from extending the scene or returning to it at any point in the future. This may be desirable if the player feels he has ended the scene in a suitably dramatic fashion and doesn't want another player dragging it out. Like anything else in the game, "Fade to Black" can be Challenged by any player who feels it inappropriate.

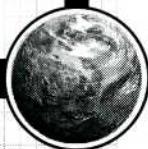
## REFRESHMENT

Refreshment occurs immediately following the end of each scene. This is true even if the new scene is a continuation of the previous one. All players receive a set number of Coins from the Bank. It is suggested that starting groups use 5 Coins as the Refreshment amount, but each group is encouraged to experiment and find an amount they find most appealing (Rules Gimmicks are a great way to handle this)

Returning to Christine's earlier scene involving the forest fire and the squirrels, we can see that after using her last 4 Coins to narrate the harrowing escape across the river, she declared the scene over. She, and all of the other players receive 5 Coins from the Bank.

## PLAYER TURNS

All scenes have a formal beginning and a formal ending. In between there will be many player turns as players take their actions and Interrupt each other to narrate some element of the story. The Framing Player essentially has the first turn which begins as soon as the scene is framed. When a player is done with their turn (because they do not want or can not afford to do anything further) they end their turn and play proceeds to the next player in clockwise order. Note: ending ones turn is not the same thing as ending the scene.



**INTERRUPTION**

A player can Interrupt another player's turn by spending 1 Coin to do so. Play passes to the Interrupting player and proceeds clockwise from there when he is done, unless he is also Interrupted.

- Interrupting a turn costs 1 Coin

These rules provide a good deal of structure as to whose turn it is and what they get to do on their turn. However, in practice players will find turns evolve in very free form fashion. A player may spend some time narrating a scene until a second player Interrupts. That player just adds a single Event and then ends his turn. The next player begins his turn until Interrupted by the fourth who begins narrating his own ideas, until the first player Interrupts him to start a Complication. In other words, a player's turn is not sacrosanct. While a player has the power to author and direct the story in any way he sees fit during his turn, his turn is always subject to Interruptions by other players seeking to do the same thing. In this way suspense is maintained because no player can ever really be sure what's about to happen or why.

The player being Interrupted can complete whatever immediate narration he was doing (i.e. he can't be stopped in mid sentence) but cannot continue with his turn beyond that immediate action. He is, of course, free to spend a Coin to Interrupt and take the turn right back.

The only time a player cannot be Interrupted is when they have won the bid for turn and are engaged in framing the scene. Until the location, time, and principal Components present have been announced, the Framing Player is immune to Interruption. Once those three items have been established, he is no longer immune.

Dave has continued to narrate his scene in the Queen's throne room when he is Interrupted by Ed.

**INTERRUPT PRIORITY**

In the Event that multiple Interruptions happen at the same time, precedence is given to the player sitting closest to the Interrupted player's left.

This precedence even trumps players who clearly declared Interruption first. The purpose of this rule is to prevent Interruptions from becoming a speed contest to see who can Interrupt first. Regardless of who's first, the player closest to the current player's left always gets priority.



**Ed:** I'm Interrupting you [for 1Coin. Dave finishes his last thought, but can spend no further Coins].

As the planning continues, a scout rushes into the throne room and dismounts to give his report [This costs 1 Coin to Create the scout as a new character with the Role Trait of "Scout". Note: the cost would have been the same if Ed were Introducing an existing scout character into the scene.

"My Queen" he says "the fire was set as per your orders, however, I regret to inform you that we believe the Meadow spies managed to escape across the River" [This costs 1 Coin for the Event of having the scout deliver his report to the Queen and 1 Coin for the Fact about the fire having been set by the Slytheran.]

There are a couple things of note here. First, during Christine's forest fire scene, she had never established the origins of the fire. Ed has interrupted this scene to establish that the fire was intentionally set by the evil Slytheran who will stop at nothing to kill the Meadow People. Second, since Ed now Controls the Scout and Dave still Controls the Queen (see the section on Control below), Ed and Dave can speak to each other in the voice of those characters using the Dialog rules (also found below).

## MINI SCENES

When a player takes his turn during a scene, he may temporarily change the scene in order to describe events happening elsewhere. Ordinarily, especially if this other scene is to be an elaborate one, the player would wait for the current scene to end, and then bid enough to win the next scene and describe the events then. However, sometimes the desired scene is too small to be worth bidding many Coins on to ensure winning the bid; and sometimes the information the player desires to convey would lose its impact if not conveyed right then. When this is the case, the player may make use of a Mini Scene.

A Mini Scene must be Framed exactly as described above for any other scene, this includes immunity from Interruption during the actual Framing. The player must Establish Location, Set the Time (most often either concurrently with the main scene, or in the past



as a flash back), and Introduce characters.

The Mini Scene must be ended when the players turn ends (either by ending it himself, or through Interruption) and there is no Refreshment received for it. Unless the player paid a Coin to Fade to Black, however, the mini scene can be picked up again and continued either as another mini scene, or as a regular full scene after bidding.

Ed has ended his turn, so play continues with Albert.

**Albert:** Ok, I'm declaring a Mini Scene, flashing back to the origin of the forest fire [this costs 1 Coin for the Location where the fire began, and 1 Coin for setting the scene in the past (see Chapter 5 for more details on framing into the past)]

Present are a team of Slytheran [1 Coin for Creating the entire team as a character (see Chapter 4 for more details on creating groups as single Components)]

...and Jerek the Sparrow Rider [1 Coin for Introducing Jerek into the scene. Jerek is an existing character who has as a Trait the fact that he was "Exiled by the Meadow People" years ago. He also has as a Trait, "possession of the sparrow 'Fright'" which he rides. This allows the sparrow (which has been defined as a separate Component) to be Introduced into the Scene automatically for free (see Chapter 4 for more details on using Traits to express possession)]

Jerek observes the Slytheran start the fire and trails them as their scouts follow the Meadow People heroes as they flee. [1 Coin for the Event of Jerek observing the activity, 1 Coin for Introducing the Scouts into the scene. 1 Coin to follow them. The flight of the heroes has already been described in Christine's earlier scene]

That's the end of my turn [Albert ends his turn. He's managed to tie the roguish character Jerek to the events of the story with this scene. Perhaps in another scene one of the players will describe Jerek flying in to give aid to the heroes, potentially earning redemption for his past, as yet unspecified, crimes]



## HAVING CHARACTERS AND OTHER COMPONENTS INTERACT

### CONTROL

A player Controls any Component that he Introduces into a scene (either existing or newly Created). This Control does not last beyond the end of the scene. When a new scene is framed, the Framing Player gains Control of whichever Components he Introduces. If the new scene extends or returns to an existing previous scene, the new Framing Player gains control of any Components that are already there regardless of who Controlled them previously.

A player can narrate Events (see Chapter 5) which affect, manipulate, alter, or even destroy any Component which is under his Control. He may add Traits or remove them from a Component he Controls. He may not directly do these things to any Component which is not under his Control (including adding Traits).

There are four things a player can do with a Component that is not under his Control: Take it Over, engage it in Dialog (if its capable of such), involve it in a Complication, or (if already involved in a Complication) Draw upon one or more of its Traits to add dice to one of the Dice Pools in the Complication.

### AN IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT CONTROL

When thinking about Control, it is important to distinguish between player turns and framing scenes, and between Controlling and Creating Components.

When a player frames a new scene that is a continuation of a previous scene, he automatically gains Control (at no cost) of any Components that are already present. When a player takes a new turn in an existing scene, he does not. Taking a turn is not the same thing as framing a scene. Taking a turn is merely participating in the current scene.

There are two ways of gaining Control over a Component during a scene. Either you Introduced that Component, or you took it over from another player.

Also, Creating a Component does not confer any special advantage regarding Control. If you Introduced the Component into a scene by Creating it from scratch, then you have Control over it by way of the Introduction. However, Control of subsequent scenes is determined irrespective of who initially Created the Component. Who Created the Component has no impact on the game.



## TAKE OVERS

- Control of a Component can be taken from another player by paying 1 Coin.

Control can change hands multiple times in a scene in this manner. It is possible for Control to be immediately taken back (also for a Coin); and two players intent on Controlling the same Component may spend Coins back and forth until one player yields. Note that this is very similar to the Challenge mechanic explained below. Players are essentially Challenging one another for Control.

It does not have to be your turn to in order to Take Over a Component, nor does taking over a Component make it your turn. In fact, a common use is to Take Over a Component during another player's turn for the express purpose of setting up a Complication. In this use, a Take Over can occur after a player has declared an Event or activity but before it has been functionally carried out. By Taking Over a Component involved at that time, the player has turned the Event or activity into a Complication (see below and Chapter 6).

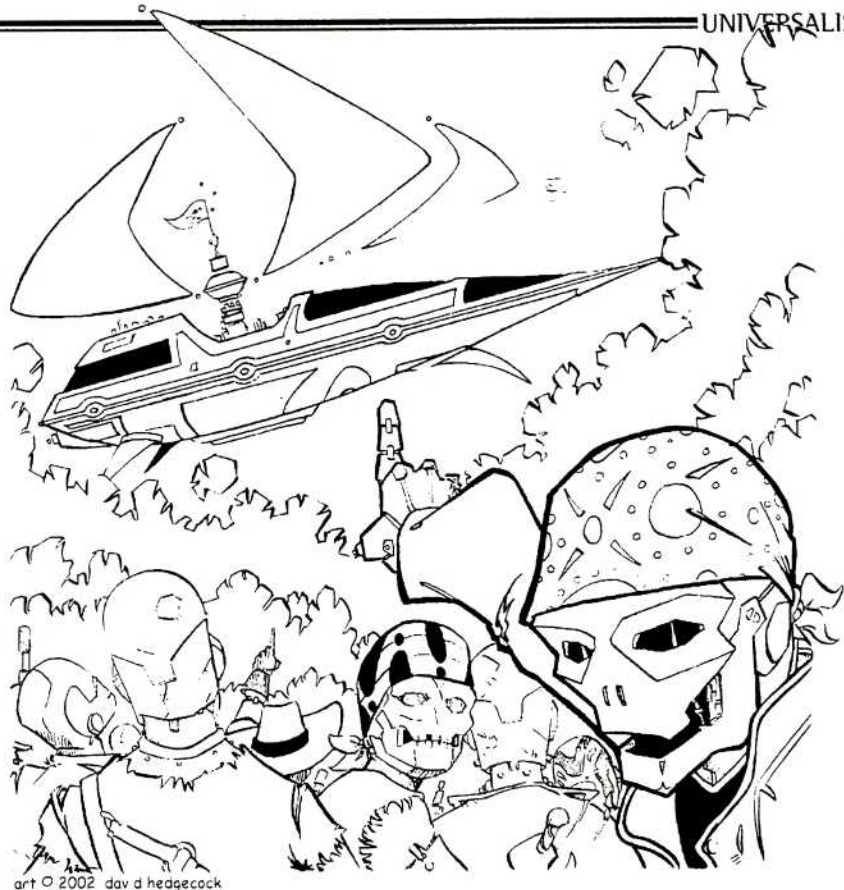
In our example, it is now Bob's turn (following Albert's mini scene). He decides to Take Over the character General #2 for 1 Coin. Control of this character now passes from Dave, who'd originally Introduced him, to Bob.

## DIALOG

Because Universalis does not involve traditional player characters, opportunities to speak in the voice of your character may not be as common. Much of the action in Universalis is described in the third person, including conversations like "Joe asks the bartender where he might find Tom Slick". This is common practice in novels where not every word a character speaks is actually said inside of quotation marks. However, there may be times when an actual dialog between characters in first person is dramatically important or just entertaining ("Yes Luke, I am your father"). This rule allows for that.

Normally, when a player attempts to interact or manipulate a character he doesn't control, the result would be a Complication. However, if the interaction involves a character he does control attempting to speak with a character he doesn't, Dialog can be the result instead. Note that if one of the players doesn't desire dialog he can force the Event into Complication and the winner can narrate the conversation third person as desired. However, if both



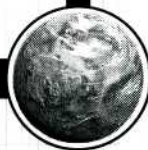


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players are willing, Dialog can be a powerful story tool. Players are free to Take Over characters and enter into Dialog in the same way as they'd Take Over Components to cause a Complication. A Player may even ask for volunteers to Take Over a Component that he's currently in Control of in order to engage in Dialog.

The rules of Dialog are simple. A player initiates a Dialog as an Event for 1 Coin and can end it at any time and continue with his ordinary turn. If the other character still has more to say, that player can, of course, Interrupt and use his turn to start up the Dialog again. Other activity (such as describing Events going on around the conversation) can be narrated by the player who's currently speaking without breaking the Dialog. Essentially, in game terms, each back and exchange of dialog is treated as a free Interruption.

After that, each player is free to speak in the voice of the charac-



ter he is Controlling, in first person, responding to the conversations as he believes the character would. Much of what is said will not have to be paid for and the players are free to converse. However, significant items that are said should be purchased as Facts. Note that if a character says "the treasure can be found on Castaway Island" that the relevant Fact is not that the treasure can be found on Castaway Island, but that the character said it could be found there. The character could be mistaken or lying. See the "Other Details" section of Chapter 5 for more ideas about what might be worth paying for from a Dialog.

Note: because of the potential for powerful story development, it is suggested (although not required) that other players avoid Interrupting in the middle of a first person Dialog, unless it is particularly dramatic to do so.

Having taken over General #2, Bob decides to enter into Dialog with the Queen who is still Controlled by Dave. The scout character, also present in the scene is still Controlled by Ed.

**Bob:** General Frederich von Stuben addresses the Queen [The General Trait has already been bought as a Role for this character by Dave, here Bob is assigning a proper name to him to replace the generic placeholder " #2". This costs 1 Coin.]

Oh, by the way, we should all use Prussian sounding names for the Slytheran [This can be considered to be a Fact attached to the game world itself that "Slytheran have Prussian names". Alternatively, Bob could describe it as a Rules Gimmick, requiring the special attention of the players. Either way it costs 1 Coin and can be Challenged.]

General Frederich, being quite Prudent and a Master Planner says [These two Traits cost 1 Coin each]

"My Queen, I strongly urge you to reconsider this plan. If those Meadow Spies manage to report back, the enemy will be waiting for us. Their defenses are strong, we need more time to prepare" [The plan the General refers to was part of Dave's narrative earlier in the scene. The Meadow Spies are, of course, the heroes who've managed to escape across the river, and the strong defenses were established earlier in the story. Since nothing new is being introduced there is no additional cost. Dave, however, can reply]



**Dave:** "Rubbish, the Meadow People are weakling cowards, we will overwhelm them and drive them from the forest" [again, nothing new in the dialog, but Dave decides to buy the Traits "Proud" and "Reckless Arrogance" for the Queen to describe her attitude]

**Bob:** "My Queen, if we but wait, the Meadow People will become complacent and we can strike will full surprise"

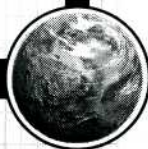
**Dave:** "If we strike now we will have full surprise! What side of the river did the spies end up on?" [Dave looks expectantly at Ed playing the Scout]

**Ed:** "The north side my Queen" [Since the exact compass direction had not been explicitly stated in the earlier scene being referred to, Ed is free to add the information as he desires. Thinking fast he remembers that the nest of the Slytheran is to the north of the Meadow, so by placing the heroes on the north side of the river, he has cleverly given them another obstacle to cross before they can get back home. He pays 1 Coin for this new Fact.]

**Dave:** "Excellent" addressing General #1, the queen says "make sure those spies don't make it back to the Meadow in time to raise the alarm" the General (being unquestioningly loyal) says "at your command my Queen" clicks his heels together smartly and leaves to carry out the order) [Here Dave has engaged in Dialog with General #1 who is also under his Control, so he is free to fill in both sides of the conversation. Dave pays 1 Coin to make the order official and 1 Coin to exit General #1 from the scene. He also pays 1 Coin to add the Trait "Unquestioningly Loyal" and another for the Trait "Dressed Smartly" to General #1]

"General von Stuben, I'll hear no more of delays, make ready the Dread Cannons" [here Dave addresses Ed and pays 1 Coin for the Dread Cannons...an intimidating sounding weapon that as yet no one knows anything about because Dave just made them up]

**Ed:** "as you command, my Queen" [Ed says clueing in to how Dave wants the queen addressed based on Dave's earlier dialog with himself]



### COMPLICATIONS

Players are free to define any Event that is caused by any Component under their control, and they can apply any effect (including adding, removing, or restoring Traits) to any Component that they Control. However, if they attempt to involve a Component that they do not Control in any of these things, they've Originated a Complication. Complications are described in Chapter 6.

Complications can also be the result of another player placing an Obstacle into the scene. This can happen any time a player defines an Event (even one involving his own Components) that another player wishes to turn into a difficulty test. The interfering player can Buy Dice representing the difficulty involved which the current player must roll against in order to narrate the outcome as he chooses. Note that Buying Dice for an Obstacle, is conceptually identical to Creating a new Component to represent the Obstacle, buying Traits for it, and then having that Component (which you control) interact with a Target Component which you do not Control.

At this point Christine pays a Coin to Interrupt Bob's turn and Introduce Princess Altia into the scene for 1 Coin. The Princess is an existing character who has been shown to be a friend of the Meadow People and is secretly in love with one of the main characters. Christine wishes to have her desperately try to convince her mother to call off the aggression, so she decides to Originate a Complication between the Princess (Controlled by Christine) and the Queen (Controlled by Dave). Both players will form a die pool using applicable Traits present in the scene or buying them outright with Coins. Other players Controlling other characters can participate as desired. The dice are rolled and the winner of the roll will get to narrate the outcome as they see fit (by receiving a significant number of bonus Coins from the Bank). This is explained in detail in Chapter 6

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### CHALLENGES AND FINES

A Challenge is the way that players can police other players in the game. Challenges can occur for any reason. Anything a player says or does in the game can be Challenged. This can include player behaviors that are not directly game rule related but are deemed inappropriate. There are two phases to a Challenge, Negotiation and Bidding. In the Negotiation phase, if players can reach an agreeable



accord, play can continue virtually uninterrupted. Only if an accord cannot be reached does the Challenge proceed to a Bidding contest.

A player normally uses challenges on another player's turn to oppose or suggest changes to what the other player is doing.

## NEGOTIATION

To initiate a Challenge a player merely breaks into the action and raises a dissenting voice. This can be done with a formal declaration of Challenge or be as simple as "Hey wait, that doesn't make much sense". Challenges can also be used to offer suggestions for a different approach that the Challenger would like better, Such as "Hey that's great, but I think he'd be more inclined to punch the guy then sit there and take it like that".

If the acting player alters his play in a manner acceptable to the Challenger, then the Challenge ends and the acting player continues his turn. In this way, all players can take interest and collaborate in a scene, or can reign in players who are straying from the Social Contract or a desired game mood, etc, in a non-disruptive manner.

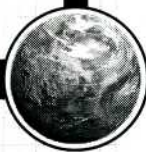
In an earlier scene, the party of Meadow Heroes had been crossing a pond in a makeshift canoe made out of a dry curled leaf and a couple of twigs, when Bob Originated a Complication involving a snapping turtle. Bob won the dice roll and used his bonus Coins to narrate the turtle overturning the boat and then snapping one of the characters, Turk Reigns, in half and devouring him (by spending Coins equal to Turk's Importance as explained in Chapter 6).

**Ed:** Wait a minute, I like Turk, he's a pretty cool character. Besides he's a special forces operative and the team needs him to get through to the Slytheran nest.

**Bob:** Its ok to have character's die, besides he has a silly name and deserves to get eaten. That's what happens when the Complication dice roll big, you should have built a bigger Dice Pool if you didn't want to lose.

**Ed:** How about this. The turtle snaps at Turk, but given his Trait of "Split Second Reflexes" he manages to jam his XR-27 Hyperblast Rifle (another Trait) in the turtle's jaws, barely escaping.

**Bob:** Ok, but the turtle snaps the rifle in half and Turk has to cross that Trait off his sheet [its removed per the rules in Chapter 6].



Since Bob and Ed have come to an accord, the cost for the Complication Resolution is recalculated to the new outcome and game play continues normally.

## BIDDING

If the acting player refuses to make changes and the Challenger wishes to insist, then the Negotiation has failed and the Bidding begins. The Bidding is a process by which all players in the game get to rule on the outcome of the Challenge by spending Coins to support whichever player they desire.

Bidding begins with the Challenger who must bid at least 1 Coin. If he is not willing to do so then the Challenge immediately ends and the acting player continues his turn. The Bidding then progresses clockwise with the exception that the acting player who is being Challenged goes last. Each player in turn bids 1 or more Coins in favor of either the Challenger or the acting player, or he can pass. Alternatively, a player could bid at least 1 Coin to start an optional solution of his own, giving the other players a new option to bid for.

The bidding continues in this manner until no player wishes to add any further Coins. The Coins are counted and the side with the most support wins. Ties go to the player being Challenged.

- If the Challenger wins, the Challenged item is adjusted accordingly. The acting player continues with his turn.
- If the Challenged player wins, he does not have to change the Challenged item. That item is immune to further Challenge, and he continues his turn.
- All Coins bid from any side go to the Bank

Suppose Bob was not willing to accept Ed's suggestion.

**Bob:** No way, Turk's buying it.

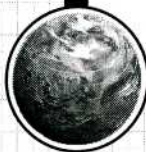
**Ed:** Ok, then, I guess I'll have to Challenge that [1 Coin. From here it goes around the table]

**Albert:** Doesn't matter to me either way, I'm not spending anything [Bob as the Challenged party gets to go last]

**Christine:** I don't like the idea of a main character dying so early, Ed's solution is just as harrowing so I Bid 1 Coin for Ed.

**Dave:** Silly name, eh? I named Turk, I don't think its such a silly name, 1 Coin for Ed.

Bob now sees 3 Coins arrayed against him. If he had a lot of extra



Coins, he'd Bid 4 and see how far the others are willing to go, he really wants Turk dead. But he doesn't have that many Coins and its hard to overcome 3 other players in a Challenge by himself, so he resigns...planning to try to kill Turk off again later. Ed's version of events wins out and the resolution cost is recalculated and play continues. The 3 Bid Coins are paid to the Bank.

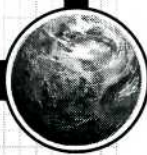
## USING FACTS IN CHALLENGES

Every Trait and every Event in the game also serves as a Fact. A Fact is defined as any piece of information that a player has established in the game and has paid a Coin for. That last is important. If a Coin wasn't spent on it, its not considered to be a Fact. The term Fact can be used interchangeably with Trait or Event or Tenet in many cases as all three involve a player making a statement and paying 1 Coin for it.

In game terms the effect of a Fact is to give additional leverage during Challenges. If an established Fact is being contradicted, any Coins spent in defense of that Fact (i.e. opposing the contradiction) are doubled for purposes of determining the winner of the Challenge, thereby making the violation more expensive. This is intentionally not the same thing as saying a Fact can never be violated. Reality and stories are rife with examples of things that were believed to be true until discovered otherwise, or two different groups fanatically believing contradictory truths.

Therefor a Fact is only absolutely true until: 1) someone pays for a different Fact that contradicts it, AND 2) no one successfully Challenges that contradiction. For example: Naomi may have been established as Sebastian's daughter; but sometime later a player decides to frame a scene "revealing" that she is actually Drake's daughter. If someone Challenges this statement, the Challenge is made with the weight of the original Fact behind it, but if no one does then the new "Fact" takes effect.

Note, that the new Fact does not always replace the old Fact, although it likely does in the above example. Instead, the incident of violation can be described as an exception to the Fact which otherwise remains in place rather than being repealed entirely. For instance: take the Fact "Nothing can travel faster then the speed of light". If someone then narrates a discovery that permits faster than light travel, it doesn't necessarily eliminate the original Fact. Instead the Fact could be modified to become "Nothing can travel faster then the speed of light, except the PanGalactic Hyperform



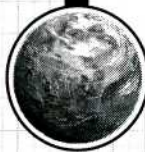


Transducer Drive". This still leaves the original Fact largely in place to Challenge other contenders.

Determining whether a Fact is replaced or modified occurs during a Challenge as part of the conditions of the Challenge. Often, a player who is willing to accept a modification rather than insist on total replacement may find he can avoid a full Challenge all together.

Any player can attempt to bring a Fact into play during a Challenge, but if there is any doubt as to its applicability a majority vote of players can determine it. If a player doesn't agree with the decision, the outcome of the vote can itself be Challenged.

- If the Challenge involves a Fact which is being contradicted, Coins spent in defense of that Fact count double.
- A Fact that is being Challenged can not be used to defend itself.



Back during the forest fire scene, before the heroes managed to escape on the backs of squirrels, Dave took a turn where he narrated several things; one of which was Marissa Tournou (one of the characters) being caught by the flames and severely burned. Christine Challenged that narrative by pointing out that one of Marissa's Traits was "Flame Retardant Jump Suit". If Dave had pressed the issue and tried to burn Marissa anyway, any Coins spent opposing him would have had their value doubled because the majority of players ruled that that suit constituted a Fact protecting Marissa from fire. Ed entered into the negotiations and suggested that a fair compromise would be for Dave to pay double Coins for whatever effects he wanted the burns to have since the suit was only Flame Retardant and did give complete protection. Ultimately Dave avoided going to bidding, by instead narrating Marissa being surrounded by flames, but thanks to the suit emerged singed but unharmed.

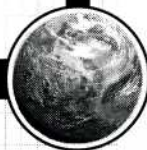
## FINES

Instead of, or following, a Challenge, a player can ask that a Fine be levied. Fines should be reserved for egregious behaviors or abuses, which are chronic, have not been solved through Negotiation, and are detracting from the enjoyment of others. The amount of the Fine will generally be fairly trivial. The point of a Fine is not to punish but to serve as a gauge of the sentiment of fellow players. A player who finds the other players united in levying a Fine has been formally requested to alter his behavior.

If a Fine is requested, both sides state their case and then all players vote thumbs up (yes a Fine should be levied) or thumbs down (no Fine is necessary).

- If the number of thumbs up is higher, the accused pays Coins equal to the thumbs up to the Bank for his undesirable behavior
- If the number of thumbs down is higher then the accuser pays Coins equal to the thumbs down to the Bank for unnecessarily asking for a Fine.
- If the thumbs are tied, there is no Fine levied against either party.

In an earlier scene Albert had described an aviary where the Meadow People keep swallows as mounts.



Dave: What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?

Ed: Monty Python violation! I call for a fine.

4 thumbs immediately went up from the players. Dave sheepishly pays 4 Coins to the Bank.

### ACTIONS YOU CAN DO ANY TIME

- Spend a Coin to Interrupt and begin your own turn
- Spend a Coin to Interrupt and Originate a Complication
- Take Over a Component in the scene for 1 Coin
- Initiate a Challenge. Bid Coins if necessary
- Engage in dialog for a character you Control.

### ACTIONS YOU CAN DO ONLY ON YOUR TURN

- 1) Scene Narration Activity (Chapter 4)
  - Establish or change the scene's location to a new or existing location for 1 Coin
  - Introduce an existing Component into the scene for 1 Coin.
  - Exit a Component from a scene for 1 Coin.
  - Describe an Event for 1 Coin.
- 2) World Building Activity (Chapter 5)
  - Create a new Component and Introduce it into the scene or not for 1 Coin.
  - Add, Remove, or Restore a Trait for 1 Coin per Trait.
  - Reduce or Restore Importance for 1 Coin per Level.
- 3) Game Tenet Activity (Chapter 2)
  - Propose a new or modify an existing Social Contract issue for 1 Coin
  - Propose a new or modify an existing Story Element for 1 Coin
  - Propose a new or modify an existing Rules Gimmick for 1 Coin.
- 4) Complication Activity (Chapter 6)
  - Originate a Complication with one or more Components you do not Control
  - Draw on a Trait to add dice to a Complication Dice Pool
  - Buy Dice (and justify the purchase) for a Complication Dice Pool for 1 Coin apiece
  - Roll the dice, determine the winner, and spend or keep Bonus Coins



# CHAPTER FOUR

## CREATING COMPONENTS

There are three broad types of Components: characters, locations, and props (people places and things). Characters are the most important Components of any story and range from great heroes and villains, to antiheroes, to supporting cast, down to extras. Locations can be thought of as stage sets. They are the backdrops for the action. Props are everything else. They can be physical objects, like a car or sword or valuable oil painting. They can also be intangibles like religions, ideologies, organizations, etc. Basically, if it is a noun it can be Created as a Component in the game.

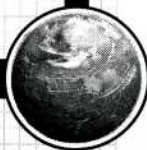
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### TRAITS

Each Component is defined by a set of Traits. A Component does not exist in the game until a Trait has been purchased for it. Traits are Facts purchased for Components, and as such are the basic building blocks of the game world. Anything that is notable or significant about a Component can be defined as a Trait. "Strong", "Likes the Ladies", "Devout Buddhist" can all be Traits for a character. Likewise a river can be "Deep" and "Cold", a sword "Perfectly Balanced", a bar could be "the place where everybody knows your name". Traits can be virtually any word or phrase that describe a feature or characteristic of the Component, or which provides information about the Component that would be useful in the game.

Traits serve 3 purposes in Universalis.

1. First they provide all players with a gauge of what the Component is like and how it should be used in the story.
2. Second they provide the Component with Importance. Importance is explained below but basically the more Coins that have been spent to buy Traits for a Component, the more Important the Component is to the story.
3. Third they can be Drawn upon to provide dice to roll in Complications.



- The first Trait that is purchased for any Component should be its role.
- Adding 1 Trait to a Component costs 1 Coin
- A Component's Importance equals its number of Traits

Later in the game, while the heroes are attempting to make their way back to the Meadow, Albert stages a Mini Scene where he cuts to a scene of the Slytheran army advancing slowly but inexorably towards the Meadow. As part of the Mini Scene, Albert decides to flesh out the dreaded Doom Cannons. Dave had Created the Doom Cannons for 1 Coin, which in game terms bought a Role for the Component of "Doom Cannons".

### BUYING THE SAME TRAIT MULTIPLE TIMES

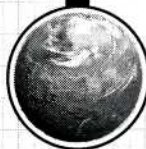
A player can buy the same trait multiple times for a Component. This can be done to indicate a particular advantage in that trait. This can be recorded with a simple x2, or x3 after the Trait name.

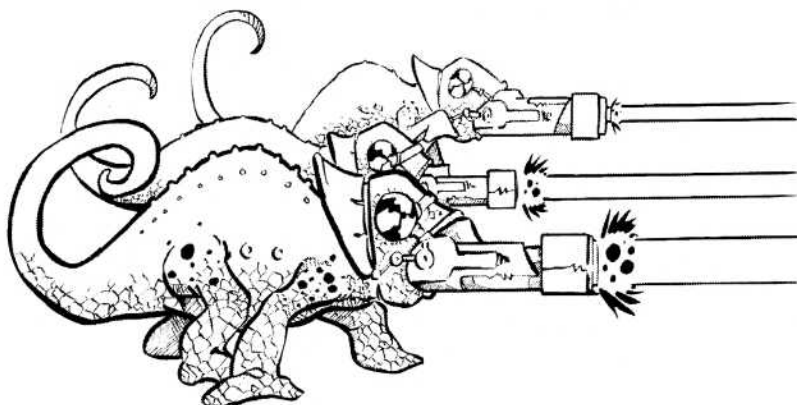
A multiple Trait allows multiple dice to be drawn during Complications. During narration, additional consideration should be given to the magnitude of the added advantage.

Also, the additional copies of the Trait provide additional Importance. If a player deemed it important enough to designate a character as being "very strong" by way of having a Trait of "Strong x2", as opposed to simply defining the character as "Strong" it is presumed that this additional strength will carry some impact for the story.

If a player's primary goal is to get additional dice for use in a certain type of Complication, often times using Traits creatively can be more effective. Instead of buying "Sword Master x3", consider buying "Sword Master", "Incredible Reflexes" and "Combat Awareness" as three distinct Traits. All three are likely to be legitimate Traits to Draw upon in a sword fight, but each has additional uses as well.

If, however, the characters concept truly demands an extraordinary caliber of sword mastery, the first option is perfectly acceptable.





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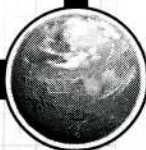
Doom Cannons advancing on target, assault lasers blazing.

**Albert:** Doom Cannons are armored "Chameleon Lizards", They have "Thick Scaled Hides", which have been enhanced with "Armor Plating". Being Chameleons their "Eyes can Swivel" in any direction. Since their normal means of feeding is to strike at range with their tongue with pin point accuracy, I'm giving them the Trait of "Pin Point Accuracy". But here's the thing. They've been surgically altered. Instead of tongues they have a large barreled assault laser cannon housed in their mouths ("Assault Laser Cannon for a Tongue" which he buys at x3 representing the power of the cannon). The Chameleons are controlled with a "Chip Embedded in their Brain". When they go to strike a target with their tongues, it fires the laser instead.

[Albert pays 9 Coins for the above indicated Traits. Combined with the already purchased Role of Doom Cannon, the Component has an Importance of 10]

### DRAWING UPON TRAITS

Complications are described in Chapter 6, but essentially, the more dice a player rolls in a Complication the better. His dice can come from 1 of 2 sources, he can either pay for them out of his own Wealth, or he can Draw upon the Traits of Components that are participating in the Complication and which would be useful in that situation. Each applicable Trait allows 1 die to be added or subtracted from an appropriate Dice Pool.



It is likely, that when the battle is engaged against these Doom Cannons that some player will narrate Meadow Troopers attempting to destroy them. Since it is likely that the Doom Cannon will be controlled by a different player than the player controlling the Troopers, a Complication will result. In any Complication where the Targeted Doom Cannons are attempting to avoid being destroyed they have 2 relevant Traits "Thick Hides", and "Armor Plating" which can be Drawn upon to provide 2 dice to their Dice Pool in their defense. Unless of course, the player Controlling the crafty troopers can come up with a means of damaging the lizards in which armor plating wouldn't help them (like drowning perhaps).

## ROLE

A Role is a standard Trait that every Component must have. It is the most basic form of defining "what the Component is and how it should be used". A Role is sufficient to bring the Component into existence.

Role's can be just about anything. For a character they could be a profession like "accountant", or "sheriff", or "knight", or "scientist". They could have a more story related purpose like "bully", or "cynic", or "troublemaker". They could have a role based on their relationship to another Component like "Jeb's son", or "Dirk's sidekick". For a location, the role is usually an actual place name or something descriptive about the place "Dry Gulch", "Abandoned Warehouse", "Joe's House", "Red's Bar & Grill", or "Spooky old Mansion". For a prop the role typically defines what the prop is: a "sword" or "car" or "gun" or "religion".

Often times the Role involves multiple related Traits which need to be purchased separately. For instance, the "Spooky old Mansion" is "Spooky", "old" and a "Mansion" costing 3 Coins. The "Accountant" might be an "Accountant", "at Myrex Corp" costing 2 Coins. The "car" might be a "Souped-up", "Cherry Red", "Dodge Charger" costing 3 Coins.

A Role conveys a basic set of characteristics that make the Component identifiable. For instance, a horse Created by paying 1 Coin for the Trait "Horse" will have four legs, hooves, eat hay and someone looking at it would say "hey, that's a horse". However, this horse has no particular ability, strength or speed. What this means is that while the horse exists in the world and can be included in the story and described as doing whatever horses do, it is little more than scenery at this point.

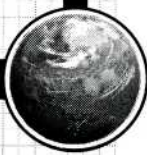


How Roles are used in the game and how broadly they can be interpreted is often something best specified with a Tenet. For example, the above “horse” is a horse. But, if a player tried to narrate a character riding it would another player be justified in pointing out “hey no one said that horse has been broken.”? Is it a riding horse, a war horse, a wild horse, a work horse, a race horse? Play groups should decide for themselves how detailed they want to require Roles to be, or even if they would consider “War Horse” to be two separate Traits altogether (“Horse”, and “Trained for Battle”). Since it is beyond the scope of any set of rules to account for a nearly infinite array of possible permutations, Universalis specifically leaves these decisions up to individual play group preference, best defined as a game Tenet, either at the beginning of the game, or when such an issue first arises.

A Component with nothing but a Role defined is of limited Importance. A Role can be Drawn upon to provide 1 die during Complications in which that Role would be useful (or 1 die per Trait that applies if the Role consists of multiple Traits). In this example if the Complication involved the need to pull a wagon, 1 die can be drawn from the Role Trait “Work Horse” as this is something that work horses are certainly useful for (of course, some groups may want to specify the difference between a pack horse, a cart horse, or a plow horse and may not be satisfied with “Work Horse” as being specific enough. Other Groups might decide that “Work” “Horse” is actually 2 Traits. If they’re paid for seperately they can each be Drawn on for dice.)

### PROPER NAME

The actual name of a Component is bought like any other Trait. Buying a proper name for a Component serves 3 purposes. First, it helps identify that Component as something special to be paid attention to. It is a staple of movies and literature that “named characters” are more important than “unnamed extras”. Second, because it is an additional Trait it does, in fact, increase the Component’s Importance in game terms as well (see below for more about Importance). Third, for a character only, a proper name Trait can be Drawn upon to provide 1 die for any Complication of any type involving that character. Essentially, if the character is important enough to name, he should be guaranteed impact in a scene. This does not apply to locations and props, simply because the relationship between in game name and meta-game importance doesn’t have a parallel in movies and literature. The heirloom gold



watch so important to a character is simply "Grandfather's watch" it isn't itself given a proper name. For props that would legitimately have a proper name, such as "Excalibur", the name exists as a Trait that gives additional Importance, but is not normally something that can be drawn upon. Of course, for a prop (like Excalibur) that is itself an item of extraordinary stature, a Rules Gimmick can certainly be used to give the item proper name status.

Thus, in a barroom brawl, the character identified as simply the "accountant" does not provide any dice because that role does not convey any particular fighting ability. However, "John Oswald", the "accountant" does provide 1 die by virtue of being a named character. John's pocket calculator which he's named Doris, on the other hand, does not, because Doris is a prop and not a character, and the proper name rule doesn't apply.

In the scene in the throne room, Bob took Control over General #2 and gave him the proper name of Frederick von Stuben. As a named character in the game, Frederick is now able to contribute 1 die to any Complication he's involved with (Drawn from his name) just for being important enough to have been given a proper name in the story.

### TRAITS DEFINING NUMBERS OR GROUPS:

It is entirely possible for a Component to represent more than one item or person. This can be accomplished simply by adding a Group Trait to the Component indicating a specific or general number of members, as in "Three" "Gangsters", or "Squad" of "Riflemen". The most common format, as in these examples, is to simply append the Group Trait to the Component Role.

It is entirely possible (and common) to purchase the Group Trait multiple times to represent increasingly larger groups. This may be a one to one ratio of additional members to additional Traits but it doesn't need to be. The additional Group Traits serve three functions:

1. To define a relative size of the group for purposes of aiding in player narration.
2. To draw additional dice from during a Complication in any situation where added numbers would be an advantage
3. To provide additional Importance to the Component making it more difficult to eliminate because of numbers.



If the Component is a fairly significant one, and each member is of sufficient stature then each Group Trait could well represent a single member (if the Components are of very high significance, of course, each member could simply be entirely bought and paid for as a separate Component altogether). If, however, the Component is meant to be simply a throwaway opponent for the characters (like a squad of enemy troopers) or represents very large numbers (like an army battalion, or a wing of fighter planes) than the Group Trait can be left as an abstraction of the actual numbers involved. Players can use the Challenge mechanic if they feel a given Group Trait doesn't reflect the numbers sufficiently.

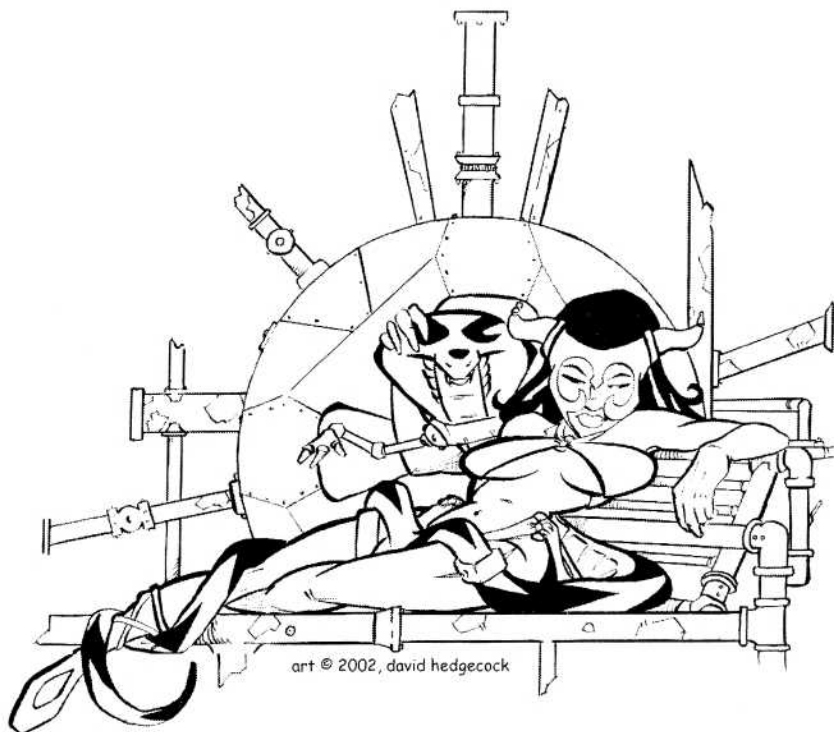
This section speaks to using Traits to define a specific group. The section on Master and Sub Components below speaks to defining entire classes and categories with a single Component.

For example, after defining the Doom Cannons, Albert decides that he doesn't know how many such war machines are in the Slytheran Army, but he decides that his cut away Mini Scene shows more than one for added dread. So he adds the Trait "Lance" to represent the unit size and then adds x2 to represent that a Lance of Cannon consists of 3 members (the original plus 2 more from the Lance x2 trait). This costs an additional 2 Coins and brings the Importance of the Component to 12. Obviously, by spending so many Coins, Albert is saying that destroying these cannon should be a cornerstone of the scene (or scenes) depicting the battle between the Meadow People and the Slytheran.

### TRAITS DEFINING RELATIONSHIPS:

Traits can define relationships between Components. For instance: Super Villain Archon can have a Trait "Hates the Vindicator". Princess Ridela can have a Trait "Thinks Sir Ulaf is a crude boor". Lancelot can have the Traits "Loves Guenevere", and "Loyal to Arthur". These Traits not only provide additional Importance to the character (if the character is worth defining relationships for, he must have some importance to the story), but also can be used to Draw on for dice in a Complication connected to that relationship. For instance, if Ulaf attempts to seduce Princess Ridela, the above Trait would likely be drawn upon by the player Controlling the princess to resist the attempt. If Guenevere was in danger, Lancelot might Draw upon his love Trait to gain an additional die to try and save her.

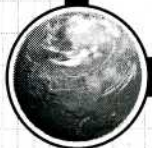




The traitor, Lady Alasandre, with the snake she uses to deliver intelligence to the Slytheran High Command.

Note that it is possible for a single Trait, which involves defining a relationship between two or more Components, to apply to all related Components for that same single Coin. For example: a player buys a Trait for Jill of “Jack’s sister”. This leads to the corollary Trait for Jack of “Jill’s brother” which does not cost extra to record.

In the throne room dialog scene, General von Stuben mentioned the strong defenses of the Meadow People. He knew of them because of the treacherous spy, Lady Alasandre; a self styled Meadow aristocrat who has betrayed her people’s secrets for promises of a position of power in the occupation government. As an added complication, Bob gave the lady a Trait of “Obsessive Lust for Turk Reigns” (all part of his apparent quest to see Turk suffer). This Trait does not automatically spawn a corollary Trait in Turk, but can be used to provide dice in all sorts of interesting ways.

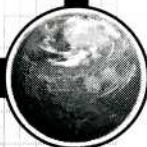


## TRAITS DEFINING POSSESSION

The simplest way to define a possession is to simply list it as a Trait of the owning Component. This is especially true of minor utilitarian items. For example one of the Traits of a cowboy might be "Pair of Pearl Handled Revolvers" which could be drawn upon to provide dice in a Complication any time guns are used, or even in a social scene where the pearl handles might have some influence. Another character might have his "Pet Dog Fido" as a Trait, or "Sharp Pressed Suits", or "Carries lots of Cash", etc.

Sometimes, however, the item is important enough to the story to be worth Creating as a separate Component of its own (like say King Arthur's sword, Excalibur). In such a case, the two Components can be Created separately and a Trait added which defines 1 of them as being in the possession of the another. This ownership relationship applies to both Components; the first owns the second, the second is owned by the first. There are no limits as to how many Components may be owned by a single owner. There are several game mechanic effects that come as a result of this Trait.

1. If the owning Component is Introduced into a scene, the owned Component is automatically Introduced as well.
2. In most cases a Coin can be spent by a player to separate the owned Component from its owner (if it is something which can be dropped or forgotten, etc). This is akin to paying to remove Traits described below. It does, like all uses of Coins, have to be justified. It is not enough to simply spend the Coin and declare them separated. Depending on Control this may require a Complication to accomplish. Otherwise the owned item can be eliminated from play by overcoming its own Importance (see below).
3. The player who is Controlling the first Component also Controls the second Component. If a player Takes Over the first Component he also automatically gains control of the second. If the second component is separated from its owner than a player can pay 1 Coin to Take Over that Component individually.
4. The first Component's Importance is increased by the Importance of the second Component for as long as the



second Component is in his Possession. If the Components are separated, they lose this advantage. In other words if a 5 Importance character owns a 3 Importance item, the character is treated as if he has an Importance of 8 unless he is separated from the item.

The Possession rule was specifically designed for “signature” possessions, like a mad scientist’s gizmo, a Jedi’s light saber, Thor’s hammer, Arthur and Excalibur and other similar relationships. However, with a little judicious application, the Possession Trait can become a real story driver. A wealthy tycoon’s assets can be defined as possession. Bringing the tycoon down can involve one by one separating him from those assets. Similarly a major villain’s body guards can be possessions. Their abilities add to their master’s Importance, protecting him from defeat, until one by one, they themselves are defeated.

**Important Note:** It is not necessary for all of a character’s belongings to be defined as Possessions using these rules. In fact, most often they won’t be. Treat most ordinary props and items as simple Traits as described in the first paragraph. Only if the item is some how extraordinary should it be Created as a separate Component and treated in this manner.

During the scene with the snapping turtle described in the Challenges section, it was mentioned that the character Turk Reigns possesses an XR-27 Hyperblast Rifle as a Trait. This Trait was crossed off Turk’s record sheet when the weapon was snapped in half by the hungry turtle allowing Turk to escape death. This is an example of the simple type of possession.

As another example, Kevin McCrae has been created as a member of the group. He is the team technician and engineer. He also has as a pet skylar named Fritz. Ed, who Created Kevin as a character, also Created skylars as small winged lizard like creatures about the size of a dragonfly which eat fruit. As a bit of color (which didn’t cost him anything except the 1 Coin for the name) Ed described how Kevin gave his pet a Slytheran name (remember Slytherans have been defined as having Prussian names) as a joke since it’s a reptile. Ed could have defined Fritz simply as a Trait for Kevin, but he became so enamored of the little guy that he Created him as a separate Component complete with Traits





Kevin McCrae and his pet Skylar "Fritz"

like "Skylar Pet" (Role), "Devoted to Kevin", and "Highly Trained", with an "Embedded Control Chip" and of course the name "Fritz" Throughout play, the players agree that Fritz is enough of a character to benefit from the proper name rules. Kevin was then given the Possession Trait "Owns Fritz" for 1 Coin which automatically adds "Owned by Kevin" to Fritz for that same Coin.

#### ASSIGNING FACTS TO A SCENE OR TO THE GAME WORLD ITSELF

It is often convenient to think of the game world itself and each individual scene as actual Components. Players can purchase Facts explicitly for a scene or the World itself just as purchasing Traits for a Component. As mentioned in the opening chapter, the Events that take place within a scene as described in Chapter 5, are Facts bought for that scene, and the Tenets described in Chapter 2, are Facts bought for the game itself. These can be thought of just like the purchasing of Traits for Components described above.

For example: Facts related to the weather or time of day might be bought for a scene. The laws of how magic works or what level of



technology is available in the game might be bought as a Tenet for the world itself (or at least the part of it where play takes place).

Staying with the Tenet Albert proposed about playing in a Science Fiction game and the Tenet Dave proposed about the use of animals, Ed introduces a Fact for the Game World.

**Ed:** Both the Meadow People and the Slytheran use computer chips embedded in the brain to control their animals and make them do their bidding. [This costs 1 Coin for the Fact. Some play groups may prefer to treat this as two separate Facts, one for the Meadow People and one for the Slytheran and charge 2 Coins]

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## MASTER AND SUB COMPONENTS

Master and Sub Components are an advanced way to leverage Component Creation in order to populate an entire world without breaking the bank.

One Component is defined the Master Component which defines the features held in common by an entire class or category. It costs 1 Coin for a Trait which designates a Component as a Master Component. A Master Component cannot have a proper name and should only possess Traits that can be considered typical of that entire class. It essentially serves as a template for the Sub Components that are based on it. Master Components cannot be introduced into scenes or manipulated as distinct individuals.

A Sub Component is Created merely by buying a Trait for 1 Coin which defines the Component as being a member of the class defined by the Master Component. There is no limit to the number of Sub Components that can be tied to a Master, or the number of Master Components that a single Component can be the Sub of (save plausibility). Note that throughout these rules all rules for Components apply to Sub Components, except as noted here. There are several game mechanics effects that accompany this relationship.

1. The Sub Component is assumed to have all of the Traits of the Master Component without them having to be paid for individually, for purposes of narrating the story appropriately. These Traits can be Drawn upon during Complications. Multiple Sub Components can Draw on the same Master Component Trait during the same Complication, just



- as if each had that Trait themselves separately.
2. The Importance of the Sub Component is not increased by the Traits of the Master Component. Even though the Sub Components can use these Traits, they are not counted towards the Sub Component's own Importance. Thus, even though the Master Component "Super Ninja Warrior" itself has many Traits, allowing its individual Sub Components to Draw on many dice during Complications, a Sub Component whose only Trait is "Super Ninja Warrior #12" still has an Importance of only 1 and can be eliminated with a single Coin.
  3. Sub Components can have their own individual Traits in addition to being members of the Master Component Class. These Traits are not shared by other Sub Components or the Master, and do count towards that Sub Component's Importance normally.
  4. It is possible for the Sub Component to have a Trait that effectively negates a Trait provided by the Master Component. Such a Trait prevents the Sub Component from Drawing on that Trait of the Master Component, but does add to the Sub Components Importance. It is, after all, increasing that Sub Component's individuality and thus Importance to the story. For instance: one of many Traits ascribed to the Master Component "Elf" is "At home in the woods". A particular character who has the Trait "Elf" (and is hence a Sub Component of the Elf Class), also has the Trait "Not at Home in the Woods". This Trait increases the Importance of the character while at the same time preventing a player from using the "at home" Trait.
  5. A Component may be a Sub Component of more than one class. For instance, a character may have the Trait "Keltonese" as a Sub Component and have all of the racial and ethnic characteristics of someone from Kelton. In addition they may have "Imperial Guardsman", and "Worships Ammon" as Sub Components and have all of the Traits granted by training as a member of the Imperial Guard and



all of the Traits common to practicing Ammonites.

6. The Master Component's own Importance is increased by the Importance of all of its Sub Component members. Thus, the only way to wipe out all of the elves from the world, would be to wipe out all of the individual elf characters in the story, and then Eliminate the Master Component itself.

In our sample game, Bob Created Slytheran Shock Troopers as a Master Component. He gave them the following Traits: "Slytheran Shock Troopers" (as a Role), "Acute viper-like sensing pits", "Venomous Fangs", "Fierce Fighters", "Single Mindedly Aggressive" and "Blindly Loyal". He equipped them with a "High Power Assault Rifle", and "Body Armor". This cost 9 Coins including the one designating this as a "Master Component".

From now on individual Shock Troopers can be Introduced into the scene for a single Coin (to purchase the Sub Component Trait "Slytheran Shock Trooper". Each trooper will have access to all of the above Traits of the Master Component, but itself will have only an Importance of 1 (allowing our heroes to kill them by dozens as required). Additionally, using the group rules a Component can be Created called "Slytheran Shock Troops", "Shock Squad x3". This would cost 4 Coins and have and Importance of 4. It would be a Sub Component of the Slytheran Shock Troops and represent an entire squad of such troops in a single Component.

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## INJURING, DAMAGING, AND ELIMINATING COMPONENTS

### IMPORTANCE

Importance is a measure of how valuable a particular Component is to the story. It is assumed that the more time and effort (and Coins) that have been spent describing a Component, the more valuable it is, and thus the more difficult it should be to remove from the story. A Component that has been Created with few Traits beyond a role (like "Thug #3) is assumed to not be very important to the story and thus can be removed easily. Or to put it another way, while the army of thugs may, in fact, be an important element in the story, no one thug has any value on his own...unless that





art © 2002, david hedgecock

A Slytheran Shock Trooper with body armor and assault rifle.



thug is individualized further by the addition of additional Traits.

Importance is a number that is simply equal to the number of Traits the Component has (by extension the number of Coins that have been spent on it). If the Component has a Possession, its Importance is increased by the Importance of the Possession. If the Component is a Master Component, its Importance is increased by the Importance of all of its Sub Components (assuming those Possessions and Sub Components have not themselves been Eliminated).

- Importance equals 1 for every Trait the Component has, plus the Importance of any Possessions, plus the Importance of any Sub Components.

Marissa Tournou is one of the main characters in this game. She was Created by Christine and throughout the game has accumulated the following Traits: "Marissa Tournou" (proper name), "Trained Killer x2" (Role, which she's particularly good at), "Physically Rugged", "Fiercely Determined", "Command Ability", "Impatient", "Hard Cold Demeanor" and equipped with "Flame Retardant Jump Suit", "IR Goggles", and "Type VII Laser Pistol". All told this is a total of 11 Traits which cost 11 Coins and provides Marissa with an Importance of 11. Later in the story its also revealed that she had a "Torrid affair with Jerek" and "feels betrayed by Jerek" which ups her Importance to 13.



Marissa Tournou with a Meadow Guard Frog standing watch atop a mushroom sentry tower.

## ELIMINATING A COMPONENT

A Component can be Eliminated for many reasons: a character may be killed, a location or prop can be destroyed, etc. In order to do this a player must spend a number of Coins equal to the Component's Importance. For instance: "Jack", the "Alcoholic", "Bartender" has 3 Traits and thus an Importance of 3. In a gang-land attack on the bar, a player wants poor Jack to get whacked. 3



Coins will do the job. Kang the Merciless, Imperial overlord of the Dark Empire has a couple of dozen Traits and many Possessions. It will take far more Coins to Eliminate Kang.

The game mechanic effect of Eliminating a Component is to render the Component unavailable to be Introduced into scenes chronologically set in the future. The Component could still be introduced into scenes set in the past (before it was Eliminated). However, while additional Traits may be bought for the Component in those prior scenes, they will not (simply by increasing the Component's Importance) over ride the fact that the Component has been Eliminated. In other words, if, in a subsequent scene, a player flashes back to Jack the Bartender and adds the Traits of "College Graduate", and "has a young son", Jack's Importance has been increased to 5. That does not change the fact that Jack was killed during the hit even though the player spent only 3 Coins instead of 5 to do it. In stories, it is often the case that a character becomes more important after he is dead.

What Elimination actually represents is left to the player to decide. Like any expenditure of Coins, Coins spent to overcome Importance must be justified. Elimination often represents the death of a character or destruction of a location or prop. However, it does not have to mean this. It could mean anything that renders the Component out of play for the rest of the story. In the case of particularly minor Components, the cause of their Impairment might be left unstated. The faceless mook is simply put down. No one really cares if he lives or dies. The empty gun is merely cast aside never to be seen again in the story. The stolen car is abandoned, the key witness disappears overseas, a character takes an extended vacation. Whatever the reason is, he is now effectively out of the rest of the story.

Unless ... (of course, there is an "unless"). Certain genres practically require the return of a villain long thought defeated, or the return of a loved one who wasn't dead after all – they just had amnesia for 10 years. The broken sword can be forged anew, and the One Ring lost for generations can be rediscovered. To "resurrect" a Component in this way, a player must merely spend a number of Coins equal to its current Importance (which may have been increased since it was first Eliminated). If this is done in a plausible enough manner to avoid (or overcome) Challenge from other players, than that Component can be welcomed back to the land of the living. In fact, Eliminating a Component in this manner may be



used as a way of preventing a character's death. If a player pays Coins equal to the Importance of the Arch Villain, he could narrate how the villain manages to escape into another dimension, thereby preventing another player from paying that many Coins to narrate his capture and execution. Either way the villain is out of the story and no longer plaguing mankind...for now.

While attempting to make it back to the Meadow, the heroes have several run-ins with the Slytheran forces the Queen had dispatched to stop them. One of those confrontations is handled as a Complication Originated by Dave using the 4 point Slytheran Shock Trooper Squad described above.

Following the resolution of the encounter, the players Controlling the heroes use the Bonus Coins earned in the Complication to narrate the defeat of the enemy squad. They can describe blasts of laser fire, fierce hand to hand combat, and feats of derring-do as desired. The Troopers can be killed, driven off, taken prisoner, or any other outcome the players desire that essentially equates to their defeat as a "Shock Trooper Squad". Since the squad has an Importance of 4, it requires 4 Bonus Coins to accomplish this. Using 4 Coins in this manner also entitles the Target players, up to 4 Facts related to the Elimination of the Squad, and as much colorful description as desired (within reason, as defined by the other players willingness to Challenge).

### DAMAGING TRAITS

Components can be damaged or injured without having to first overcome their Importance, but this does require Coins. First, the Event causing the injury must be paid for, then the effects of the injury or damage can be purchased. Damage and Injury can be handled in one of three ways.

1. Existing Traits can be Removed for 1 Coin each. If the character has ".44 magnum" as a Trait, it is a simple matter to cross that Trait off for 1 Coin. Instant disarmament. If the character has "excellent physical condition" as a Trait, it is a simple matter to cross that Trait off as a result of suffering a debilitating illness.
2. Second, new Traits can be purchased which reflect the nature of the damage. These Traits can then be



Drawn on just like any other, albeit usually in a way detrimental to the Component suffering from them. A character may suffer from a "Broken Leg", a car from a "Blown Tire", a location from "Broken Windows", and "Smashed Furniture".

Note that adding Traits in this manner actually increases a Component's Importance even though they represent injury. There are two principles at work here. First, the author of a story usually only takes the time to describe the injuries of characters who are important, thus a character's Importance in the game is increased when players do this. Second, in many stories the hero takes beating after beating but actually becomes more and more difficult to kill. In Universalis this is no surprise, as his Importance is going up every time he gets a black eye.

3. If the player is actually Eliminating a Component, and is merely using the expenditure of the required Coins to graphically describe how this is accomplished, then the Coins are not buying additional injury Traits as in #2 above, they are just flavorful narration. For instance, a villain's henchman has an Importance of 5. A player is having the hero defeat and kill this henchman and has spent 5 Coins to do so. He describes a hard kick to the leg blowing out the knee, a twist to the arm dislocating the shoulder, and finally a chop to the throat crushing the larynx. These three injuries are not added as Traits to the henchman, they are just part of how the henchman was killed. If the henchman was not killed, than they would be, and the henchman would now have an Importance of 8.

In the snapping turtle scene we saw how Turk Reigns' "X-27 Hyperblast Rifle" trait was Removed from the character record as a consequence of escaping with his life.

In the above scene with the Shock Squad, lets go back and assume the heroes only earned (or desired to spend) 3 Coins from the Complication. 3 Coins would not be enough to Eliminate the squad as a Component. Instead, the players could use the 3 Coins to Eliminate the "Shock Squad x3"



Trait. This is the Group Trait that defines the squad as consisting of more than one member. By reducing this Trait the players can narrate how its numbers are dwindling. By Eliminating all 3 occurrences of the Trait, the players Controlling the Targeted heroes have essentially killed all but 1 member of the squad. With the Complication over, it would be back to the player whose turn it is to narrate what happens to that final member using his own Coins.

During Complications, both the winning and losing side will receive Bonus Coins. Assuming that the heroes were the winning side in the Complication with the Shock Squad, the player Controlling the Squad (Dave, the Originator of the Complication) would also have Bonus Coins to spend. In our example we'll assume he has 2 Bonus Coins he wishes to spend to give Marissa an injury from the battle. He describes how in the fire fight her leg was hit by blaster fire and now she has a "Severe Blaster Injury to Leg x2" Trait (he essentially bought the same wound twice to demonstrate its severity). This injury serves to increase Marissa's Importance by 2 from 13 to 15 (until the wound is healed), but clearly her ability to walk has been compromised. Will the injury delay the heroes return to the Meadow?

The effect of this injury in games terms is three fold: First, players should take the injury into account when narrating Marissa's activities, possibly paying extra Coins to describe how she overcomes the handicap. Second, the injuries serve as a Fact in any Challenge against a player who's not taking the injury into account to another player's satisfaction. Third, in any Complication involving physical activity those injury Traits may be Drawn upon to reduce Marissa's dice or add dice to an opponent to represent their impact on her ability.

#### RESTORING TRAITS: HEALING, REPAIR, OR RECOVERY

Healing or repair of such damage and injury is simply handled by either paying to remove a damage or injury Trait which has been purchased (the "Broken Leg" heals), or paying to restore a Trait that had previously been removed (the character recovers from the illness and gets his "excellent physical condition" back). In the case of a lost item, a Coin can be spent to have the item found, returning the Trait to the Character sheet.



When Turk gets back to the Meadow, he almost certainly will requisition a new firearm from supply. The player Controlling Turk at the time can pay 1 Coin for the action and Restore the X-27 Hyperblast Rifle to the character record. Alternatively, the player may decide that Turk takes the opportunity to upgrade to the new X-30 model with the under barrel grenade launcher, paying 2 Coins, one for the rifle and one for the launcher. Essentially, buying 2 new Traits instead of Restoring the old one.

Remembering the Med Kit the party had picked up (see the example in the Rules Gimmicks section), Christine sets to work tending Marissa's injury. She is unable to cross off both wound Traits (could Dave have been aware of that when he chose to give her two...). Unfortunately there is only 1 "Heals Burns" Trait left in the Med Kit. Using the Rules Gimmick proposed by Albert, she crosses off the last "Heals Burns" Trait and then crosses off one of the "Blaster Injury ...") and so Marissa is still suffering from a leg injury, although a less severe one. Her Importance drops down to 14 as a result.

Since the injury may still impact the groups' ability to warn the Meadow in time, Christine proposes a Rules Gimmick for 1 Coin. Justified by Marissa's Trait of "Fiercely Determined" Christine proposes that Marissa be able to completely ignore (as if she didn't have the Trait at all) the injury to her leg until she returns to the Meadow to get medical attention. In return (to make the Gimmick less likely to be Challenged, and because she thinks it would be cool) she proposes that due to the added strain of pushing herself too hard and not caring for the injury properly, Marissa will acquire a "Slight Limp in Right Leg" Trait after the injury is healed. That is, instead of removing the temporary injury Trait entirely, it will be replaced with a permanent Trait, a war injury to be proud of. The rest of the player's agree to this unusual way of dealing with an injury Trait and so it becomes accepted as a rule.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## NARRATING THE SCENE

All of the action that takes place in the game occurs within scenes. Chapter 3 described how players frame these scenes and this chapter serves to elaborate on the concepts raised there. Except as noted in Chapter 3, all of the following applies to both scenes and mini scenes.

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### FRAMING THE SCENE

The Framing Player has the responsibility of framing the next scene of the story or extending the previous scene. A scene may be of any duration, from a brief cut to action happening elsewhere; to an epic climax that is extended over multiple bids for scene. All scene framing includes the following 3 items: Establish the Location, Set the Time, and Introduce the Components.

All scenes start as collections of Components that are active in the scene (i.e. a location, characters at that location, and any props that are present). The act of adding a Component to a Scene is called "Introducing" that Component. This costs 1 Coin. If the Component already exists (i.e. has been Created previously) then the 1 Coin pays for its presence in the scene. If the Component has not yet been Created, then it is Created now with that Coin (which buys its Role as described in Chapter 4). Only Components that have been Introduced in this way are present in the scene. Components that have been eliminated through the Importance rules cannot be Introduced in a scene chronologically after the one in which they were eliminated.

The player who Introduced the Component, Controls it initially. This Control can change during the scene through Take Overs. The Controlling player (and only the Controlling player) can add, remove, or restore Traits to the Component, unless this is done as the result of a Complication. Control of a Component in one scene has no bearing on who controls that component in a subsequent scene.

The Framing Player cannot be Interrupted while he is framing the scene. Framing refers to the 3 required activities of: Establishing Location, Setting Time, and Introducing Components.



When the first Event is narrated, the framing portion of the scene is considered over. Components can be Introduced throughout a scene, not just during framing. The Framing Player may spend any of the Coins he bid to win the scene during any point in the scene not just during framing. Any of the bid Coins that are not spent before the scene ends are lost to the Bank.

### ESTABLISH LOCATION

- Establishing a location costs 1 Coin to establish or change

All scenes require a location to occur in. All locations are a type of Component which are Created by the players as described in the last chapter.

Locations can be changed during a scene by a player merely establishing a new location as above on their turn. Changing locations is not the same thing as starting a new scene. It is appropriate only when a single scene spans across multiple locations (such as with a chase scene). Characters and Components should remain fairly constant across locations. It is assumed that all Components travel to the new location at no additional cost. Any that do not should be paid to exit (see below). Only Traits from the current location are available to be Drawn upon. If the change of location also involves a substantial change in cast, then this is best handled by ending the current scene and beginning a new one.

### CUTTING BACK TO THE SAME SCENE

If a Framing Player wishes to return to a previous scene to continue the action of that scene he needs only pay the 1 Coin necessary to Establish the location. Another Coin may be necessary to Set the Time if the scene is in the past or future (as opposed to running concurrently with more recent scenes).

Components that have already been established as being in that location at that time do not have to be reintroduced. In fact, in this situation, it would require Coins to Exit a Component from a scene where it otherwise should be.

It is important to mention that in this way scenes can be paused while a new scene cuts to action elsewhere. Then a subsequent scene can simply pay to cut back and pick the action of the first scene back up from where it was left off with all prior components included. Note that if this technique is used often, players would be well served to keep careful record of scenes and the Components that were present.



## SET THE TIME

- Setting the time costs 1 Coin to set in the past, 1 Coin per player to set in the future

Unless otherwise stated, each scene occurs either immediately subsequent to the previous one or simultaneously with it (possible if framed at a different location). This is the default and costs nothing. Establishing a time other than these must be paid for.

There are two ways to frame into the past. First is to frame into the distant past to deal with Events that occurred before the current game began. These are the easiest past frames to accomplish as the player must only ensure he does not establish any Facts which violate what is already known to be Fact (unless he desires to do so and is risking Challenge). The second is to frame the scene back to an earlier point in the game itself. This is a much more advanced technique. If players intend to use it with any frequency they should create a timeline of scenes and maintain a record of which Components were present in order to preserve continuity.

Framing a scene into the future, however, will limit the Events of other scenes that occur before it chronologically but have yet to be framed. In order to frame a scene into the future the player must pay 1 Coin to each other player in the game as compensation for limiting their future control in this way.

During most scenes, time progresses at a normal rate into the future. The time of the scene is not normally changed in mid scene the way a location can be changed. Usually if game time is to be moved substantially forward or is to flash back to the past, a whole new scene or mini scene is framed and an appropriate time set. However, since it is not possible to write rules to cover every possible scene players could wish to invent, this rule can be violated by proposing a Rule Gimmick allowing it to be lifted (such as a Component which creates rifts in the dreaded "space-time continuum").

## INTRODUCE COMPONENTS

- Introducing components costs 1 Coin to Introduce or Exit one Component

The location provides the setting of the scene. Other Components provide the actors in it. The player must decide which characters and other major props he desires to be present in the scene. As noted above, it costs 1 Coin to Introduce an existing Component



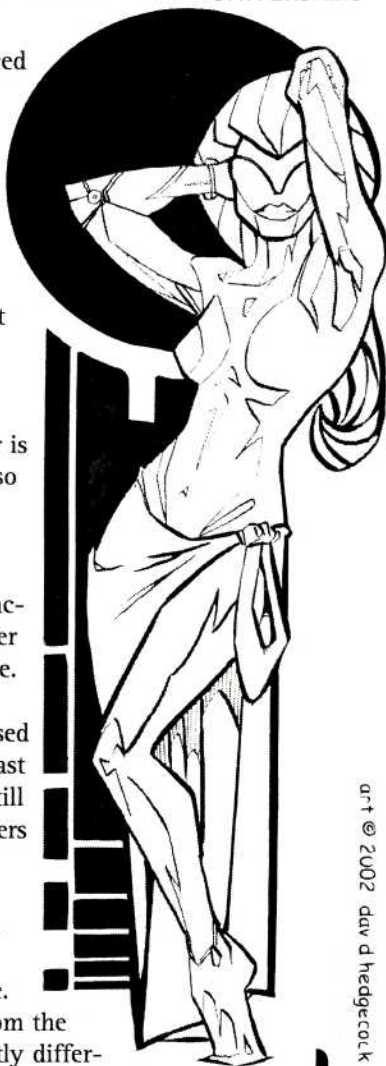
into or Create a new Component within the Scene. Characters and props can be Introduced at any time throughout the scene during player turns in this same way simply by paying a Coin. The Introducing player will have initial Control. Controlled Components can similarly be Exited from a scene by paying a Coin to have them depart. Any Component is assumed to be available to be brought into a scene unless it has been Eliminated.

Players can also spend a Coin to explicitly state a Component as not being in the scene. This may be desirable because another player is free to retroactively place any character not so limited into the scene at a later time. For example, if the Events of a scene included a murder, another player could later frame a scene at a local police precinct where a character (who wasn't explicitly present in the earlier scene) is claiming to be a witness to the crime. Explicitly paying to not have that character present at the scene is a Fact that could be used to assist in Challenging that attempt (or at least Challenge it being true, the character could still lie about having been a witness, but the players would all know that she actually wasn't).

If the location changes during a scene, all characters and props present in the scene can be moved to the new location (with proper explanation as to how they got there) for free. Otherwise a Coin can be paid to exit them from the scene. If the new location involves significantly different characters and props then it is probably an entirely new scene. The player should end the current scene and then bid to take the next turn so he can frame the new scene.

Early on in the game, the players set up the scene that would give direction to the story:

Dave: Ok, lets get started, the place is the "Town" of "Meadow" [This costs 2 Coins and Creates a Component



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with "Town" as its Role and "Meadow" as a proper name. The same Coin that defined the Role, also establishes the Component as the location for the upcoming scene]

We see the town from above, like from a bird flying overhead [This is pure color, Dave is just giving screen direction type information in order to better paint a picture for his fellow players. This costs nothing]

It is "quiet little community", of "small cottages" and "red tile roofs". Given that it is the home of a small diminutive people, every thing is in miniature. "Set in the middle of a small meadow", the town is "surrounded by grasses the height of the buildings" and "bright wildflowers towering like trees". Throughout the town are signs of contrast: here are "streets paved with pebbles like cobblestones" and an "old style water tower". There, is a "satellite dish" and "antennae for cell phones". [As Dave is speaking, he has a handful of Coins from his Wealth. When he mentions something that sounds to him like its worth paying for, he drops a Coin into the Bank. Albert, who has taken it upon himself to record all of the Components in the game on behalf of the other players, scribbles furiously each time. The players are using the simple expedient when defining Traits that if its something you want written down for future reference, it costs you a Coin. The above Traits (indicated with quotation marks for reference) cost Dave 10 Coins. Including the 2 spent above, Meadow now has an Importance of 12. Dave has spent a lot of his initial Coins, but has really put his stamp on the story by giving substance to the somewhat vague Tenets the group came up with.]

It is early summer and the flowers are in bloom. The "oak and beech trees surrounding the meadow" are just starting to take on a deeper shade of green and they dominate the horizon like mountains. [Here Dave has set the time for the scene. Since this is the first scene of the game, Dave has used an actual calendar reference. Most other scene's time will be set in relative terms (referring to how long before or after a previous scene it was). Any scene set immediately following the previous one costs nothing, but since there has been no previous scene, this costs 1 Coin (a fair price, since Dave has now established

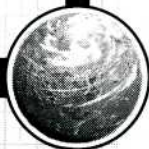


a season for the story to start in). Dave doesn't pay for the flowers being in bloom. He decides that that is just color and no other player feels differently enough to Challenge him on it. He does drop a Coin on "Oak and Beech Trees Surrounding the Meadow" to make that a Trait for the town. Given that the town is in a meadow, one could assume the trees as a given, but Dave feels like making it explicit and getting to decide what kind of trees in the bargain. Albert, keeping record, tacks on "...like mountains" for free, feeling that that is all part of same Trait and Dave has spent plenty of Coins so far anyway.]

Down in the "square" there are three figures standing about like they're waiting for something. That's the end of my turn. [Dave buys yet another Trait for the town, ensuring that it has a proper "Square" and bringing the total Importance of Meadow to 14 so far. He then pays 3 more Coins, 1 each for the three figures, and 1 Coin for the activity of them waiting for something. Ordinarily the Coins to Create those figures would entitle Dave to define a Role for each of them. However, Dave is instead doing something unusual (unusual enough that some groups may require a Rules Gimmick to allow it). He has paid for the figures, but left defining their Role up to someone else. This is Dave's way of getting another player to kick start the story. He set the stage, he Introduced 3 potential characters and now he's leaving defining those characters and having them do something to someone else. Dave's turn ends (having spent 19 Coins on Framing the Scene). Play passes to Ed.]

Ed has his own ideas about what he wants the story to be about. Dave's initial setting has changed them somewhat (he was planning on more of an urban industo-tech setting, than European rural quaint), but in a more important way, it dovetails nicely. Ed is planning on having the character's homes threatened by an enemy, and Dave has nicely created that home.

Ed: Ok, the camera zooms in on one of the buildings "on the square". It is an "imposing stone edifice" with the words "Defense Command Headquarters" carved above the door. We watch as the three figures walk inside. [Ed has creat-



ed a new location for 3 Coins, and spent 1 Coin on the actions of the as yet mysterious figures.]

Ok, I'm changing the location we are now in the "Offices of General Jackson Trudeau". "at DefCom HQ". [This costs 2 Coins and Creates the offices as a Component with the indicated Trait as its Role. That same Coin also Establishes that Component as the location for the upcoming scene. The second Trait defines the offices as being a Possession of the HQ building itself, a creative way to connect locations together. The "On the Square" Trait above serves the same purpose with regards to the HG and the town of Meadow.]

The General is present as are the three unknown figures. [Since the location has been changed, existing Components from the old location are assumed to automatically change location without having to be paid for. Ed pays 2 Coins to Create the character of the General (his Role) and define his proper name.]

The General's Offices are "Spartan" and "Meticulous" [These are Traits added to the location for 1 Coin each as per Chapter 4]

At this point the scene continues. Ed establishes a potential threat from an old enemy which he Creates and names the Slytheran. Christine Takes Control of one of the figures and on her turn begins defining the character of Marissa. The other characters will eventually become Kevin and Turk, and the group becomes part of a team ordered to investigate Slytheran activity. The story has now been given a direction.

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## EVENTS

### DESCRIBE THE EVENTS

- Costs 1 Coin per Event which includes any or all of the following elements:
  - 1) a single effect,
  - 2) a single Component performing the effect,
  - 3) a single Component receiving the effect.

Events include: actions performed, conversations held, emotions felt, ideas thought, environmental impacts, and anything else that



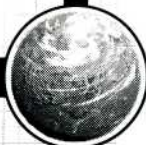
can be thought of as an effect or an activity. If Components are nouns and Traits are adjectives, than effects can be thought of as the verbs and Events as the sentence which ties them all together. Events are considered to be Fact (i.e. it is a Fact that the Event occurred) attached to the scene in which the occurred.

Often the logical result of an Event will be to add Facts to Components by adding, reducing, or restoring Traits. These Traits are paid for separately as described in Chapter 4. The Event is essentially the justification behind it.

For example: the Event may be "Marissa shoots the buzzer with her laser pistol". The shot is the effect, Marissa is the Component causing the effect, and the buzzer is the Component receiving it. The pistol in this case is not strictly part of the Event ("guns don't kill people, people kill people"). Rather, its inclusion in the Event justifies the player now detailing the results of the shot by defining suitable wound Traits for the target. He uses 2 Coins to give buzzer a Trait "Hit in the Wing" and to pay for the Event "the buzzer goes down".

Note, some play groups may argue that the Event is really "Marissa pulls the trigger on the pistol" paid for with 1 Coin, and then "the pistol shoots the buzzer" for another Coin. In this example, we feel that this interpretation is probably far too nit-picky to make for an enjoyable game, but there will certainly be situations in the game which arise that could be defined equally well in different ways like this. Often it will not be clear when one interpretation is "better" than another. It is up to the individual play groups to determine to what degree they wish to subdivide Events into smaller and smaller atomic units. After all, another group may argue that the Event is really 4 Events "Marissa moves her finger", "the finger pulls the trigger", "the trigger discharges the pistol", the "pistol shoots the buzzer".

Because of the near infinite number of potential events that can be narrated, there is no way to write rules to cover each possibility specifically. What is clear is that some definitions of an Event are far too narrow and clumsy to be fun, while other definitions of an Event are far too broad and would allow players to accomplish too much with a single Coin. Arriving at some general consensus before the game as to how your group plans on defining the scope of Events and



Traits is a large part of the Social Contract, and can make for an effective Tenet.

Universalis is designed to also allow such parameters to be established during play. This works as follows: the narrating player states his Event and pays 1 Coin. If no other player Challenges then the scope of that Event is deemed as being acceptable. If some player believes it is not acceptable (too narrow or not narrow enough) they Challenge. The Negotiations phase of the Challenge allows players to talk about what they feel is or isn't an appropriate scope for that particular event and suggest how many Coins they think the Event should cost (i.e. how many individual Events are really embedded in what the narrator said). Either through Negotiation or Bidding (or no Challenge at all) the issue gets resolved, the Coins get paid, and all players have a new data point to help judge where those parameters are in the future. The bottom line is, no matter where your group sets the threshold for the scope of a single Event or Trait, if you're having fun, its set at the right level.

This is why in the first chapter we made a point of saying that each play group must determine its own level of Coins to start the game with and to recover via Refreshment. A lot of this choice will depend on how many Coins it takes to establish the Event of "Marissa shoots the buzzer" in your group...1 or 4.

Events are the entire point of framing the scene to begin with. Players should have an idea of what they wish to accomplish within each scene and then pay for the Events necessary to make it happen.

Not every statement spoken by the player must be paid for as an Event. The player is free (and indeed encouraged) to embellish his narrative with color and detail. Note, however, that technically only those statements that are explicitly paid for carry the weight of Fact. The act of paying for a statement or colorful description gives special significance that it otherwise wouldn't have. In game terms, it has become a Fact.

A easy way we have found to help judge when something should be paid for is the "written record sheet test". If a player says something that should be written down so it gets remembered (like recording information on a character sheet) its worth paying a Coin for. If a Coin isn't paid, it doesn't get written down.



## OTHER DETAILS

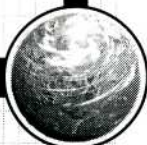
## ○ Other details cost 1 Coin as for any Fact

Other details like “why” and “how” can be added to a scene exactly like purchasing any Fact. In many cases the why is implicit and the how is demonstrated by the Events: the bad guys attacked because they are bad guys, the earthquake happened because it is a force of nature, etc. Other times a player may wish to explicitly state the why. The Event may have involved the betrayal of a trusted friend. The player may want to illuminate the reasons behind the betrayal and this can be done just as for any other Fact by spending Coins.

Often times, however, the player will not want to explicitly state the whys or hows. These may be left to be explained by another player in a future scene in a way completely unexpected by the initial player. In this way suspense can be preserved in a game where the players have total power to author the story. For example, a Mafia hit man just kicked in the door and attempted to off one of the game’s principal characters. Why? We don’t know. The player framing that scene never said. But at some point, unless the players want to leave a rather glaring loose end in their story, somebody is going to have to come up with a justification and frame a scene accordingly. Until then all of the players are left wondering “why the heck is the Mafia trying to kill this guy”.

Similarly, consider a scene framing a secret meeting between an agent and his underworld contact. Another player introduces a Complication (described in Chapter 6) where government counter espionage forces attempt to apprehend the characters. How did the government know about that meeting in order to crash it? We don’t know. The player creating the Complication may not even know. But answering that question will provide some player with great grist for a future scene (could the agent’s contact be a double agent?).

In the example of the opening scene earlier in this chapter, Dave did something similar when he left the identity of the “figures in the square” undefined. Nobody at that point (including Dave) had any idea who those individuals were or why they were there. In this way, even though there is no Game Master to keep secrets hidden from the players, there is still ample opportunity for secrets and suspense built into the game.



# CHAPTER SIX

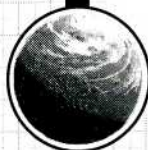
## COMPLICATIONS

- Complications occur in one of two ways:
  - 1) Whenever a player attempts to do something to or with a Component that he is not in Control of; or
  - 2) When another player wishes to turn an Event into an Obstacle and purchases dice representing difficulty
- Resolving Complications involve players rolling dice against each other to see who gets the privilege of deciding the outcome.

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### COMPLICATION BASICS

1. Start a Dice Pool for the Complication, and for each player who Controls a Component Targeted by it.
2. Go around the table and add dice (d10s) to any desired Pool by Drawing upon Traits or buying with Coins.
3. When no one wishes to add any further dice, roll.
4. Count the number of dice that came up 1-5 in each Pool (a Success), the Pool with more Successes wins.
5. The player rolling the winning Pool gets Coins equal to the total sum showing on the Success dice.
6. Players rolling non winning Pools get Coins equal to the number of dice rolled.
7. Winning player uses Coins received to narrate Events and add, remove, or restore Traits as desired.
8. Winning player may use Coins to cancel Coins received by the Losers.
9. Losing players, in order of most to least Coins received, do likewise, limited by what has already been narrated.
10. Players do not have to spend all Coins received. Coins not spent can be kept and added to Wealth.



## NEW CONCEPTS

### ORIGINATOR

The player who started the Complication by interacting with a Component he does not Control, or placing an Obstacle.

### TARGET

The Components that the Originator is attempting to manipulate, effect, or interact with, as a result of the Complication, are the Targets of the Complication. A player who Controls a Targeted Component is a Target Player and rolls the dice on the Component's behalf. Note: that if the player who controls the Target is the same player as the Originator, then there is no Complication. That player can simply manipulate, effect, or interact with those Components as he desires as part of a normal turn. If that player really desires to turn the situation into a Complication he can ask other players to voluntarily Take Control of the desired Target Components and oppose him in the Complication.

### THE DICE POOLS

During the Complication there will be 2 or more Dice Pools. One is for the Originator and represents the Complication. Each player who Controls a Target of the Complication will have a Pool of their own as well. The dice are d10s with 0s being ten.

During the Complication, players will add dice to the Pool of their choice (how is explained below). In general the Originator will be adding dice to the Complication Pool describing the nature of the threat / challenge / opponent / or obstacle. Controllers of the Target Pools will be adding dice to their own Pool describing how the Target is trying to defeat / overcome / circumvent / or otherwise prevent the Originator's intended action from coming to pass.

Players without Pools of their own may participate as they choose, adding dice to any Pool they have a desire to see prevail. They may also, on their turn (normally or by Interrupt) Introduce additional Components and involve them in the Complication. These Interruptions do not interfere with the progression of the Complication.

Alternatively, players may prefer that every participating player keep their own Pool and narrate its results regardless of whether they Control a Target Component or not. After the dice are accu-



mulated but before they're rolled each player can declare his Pool for whichever side makes sense based on the dice that built it.

### COMMITTED COMPONENTS AND TAKE OVERS

Take Overs work essentially the same as described in Chapter 3, with the following restriction. During a Complication, Components that have been committed to the Complication are not available to be Taken Over. This rule is there to avoid the bizarre effects that could result from Components changing hands in the middle of a Complication.

Committed Components include: Any Component that is an identified Target of the Complication, any Component that has been identified as the source of the Complication, and any Component that has already had at least 1 Trait Drawn from it to add dice to a Dice Pool.

### BUILDING THE DICE POOLS

Once Originated, Complications proceed regardless of other Events that may be narrated around them. Players continue to Interrupt and take their turns normally. The Complication remains open so long as any player has an interest in it being open.

The primary (though not the only) activity that should be occurring on a player's turn once a Complication has been Originated is adding dice to the Dice Pools.

- Adding dice to the Dice Pools can be done to ...

- 1) Draw upon a Trait
- 2) Buy Dice directly

#### CREATIVE SOURCES OF DICE

By Interrupting and taking a turn yourself in the middle of a Complication you can increase your options.

- 1) Introduce a new Component into the scene and Draw on its Traits.
- 2) Purchase new Traits for an existing Component and then Draw upon them.
- 3) Create a new Component, and purchase new Traits to Draw upon.

During their turn any player can call for the Complication to be closed. If all other players agree (i.e. no player wishes to add any more dice) then dice are rolled to resolve it.

## DRAW UPON TRAITS

- Drawing upon traits is FREE. This adds 1 die to, or subtracts 1 die from, a Dice Pool if the Trait applies

Drawing upon Traits is the primary (and most cost effective) means of increasing the dice in a Dice Pool. Mechanically this involves simply identifying an appropriate Trait that is present in the scene and which would apply in some fashion to the Complication at hand. Usually this will result in adding 1 die to an appropriate Dice Pool, but it could also mean removing 1 die from a Dice Pool depending on how the Trait is interpreted.

A player can Draw on the Trait of any Component in the scene whether he Controls them or not. However, the Trait must be used in a manner consistent with its nature and the Component that it is a part of. In many cases this consideration will dictate which Dice Pool the Trait effects.

For example: During the final battle with the forces of Slytheran, a building collapses and traps Kevin McCrae under some rubble. A Complication ensues to see if the other characters can rescue him before Slytheran Troopers arrive and take him prisoner. The Complication involves treating the heavy rubble as an obstacle that must be overcome. Bob doesn't Control Turk, but on his turn he Draws upon the Turk's "Strong" Trait. Since being strong would obviously help the character make the lift, the die from this Trait must go into the Target's Dice Pool. Even though Bob has shown that he "has it in" for Turk, he can't use this Trait against him since it is so clearly an advantage in the given situation (at least, not without a lot of creative interpretation that would be subject to Challenge).

If, instead, a character with a "Weakling" Trait was trying to make the lift, that die would obviously hinder the character's efforts and either have to go into the Originator's Dice Pool (on behalf of the heavy object) or be used to reduce the Target's Dice Pool.

This is nothing more than the application of the standard rule that is true throughout Universalis: any action taken with Coins must be justified. To Draw upon the Trait, the player must explain



how that Trait applies to the situation described by the Complication. The nature of this description might then be used as justification to Draw upon another Trait. The Challenge mechanic is always available to oppose uses of other Traits that other players don't find justifiable.

A Trait can only be Drawn upon once and provides only one die for each Complication. If, however, the Component possesses the same Trait multiple times (i.e. if Turk had "Strong x2" as a Trait) then each occurrence of the Trait can be Drawn upon separately providing additional dice. If there is more than one Complication in a scene, a Trait can be used in each Complication where it would apply. Traits newly purchased during the Complication can be Drawn upon immediately.

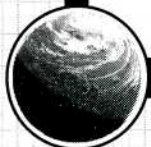
### BUYING DICE

- Buying dice costs 1 Coin to add or subtract 1 die to/from a Dice Pool

Buying dice is the only other way of increasing (or decreasing) the number of dice in a Dice Pool. For 1 Coin, a die can be added to any Pool or an existing die removed from any Pool. Like everything else in the game, however, this purchase must be justified. Buying Dice allows players to purchase modifiers for features, advantages, or disadvantages that are temporary to the scene or Event at hand and unlike Traits do not last beyond the Complication. If the player wants the feature to last it can be bought as Trait. If the feature really isn't appropriate as a Trait (or is only appropriate as a Trait), other players may use the Challenge mechanic to see that it is accounted for properly.

Each time dice are bought, the player must provide a description of what the source of the modification is. This description may then provide justification for the Activation of other Traits.

For example: During one of several Complications that made up the final battle, Dave paid 2 Coins to remove 2 Dice from Marissa's Pool declaring "you are fighting at a disadvantage because the Slytheran forces have laid down smoke to cover their advance." Christine, then Draws upon Marissa's "IR Goggles" Trait to add a die back to her Pool. Ordinarily this Trait would have no applicability to a scene during the day, but the nature of the Dave's description provided the justification.



## RESOLVING THE COMPLICATION

When none of the players desire to do anything further in relation to the Complication and all are satisfied with the Dice Pools as they stand (or at least are unwilling to spend more Coins to alter them further), resolution begins.

The Originator will roll all of the dice in the Complication Dice Pool and control any Coins generated from the roll. Each player who has a Component that he Controls Targeted by the Complication will have his own Dice Pool.

In the Core rules, there are only two sides in a Complication. The Complication itself, and the Targets collectively. The rolls of all of the Target Pools are counted together (as one big Pool) to determine the winning side of the roll (either the Targets win or the Complication wins). They are counted separately for purposes of spending the Coins generated (with each rolling player spending the results of his own Pool).

The Universalis expansion will contain several optional rules, including different ways of handling multiple targets during Complications. Players are free to use Rules Gimmicks to address unique situations where they feel the Pools should be handled differently.

- The dice are d10s with “0” being read as ten.
- All dice that roll 1-5 (50% possibility) are Successes and are kept, and all dice, which roll 6-0, are set aside.
- The side with the most Successes is the winner, the other side is the loser.

The side with the most Successes “wins” the contest and will have the advantage in describing the resulting action (usually from the perspective of being either advantageous or disadvantageous to the Target). A number of Coins are generated from the die rolls and are used to narrate the outcome of the Complication.

### IF SUCCESSES ARE TIED

If both sides have the same number of Successes, add up the sum of the numbers on the Successful dice in each Pool. The side with the highest total has the Edge. Add one free die of a different color to that Pool and reroll both Pools. Continue (giving out additional Edge dice each time) until the tie is broken. If the totals are tied,



both Pools get an Edge die and both roll again. In the case of multiple player Pools on the Target side, give the Edge die to the Pool which contributed the most successes to the Target side's cause. Ties in this go to the player sitting closest to the left of the Originator. In resolving the Complication, players should treat ties as indicating escalating drama or suspense and work this into the narrative accordingly.

During the final battle there is a Complication involving a firefight between teams of Meadow Soldiers and Slytheran Shock Troopers. Both sides are evenly matched and both sides have 6 dice in their Pool. The dice are rolled and the results are: Complication (Slytheran) 1, 3, 5, 6, 6, 9 and Targets (Meadow) 2, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9. Both sides have 3 Successes so there is a tie. The Slytheran have a sum of  $1+3+5 = 9$ , however, while the Meadow has  $2+2+3 = 7$ . The Slytheran have the advantage and so gain an Edge Die.

Both sides reroll, the Slytheran now with 7 dice. The results are 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 7, with 10 on the Edge die for the Slytheran and 4, 5, 5, 8, 8, 9 for the Meadow. Again there is a tie at 3 Success each. This time the Meadow has the Edge with  $4+5+5 = 14$  vs.  $2+3+4 = 9$  for the Slytheran.

Both sides reroll and now have 7 dice each in their Pools. This time the results are: Slytheran: 1, 4, 5, 7, 7, 0 edge 9 and Meadow: 2, 4, 4, 8, 8, 9 edge 3. The Meadow has 4 successes to the Slytheran 3 and thus wins the Complication.

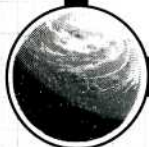
Continuing with the above example: The Meadow forces won

### COINS GENERATED

The Loser's Pool: generates 1 Bonus Coin per die rolled regardless of Success

The Winner's Pool: generates a number of Bonus Coins equal to the total sum on all Success Dice in the Pool. This will usually be more than the 1 Coin per die rolled of the Loser's Pool (averaging 1.5 Coins per die) which is part of the economic advantage of trying to win Complications. However, it may also be less, meaning it is possible to win the Complication but wind up with fewer Coins, which is the risk of Complications

Edge Dice: Both sides can add the number rolled on their Edge Dice (regardless of Success) to their total, if not already part of the Success Dice.



with 4 successes: 2, 4, 4, and 3 on the Edge Die. This gives them 13 Bonus Coins to spend on narrating the result of the Complication.

The Slytheran rolled 7 dice, plus they rolled a 9 on their Edge Die. They get 1 Bonus Coin per die rolled, plus they get to add the 9 from the Edge Die (even though it wasn't successful). That gives them 16 Bonus Coins to spend.

The Meadow has the advantage of going first, and ensuring that they narrate the outcome of the Complication as they please, but the Originator of the Complication has plenty of Coins (even more than the Meadow) to narrate the winner's losses with. This encounter became something of a Pyrrhic Victory for the Meadow People.

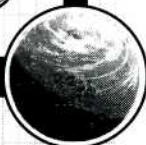
In this way, ties make it possible for extraordinary results by the side gaining the Edge, whether they ultimately win or lose.

### USING THE COINS

It is important to keep in mind that the dice rolled are not a "to-hit" roll, or a "task resolution roll", or even a "scene resolution" roll. They are a roll off between players to determine which player gets to decide the outcome of the Complication. The advantage goes to the player who invested the most Coins and effort into the Complication and accumulated the largest Dice Pool.

#### RULES FOR USING COINS FROM COMPLICATIONS

- 1) The Winner of the Complication narrates his Coins first, although he may discuss options with the Loser if he desires.
- 2) The Winner may sacrifice his own Coins in order to negate a like number of Coins received by the Loser.
- 3) The Loser may Narrate his Coins as desired, within the parameters of what the Winner has already narrated.
- 4) The Coins should be spent on items directly or indirectly tied to the Complication itself, not on items completely unrelated.
- 5) The overall outcome should be narrated with a bias favoring the Components of the Pool that won or to the detriment of the Components of the Pool that lost.
- 6) The Events and activities narrated should tie into or reference, at least tangentially, the Traits that were Drawn upon and the justifications given for purchased dice.



Complication and accumulated the largest Dice Pool.

The Coins can be used in any and all ways already described in these rules. This includes: Creating a Component, adding Traits to a Component, removing or restoring Traits to a Component, overcoming Importance, narrating Events, Introducing additional Components into the scene, Changing the location or even the time of the scene, and even proposing new game Tenets. The only restriction is that the use of the Coins must be appropriate to the Complication at hand and bear some relation to the Traits that were Drawn upon and the justifications used to purchase dice.

The generated Coins can also be kept by the player and added to his own Wealth. In fact, Originating Complications is one way for a player short of Coins to earn a few additional ones.

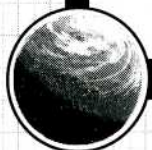
The big Complication Example: Following their escape from the forest fire, the heroes were in a quandary. They needed to get back across the river and back to Meadow in time to warn the town of the impending attack. Yet confronting them were troops dispatched by the Slytheran Queen with orders to stop them.

Its Albert's turn and he has just narrated how the team has moved down stream away from the fire and will be crossing the river on a hastily built pontoon boat with a tent cloth for a sail. He Created the boat as a Component with the Traits of "Pontoon Boat", "Sturdy", "Tent Cloth Sail", "Bark Chip Paddles", and "Big Enough for 3 plus Gear". He had narrated the boat being in the water and crossing the stream when he is Interrupted by Bob.

**Bob:** As the team tries to cross the river they are met by a hail of fire from the opposite bank. I'm Introducing 2 Squads of Slytheran Shock Troopers to oppose the Crossing, which will make a Complication out of it. [He pays 4 Coins for each squad using both the Sub Component and Group Trait rules from Chapter 4].

The squads both have Traits of "Shock Troopers", "Fierce Fighters", "Single Mindedly Aggressive", and "High Power Assault Rifle" [From the earlier example].

I think those all apply to the situation of trying to gun down the heroes on their little raft before they can cross. That's a total of 5 Dice apiece, or 10 Dice total for the



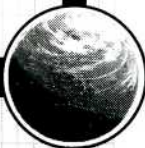
Complication Pool. Also, numbers are certainly an advantage here, and each squad has "Shock Squad x3" which I'll Draw on for 6 more dice. [Bob decides that the Troopers "Acute viper-like sensing pits" don't apply because the targets are easily visible. Nor do their "Venomous Fangs" help since they aren't fighting at close quarters. The Troopers are "Blindly Loyal", but so far neither their loyalty nor their morale has been called into question so he doesn't use that trait either. They are equipped with "Body Armor" but the Target's haven't declared they're shooting back, so that doesn't apply yet.]

Christine, Dave & Ed all take their turn in that order around the table, and all pass in order to wait and see how Albert decides to address this threat.

**Albert:** Wow, that's a hefty Complication Bob. One might think you really want the Slytheran to win. Ok, let's start with the obvious choices. First, all three of the Targeted characters are "named" and so provide a die each. They each have roles, but only Turk's "Special Forces" Trait seems applicable to the situation at hand, so that's a fourth die. [Having framed and narrated the entire scene so far, Albert is in Control of all of the characters at this point, so there is only one Target Pool for the Complication]

I guess we need to decide how they're going to respond to this danger. Going toe to toe in a firefight seems pretty futile (especially since Turk no longer has his weapon), so instead I think the team will decide to try and escape downstream; outrunning the troops on the shore and finding a safer place to land. So that gives us Turk's "Small Boat Handling" Trait, and the Traits "Sturdy" and "Tent Cloth Sail" from the boat to add 3 more dice. [Turk's Trait had been added earlier during the snapping turtle scene when the players needed a way to get across the pond. Bob considers Challenging the use of the sail, since he doubts a jury rigged piece of canvas will do much to speed up a raft heading down stream already, but decides it isn't worth making an issue of.]

**Bob:** I think the Complication is good where it is [he decides



to hold off adding any more dice to the Pool]

**Christine:** Well, Marissa has "Fiercely Determined" that sounds useable, so a die for that. What about "Command Ability" could she add a die for that, or not? [Here Christine is soliciting opinions about the suitability of a particular Trait]

**Bob:** I don't think so, they're on a boat, and Marissa has no particular boating skill. Its more Turk's bailiwick at the moment. [The other players concur with this, and so no die is added]

**Dave:** I pass

**Ed:** What about Fritz? Kevin sends Fritz aloft to scout the far bank and signal when he's found a safe place to land. I'd say that counts for 4 dice "Highly Trained", "Embedded Control Chip", the proper name "Fritz" which we've been counting, and "Fly" from the Master Component of Skylars

**Bob:** Man you're really milking that pet thing aren't you. You should have named him Lassie.

**Ed:** We've used him to scout stuff out before.

**Bob:** I'll tell you what, I give you 2 dice for it, but not 4. Take one for being "Highly Trained", and one for the name (I still say its silly to give a pet that name bonus, but I lost that Challenge). But the "Embedded Control Chip" and the "Fly" thing are what makes the justification even possible. Those Traits are what allow you to get any dice at all out of Fritz so I don't think its right to count them too. [Bob is Challenging Ed's use of Fritz here and is currently Negotiating with him on the appropriate number of dice. The other players think Bob's reasoning here is a little flimsy, because that logic could apply to a lot of different situations, but when Christine points out that regardless of the reasoning, she doesn't like the idea of the pet overshadowing the heroes, they decide not to fight him on it. 2 Dice only are added to the Target Pool.]

**Albert:** Well, that gives us 10 Dice total. Lets go ahead and roll and see what happens.



The Targets Roll 10 dice. They come up 1, 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 9, 0, 0, 0

The Complication Rolls 10 dice. They come up 1, 2, 2, 3, 4, 4, 5, 5, 7, 7, 8, 8, 9, 0

The Complication wins with 9 Successes to the Target's 4.

That gives the Complication  $1+2+2+3+4+4+5+5+5 = 31$  Bonus Coins, and the Target gets 10

**Bob:** Ok, this is what happens.

**Coin 1:** Blazing fire from the shore strikes the small craft repeatedly. [1 Coin Event]

**Coin 2:** Turk attempts to get the boat turned down stream [1 Coin Event]

**Coins 3-4:** but fire rips through the sail and cuts into the mast [2 Coins put into the boat, undefined as yet]

**Coin 5:** Meanwhile Slytheran Troopers spot the Skylar and recognize it is providing aerial recon. [1 Coin Event]

**Coin 6:** They open fire on it. [1 Coin into Fritz]

**Coin 7:** Fritz dodges and weaves, but its ultimately futile [1 Coin into Fritz]

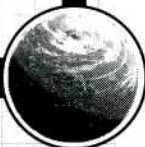
**Coins 8-11:** 2 blasts hit the small lizard square in rapid succession and Fritz is incinerated [Fritz has a total Importance of 6, so with 2 Coins already applied towards this, 4 more Coins will eliminate Fritz altogether]

**Coin 11:** Kevin gets a "signal not found" error from his control chip interface [color, no Coins]

**Coin 12:** The boat has managed to make decent progress downstream and despite the Troopers running to keep up it is starting to outdistance them [1 Coin Event]

**Coins 13-15:** But the damage done to it is making it difficult to control and when a last few parting shots strike home the boat breaks apart and capsizes [The boat has a total Importance of 5, so with 2 Coins already applied to it takes 3 more to eliminate the boat altogether]

**Coins 16-18:** The team is dumped into the water, and



with no boat to help control their progress they are carried much farther downstream than they had intended and are now even farther from the Meadow than they were before they crossed. [Being swept downstream is an Event that applies separately to each effected Component so 3 Coins covers this.]

**Coins 19-23 & 24-31:** Lets see, that's 18 Bonus Coins spent total so far. I'll use 5 more to cancel 5 Bonus Coins from the losing Pool leaving you with 5, and save the remaining 8, recouping my cost for this Complication.

**Dave:** Oh my god, you killed Fritz, you bastard!

**Ed:** Poor Fritz, he was a good lizard.

**Albert:** Ok, with 5 Coins I can't do much, which was obviously Bob's intention. So first things first.

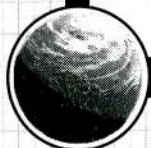
**Coins 1-3:** All three team members manage to make it safely to the desired shore, so they're now on the right side of the river. [3 Coins for each character crossing the river. The safely part comes as a result of Bob not seeing fit to saddle the characters with any injury so Albert isn't about to either]

**Coin 4:** Turk recognizes where they are, so they aren't lost [1 Coin to establish that as Fact so they can at least avoid that difficulty going forward]

**Coin 5:** and finally, none of their gear appeared to be lost or damaged in the dunking [One could argue that this should require a separate Coin for each character whose gear made it safely through, but no one Challenges, so Albert gets it for a single Coin]

Albert ends the scene and after a round of bidding Dave wins the right to frame the next one. He decides to continue where the previous one left off and so begins his scene with the wet and bedraggled heroes having just crawled up on the river bank. He hasn't gotten very far when Bob again spends a Coin to Interrupt.

**Bob:** I'm Creating "Buzzers", they are the somewhat "larger", "more aggressive", "carnivorous", "cousins of Skylars". They





art © 2002, david hedgecock

Jerek and his War Sparrow "Fright" drive off the attacking Buzzers.

also "Fly", but they eat meat instead of fruit. They have a "paralytic venom", that they can "spray at their target" which allows them to leach on and "suck their prey dry" in safety. They also have "embedded control chips" and are used as "Aerial Weapons by the Slytheran" [Bob pays 11 Coins for the above traits, plus a 12th to make buzzers a Master Component. Ed wonders if this Complication doesn't derive from Bob wanting to introduce Fritz's evil twin.]

They'd been following the team's progress down the river, and seeing them make it to shore alive, they descend to finish the job. [2 Coins for the following and the descent as Events]

I'm saying there is 4 of them, so I'm Creating a Sub Component "Buzzer" with a "Numbers x3" Trait for 4 Coins.

Dave: Dang, that's 18 Coins you sunk into this Complication.

Christine: Yeah, but he's Created another weapon for the Slytheran army to attack Meadow with. Now they have an airforce too.

Bob: Ok, "large", "aggressive", "carnivorous", "Fly", "paralytic venom", "spray at their target", "suck their prey dry" "control



chips" and Aerial Weapons". That's 9 dice, plus 3 for the size Trait is 12.

**Christine:** are we going to fight them?

**Dave:** Yeah, I guess we have no choice this time.

**Christine:** Ok, well then I think Marissa's "Command Ability", would apply, as would her "Laser Pistol". I'm not going to Draw on her "Trained Killer x2" because I don't think that covers flying lizards. But I do think "Hard Cold Demeanor" can work. I see this as being one of those grim moments where the camera focuses on her standing there all calm, cool, and collected barking orders and taking charge.

**Bob:** That works for me,

**Dave:** What about her "Determination"

**Christine:** Well, you can Draw on that if you want, but it seems to me that since there is no clear objective like crossing the river to this scene that I don't think it applies.

**Dave:** Hmmm, we'll see. Ok, so that's 3 dice so far, plus another 3 for the named characters, plus Turk's "Special Forces Training" makes 7. Now what.

**Ed:** Beats me

**Albert:** Time to call in the big guns. I'm paying 1 Coin to Introduce Jerek into the scene. That also brings in the sparrow he rides automatically as a possession. He's been shadowing us ever since he watched the snakes start that fire, and now he's seen our plight and decided to come in guns blazing. [Albert pays the 1 Coin for the Introduction, plus 2 more for the Events that Jerek has been following and that he leaps into the fray]

Lets see, he's got "Ace Flyer x3", and his sparrow is "Cybernetically enhanced" and has "mounted laser cannons across the neck x2". That's 6 more dice making it 13, plus I'm going to add 3 more for his surprise attack out of the sun [buying the 3 extra dice costs 3 more Coins] that's 16.

**Bob:** Sweet, I wondered if that rogue was ever going to show up. I figured he might if I threw a flying enemy at the heroes.



**Christine:** Hooray for Jerek!, I wonder if this will change Marissa's feelings for him.

**Dave:** Don't know, but I think that his showing up is enough of a justification to trigger Marissa's "Fiercely Determined" Trait, so I'm going to throw that in and push us up to 17 dice.

**Ed:** I say we roll, Bob you want to add anything else.

**Bob:** Lets roll.

The Target Roll on 17 dice comes up 1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 4, 4, 5, 5, 5, 6, 7, 8, 8, 9, 0

The Complication Roll on 12 dice comes up 1, 3, 5, 5, 6, 6, 6, 8, 8, 8, 9, 0,

The Target wins with 11 Successes to the Complication's 4.

That gives the Target  $1+2+2+3+3+4+4+4+5+5+5 = 38$  Bonus Coins and the Target 12

We'll end the example here in the interest of brevity. Suffice it to say, that after a brilliant dog fight and a saving shot from Marissa's pistol, all of the buzzers were shot down. Jerek, then agreed to take the heroes back to Meadow the short way if they agreed to help him get his commission reinstated in the air wing (you'll recall he'd been exiled for some, as yet still unspecified, crime). Ultimately the heroes agreed, and with Marissa riding behind him in the saddle, and Turk and Kevin dangling painfully from Flight's claws (although less painful than having been left to the Slytheran Troopers who were still closing in), the team returns to Meadow in time to put the defenses on full alert.



# CONCLUSION

**N**ow you have everything you need to create your own worlds and characters with Universalis. You're ready to see what kind of story comes out of the collective imaginations of you and your friends. You will find that the more you play Universalis, the more the system becomes second nature and fades into the background; and the more you will begin to use the system in new and unexpected ways. This is a natural part of the process of acclimating to these rules. In other words, the more you play, the better it gets. The more you play Universalis, the more it becomes the game that you need it to be. This effect should not be overlooked. Many games get old as you play them. People discover things that they don't like about the system, and they get tired of the same sort of action. Universalis, over time, actually becomes more the game it needs to be to fit your style of play. Try the system out "as is" for a bit, but don't be afraid to add in a Gimmick whenever you feel the need. Make the game what you need it to be for you. Get creative with it's use, and you'll like the results.

What will happen to the heroes in our example? Will they be able to help in the defense of the Meadow? How will their story end? We don't know; it hasn't been played out. That's a very fun part of Universalis, nobody ever really knows where the story is going until it gets there. You could play out the end of the Meadow gang if you wanted to. Better yet, make up your own world, heroes, and story. You'll find that it's more rewarding than you might have imagined.

Be sure to check out the Universalis Website at:  
<http://universalis.actionroll.com> where you'll find:

- Add-ons...pre-designed Rules Gimmicks that can be incorporated directly into your game
- Links to the Universalis Forum on The Forge where you can have your game questions answered
- Essays and game guides on how to get the most out of your Universalis sessions



We also want to see transcripts of your games, great scenes you've run, and characters, locations, and props you've created. If we like them, we'll put them up on the page where everyone can use them as a source of inspiration for their own games.

Happy Gaming,  
Ralph & Mike



# GLOSSARY

**Bank:** A central reserve of Coins where all spent Coins are returned and new Coins are drawn from.

**Bid for Turn:** Players bid secretly for the right to frame the next scene. The winner is the Framing Player and can spend the Coins bid during the scene. The losers return their bid to their wealth. Ties are broken by the first player to the left of the last Framing Player.

**Bidding in Challenges:** If Negotiations fail to resolve a Challenge, players Bid. The Challenging player must bid first (openly) followed in order by the other players with the Challenged player bidding last. Each player can bid one or more Coins either in favor of the Challenger or the Challenged (or a new option). The side with the most Coins when no one wishes to bid further wins. If a Fact is being Contradicted the side defending the Fact counts double for the Challenge.

**Buying Dice:** 1 Coin allows 1 die to be added to or subtracted from any Dice Pool. The rationale for this must be fully justified by the player making the purchase.

**Challenge:** A means for players to regulate the actions of other players in the game. Any action or behavior can be Challenged. If possible the issue is resolved through Negotiation. If not, it is resolved by Bidding Coins.

**Characters:** A type of Component describing a person or group of people (where person is defined very loosely). Characters are the most important Component, and the story is told through them. Players can Control any character in the story, there are no specific Player Characters.

**Coins:** Coins regulate story power in the game. Players spend them to add Traits to Components, Tenets to the game, and narrate Events in scenes. Additional Coins can be earned from Complications and automatic Refreshment after every scene.

**Complication:** A Complication involves building a Dice Pool for the Complication rolled by the Originator and a Dice Pool for any Targets rolled by the Target Players. The most Successes wins and both sides receive Coins to narrate the outcome.

**Component:** All people, places, and things, and even intangibles can be

defined as Components. All Components are collections of Traits which describe it. The more Traits, the more Important the Component is to the story. If it is a noun it can be defined as a Component.

**Control:** The player who Introduces a Component into a scene Controls that Component until it is Taken Over by another player. Only the Controlling player can add, Remove, or Restore Traits to a Component or involve a Component in an Event without causing a Complication.

**Create Component:** Players Create all Components in the game by purchasing 1 or more Traits for it costing 1 Coin each. The first Trait must be the Component's Role.

**Dialog:** When a Character Controlled by 1 player wishes to have a conversation with a Character Controlled by another, the two (or more) players can enter into Dialog with the initiating player paying 1 Coin. During Dialog the players speak in the voice of their Characters and pay for any statements their Characters make that they wish to have treated as Fact.

**Dice Pool:** Both the Complication and the Targets will have a Dice Pool made up of d10s. There may be more than one for multiple Targets but they are treated collectively for purposes of determining the winner. Dice are added to the Pools either by Buying them or Drawing them from Traits.

**Drawing on Traits:** Any Component in a scene can have its Traits Drawn on during a Complication. If a particular Trait applies to the Complication at hand it can add or subtract 1 die to the relevant Dice Pool. Each Trait can provide only 1 die per Complication but can be used in multiple Complications in any one scene.

**Edge Dice:** If the number of Successes rolled in a Complication are tied, sum the values of each of the Success dice. The side with the highest sum gets a free die of a different color known as the Edge Die. In the event of multiple ties, continue handing out Edge Dice until the tie is broken. In the event of multiple target Pools, award the edge die to the Pool with the most Successes. If this is tied, award it to the tied Pool closest to the left of the Originator.

**Eliminated:** Components can be Eliminated from the game by paying Coins equal to their Importance. Each Coin paid also entitles the player to a Fact regarding the Components fate. Eliminated Components cannot be Introduced into any scene occurring chronologically after the time of its Elimination. They can be returned to play (with suitable justification) by paying additional Coins equal to their Importance.



**Event:** Events cost 1 Coin and deliver the action of the story. Each Event consists of a single effect, a single Component receiving the effect, and/or a single Component performing the effect. If Components are nouns and Traits are adjectives, then effects are verbs and Events are complete sentences.

**Exit Component:** Exiting a Component is the opposite of Introducing a Component. With a suitable justification, a Component currently present in a scene can be removed from the scene for 1 Coin.

**Facts:** Facts cost 1 Coin and give added leverage in Challenges. A Trait is a Fact assigned to a Component. A Tenet is a Fact assigned to the game itself. An Event is a Fact assigned to a scene.

**Fines:** Fines are a way of indicating dissatisfaction with the play of another player. Any player can at any time call for a Fine against another player. All other players vote simultaneously "thumbs-up" to levy the Fine or "thumbs-down" no Fine is necessary. The losing party must pay a number of Coins equal to the total thumbs against him to the Bank.

**Framing Player:** The winner of the Bid for Turn is the Framing Player. He can use the Coins he bid (and additional ones from his Wealth) to frame the Scene. He cannot be Interrupted while doing this. The first Event he narrates ends framing and begins regular play. Only the Framing Player can declare a scene ended.

**Framing a Scene:** The Framing Player Frames a scene by Establishing Location, Setting the Time, and Introducing Components. He cannot be Interrupted while doing so. The Framing ends when the Framing Player narrates the first Event.

**Group Trait:** Any Component can be turned into a group of like Components simply by adding a Group Trait. The number of times the Group Trait is added indicates the relative numbers of the group (not necessarily at a 1:1 ratio). The additional numbers are not treated separately in the game (it is still a single Component) but can be Drawn upon in any Complication where additional numbers would be useful.

**Importance:** All Components have an Importance which is simply equal to the number of non Removed Traits the Component has. A Component can only be Eliminated from the game if a number of Coins equal to this Importance are spent to do so (and can be justified). Likewise an Eliminated Component can be brought back into the game if a number of Coins equal to its Importance is spent to do so (and can be justified).



**Interrupt:** For 1 Coin any player can Interrupt the turn of another player (except during framing) and begin taking his own turn. The interrupted player can finish his immediate thought before handing over the turn.

**Introduce Component:** Any existing Component can be Introduced into a scene by paying 1 Coin. Only Components that have been Introduced can have Traits Drawn upon for Complications.

**Locations:** A type of Component describing a place. Locations are one of the first things that must be Established in any scene for 1 Coin.

**Loser:** The side rolling fewer Successes in a Complication is the Loser. The losing player (or players) receive 1 Coin per die rolled plus the value of any Edge dice to narrate the outcome of the Complication, after the Winner's narration is completed.

**Master Component:** A Component can be marked as a Master Component for 1 Coin. A Component so marked can never be given a Proper Name and serves as a template for every related Sub Component tied to it. The Traits bought for the Master Component should be suitable for a generic representative of that class or category of Components. A Master Component can not be eliminated unless all of its Sub Components have been eliminated.

**Mini Scene:** Instead of waiting for the current scene to end and then winning the next Bid for Turn, a player on his turn, can cut to a scene elsewhere to depict events going on in another time or place. The Mini Scene automatically ends at the end of the player's turn (voluntarily or by Interruption). There is no additional cost for the Mini Scene, but Establishing a Location, Setting a Time, and Introducing Components all cost as they do for framing a normal scene.

**Negotiation:** Before any Challenge goes to Bidding, players can discuss alternative solutions amongst themselves. If the Challenged player agrees to modify his action to the satisfaction of the Challenger, or successfully convinces the Challenger to drop the Challenge, then the Challenge ends without Bidding.

**Originate a Complication:** A Complication occurs in one of two ways:

- 1) when a player who Controls one Component is attempting to effect a Component Controlled by a different player, or
- 2) when a player wishes to turn an Event described by another player into an obstacle by Buying Dice for it.



**Originator:** The player who begins a Complication is the Originator. He represents the source of the Complication and rolls the dice related to it.

**Pool:** Shorthand for Dice Pool

**Possession Trait:** One Component can be marked as being a Possession of another Component with a Possession Trait. The owned Component is automatically Introduced whenever the owner is Introduced. The owner's Importance is increased by the Importance of the Possession. The owner can be separated from the Possession by paying to Remove the Possession Trait (if such can be justified in the narrative).

**Proper Name:** Any Component can be given a Proper Name as a Trait. Like any Trait it can be Drawn on for any Complication in which it applies. It is difficult to conceive of many situations where a mere name would apply to a Complication. However, there is a special rule for Characters (and rarely other Components). Because "named" Characters are always held to be more important than unnamed ones, a Character with a Proper Name can Draw upon that name in any Complication in which they participate.

**Props:** Any Component that is not a Location or a Character. Typically items, equipment, and gear, but also intangibles like religions or ideologies.

**Refreshment:** At the end of every scene and before the next one begins, all players receive a small number of additional Coins (typically 5) from the Bank added to their Wealth.

**Relationship Trait:** Traits can depict family or emotional ties between Characters or a Character and other Component). These Traits can be Drawn upon any time the relationship applies. It is possible for 1 Coin to buy both a Relationship Trait for 1 Component, and the corollary matching Trait for the related Component.

**Removing Traits:** For 1 Coin any Component's Trait can be crossed off of its record sheet. The rationale for this must be fully justified by the player causing the Removal.

**Restoring Traits:** For 1 Coin any Trait that had been previously Removed can be Restored. The rationale for this must be fully justified by the player causing the restoration.

**Role:** The first Trait that must be bought for any Component, the Role defines what that Component is or does for the story. This is often a position, or occupation for Characters, but can also be a story based role. Roles can be Drawn on for any Complication in which they apply.

**Rules Gimmick:** A formal means of proposing optional house rules during the game for 1 Coin.

**Scene:** A game division in which the Framing Player Establishes a Location, Sets a Time, and Introduces Characters and Props. All players then take turns narrating events within the scene until the Framing Player ends it and a new scene is Framed.

**Social Contract:** The Social Contract is an agreement between players about how a particular group intends to play. It can include rules on outside distractions, table talk, how loose the players will be with the rules, forbidden topics, pacing, and much more. The Social Contract can be an informal understanding, a formal agreement, or elements can be proposed during play as a Tenet.

**Story Element:** A Story Element is a Tenet which defines the type of story about to be told. Items like genre, theme, setting, mood, and situations. These make up the "type" of story the players want to tell.

**Sub Component:** A Component can be made a Sub Component of a Master Component by buying a Trait indicating the connection. The Sub Component has access to all of the Traits of the Master Component and each Sub Component is free to Draw on them during Complications. The Sub Component's Importance is determined only by its own Traits, not including those inherited from the Master.

**Successes:** When the Dice Pools in a Complication are rolled, each die that comes up a 1-5 is a Success. The side with the most Successes is the Winner, the other side is the Loser.

**Take Over:** For 1 Coin a player can take Control over any Component in a scene currently Controlled by another player. It does not have to be his turn to do this, nor does the Take Over make it his turn. Complications or Dialog are often the result of a Take Over. Alternatively, Take Overs can allow players to avoid Complications if they desire.

**Target:** Any Component that is going to be effected as the result of a Complication is a Target.

**Target Player:** The player who Controls a Target Component is the Target Player and will roll the dice on behalf of those Targets.

**Tenets:** Tenets are rules of the game. They can be Social Contract Issues, Story Elements, or Rules Gimmicks. They define how and what a group intends to play. Tenet's cost 1 Coin and only 1 can be proposed on a player's turn.

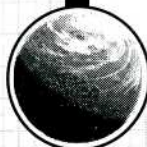


**Traits:** Traits are like adjectives which describe Components. The more Traits a Component has the more Important it is. Traits can also be Drawn on to provide dice during Complications. Traits cost 1 Coin

**Wealth:** A player's supply of Coins is called his Wealth. Players begin with a supply of Coins at the beginning of each game (typically 25), and this is replenished through Complications and Refreshment.

**Wound Trait:** A specific kind of Trait that is added to a Component to represent injury or damage of some kind. During the game Events involving the Component should be narrated to take the Wound Trait into account. During Complications the Wound Trait can be Drawn on to provide dice which hinder the Component if applicable. Wound Traits do increase Importance while present and can be healed / repaired by paying to Remove them (which reduces Importance).

**Winner:** The side in a Complication with the most Successes is the Winner. Sum the value of each of the Success Dice plus the value of any Edge Dice that weren't Successful. The total is the number of Coins the player draws from the Bank to narrate the outcome of the Complication.



# UNIVERSALIS

## The Game of Unlimited Stories

### UNIVERSALIS IS:

The game where every player is the Game Master

The game where players can create  
and populate the world as they desire—as they play

The game where everything that happens,  
happens because a player wanted it to happen

The game where suspense comes  
from the actions of other players, not from a random roll

The game whose plot evolves as you play  
with no random tables, rail-roading, or scenario books

The game which requires absolutely  
no set up or preparation time

The game where it doesn't matter  
if all of the players show up on time or at all

Begin play with only sheets of blank paper, pencils, ten-sided  
dice, tokens, and plenty of imagination

**ALL THE RULES YOU NEED CAN BE FOUND WITHIN THESE PAGES**



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# UNIVERSALIS

## Order of Play

### PREPARATION

Decide the number of coins each player starts with and the Refreshment rate for each scene. (The default is 25 coins per player and 5 coins Refreshment.)

By any means the group prefers, choose someone to begin. The first player then pays 1 coin to propose a Game Tenet or passes to the player on his left. When all players have passed, begin the Bid for the first Scene.

### PLAY

Play proceeds in Scenes. At the beginning of play, and after a Scene ends, players Bid for the Next Scene. The winner Frames the Scene, and play proceeds to his left.

### Bid for Next Scene

Players secretly bid coins. Bids are revealed simultaneously. Losing bids are retracted. Ties go to the player closest to the last Scene Framer's left. The winner is the Framing Player.

The coins bid by the Framing Player are set on the table; he may use these, in addition to his own, during the scene. Any bid coins not used when the scene ends are lost.

### Framing a Scene

The Framing Player establishes (and pays for) the Location, the Time, and any Components present. He *Controls* any Components he introduces. Framing ends when the player narrates the first Event. The Framing Player may not be Interrupted until then. His turn then proceeds as normal.

### Rounds of Play

On his turn, a player narrates his additions to the story, and pays for any changes. He *Controls* the Components he brings into the scene. If he tries to change a Component he does not Control, he starts a Complication.

*Other players may Challenge, Create an Obstacle, Take Over, Interrupt, Call for a Fine, or speak Dialog for Components they currently Control.*

A player may end his turn at any time, but must end it when Interrupted or when he has no coins to spend. If not Interrupted, play passes to his left.

### Ending a Scene

Only the Framing Player may end a Scene and only on his turn. Ending a Scene normally costs nothing, but does allow other players to continue or flash back to that scene. *Fade to Black* costs 1 coin and prevents anyone from returning to the scene.

When a Scene ends, all players claim Refreshment coins, and then start the bid for next scene.

## Spot Rules

### Challenges

A player may challenge at any time. Play pauses for negotiation and bidding. If no agreement is reached, bidding starts with the challenger and goes to his left, except for the challenged player, who bids last. The challenge ends if the challenger does not put up at least 1 Coin in his first bid. Other players may pass or bid as they wish.

Players place their bids in support of the challenger or the challenged. (Or they may suggest an alternative, which may also be supported with bids.) The solution with the most number of coins wins, and may not be challenged again.

All bids are public. All coins bid are paid to the bank. A player who passes is not barred from bidding later. Bidding continues until all players pass.

### Fines

Anyone may call for a fine. Play pauses while the accuser and defendant make their cases. Then all players vote. The majority wins. The loser must pay to the bank a number of coins equal to the number of votes against him.

### Importance

The total of all Coins spent to create a Component and any Sub Components. The value of a Master Component is *not* included in the Importance of a Sub Component.

### Injury, Death, and Elimination

Injury may be added as a Trait. This increases the component's Importance. Alternately, you may just remove Traits. A component with no Traits may be removed from play for 1 Coin. A Master Component may not be eliminated until all Sub Components are eliminated.

### Master Components

A Master Component defines a template for Sub Components. Traits bought for the Master Component may be used by each Sub Component in a Complication. The Sub Component's Importance is based only on their own Traits, not the Master's.

# UNIVERSALIS

## Actions you can do any time

- Interrupt and begin your own turn. 1 Coin.
- Turn an Event into an Obstacle, starting a Complication. 1 Coin per die.
- Take Over a Component (as long as it is not part of a Complication). You now Control it. 1 Coin.
- Challenge. Bid Coins if necessary.
- Call for a Fine. No cost.
- Speak Dialog for a character you Control. No cost.

## Actions you can do ONLY on your turn

- 1) Scene Framer Only (Chapter 5)
  - Establish scene's location. 1 Coin
  - Place a scene in the present. No Cost.
  - Place a scene in the past. 1 Coin.
  - Place a scene in the future. Pay 1 Coin to each player.
  - End the scene. No cost.
  - Fade to Black. 1 Coin.
- 2) Narration Activity (Chapter 4)
  - Change scene to a new or existing location for 1 Coin
  - Introduce an existing Component into the scene for 1 Coin.
  - Exit a Component from a scene for 1 Coin.
  - Describe an Event for 1 Coin.
  - Start a Mini-Scene, which ends when your turn is over. No cost.
- 3) World Building Activity (Chapter 5)
  - Create new Component & Introduce it (or not). 1 Coin.
  - Add, Remove, or Restore a Trait for 1 Coin per Trait.
  - Reduce or Restore Importance for 1 Coin per Level.
  - Create a Master Component. 1 Coin.
  - Link a Component to a Master Component (creating a Sub Component). 1 Coin.
- 4) Game Tenet Activity (Chapter 2)
  - Propose or modify a Social Contract issue for 1 Coin
  - Propose or modify a Story Element for 1 Coin
  - Propose or modify Rules Gimmick for 1 Coin.
- 5) Complication Activity (Chapter 6)
  - Originate a Complication with Components you do not Control
  - Draw on a Trait to add dice to a Complication Dice Pool
  - Buy Dice (and justify the purchase) for a Complication Dice Pool. 1 Coin per die.
  - Roll the dice, determine winner and spend or keep Bonus Coins

## Control

A player controls any Component he brings into a scene. During the scene, other players may Take Over control of any Component., as long as it isn't involved in a Complication. When the scene is over, all control is lost.

## COMPLICATIONS

A Complication begins when the acting player wants to change Components he does not Control, OR when another player buys dice to create an Obstacle.

**1) Start Dice Pools** for the Complication and each player who controls a Component involved.

**2) Regular play continues.** However, narration should focus on the Complication. On their turn, a player may add dice to (or subtract dice from) the pool(s) of their choice by drawing on traits or buying dice. He may also Call for a Resolution. If all players agree, the dice pools are rolled.

*1 Trait or 1 Coin = 1d10.*

**3) Roll the dice.** A roll of 1-5 is a Success. Compare the total successes in the Complication Pool to the total of successes in *all* opposing pools. The side with the most successes wins.

**Ties:** *Sum of the numbers on each side's Success dice. The higher side gets an Edge dice. (If more than one player is involved, then the Edge die goes to the highest single total or the player closest to the acting players left.) Reroll and repeat as necessary, adding more Edge dice.*

**4) Get coins.** Winner gets coins equal to the sum of the numbers on his Success dice. Losers gain 1 coin per die rolled.

**5) Winner uses Coins to narrate** Events and add, remove, or restore Traits as desired. He may also buy down the coins other players got in the Complication.

**6) Losing players narrate,** in order from most to least coins received, limited by what has already been narrated.

Coins not spent may be kept.



# Add-ons

Rules Gimmicks are changes and addition to the game rules that are invented on the fly as needed and added to your game for 1 Coin.

Add-ons are Rules Gimmicks that have been written down and standardized so that they can be reintroduced into future games without needing to be completely reinvented.

Some of these are just minor rules tweaks. Some will cover special situations that may arise in the game better than the core rules cover them. Some completely alter the way the game is played.

If you've created interesting Rule Gimmicks in your game, [let us know](#), we'd love to see them.

- **Game Preparation Add-ons** (Chapter Two)
  - [First Scene Coin Refreshment](#) (Roy Penrod)
  - [Setting Creation Phase](#) (Mike Holmes)
  - [Serial Play](#) (Roy Penrod)
  - [Meta Game Jobs](#) (Mike Holmes) 10/6/02
- **Game Play Add-ons** (Chapter Three)
  - [Open Scene Framing](#) (Ralph Mazza) 10/6/02
  - [Judgment, Challenge Variant](#) (Kirt Dankmyer) 7/31/03
  - [Alternate Reality Variant](#) (Kirt Dankmyer) 7/31/03
  - [Friendly Control](#) (Kirt Dankmyer) 7/31/03
- **Component Creation Add-ons** (Chapter Four)
  - [Greater Control](#) (Bob McNamee)
  - [Royalty](#) (Ralph Mazza)
  - [Player Character](#) (Mike Holmes)
  - [PC Endowment](#) (Mike Holmes)
  - [PC Plot Protection](#) (Mike Holmes)
  - [PC Descriptive Paragraph](#) (Ralph Mazza)
  - [PC Story Driver](#) (Ralph Mazza)
  - [Durable Components](#) (Bob McNamee) 10/27/02
  - [Enigma Traits](#) (Christopher Chinn) 10/27/02
  - [Public Domain Trait](#) (Kirt Dankmyer) 7/31/03
- **Scene Narration Add-ons** (Chapter Five)
  - [Plot Pools](#) (Mike Holmes)
  - [Mechanically Enforced Pacing](#) (Ralph Mazza)
- **Complication Add-ons** (Chapter Six)
  - [Add Dice Only](#) (Roy Penrod)
  - [Multiple Target Pools](#) (Ralph Mazza)
  - [Nested Complications](#) (Ralph Mazza)
  - [Using d6s instead of d10s](#) (Jonathan Nichol) 1/21/03
  - [Extended Complications](#) (Chris )  7/27/04
- **Inter-Session Add-ons**
  - [Players Present Limit](#) (Mike Holmes) 10/6/02
  - [Revisit Game Tenets](#) (Mike Holmes) 10/6/02
  - [Introduce New Players](#) (Mike Holmes) 10/6/02
  - [Coin Option Gimmicks](#) (Mike Holmes) 10/6/02
  - [Create Components Between Sessions](#) (Mike Holmes) 10/6/02



# Game Preparation Add-ons

Some optional rules that change the way the Game Preparation Phase is handled.

## Additional Coin Refreshment Before First Scene

Submitted by [Roy Penrod](#)

Coins refresh to 25 before the first scene is bid on (applies to the first session only).

### NOTES

I use this Rules Gimmick to encourage players to really detail the setting and characters before we start playing.

With this Rules Gimmick, players are encouraged to get involved in the world building phase because they each have 25 Coins that can't be saved for later use.

*----I really like this one and intend to use it for my own games, Ralph.*

## Setting Creation Phase

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

After the normal Game Preparation Phase, but before the first scene is framed, insert a new special Setting Creation Phase. Give each player a separate pool of 25 Coins (or more if you like) just for this phase. During this phase only setting information can be generated. This includes, but is not limited to, declaring Tenets that relate to the setting, Creating Components that exist within the setting, and establishing a variety of Facts related to historical events. Anything is possible really, as long as the player can rationalize it as setting development (and the other players do not challenge). The phase will continue until all players have either spent all of their Coins, or until all players pass (or the phase can be extended at that point with a new gimmick). At which point any unspent coins are returned to the Bank.

### NOTES

Use this Add-on for a game that emphasizes a more developed setting before play begins. This is a more involved version of Roy's Coin refreshing Add-on above.

### OPTIONS

One can also insert separate special phases to address characters, or to develop a detailed situation or premise. Whatever you think needs more attention.

## Serial Game Structure

Submitted by [Roy Penrod](#)

Declare that a game is to be part of an ongoing series of sessions. Players are required to leave at least one plot thread dangling to be picked up at the start of the next session.

### NOTES

I use this Rules Gimmick to add a serial structure to a campaign game of Universalis. It's really just a reminder to make sure we leave a plot thread dangling so we have something to look forward to next session.

## Metagame Jobs

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

These Gimmicks can be established at any time, but are least disruptive to institute during the Game Preparation phase. Essentially, a player may be designated with a title and certain responsibilities for which he receives some scheduled remuneration in Coins.

The game pays the player Coins from the Bank to perform certain duties. The payment can be received on a per scene basis; or, for multi-session games, at the beginning or end of each session. It can be on a "per item produced" basis, or any other schedule of payment. The amount and timing should be well designated as well as the nature of the duties. Gimmicks can also be instituted, of course, to terminate any such contract between a player and the game.

Some sample jobs:

- Record keeper - Potentially onerous depending on the speed of play, this player is responsible for taking notes on the game. He records all Components created, all their Traits, and all Facts, and organizes their presentation so that he can recount details when necessary. Having one player do all this (as opposed to each player making his own notes) makes recalling records easier, and frees the other players from note taking leaving them less distracted.
- Librarian - often the same player as the record keeper if there is one, this player is responsible for keeping all notes between sessions of play. If there is no sole record keeper, he collects the notes from each player. The downside to the librarian is that he must be present at every session, or have his archive accessible for play. Else play is very difficult.
- Illustrator - players can sell articles of art created during the game or between sessions to the game on a "freelance" basis. Truly gifted artists might be able to do a running account in which case they could be paid per scene, theoretically.
- Journal Writer - between sessions a player can write the reflections of a character into a fictional journal entry. These can be submitted like art for payment.
- Disc Jockey - a player can be paid to act as DJ for a session, ensuring that a constant supply of appropriate music (or sound effects) is provided. Discuss well with the group what music is appropriate before hiring a DJ, and promptly fire a DJ that gets out of hand.
- Host - consider paying the host of the session a fee to account for the problems associated with having the players over.
- Caterer - similar to the host, payment can be assigned for food brought to share.
- Prop Master - players can be paid for creation of interesting and evocative props.



# Game Play Add-ons

Some optional rules that change Turn Order or Game Flow.

## Open Scene Framing

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

In the Core rules there is only 1 active scene at a time. Other scenes may remain unresolved and waiting for completion, but before players can return to them, the current scene must be formally declared ended by the Framing Player and a new scene started which returns to that previous one. In between, players Bid for Scene to determine who has the privilege of Framing that new scene. Mini scenes allow for small, short, scenes to be inserted into the main scene. This add-on allows several full scenes to be going on simultaneously.

The Bidding for scene procedure was written to keep the flow of the game very structured and progressing in a clearly delineated way. This is especially valuable for introducing new players to the concepts of total player control. The Open Scene Framing Add-on is an advanced technique that does away with all of the above mentioned structure.

When using this Add-on there is no Bidding for Scene Framing. Two new options are added to the player's turn. "Frame New Scene" and "Switch Between Scenes" either of which costs 1 Coin.

To Frame a New Scene a player on his own turn pays the 1 Coin and then proceeds to frame the scene exactly as described in Chapter Five. After he Establishes a Location, Sets the Time, and Introduces Components, he continues with his turn normally.

At any time a player can on his turn pay 1 Coin to switch from the current scene to another of the currently active scenes to continue the action there where it was left off. He, or some other player who Interrupts him, can then pay a Coin to switch back again. The Framing Player for a given scene can at any time on his turn close the scene by paying the 1 Coin to Fade to Black. Once closed the scene can no longer be switched to.

This technique is fairly advanced and demands good organization to keep all of the separate scenes straight. It is not recommended that more than 2 or 3 Scenes be active at any one time.

It is also possible (and in some cases encouraged) to use this Add-on like a Rules Gimmick. In other words use the Core rules for Bidding for Scene as the standard in the game. Then, only on the occasion where rapid fire switching between scenes becomes desirable, propose this rule be adopted. When that sequence of scenes is over, revert back to the standard rules.

## Judgment, Challenge Variant

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

This Add-on replaces the normal Challenge Variant. It offers the opportunity to bring a more GM like influence to the game.

If players disagree about the legality of a move or the interpretation or application of a Gimmick or Fact, then the player who spent Coins before the current player's turn is to be the Judge and decide the question. Disagreement for the purposes of this rule may be created by the insistence of any player. This process is called invoking Judgment.

When Judgment has been invoked, no one may Interrupt or pass the turn without the consent of a majority of the other players.

The Judge's Judgment may be overruled only by a unanimous vote of the other players taken before the next Coin is spent. If a Judge's Judgment is overruled, then a player chosen at random from those remaining (i.e. not the one of the previous Judges or the player on whom Judgment had been called) becomes the new Judge for the question, and so on. If all Judges are overruled, well, then, the player on whom Judgment was called can continue without further Judgments regarding that action.

New Judges are not bound by the decisions of old Judges. New Judges may, however, settle only those questions on which the players currently disagree and that effect the completion of the turn in which Judgment was invoked. All decisions by Judges shall be in accordance with all the Facts and Gimmicks then in effect; but when Tenets and Facts are silent, inconsistent, or unclear on the point at issue, then the Judge shall consider game-custom and the spirit of the story before applying other standards.

## Alternate Reality Variant

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

This variant requires very careful record keeping with regards to scenes. Scenes should be arranged on a chronological number line.

At the end of any scene, you can split off a "mirror scene". This puts a fork in the number line immediately prior to the just finished scene and adds the mirror scene. This mirror scene starts the same way (time, location, and introduced Components) with no additional framing cost. At that point the group plays the same scene again, likely with different events and outcomes.

There are now two alternate realities. The first where the events proceeded according to the original scene, and the second where the events proceeded according to the mirror scene. There can be many branches formed in this way. The same scene can be mirrored multiple times and each branch may then branch out itself. Only the very first scene of the game, the starting point, cannot be forked.

The cost for creating a mirror scene in this way is 1 Coin per fork (including the newly created one) between the mirror scene and the original first scene of the game.

Each Branch needs to be labeled and each Component must be identified with the branch it belongs to. A component is part of each successive branch after it is Created, but if it is altered subsequently, it is only altered for that current branch (and subsequent ones) and so a duplicate Component must be made specific to that branch. Whoever splits off a new branch, should be appointed record keeper for that branch.

## Friendly Control

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

Whoever Controls a component can cede Control at any time to another player, at no cost to anyone

Variant: Anyone can take Control of any Component on their turn for no cost. The current owner can Challenge this with the weight of Fact behind him to prevent it.



# Component Creation Add-ons

Some optional rules that change the way the Components Get Created, including three variants on the oft requested "PC Add-on".

## Greater Control Over Created Components

Submitted by [Bob McNamee](#)

Add a Trait to any Component you Created called "Controlled by \_player name\_" (as in "Controlled by Bob"). This doesn't prevent other players from Controlling Component's that you've Created but it is a Fact that gives your Coins double value to Challenge for Control.

*---I call this the PC-lite rule. It is by far the simplest means of gaining a degree of traditional Player Character like authority over a particular character in the game.*

*---Note the possibility for a "hostile takeover" as other players attempt to remove and replace a "Control" Trait and this attempt is Challenged.*

### OPTIONS

Allow this Add-on to apply only to characters not other types of Components. Allow each player to buy this Trait only once, limiting each player to a single controlled character. Allow this Trait to be applied to a Component even if the purchasing player didn't Create it. Disallow "hostile takeovers" by ruling that Control Traits can never be eliminated or altered.

## Public Domain Trait

Submitted by [Kirt Dankmyer](#)

This add-on is something of the reverse of the Greater Control add-on above. Instead of adding a "Control Trait" that makes it harder for others to take Control of a Component, the player adds a "Public Domain" Trait to the Component.

This Component can now be Taken Over for free, without spending a coin to do so. The Take Over can be Challenged as usual.

*---This gimmick would be useful in a variety of situations such as: Large complex locations like a castle or city that every player wants to be able to add Traits to at any time without having to spend a Coin to Take Control each time, reoccurring villains so that any player can initiate a Complication using that villain without needing to pay to control him.*

*---See also the [Friendly Control Add-on](#) for a similar way of handling this.*

## Royalty Add-on

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

Must first be playing with Bob's Control Add-on above. This Add-on allows players to take Control of a Controlled Component without fear of Challenge if they first play an additional 1 Coin from Wealth, directly to the player named in the Trait.

*---Royalties were actually a concept from way in the early days of Universalis, whose intention was to motivate players to Create interesting Component, by paying them if they were something other players would want to use. This motivation proved completely unnecessary and so the rule was scrapped; but it fit so nicely with Bob's clever Control rule above that I resurrected the concept just for it.*

## Player Character Add-on

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

A player can, once during the game (across all sessions), spend 5 Coins, and permanently Take Over a single character. This character becomes the Player's Character (PC). Add a Trait to the character of "\_Player Name's\_ Character" (as in "Mike's Character".

The PC can only thereafter be Controlled by that player. Further Take Overs of that character are not allowed. The PC can not be altered in any way (such as buying Traits for the character) by any player other than the owner, except through the use of Coins received from a Complication in which the PC was a participant.

This includes being Introduced into scenes. The PC can only be Introduced to a scene with the agreement of the owning player (who still retains Control despite not having Introduced the character). If a player wants to Introduce a PC against its owner's will, he can frame a Mini-Scene in which the PC is involved in a relevant Complication and use Coins won in the Complication to Introduce the PC into the main scene.

The owning player is also solely responsible for all of the character's dialog.

*---This Add-on can really alter the game in subtle, but powerful ways. Shifting the player's emphasis from the story as a whole to a specific character, can lead to player myopia and disinterest in parts of the story not involving the PC. It is suggested that not all player utilize this option at the same time. It is perhaps best used to give the hero of the story to a particular player as a PC, and perhaps the major villain of the story to another player as a PC, but for the rest of the players to remain unattached to specific characters.*

*---See also the [Judgment Challenge Variant Add-on](#) for a way to bring a more GM like influence to the game. Ralph*

## The PC Endowment Pool

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

When a player adopts a PC he gets an Endowment of 25 Coins, which are kept in a separate pool. These Endowment Coins can only be used to give Traits to the PC, or to add to Complication Pools in the case of Complications in which the PC is involved. These Coins are never Refreshed. When they are spent they are gone.

### OPTION

Set the number of Endowment Coins at a different amount based on the character's importance to the story and the level of realism in the game.

## PC Plot Protection

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

With this option it takes double the normal number of Coins to eliminate a PC by reducing Importance.

*---This rule has the interesting effect of causing players who are determined to eliminate a protected character to concentrate first on removing the character's Traits, thereby lowering the PC's Importance before having to pay to reduce it. I recommend considering this sort of protection for major villains or other important Component as well. Ralph*

### OPTIONS

Allow this Add-on to be purchased individually for any important Component, not just PCs (even in a game that isn't using the PC Add-on). Alternatively players can make it illegal for any player except the owner to reduce a PC's Importance. Thus only the owner can decide if and when it's time for the PC to be eliminated.

## PC Descriptive Paragraph Add-on

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

This is a special method of generating Player Characters which should be used in conjunction with the Endowment Add-on above. Players must write a paragraph (or several) describing who their character is and what he's like. Game balance issues are not important here (they will come into play below) but players should strive to keep their description limited to 100 to 200 words. This will help ensure that the description is tightly worded, and focused on the most essential aspects of the character. Sentences that are merely lists of things the character can do are to be discouraged.

Key elements of a paragraph would be cultural and social background, occupation, personality, important possessions, friends or contacts, hobbies or things the character does exceptionally well. Take this paragraph and use it as a source to draw the character's Traits from. Pay for those Traits (or at least as many as possible) out of the character's Endowment.

*---This Add-on is inspired by several RPGs such as Hero Wars which use just such a descriptive paragraph to create their characters. Ralph.*

## PC Story Drivers

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

This Add-on should be used in conjunction with the Endowment Add-on above.

The Story Driver is some compelling feature about the character's personality or motivations that serves to provide interest. The Story Driver is the reason why the character is part of the story being told. It is the reason the character is a protagonist of the story and is the motivation that drives the character through the story. If the character does not have a Story Driver it probably isn't compelling enough to be a player character and is best left as an NPC.

The Story Driver is that facet of a character that makes him of interest to the audience. It may be tied to the character's role but this is not necessary. It answers the questions: "Why should we care what happens to this character?", "What makes this character suitable as a protagonist?", "What keeps the character moving forward through the story?", and "Why is this character worth telling a story about in the first place?" It may be a quest to complete, a vendetta to pursue, a mystery to solve, a promise to keep, or a destiny to fulfill. It may also simply be an interesting situation that the character is in that requires immediate action to respond to. For supporting characters, it may be largely tangential to the main story line (which should be concerned with the Story Driver of the protagonist) but it should provide the opportunity for subplots, and exciting narrative in its own right.

The Story Driver should not just be a static tag line. It should be an ongoing theme in the character's life which become more developed as the story progresses both from the character's perspective and the audience's. The player should make an effort to work elements of the Story Driver into his narrative where appropriate and keep in the back of his mind the potential for its ultimate resolution or fulfillment, if such is possible.

The Story Driver for a player character can be altered and changed during play as the character evolves and the details of the surrounding world and events get filled in. In this way a character whose Story Driver includes following in the footsteps of his dead and heroic father, can, later in the story, latch on to the idea of making the main villain of the story his father, who is not dead after all.

The elements that make up a Story Driver write-up are not considered Facts for game purposes. They are merely the perceptions of the character whose actual veracity may vary. Elements of the Driver that the player wishes to be irrefutable can be purchased as Facts normally.

Whenever the player manages to focus attention on his Story Driver he can earn Coins from the Bank. For each scene in the game that addresses some aspect of the character's story driver, the owning player may draw 1 Coin from the Bank and add it to the character's Endowment Pool.

Whenever the player manages to actually resolve his Story Driver (if such is possible) the owning player may draw a number of Coins from the Bank equal to the total number of game sessions that character has participated in with that Story Driver in place and add them to the character's Endowment Pool.

*---This Add-on is inspired by features found in many games, such as Sorcerer's Kickers. Ralph*

## Durable Components

Submitted by [Bob McNamee](#)

This is an add-on designed to make it more difficult to remove Traits or Eliminate Components from play.

When Components are Created, they can be designated as "Durable". This is a special Trait that costs 5 Coins and cannot be Removed from the Component. For the rest of the game it takes 2 Coins instead of 1 to Remove a Trait of that Component or reduce the Component's Importance. This will make killing Characters, destroying Locations, etc **much** harder. It will tend to skew things toward making existing things gain Importance, since it is cheaper to add a Fact to something than to destroy a Fact from it.

A combat example...

Bob's has character A attack B. Character B is Durable. After resolving the Complication. A side wins with 10 coins, B side gets 3. B is an Importance 6 character. With this Add-on, instead of reducing Importance to 0 and describing the 6 "coin moves" and keeping 4 Coins- killing B like the normal rules, Bob can't kill B (he would need 12 coins to reduce the importance), so he adds 6 Coins worth of Facts (like...Flesh wounds x2, Weak with Blood Loss x2, Broken Nose, No match for Character A) and keeps 4 Coins. These added traits will have the effect of acting against B in other Complications, but they also increase the Importance of character B to 12. These "negative" Facts are also difficult to remove from B. (and perhaps Bob will destroy one or two trait Facts and add a couple wounding traits etc instead of using them all one way)

If you want to make sure that the groups creative work hangs around longer, this might be a good Add-on for you.

*---Mike and Bob worked on this Add-on on our Discussion Forum. I added a couple small tweaks to it before posting it here. Ralph*

## Enigma Traits

Submitted by [Christopher Chinn](#)

This rule allows players to conceal the hidden facts about a character or other Component. You can buy Traits for Components that are not known to the other players, although they do have to be written down, and cannot be used for Complications or Challenges until revealed.

You have to pay 2 Coins for an Enigma Trait (essentially 1 Coin for the Trait and 1 for the privilege of keeping it secret). The Trait is written down and not revealed to the other players. At any point the player desires he can reveal the Trait and bring it to bear in a Complication or Challenge or simply refer to it in narrative.

The purpose of an Enigma Trait is to allow a player to secure "first dibs" on an idea but yet still keep it secret to "spring" on the other players at a dramatic moment. Players can always add "surprise" or "plot twist" Traits to Components via the normal rules. But by waiting for the right moment to purchase those Traits other Facts may be purchased by other players in the mean time that invalidate the player's plans.

For instance. Dave might really want to add a Trait to Elton Frakes that he is, in fact, a werewolf. He decides to wait to a suitable moment to buy the Trait and reveal Elton's secret. Before he gets the chance, Ed buys "Immune to Lycanthrope" as a Trait for Elton. Now Dave could Challenge this, but in addition to the expense it may make his announcement anti-climactic. Using the Enigma Trait rule Dave buys the Werewolf Trait for Elton but records it in secret. Now if Ed tries to render Elton "Immune" he will be too late. Dave can now challenge Ed with the weight of the newly revealed Enigma Trait serving as Fact.

These traits work well for mystery stories, noir stories, heroes with undiscovered powers, and soap operas. Memento comes to mind as a movie that would incorporate this very well.

*---This Add-on was first proposed in our Discussion Forum. I tweaked it a bit before posting it here. Ralph*

## Making Protagonists Special

[These Add-ons](#) suggest a few ways to mechanically make the main characters of your story more involved and influential than the supporting cast.



# Complication Add-ons

Some optional rules that change the way the Complications are handled.

## Dice Can Only be Added to Dice Pools

Submitted by [Roy Penrod](#)

The core rules allow dice to be added or subtracted from dice pools. This rule prevents dice from being subtracted from a pool. Any event that would logically be justified as subtracting dice from a pool is instead added to an opposing pool..

### NOTES

I use this Rules Gimmick to make sure we never end up with an empty dice pool (no dice to roll).

For example: A named character only has 1 die to contribute to a Complication (e.g. his name). He does, however, have a Trait that can be used against him (e.g. Cowardice). Using the standard rules, the character would end up with an empty dice pool. Using this Rules Gimmick, the character still contributes 1 die to his dice pool while the opposing dice pool is also given 1 die for the character's negative Trait.

## Multiple Targets in Complications

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

[These Add-ons](#) illustrate several different variations on the standard Dice Pool for Complications which players may find more accurately reflect a given situation.

## Nested Complications

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

A nested Complication is nothing more than a new Complication that is Originated before an existing Complication has been completely resolved. This sort of Complication can either be internal to the current Complication or external to it.

An internal Nested Complication is one where the source of the new Complication was generated within the current Complication. For an example inspired by Ron Edward's [Sorcerer](#), imagine a Complication which involves a party of sorcerers fighting an enemy deep in an underground stronghold. One of the players seeks to draw upon Traits from a powerful demon that a character is bound to. This demon has not had its Needs met in a while and so is likely to resist its master's commands. Another player begins a new Complication pitting the character against his demon in a battle of will to see if the demon will obey or not.

An external Nested Complication is one where the two Complications are entirely separate and running parallel to each other, but where the outcome of one Complication can influence the outcome of the other. The classic example of this is where one group of characters is responsible for establishing a "diversion" while another group proceeds with the mission. These Complications could be going on separately within the same scene or actually simultaneously in two different scenes.

Both types of Nested Complications are handled the same way. One of the Complications must be resolved first and has the capability to impact the Dice Pools of the other. In the case of multiple Nested Complications going on simultaneously, they all might impact the same primary Complication, or they may all impact the next Complication up daisy-chain style. A word of caution: multiple Nested Complications are an advanced technique that, while they can be extraordinary fun, requires lots of dice, lots of table space, and careful organization. Which Complication is resolved first is up to the player Originating the new Complication. Almost always it will be the new Complication being resolved first.

Each Nested Complication will have its own set of Dice Pools, and are separate Complications for purposes of Drawing upon Traits. Resolving the Nested Complication is handled just as any other. Common uses of the bonus Coins generated by a Nested Complication include: purchasing a new Trait attached to the scene which can then be Drawn upon to provide dice to another Complication; describing Events and Facts related to the Nested Complication that can be used to provide justification for Drawing upon Traits in another Complication that otherwise couldn't be used; to Introduce or Create new Components that can be used in another Complication; or to damage or even eliminate Components that could be useful to another Complication before they're Drawn on.

## Using d6s Instead of d10s

submitted by Jonathan Nichol & [Wilhelm Fitzpatrick](#)

When resolving Complications one normally rolls d10s with 1-5 being successes and the sum of the numbers rolled being the bonus Coins received. In a thread in our [discussion forum](#), Jonathan and Wilhelm described using d6s instead.

Simply treat odd results as successes (which maintains the same 50% chance of success) and add the numbers normally. In this case the numbers 1, 3, and 5 have the exact same average sum as the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 when using d10s.

*As Wilhelm said, "the simple elegance of that approach is astounding"; which leaves me a little embarrassed that I hadn't seen that myself. --- Ralph*

## Extended Complications

submitted by Chris

After dice pools are assembled for a Complication but before the dice are rolled, a player can make the complication "extended." This means that rather than resolving the complication with one roll of the dice, the dice pools are divided and each is rolled separately.

The person who pays to extend the complication gets to decide how many sub-pools the complication will be divided into. The dice in each side's pool are then divided as evenly as possible into that number of sub-pools.

The smallest sub-pools on either side are rolled first. Edge dice are accumulated in the sub-pool that rolled them. The winner narrates the victory as usual. Then proceed to roll and narrate each of the other sub-pool pairs in the same way.

The purpose of this Gimmick is take a complication and convert it into a number of separate stages allowing the full complication to be narrated back and forth in multiple steps rather than resolved all at once. This is especially useful for climactic battle scenes with arch villains and other similar scenes where players might want the action to trade back and forth.



# Narration Add-ons

Some optional rules that change how players can narrate the story.

## Plot Pools

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

If you have a particular idea for a subplot or even main plot that you want to ensure has a life of it's own, give it a Plot Pool. Depending on how important the plot, give it between ten and fifty Coins from the Bank. Any player may, on their turn, spend up to two of these Coins per scene so long as their spent in a way that relates to developing the action or backstory of the plot with which they are associated.

### OPTION

Adjust the rate of spending, increasing the number of Coins per scene to bring a Plot to the forefront, or reducing the rate to draw its conclusion out.

## Mechanically Enforced Story Pacing

Submitted by [Ralph Mazza](#)

-----COMING SOON-----



# Intersession Add-ons

For games of Universalis that are intended to go for more than a single session, players may want to set up a set of Tenets for continuing play. Below are a set of standard Tenets that can be adopted by the group via social contract before play, or paid for with a single Coin after play has begun. They are very standard and intuitive, and most people playing adopt something very similar even if the specifics are unspoken.

## Standard Intersession Rules

- The first scene framed in the subsequent session is considered concurrent with, or immediately following the end of the last scene of the previous session, unless Coins are spent to set the time differently..
- Scenes that are open at the end of the last session are still considered open, and can be continued as normal.
- All players begin the next session with the same number of Coins that they had at the end of the previous session. at the end of the last session.
- At this point play continues as if there had been no interruption

## Players Present Limit

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Subsequent sessions can only be played if all players from the first session are present, and wish to play.

## Revisit Game Tenets

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

At the start of the subsequent session, a new Game Preparation phase occurs wherein players can discuss and modify current Tenets. When this is finished begin with a new scene. This gimmick is intended to address any concerns players may have over the direction the story is going, and to make sure everyone is on the same page to start the new session (players satisfied with the current direction of play may just pass in this phase in order to get directly to the first scene).

## Introduce New Players

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Each new player is introduced to the game by a special Rules Gimmick so that the other players can object to the new player's presence if they so wish. Alternatively, one can have an "open-door" policy, and allow any player to add any other new players that they like.

If new players are allowed, the number of players who are involved in the story can be capped, as can the total allowed to play in a single session. If the latter is selected, and too many players present themselves for play, players should bid Coins in round robin fashion for the right to play. Those who bid lowest cannot play in that session.

If persons who were not players in a prior session are allowed to become players, then a rule for how many Coins they start with needs to be adopted. Often a group will endow new players with whatever the standard starting Wealth is for that play group. Other options include starting them with the same number of Coins as the player with the most or least Coins; or an average. Any number that seems sensible can be selected. Such a Coin level Gimmick can be declared to be a one-time thing, or a policy for all new players.

(One can also see here the possibility of using similar player-adding gimmicks to allow new players mid session. The author highly recommends this.)

## Coin Option Gimmicks

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Some players may wish to allow for the level of Coins to be adjusted between sessions. This can take many forms:

For example, the end of a session can be treated like the end of a scene, and additional refreshment can occur.

Or, normalization of Coin totals for each player can occur, perhaps resetting the number of Coins to a certain level (perhaps the starting level) at the beginning of each session.. This latter option will have the result of having players spend all their Coins during the course of a session as the "Use 'em or lose 'em" mentality sinks in.

As always, any adjustment of Coin availability will affect the pacing of the game; potentially dramatically. Players can conceive of other methods of moderating the number of Coins available, and should consider the potential effects before putting them into play (or allowing them into play unchallenged).

## Create Components Between Sessions

Submitted by [Mike Holmes](#)

Gimmicks can be established to allow players to flex their creative muscles between sessions.

Allow for a limited amount of Coins to be spent between sessions on creating things. Potentially players may be given a pool of Coins for just such a purpose that are used or lost between sessions. The results of such creativity can be presented at the time of the Game Preparation phase at the start of the following session, each player presenting one Component on his turn, at which time they can be challenged.



# Essays Discussing the Game

Click on these links to read more about the design, play, and theory of Universalis.

- [Intent and Departure from Tradition](#)
- [Coins and Currency](#)
- [The Importance of the Social Contract](#)
- [More on Story Elements](#)
- [Using Challenges to Regulate the Game](#)
- [The Purpose of Complications](#) 10/27/02
- [\*\*How to Get Started Playing Universalis\*\*](#) 02/12/03
- [Traits, Challenges, and Enforcing Story Logic](#)  03/21/02



## Intent and Departure from Tradition

Universalis is not the first game to push the envelope of what role-playing games are. In fact, elements of the Universalis can be seen in games like Story Engine, Once Upon a Time and Baron Munchausen. Even so, it is quite different from any of those and vastly different from any traditional RPG. Many aspects of Universalis are so different that it has led some to question whether it is even a role-playing game at all. We think there is great opportunity for role-playing within Universalis, but it all depends on how you use it. More than anything, Universalis is a tool kit for the creation of stories. With it, you can create entire worlds and civilizations to whatever level of detail you desire. You can populate those worlds with a cast of characters limited only by your imagination and the needs of the story; and you can concentrate on defining only those aspects of the world that are important to that story.

The plot of the game is entirely created and motivated by the players. Other games in the past have used various mechanisms to give players a degree of control over the story. "Hero Points" as a way of cheating death, or "Drama Points" used to achieve some cinematic effect, are examples of granting limited power of this kind to players. Other games use "Plot Points" to give players a great deal of dramatic control over the course of a game's events. Some even empower players to describe the entire resolution of a conflict in whatever manner they choose. Universalis goes further and puts the entire story in the hands of the players. Not only what the characters want to achieve and how they will achieve it, but also what their enemies are doing and what obstacles they'll have to overcome along the way as well. All of it (including everything normally reserved for the Game Master only) is player created, player developed, and player driven.

There is no pre-established setting. While many games are designed to be generic in that they can be used with a variety of different settings, Universalis can be played literally without defining any setting at all in advance. While it is possible to play Universalis using already published settings for inspiration, or predefining a few features; the game is at its most revolutionary when players sit around a table for the first time with no characters and no clear idea of even what sort of game is about to be played. Everything in Universalis is under your control as a player: the setting, the genre, various genre conventions; even the theme, mood, situation, and plot are all decided upon and moved forward by player interaction, collaboration, and even competition. Every mountain range, every city, every NPC, every monster, every mission, every powerful evil empire is totally invented by you and your friends as you are playing. Even the characters in the story will be created "on the fly" as play progresses. Universalis's rules are designed to promote the creation of a good story, and a good story can be told about any place and any situation.

There is also no Game Master. Almost all traditional RPGs, and even most non-traditional ones, rely on a Game Master. The Game Master is the one who does not play an individual character himself but rather controls the game world and everyone else in it. In Universalis the GM's powers aren't just shared with the players, they're totally ceded. Player's have all of the control, all of the power, and do all of the decision making. As players, you will decide where the characters of the story are going and what manner of obstacles they will find when they get there. You will decide the nature of the adventure, who the enemies are, and what those enemies are plotting. You will decide the reward for success and the price of failure. You alone have absolute power. Essentially, every player is a Game Master and Coins are a measure of your authority.

But don't be fooled into thinking there is no game to be played, that with absolute power there will be no suspense and no challenge. Indeed the opposite is true. For while it is true that you have enormous power to influence the world and everything in it, so do each of the other players. Each of them will have their own ideas of what to do, and where to go, and what should be found there. Instead of several players trying to unravel the twists and turns of a single GM's story you have several players trying to unravel the twists and turns of several GM's stories. You can't do everything your way. You can try, but then you'll quickly run out of Coins and hence out of power. The collaboration, competition, and even subterfuge of play provides its own very powerful form of suspense and challenge.

But don't take our word for it. Head on over to the [Play Examples](#) page and see for yourself the kind of stories that have been told using Universalis.



# Coins and Currency

Every RPG has its system of rewards. What kind of activity in the game earns a player a reward? What form does that reward take? What can that reward be used for? In many traditional fantasy RPGs for example, characters are rewarded for defeating monsters. The reward takes the form of experience points and treasure. Experience points are used to make the character tougher by increasing his skills or level; and treasure is used to make the character tougher by giving him powerful items or the gold to buy powerful items. The effect is to render the character better able to defeat more monsters and thus earn more experience and treasure.

This circular system of rewards functions as the game's currency, or money. In the real world people pursue different ways of earning money, and then spend that money on the various products and services that are available. While playing the game, players will pursue various ways of earning game rewards, and then spend that reward in whatever manner the game makes available. The game's flavor text may say that the game is "about" something. But it is the system of rewards provided that determines how it will really be played.

The core mechanic of Universalis is its system of rewards. Beginning with the thought that these rewards function like a game's currency, Universalis uses Coins as its primary resource. They are spent to gain dramatic control over the story and all aspects of the game world itself. The entire game world is available for player creation and manipulation: geography, economics, politics, religion, and the people and creatures who populate it. Likewise the plot will be written, developed, and negotiated by the players through the mechanism of Coins.

The spending of Coins creates an entire Coin based economy to the game. As a player, you will notice that your play is different you are "wealthy" than when you are "strapped for cash". You will learn to keep a close eye on the "money supply" of the game and who is currently rich and who is currently poor. This economy is the driving factor behind the entire game. All game mechanics are essentially 1) a means of spending Coins, 2) a means of acquiring Coins, or 3) a means of settling disputes (in the absence of a Game Master) about how Coins are spent or acquired.

It is important to understand what Coins represent in Universalis, which may be most easily explained by what they are not. Coins are not a literal measure of in game character wealth, nor are they "Hero Points" which allow characters to achieve extraordinary feats. They are not a measure of Action Points, or who is more powerful. In fact, they are not associated with individual characters in any way.

What they are is very simply clout. Players as a group have ultimate authority over every single aspect of the game. Coins are a measure of how that authority is currently distributed among those players. You achieve control over the world and story by spending Coins. Your current Wealth is your store of potential authority for the future. This has great impact on play. If you spend a lot of Coins in a brief amount of time you'll have had tremendous impact over events and the scope of the world. However, your impact in the future will be more limited because you will now have fewer Coins relative to your fellows. Horde Coins in order to have decisive control in the future (enough to win Challenges or Complications with ease) and you'll find a large part of the story has already been told, and a large part of the world defined without you. Balancing this dynamic is a key to play.

Universalis can be compared to a team of scriptwriters working on a TV show episode. Everyone has ideas of what they'd like to see in the show or how a scene should play out and many ideas are tried and discarded and batted around for commentary. What Universalis does is superimpose a game structure on this collaborative process, using Coins to measure each player's ability to contribute.



# The Importance of the Social Contract

Before the game begins, players are encouraged to establish a Social Contract, that is to get a consensus about individual play style preferences and expectations on the record in advance. Chapter Two mentions several features that can be included in a Social Contract. The Contract is an explicit acknowledgement that every group has its own dynamic. Everyone has their own preferences and their own expectations. They have their own ways of dealing with situations and with other players.

Preferences are a collection of things a player likes and dislikes. Often times if a game does not fit within a player's set of preferences there is not much to be done. Everyone is different, and everyone is entitled to like what they like. This means Universalis may not be for everyone. However, most of the time, preferences are flexible. There is usually a lot of gray area between features players insist on having and things they refuse to play with. This is where expectations come in.

Expectations are what a player believes he will be getting when he sits down to play. In any game, if a player's expectations aren't being fulfilled they are going to be dissatisfied with the experience. However, much of the disappointment can be avoided if players are clear about what they can expect from the game right at the start. Universalis offers a game that is unlike almost any other RPG out there. We think it is a damn good game: a lot of fun and a powerful story creating tool kit. However, if a player comes to the table expecting seafood and instead gets served a thick steak, he will likely be disappointed, regardless of how good a steak it was. The Social Contract is the way to make sure everyone knows what's on the menu. Items to discuss in a Social Contract include:

## Outside Distractions:

Some groups have no problems playing a game amidst many distractions. Other groups have very strict bans on things like cell phones, televisions, Monty Python jokes; or discussing sports, a favorite movie, or a new computer game. Some groups forbid food and beverages at the gaming table, and establish set break periods where the game halts at a predetermined time for such activities. One of the first parameters that should be established by any playgroup is its policy on distractions. A rambunctious, talkative group with lots of out of game camaraderie will present a very different play experience than one where such things are banned and total focus on the game is demanded. Players expecting one will be very disappointed if presented with the other.

## Table Talk:

Related to this is the idea of table talk. During a player's turn is it encouraged, permissible, discouraged, or even forbidden for other players to offer suggestions, reminders, or threaten retribution to the player taking his turn? Some groups will find that the story is more collaborative if collaboration is allowed at all times. Players can actually work together to help another player craft his turn in the best way possible. Other groups feel that such efforts stifle individual creativity and lead to bland predictable stories. Still others simply find that it's distracting, promotes too much chaos at the table, or allows powerful personalities to dominate play. Some will permit a suggestion or two if a player seems stumped but discourage it in general. Games will function much more smoothly if a group's attitude towards table talk is identified before hand.

## Game Rule Priorities:

How fast and loose vs. meticulous and detailed does the group as a whole desire to be with regards to game rules? Some groups will fall into the fast and loose category. They may get so absorbed with slinging around cool descriptions and clever plot twists that they forget to keep track of exactly how many Coins they're supposed to have spent. Later, when they realize this, they might be satisfied to simply say "yeah, that would have been something like 6 Coins or thereabouts". Other groups will want to be far more meticulous in their accounting. They will explicitly cost out every detail and if the player is a Coin short, they'll expect him to cough up another one to make good. Either method can make for an entertaining game, but all players should be on the same page as to what to expect.

## Pacing:

Universalis is a game focused on the creative process in which brainstormed ideas serve to shape the game world's reality. The ability to Interrupt another player's turn to add details of your own, is a cornerstone of game play. Some individuals are not as quick as others at this and prefer a more deliberate pace where they have time to carefully think each item out and frame it "just so". Others are brainstorming dynamos spitting out ideas by the bushel. If your group includes a mix of these types, players should discuss in advance how to keep the "rapid fire" players from dominating play and leaving the "deliberate" players behind, and conversely how to keep the "rapid fire" players from getting bored with a more "deliberate" pace.

## Adherence to Conventions:

An important item to establish up front is how rigidly you plan on adhering to Game Structure decisions about genre and theme and the like. If the genre is one of Dark Horror, how much "humor" or silliness will be tolerated before the Challenge mechanic is used to drag the story back on course. If the genre is a gritty realistic police drama, how much tolerance will there be for over the top kung fu escapades and open flaunting of authority. Some groups couldn't care less and are willing to follow the story wherever it takes them. Other groups will demand players adhere to the setting and genre conventions as they've been established. Spelling this out up front, will save a lot of headaches and Challenges later on.

## Level of Simulation:

Universalis gives players a great deal of power to author and direct the story as they see fit. In this sense a player is much like a screen play writer bound only by his imagination and his budget. However, he is also bound by his ability to "sell" his ideas to the other players. When engaged in a scene, should players attempt to use their authority to ensure that the actions in the scene are "realistic" and reasonable? Is verisimilitude important to the game? Or are players free to be as outrageous and over the top as they desire? This is yet another issue that is almost sure to cause a great deal of conflict within a group if all of the players are not in accord. Many groups will expect the players to be self limiting. That is to say, each player voluntarily limits his own power to alter the world to what makes sense or is reasonable given that world's reality.

It is not expected that players will go down this list item by item and sign a written contract. In fact, if you're part of a well established group that has been playing together for a long time, you were probably able to recognize where your group already fits as you read through each item. Most likely many of the issues above have been tacitly assumed within your group for some time simply as a result of being familiar with each other. You may, however, have noticed an area or two in which there is some friction because players have different priorities. Or if you're part of a new group, you may not have a clear idea of what your fellow players' preferences are.

Simply being aware that these differences (and many others) exist and that not everyone in your group will share the same view on them as you do can go a long way towards smoothing tensions. Often a simple discussion about an issue can resolve it before it becomes a major source of friction. These principles can be adopted to any game (or really any social activity at all).

Universalis, however, goes one step further. It allows (and encourages) social contract issues to be introduced as a rule in the game. Items like "no food at the table", or "no chit chat while a player is taking his turn", or "make sure we account for our Coin expenditures exactly" can be proposed as a Tenet of the game. If not Challenged by the other players it is now a rule of the game that the other players are expected to abide by and can be used as part of the Challenge or even Fine mechanic if necessary.



# More Details on Story Elements

## Genre:

*A category of literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content*

Genre is often one of the first choices that will be made in a game of Universalis. Universalis is truly a universal game, games can be about anything. Genre will help to define the style, form, and content of the game world. It will be the first indicator of what is or is not appropriate to create and do in the game. Genre conventions are those aspects of a genre that are recognizable characteristics of that particular genre. They may either be definable or too subtle for definition, but they are what make one genre feel different from another. As an example compare the detectives Sherlock Holmes and Poirot with Rick and AJ Simon and Thomas Magnum. Obviously there is a noticeable difference in feel between the adventures of Holmes and Poirot and those of Simon and Simon and Magnum PI. These differences are in the genre conventions.

At the macro level, genre encompasses major literary divisions of the type of categories you might find in a bookstore. Romance, is separate from fantasy which is separate from westerns which are separate from science fiction. When someone in a game of Universalis declares "tonight we are playing a Murder Mystery", he is setting the genre of the game. Other common genres might include: cyberpunk, horror, anime, spy thriller, kung fu action, Hollywood action, or something else more exotic.

At the sub level, genre can be broken down further. Fantasy, for instance might be more specifically defined as "Swords and Sorcery" (ala Howard and Liebler), "High Fantasy" (ala Tolkein and Jordan), Dark Fantasy (ala Moorcock), or even "Historical Fantasy". Science Fiction might be based on near future hard science, or it might be a sweeping space opera. Westerns might be about cavalry and Indians, or cowboys, or pioneers, or prospectors or gunslingers.

We suggest that when a player first introduces a genre he specify only the macro level genre leaving the sub genre to be specified on a later turn or by another player.

## Theme:

*An implicit or recurrent idea. What a piece of writing or artistic work is about*

Themes are useful tools to ascribe to a game of Universalis. They don't so much determine plot as they suggest what the purpose of the over all plot should be. Themes can generally be summed in just a sentence or two. A game's theme might be about "the struggle against tyranny", "the search for redemption", "vengeance", "vindication", "survival", "the struggle to maintain tradition in the face of change", "the decent of greatness into decadence", "the corrupting influence of power", "the loss of innocence". These are just samples, but hopefully they've sparked some ideas of your own. Players are encouraged to frame scenes and Originate Complications (explained in Chapter 6) which serve to illustrate the story's theme. This will help give focus to the story and help keep if from being simply a collection of events happening to a group of characters.

Universalis is a game about telling stories. Theme can be thought of as the reason you are telling this particular story. Besides the entertainment value, what message might you try to convey, what avenues of the psyche might be explored. What hidden moral might be pursued. What commentary are you making about the nature of life. Plot is a tool through which you will explore theme. Theme is the reason you are taking the journey.

## Premise:

*A proposition antecedently supposed or proved; a basis of argument.  
A proposition stated or assumed as leading to a conclusion*

In his seminal work, The Art of Dramatic Writing, Lajos Egri introduced the world of theatre to the idea of premise. Premise is very similar to theme but to Egri it is much more powerful, decisive and less open to misinterpretation. The goal of any good play must be to prove its premise and all aspects of the play must be focused on leading the audience to that conclusion. Offered as examples are premises such as: "great love defies even death", "Blind trust leads to destruction, "Jealousy destroys itself and the object of its love".

To Egri, premise trumps both situation and emotion. "No idea, and no [unusual] situation was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion without a clear-cut premise". "No emotion ever made, or ever will make, a good [story] if we do not know what kind of forces set emotion going". Both situation and emotion are necessary but a story only becomes great if these are both focused on proving a premise.

The idea of premise must go through some alterations if it is to be applied to role-playing. In the theatre, the playwright is separate from the audience. The playwright must be convinced of the truth of his premise and must do all in his power to prove that premise to the audience. Role playing games are far more interactive, and in games like Universalis the players are both playwright and audience.

The Forge has been the leading proponent of adapting and applying the concept of premise to Narrativist RPGs. The adaptation takes the form of altering the idea of premise as a truth to be proven to one of a truth to be uncovered and discovered through play. In other words, in a role playing game, the premise is not a statement of fact but rather a question or inquiry. The answer to the question is explored through the game and the results of game play.

For role playing purposes then, the above example premises might be restated in the following manner: "Can great love survive in the face of great opposition and even death?"; "Can anyone, even family, ever be trusted completely and without question?"; or "At what point does strong desire stop being a motivator and start being self destructive?" The answers, rather than being decided by the playwright (GM) and proved to the audience (players), are instead unknown until the players decide for themselves based on the results of their role-playing experience what lesson is to be learned.

Narrative Premise is an exceedingly sophisticated role-playing technique. It is not one that will be mastered easily. It is also certainly not required for a role-playing game to be enjoyable. But it is a technique that can turn an enjoyable experience into a truly powerful and moving one. Egri indicates that it is not necessary to establish the premise first, that it is possible to have the sketch of a story in mind, and from that derive a suitable premise. Likewise in Universalis, premise may be left until a suitable one shows itself in the story before being introduced as a Game Structure element. For maximum effectiveness, however, if it is to be used at all, it should be introduced early on and all players should endeavor to stay focused on it thereafter.

## Situation:

*The relative position or combination of circumstances at a certain moment in time.  
A critical, problematic, or unusual state of affairs.*

*A particular or important complex of affairs at a given point in the action of a narrative*

If theme or premise is the driving factor behind the meaning and importance of plot, then situations are the specific facts leading up to it. Situation is what gets the story going. It provides the starting place from which players can begin to narrate. Most episodes of The Twilight Zone began with an introduction something like: "Picture this, a small town. A town, like any other town in middle America; and a day like any other day. Until today..." These opening remarks defined the situation that was going to be explored in that episode.

Traditionally, situation has been the focus (often the exclusive focus) of RPGs. Many a game campaign begins simply by the GM framing a situation and the players deciding how to react to it. Similarly, games of Universalis must have a situation. There must be some starting point to focus players' attention and act as a catalyst for the rest of the action. Universalis can also be played exclusively as focused on situation created by one player and responded to by another. Hopefully some of this section will have offered ideas on how to incorporate other story elements into the game as well..

Situations may simply be a jumping off point from which the players begin before taking the story in any direction desired. This is often a fun and enjoyable means of playing. However, situation can also be used to provide an overarching story arc to the campaign. The direction of the entire game might be established by the resolution of a specific initial situation.

## Setting:

*the time, place, and circumstances in which something occurs or develops.*

Setting is often closely tied to Genre and Situation. Setting does not refer to a specific location but more to the period, style, and color of the story that will pervade all of the locations. For example the setting might be that the story takes place on a stark, harsh prison planet, or in a fairly tale kingdom amidst the clouds, or in 17th century France, or in Texas right after the fall of the Alamo.

If a player has a specific location in mind that he wants to create during the Game Preparation Phase (see Chapter Two), he can do so, but only after a setting has been accepted.

Note that it is entirely possible for players to use an established and well known setting for their game of Universalis. They may model the setting after a favorite movie, a series of novels, or the setting of another RPG. If this is done, many of the genre convention and mood choices will already be made. There are three basic ways of using a pre existing setting in Universalis.

The first is the "Inspired by" method. This method most closely resembles a standard game of Universalis in that the game starts with no Components (see Chapter Four) being predefined. Rather the players play as they would any Universalis game but take their cues from the established setting. Locations and characters and organizations and such can be created when needed and loosely based on the inspirational setting.

The second method is "full conversion". In this case a selection of key locations, characters, and other important features of an existing world are taken and defined in terms of Universalis Traits and Facts before game play actually begins. Play begins with a substantial number of Components already in existence and already defined according to their actual capabilities in the converted setting.

The third way is actually highly encouraged, and that is to use a previous session of Universalis as the existing setting. In other words each game can continue to build on the world created and defined before. Players may wish to move to a slightly different geographical location, fast forward to different point in history, or even use the events of the previous game as part of the legends and mythology of the new one. In this way playgroups can write their own trilogies and decologies of stories.

## Mood:

*A conscious state of mind or predominant feeling. A distinctive atmosphere or context*

Mood very well may be the most pervasive story element in Universalis. Players who select and agree to a mood (especially if the Social Contract calls for it to be strictly enforced) are influencing virtually every scene and Complication that will take place during the game. This even includes creating the elements of the world itself, as visual imagery and the appearance of those elements goes a long way towards establishing mood.

Mood is often closely tied to genre. In fact, mood may well be part of the conventions of a particular genre. Mood is what sets a police drama like Hill Street Blues apart from a show like CHiPs. Mood is what made Miami Vice a sensation. It is the dark and brooding angst ridden mood of neo-gothism that made Vampire: The Masquerade one of the most widely played RPGs of all time.

Games can be full of in your face attitude, wit, or even silly. Despite similarities in genre, clearly the mood of Rush Hour is much different from that of The Dead Pool. The mood of Star Wars is much different from that of Blade Runner. Mood often evokes a particular emotional response: despair, humor, hardness, grit, hyperactivity, and silliness are just some examples. Stories told with a consistent mood throughout will be much more memorable and less disjointed than those whose mood fluctuates widely. A player expecting a game of serious soul searching will be greatly disappointed by a rampaging farce and vice versa.

## Realism:

*Fidelity to nature, fact, and reality and to accurate representation without abstraction*

The level of realism is another facet that players should agree upon. Few factors are as likely to cause disharmony among players than differing priorities regarding realism. Some players get a great amount of enjoyment from establishing the precise differences and effects on game play between a 9mm Beretta and a .45 Automatic. Some desire an exact accounting of the money that characters spend and the items they have on them at the time. Some want to know the acceleration limits of a sports car, and precisely what handling penalty is incurred for a wet road. Some players desire to establish how a suit of plate mail protects differently from a suit a chain mail when faced with a heavy bludgeoning weapon. It may become important to them to see these differences reflected in the actual Events and dice mechanics of the game.

Other players care little for the real world statistics of what, to them, are merely story props. A gun shoots until its dramatically interesting to run out of bullets, nobody dies unless there is a good story reason for them to do so. Travel times are based on the need to arrive in the nick of time not on encumbrance and terrain features. MacGyver really can make a bomb out of bubble gum and a paperclip, but only when it's dramatic to do so. So what if Arnold walks calmly into in front of a dozen trained soldiers who all have automatic weapons and doesn't suffer a scratch...hey he's the star right?

The game of Universalis plays most smoothly with the latter sort of attitude towards realism than the former. However, given the level of authority players have over the game direction, it is within their power to ensure the choices and decisions they make adhere to whatever standard of realism they choose. Deliberate use of advantageous and disadvantageous Traits can be made to illustrate the performance differences between a Ferrari and a Corvette, or a grenade and a stick of TNT, or a masonry wall and a steel reinforced concrete barrier. Rules Gimmicks, (which are basically player decided customized house rules) allow for the establishment of effects like fire vs. concussion, impaling vs. slashing, or anything else players can imagine. It should be noted here, that while the core rules of Universalis do permit this sort of realism, they do not offer any details or guidance on how to accomplish it. It is assumed that players who prefer a high level of realism normally play games that provide a high degree of realism and thus already have experience with how things should or shouldn't work in game terms. We leave it to those players to manipulate the rules of Universalis to create the effects they desire.

## Role:

*A part played or a character assumed with a socially expected pattern of behavior determined by an individual's status in the story.*

All Components in Universalis have a role. Role is the first Trait that must be defined for any Component. For most Components Role is pretty self explanatory...a gun has a Role of "gun" (or perhaps some specific model of gun). This discussion will concentrate on the roles of characters in Universalis.

All stories involve characters and all characters have a role to play in the story. Role indicates (although it doesn't restrict) much of what the character's purpose in the story is. A role can indicate an occupation like "battle hardened ex-soldier" or simply carry story weight like "scrappy sidekick". Roles can be virtually anything, but every character should have one. Example roles include: wizened old hermit, wise old mentor, hard-boiled hero, wise cracking assistant, or buddy partner. However, Universalis supports a wide range of less clichéd roles as well. A character may be the ghost of another character's father, or even a favorite pet. In one of our play test sessions a character was given the role of a sentient starship. Villains, of course, also have roles to play. Even lesser characters have a role to play in the story, even if its only as "Thug # 3"

Role is always the first Trait to be assigned to a character. The reason for this is to define a narrative territory for a character that other players should act within when controlling that character. Since you will be manipulating the game world and story line naturally (although not exclusively) through characters and their Traits, a character's place in that world and story will heavily influence the nature of those manipulations. The type of narrative you as a player will create while controlling the "Lantern jawed hero", will be decidedly different from that which you create while controlling "Joey, the eager boy scout". Roles are crucial to establishing what sort of story involvement the character should have. Players should use these when narrating the story as guidelines for what sort of activities they should be engaging in and how much "camera time" should be focused on each character. Side kicks, may periodically have the story focused on them (as is often done in television) but by and large the primary story should be being told about the protagonist.

If a player has an idea for a specific character at this point it can be Created now, but only after a Role has been established for him.



## Using Challenges to Regulate the Game

In a game with no Game Master, one might wonder who decides what is appropriate and what isn't? Who decides, amongst many players competing to put forth their own view of how the story should progress, which vision gets realized? Who decides when a player's "creative interpretations" of the rules is spoiling the gaming experience for others? In Universalis that's where the Challenge mechanic comes in.

First it should be noted that the Challenge mechanic goes hand in hand with the Social Contract and the selection of appropriate Story Elements in the Game Preparation Phase. If those things are complete, then most players should already be on the same page about what to expect and what is considered appropriate. If these steps are skipped, then everyone will be running off in their own directions and may not understand or appreciate the directions of others. While this sort of totally free form and chaotic game play can be fun (and can also result in some of the most powerfully creative and bizarre games you can imagine), it too is best established in advance that this is how the group intends to play. Giving some thought to Social Contract issues and complete set of Story Elements will go a long way to avoiding unnecessary Challenges because your players will already have a good idea about what is likely to be Challenged and what isn't.

The importance of the Negotiation phase of a Challenge can not be stressed enough. By far, the majority of Challenges in the game should never make it to the bidding stage. Most Challenges are the result of a player taking a dislike to something another player is doing, or thinking they can do a better job themselves. Often times, the acting player will be willing to make adjustments to what they are doing to enhance the enjoyment of their fellow players. They may actually agree that the other player's idea is a better one than their own and will welcome the suggestion. They may just be willing to compromise for no other reason than the expectation of similar consideration in the future. Sometimes they may even convince the Challenging player to drop the Challenge because their way is better. If any of these are true, no bidding ever needs to occur.

Since Challenges do not require an Interruption of a player's turn, most of them can be quite informal. In fact, many playgroups already engage in some degree of kibitzing and friendly suggestions to other players in all of their games. They may not even realize that this sort of activity is part of a formal Challenge mechanic in Universalis.

Only if absolutely no accord can be reached do you have to resort to bidding, and even then a quick straw poll may be enough to estimate who the likely winner of such bidding would be, causing one side to concede. Using Coins for the bidding is a way of causing you to put your money where your mouth is. If your opinion on a Challenge item isn't strong enough to be worth paying for, it isn't worth delaying the game for either. Allowing all players to participate in the bidding ensures that the preferences of the entire audience are represented.

While the most basic use of the Challenge mechanic is to prevent players from violating the rules or agreed upon Story Elements, it should not be thought of as purely confrontational. In fact, the Challenge is a powerful collaborative tool enabling all players to ring in on how they'd like to see a particular Component or plot point developed. Negotiation backed by bidding is designed to allow the players to achieve consensus even if they don't all agree on every detail.

Fines should not be overlooked as tool either. It is a tool of last resort, but one that fills a very important function in the game. Unlike Challenges it does not employ Coins so there is no bias in favor of the rich. The Fine mechanic gives every player equal voice as an audience member to vote their displeasure (or lack of displeasure) with a player's behavior.

The actual penalty is a modest one. The primary use of Fines is as a gauge of player sentiment. If a player repeatedly engages in play behavior that other players find dissatisfying, the first step should be Negotiations, moving on to full bidding Challenges if necessary. If neither of these has the desired effect, a Fine, especially one universally levied by all other players, can serve as clear and unmistakable notice that the behavior is not appreciated. Conversely, if there is a behavior that you find intolerable, but when you calls for a Fine the other players do not vote in favor of it, you now clearly realize that your distaste is not shared by the rest of the group and it is a behavior you'll have to live with if you're to continue playing. What the Fine mechanic does is serve as a formal adjustment to a players expectations. A player who expected to play a certain way is told in no uncertain terms that the other players have different expectations. A Fine that is not supported by the other players informs the initiating player that the activity is acceptable to them and that he is the one who must adjust his expectations.

Through the Challenge and Fine mechanic, Social Contract items can be recognized, addressed, and ruled upon during game play until all players are familiar with the expectations of the group.



# The Purpose of Complications

In our [Discussion Forum](#), Ed Heil asked: "One thing that seems vital that is a little hard to get into is exactly what Complications are for and how they work. They're clearly at or near the heart of the game, but they have no exact parallel in any other RPG"

Complications are indeed a key facet of the game. Here are some of the ways in which we've used them. If you've found some other good uses for them, [let us know](#).

## 1) An idea starter:

Sometimes you have a scene with a lot of potential but you don't have a clear idea what direction to take it, or how best to spice it up. One way of doing this is by Originating a Complication. The act of Drawing upon Traits (and which Traits get Drawn on) can provide a lot of interesting details to the action when it comes time to resolve the Complication. Often whole new branching story ideas can come from how players responded to an otherwise innocuous Complication.

## 2) An alternative to Challenges:

Complications can be used to guide a story another player is telling in a desired direction without resorting to Challenging that player or Interrupting them completely. Rather, a Complication can be used to introduce elements into a scene and force other players to react to those elements.

## 3) To introduce a certain degree of challenge or difficulty:

Sometimes in the course of a narrative a player may be having the hero perform all kinds of high flying actions (or even not so high flying). At some point you may want to interject a very traditional concept of "hey lets make him roll to see if he succeeds at that). This is where the Obstacle Complication comes in. When another player is narrating an Event and you want to interject an element of uncertainty into the outcome you can Originate an Obstacle Challenge. The twist is that the roll doesn't determine success / failure of the Event directly. Rather it determines which player (or combination of players) gets to decide how the Event happens.

## 4) Another means of adding an element of suspense to the game:

Which player wins will often make a big difference in the direction the story goes. That this is determined with a dice mechanic can add an element of unknown and surprise.

## 5) As a way of generating new Coins:

Complications are one of only two ways to earn additional Coins in the game. The interesting detail of how this works is that it encourages you to base Complications off of elements that already exist in the story (which helps maintain consistency). It does this because of the way Complications work. The more dice you roll, the more likely you are to get more Coins out. Also the Winner statistically should average 1.5 times the Coin output of the Loser and the more dice you roll, the more likely you are to win. So obviously, more dice in should lead to more Coins out. There are 2 ways of getting more dice. One way is to buy them at 1 Coin each. However, if you are paying Coins for most of the Dice in your Pool, your net profits will likely be slim (or even a loss if you wind up Losing the roll). So the better way is to get most of your dice from Traits that are already present in the scene. Someone else paid to put those Traits there (or you Introduce a Component that has many useable Traits for just 1 Coin) and you capitalize on their presence.

If you can arrange a situation where you are rolling a lot of dice for which you paid very little: a) you are likely to reap great profits allowing you to pocket those Coins you earn in excess of those you use to bring the Complication to a satisfying resolution, and b) the Complication is likely to be consistent with the story being told because it was built from elements that already exist in the scene.

## 6) And, in point of fact, I find them to just be flat out fun.



# How to Get Started Playing

Universalis is not a difficult game to play, but because it is so radically different from traditional RPGs it can be difficult to know where to start. Most of the familiar places to begin (like character creation or how to make a skill roll) don't exist in Universalis. For this essay I'll describe the method I use to introduce new players into the game, particularly at cons where time is of the essence. My method is to break the game up into stages, describing the basic core of each stage but leaving the more advanced or tangential parts for later. I'll structure this essay kind of like a script, it's the sort of things I say during my demoing patter, and roughly when I'd say them when teaching the game.

## Where to begin? I start with what the game is about.

“Universalis is a game about creating stories. Every story needs a setting, characters, and a plot so we'll be creating those in the game too. Every player will have a supply of Coins. Every setting element or character you create and everything you have those characters do will cost Coins. So Coins are a way to regulate how much of the story you'll be able to tell at one time. Basically, 1 statement = 1 Coin.

“When you run low on Coins you're actually running low on the ability to influence the story, at least until you acquire more Coins. Everyone will get a few additional Coins periodically during the game but the best way to replenish a low supply is to introduce plot complications into the story (usually on another player's turn). We'll get into that later.”

## Then I talk about the game preparation phase and facts.

“First we need to decide what kind of story we're going to be telling. Is it going to be an action adventure story, a romance, a mystery, a psychological thriller? Is the mood going to be dark and gritty, a light comedy, outrageously absurd humor? How strictly are we expecting the other players to abide by the conventions of the genre we're playing in. What's the setting? Is it going to be a science fiction story featuring space ships, or will it be set on an alien planet, or is it a future version of earth? Is it going to be fantasy, based in actual history, a western...?” I go on like this using examples of movies or TV shows until its apparent everyone gets what we're talking about.

“To do this we're going to go around the table and everyone is going to add one element about the type of story we're going to tell. This costs 1 Coin. As I mentioned anytime in the game you make a statement about something in the game it costs 1 Coin. Once you spend a Coin on something it becomes a Fact of the game. Facts are important when it comes to other players who want to challenge what you're trying to do. Basically, anything anyone says about anything related to the story is subject to being challenged by one of the other players who doesn't like it, but if its something that's already been established as fact its more difficult to it challenge later.

“When a disagreement arises you discuss what you don't like and offer suggestions. If you can come to an agreement, great, play goes on. If you can't agree, then a full Challenge occurs where everybody spends Coins voting for the outcome they prefer. We'll talk more about that if it ever comes up, for now just be aware you can do that.” Often this has been all I've ever said about Challenges for the whole game. Players just worked it out amongst themselves and never felt the need to call for the full bidding process.

“Ok, so, let's start collecting the elements of our story. I'll start and we'll go around clockwise how ever many times we need to. Once everyone feels they have a good idea what kind of story we'll be telling we'll move to the next part of the game. As we go along start thinking of a good opening scene, like the opening scene of a movie, something that will get our attention and give the story something to build on. Usually, once you get an idea for a good opening scene you have enough to work with and its time to move on and get that scene started. Ok, here's my Coin, tonight we'll play a game that involves...”

Usually I try to keep my opening tenets pretty basic so that there is a familiar genre or story style for players to latch on to. While Universalis can be used to do a story like Memento or Pulp Fiction, such play is best left for experienced players. For first time play I stick to convention and cliché (although depending on the group I may make a point to mention that this is for teaching purposes only).

If play has gone around a few times and after a little prompting no one seems like they're really getting an opening scene idea I'll grab one (again relying on cliché or scenes stolen right out of a movie) and bring this phase to a close. There are 3 keys to keep in mind during this phase.

- 1) If the other players are struggling with it you need to kill the prep quickly and get to the fun parts before they get discouraged and lose interest.
- 2) If the other player get into it full bore right away you want to try to avoid starting to actually play scenes in the middle of prep. If that's happening, they've obviously got it, so kill the prep and get right to the scene bidding.
- 3) I really prefer that one of the new players come up with the opening scene unless it just gets obvious that isn't going to happen. The reason is that, if I do the opening scene, it can get players into traditional player / GM thinking with me as GM. Best is when one of the players immediately grabs the opening scene and runs with it...shattering that GM expectation right from the start.

## Setting up the Scene

“Ok now we're going to get into scene by scene play. All scenes start by being framed. That sets the stage for other players to visualize what's going on. All scenes have a beginning and end. Before each new scene begins three things happen: 1) everyone gets 5 new Coins. 2) We bid for the privilege of framing the new scene, and 3) the scene gets framed. Ok everyone take 5 Coins.

“Bidding for the scene works like this. Everyone secretly takes a number of Coins into your fist as your bid. If you have a really great idea for what to do with the next scene bid a lot of Coins. If you don't, bid few or none. Keep in mind that a big part of the overall direction of the story will come from what scenes are played so being the framer is a fairly influential thing. Since this is your first game I'd keep your bids to less than 8-10 Coins but I've seen players bid more than that once they got the hang of things.

“Bids will be revealed simultaneously and whoever wins will frame the first scene. Losers will get to take their Coins back. Winners will spend their Coins during the scene” I don't get into ties and all that stuff unless it happens. Usually this part goes pretty easy and if you're really lucky you have 2 players both bidding high, which means at least 2 people have some really good ideas for what to do and you can sit back and watch them go. I always bid 0 or 1 at this point unless I'm convinced I'm with a group that really requires additional hand holding before they'll try it themselves.

“Ok, now that you've won the bid you have to frame the scene. You'll spend the Coins you just bid to do this (plus any others you want). Framing involves establishing the “who”, “when”, and “where” parts of the 5Ws. The “what”, “why” and “how” will come about as the scene is played out. You can go in any order but usually I start with stating where the scene is about to take place. Then I describe who is there and a little something about them. Time for the first scene can be pretty much anything, and time for every other scene will be in relation to this scene.”

At this point assuming the player doesn't require additional prompting I generally will let them riff for about a paragraph or so. Then I'll stop them and say “Ok, hold up a second and let me tell you how much all of that costs” At that point I'll pick up the pencil and summarize what the player said, writing down statements he made that I can identify as Components and Traits. I indicate what specifically I'm writing down and the rough hierarchy I'm placing them in to give a sense of how the game stats are organized.

“Congratulations, you just created your first game components. The location you just named and the characters you just introduced are now officially Components of the world. They exist and can be used and manipulated by any of the other players. Those descriptive phrases you added about each of the characters that cost 1 Coin apiece...those are called Traits. All Components consist of 1 or more of them. Even the name of the character or the type of location is a trait. Keep in mind *anything* can be thought of as a Trait so don't just limit your thinking to skill or attribute type stuff, possession, beliefs, relationships, emotions, personality, gifts and flaws, anything. Also if a Trait is supposed to be particularly important it can be purchased more than once. Any time one of these Components is brought into the story from here on out their Traits come with them and are considered Facts of the game. Note that you don't *have* to pay a Coin for every single detail. If its just a minor descriptive feature that adds a bit of color but isn't really important its free. But if you didn't pay for it, it doesn't get written down and it isn't considered a Fact.

“Ok, now go ahead and begin to describe what happens and what the characters are doing. When you think you've done enough, pass your turn and the next player will continue with the scene with those same characters” After another paragraph or so I'll stop them and repeat the pricing routine, this time referring to Events instead of Components. Most players at this point are a little tentative and are fairly quick to pass. If the player seems like he's heading down the road of trying to tell the whole story in a single scene I'll point out how many Coins he's spending relative to how few Coins he got at the beginning of the scene; and suggest he let some of the other players help pay.

When it's the second player's turn to go, I introduce the concept of Control. “Ok, now let me tell you a little something about Control. Right now, everything in the scene belongs to <player 1>, not because he created them, but because he brought them into the scene. It never matters who created what, only who introduced it into the scene. You can't do anything with those Components, because you don't Control them. So here's what you can do: you can either introduce your own characters and other things into the scene and have them do their own thing, or attempt to have *them* do something to his characters...or you can pay 1 Coin and simply take Control of one of his characters so it becomes yours.”

At this point one can bring in the Dialog rules or Complication rules as needed. I will typically wait until it seems like people are grasping the nature of Control and the “paying Coins to do stuff” routine before bringing up the ability to start interrupting each other...especially if it looks like there are 1 or more shy or reserved players at the table. I definitely want them to get at least 1 turn in before other more vocal players start interrupting them. Also, unless someone specifically asks, I don't mention how to bring a scene to an end until it gets back to the first player and everyone's taken a stab at scene one.

For my own turn, the first time around I do one of two things. I either take the lead and create some interesting characters who have obvious sources of conflict (or create conflict for existing characters), or if it seems like the players are getting the hang of it themselves, I try to hang back and let them go without much interference. As I'm taking my turn I'll take a handful of my own Coins and drop one in the bank every time there's something worth paying for. This gets the players into the habit of counting out the Coins as they're talking rather than stopping the narrative to do accounting, and also clues me in as recorder what they think is important enough to pay for. Once they get in the habit of that I'll interject just enough to keep everybody at about the same scale of what they're getting for 1 Coin.

## Other Stuff

From there the game starts to take care of itself. All of the other subsystems of the game are brought up only when a player starts to do something for which those rules might apply, or if they express puzzlement about how to “do” certain things. These subsystems include Master and Subcomponents, or using a single Component to represent a group (goons/mooks/brutes). This usually occurs when someone comments on how expensive it would be to do...“x”. Chances are “x” can be done quite cheaply and effectively with one of these rules. Also in this category is Importance, which I wouldn't bring up until someone tries to eliminate something. Using Traits to represent negative features like “he's been shot” is usually one of the first ones to come up and is often an epiphany moment for several players. I'll often make a point to do myself as illustration if no one else has thought of it. I may try to introduce a Rules Gimmick of some kind myself after the game has been running for awhile just to illustrate the flexibility of them and encourage people to think outside the box. Framing scenes into the future or past, increasing Importance through the possession rules, Mini Scenes, Fines, Social Contract Tenets (unless that's a particular hot point with your group), Fading to Black, cutting back to a previous already played scene, or advanced Complication variants are all more esoteric rules that can be safely set aside until the group has mastered the basics.

Hopefully this outline has provided some guidance on how to introduce Universalis to new players and get them quickly up to speed. If you've used any of these techniques, or developed a few of your own we'd love to hear about it on our discussion forum.

---Ralph Mazza



## Traits, Challenges and Enforcing Story Logic

Sometimes a game of Universalis can get somewhat chaotic. Because the story is driven forward by the input of several different people things can from time to time start to look a bit piecemeal. Different players can have different ideas about what the main character is like, or even who is the main character. As a result the story can start to drift to and fro as if buffeted by gale force winds every time a new player takes a turn.

Sometimes this can be a lot of fun. Some of the most entertainingly bizarre games I've played have been when people just cut loose and go where ever the brainstorming madness takes them. However, other times this sort of play is inappropriate and may detract from some players' enjoyment of the game. Universalis provides many ways to bring focus and vision to the story, this essay is going to concentrate on one of the more subtle, and I've found, underused methods: Traits.

Every player knows what effect Traits have in Complications. They are a source of free dice to roll. They have a noticeable and measurable impact. But what about outside of Complications? Are they just words on a sheet meant to serve only as a storage place for dice?

In a recent thread on our discussion forum, veteran player Tony Irwin explained how to use Traits as a powerful tool for articulating your vision of a character and how to see that that vision is followed by the other players.

---

[equals notations by me to Tony's original post]

Tony Irwin:

I've seen people use characters/components that were central to the story, in ways that were upsetting to others; either because they were using them purely to win coins (and the coins weren't even being used to fund anything) or they were using them with disregard for the story logic that other players took for granted.

What we came up with was that Traits should be viewed not just as "situational modifiers" either giving or removing a dice, but that *clever* selection of Traits can be used to enforce story logic. For example:

I give Frankie the trait "loves Johnnie"

Now I get a die when Frankie is protecting Johnnie or I can probably remove a die from someone if they try to make Frankie attack Johnnie.

But what people forget is that any time someone uses one of these characters in a way that seems to defy that Trait, I can Challenge for it. I just say "Frankie loves Johnnie, so Frankie wouldn't do that". My coins are worth 2 for every 1 of theirs. People forget that I can Challenge the Complication before it ever gets as far as building dice pools.

[Players often forget that all Traits are automatically Facts] You just declare a fact "Frankie loves Johnnie" or "Norgoth feels betrayed by the zombies" or even "Norgoth is slow to anger", and now you have the option to enforce some story logic when people want to introduce Complications [or just narrate something contradictory]

The thing about facts is that they're very obviously control mechanisms for your vision of the story. As soon as you introduce



## Other Uses for Universalis

Click on these links to see other cool stuff people have done with Universalis.

If you've used Universalis in one of these ways, or in a way we haven't thought of yet, [let us know](#) and tell us how it went.

- [Player Driven Metaplot](#)
- [Scenario Creation](#)
- [Setting Creation](#)
- [LARP Backstory](#)
- [On-Line Play](#)
- [Authoring Group Fanfic](#)



## Player Driven Metaplot

There are several benefits to a strong, well-detailed metaplot. They provide a number of ready made plot hooks for the GM to build upon and give the players a real sense that the world actually exists. In other words that there are things going on in the background that the characters may or may not be a part of. There are some strong disadvantages to metaplot too. If the source material is too tightly woven to it, then large parts of the game setting may become unusable based on a play groups actions. Even worse is when players become disinterested in major elements of a meta plot. No matter how good the game is, if the players don't buy into the story and become committed to moving it forward play can quickly become lack luster.

Universalis is a great way of providing metaplot to your games while avoiding many of the disadvantages. In between sessions of regular play, players can get together for a quick session of Universalis (often this can be fit in before a session while waiting for late comers, or afterwards when some players have to leave early. It's also very easy to do on-line). In the Universalis game, players will be concerned with crafting the actions of the mover and shakers of the world, playing out what the various factions and power brokers are up to. For instance, in a Vampire campaign where player characters are relatively weak soldiers, Universalis can be used to play out the interactions and plotting of the influential powers. The new happenings and story lines so developed can then be easily brought into the Vampire game as current events going on in the city.

There are two huge advantages to this. First, the players will never outrun or render obsolete a prewritten metaplot. Likewise, GMs won't have to railroad players in order to keep them within the canon material. Instead the metaplot that is created over time using Universalis will already be customized to the needs of the actual campaign being played. Second, players will be much more into the story because its one which they helped to develop. Whatever aspect of the setting that the players find most compelling is the one most likely to be developed in the Universalis game. Thus, the GM can be assured that when he dangles plot hooks based on that game, his players will eagerly leap at them.



## Scenario Creation

One of Universalis's strengths is the ease at which entire sections of a world can be created on a meaningful level very quickly. Locations, key characters, and the web of connections between them all get created as part of an ordinary Universalis game. One of the things we've been amazed at, is how good some of those Universalis creations would be as a scenario for another game. The places, people and situations created by the game can be easily modified and adapted into an adventure to use in another RPG. At GenCon 2002 we ran several demos. One of those demos would have made a great scenario (with minor modification to adapt to setting specific details) for a game like Blue Planet or The Babylon Project. Another was practically begging to be played in Feng Shui or even Unknown Armies.



## Setting Creation

Beyond just scenarios for other games, Universalis can create entire worlds for other game systems. A big part of the design of Universalis has always been to allow each game session to build upon the setting created in prior sessions, even if the characters and plot are different. Such an ongoing world creation effort can easily provide the background for an entire setting useable with another RPG system like GURPS or FUDGE.

One of our play test groups set out to do just that. They wanted to handcraft their own fantasy setting, so they started with Universalis. The earliest characters they introduced would become the gods of their world. Through play they fashioned a creation story and an entire mythology complete with a war between the gods and gods who were banished or even dead. They moved on history where they fashioned the legends and great historical events of the world complete with mighty heroes and a couple of sagas. When finished they took the whole thing and wrote it up for play with GURPS Fantasy. Benefit: every player had a vested interest in the world that they had helped create and all of them shared knowledge of a common history and mythology that was all the more meaningful to them because they had written it.

"We used Universalis to create a setting and it was splendid. Before the game even started we had this rich, layered, detailed setting. Universalis is a neat, neat game/gaming tool/imagination prod. --- "Paka" aka Judd who used Universalis to design a campaign for [The Riddle of Steel](#)



## **LARP Backstory**

A LARP session is only as good as the character relationships and plot points which drive it. Coming up with new situations with enough things going on to hook the players and drive interaction forward is a challenging endeavor and can lead to flat game play if not done well. At least one player who organizes LARPs intends to use a game of Universalis to help develop the character map and plot points for an individual run; and also to advance the story arc between runs.



## On-line Play

The format of the Universalis rules makes it ideal for PBEM or chat room play. In fact, our first play tests of the game were exclusively through chat. Its exceptionally good with chat rooms with a dice server. This means that any of the above ideas for using Universalis can be expanded to groups that can't meet face to face. Universalis can also be used to provide some formal structure to persistent free form chat room or forum based role-playing for groups that would like a few more rules to work within. Universalis is so well suited for chat-room play that the rules don't need to be modified at all except that references to "clock-wise" player order should be changed to "alphabetical screen names" or something similar.



## Group Authored Fan-Fic

Universalis could be one of the best "fanfic" games ever. Get a group of players really into Babylon 5, for example, and go to town. ---Lou Goncey

Never having really been involved in the fan-fic community, I have to say, this idea had never occurred to me. But Lou's idea seems like it would work extremely well.

In the essay on Story Elements, the section on [Setting](#) discusses a couple of ways to base a game of Universalis on an established setting. Using one of those methods one could easily base a game on a property and from the write-up of the game session have the foundation for a great piece of fan-fic

---Ralph

*I leave it to the authors of such works to determine the various legal issues surrounding copy right of licensed properties.*



# Space Traders

## Early Playtest

Our very first play test of Universalis (using a much older and since highly revised set of rules) was played via Instant Messenger between just Mike and myself. I've adjusted that session a little to be consistent with the final version of the game (to avoid confusion) but the core elements are still relevant.

Mike initiated the game by proposing "sci-fi" as a Story Element. I followed up by making the setting focus on a tramp freighter traveling between the stars. We established that there were two key characters: Ulysses Korosuki *scruffy hyperdrive engineer*, and Maxwell Smith *daring space pilot*.

During the Game Preparation phase we established that in addition to his role as *Hyperdrive Engineer*, Ulysses also had Traits of *International Politics*, and *Advanced Robotics*, which he learned at the *Skorlar Institute*. Max had Traits of both *Lucky* and *Reckless*. Our ship was called the *All's Fair*, with a role of *Medium Cargo Ship*. She had Traits of *Old*, *Heavily Financed*, *Three KM long*, and *Hyper Space capable*.

We also established that Max had been married to Ulysses sister Susan, but she'd left him and the ship. The *Sexy, Android Science Officer* named Shiela had been *programmed with Susan's voice* and Ulysses had refused to change it, making Max very uncomfortable.

We then established the current situation. Our business was transporting cargo between two large interstellar powers: the Terran Unified Polity and an unnamed "Empire". The two powers were engaged in a long cold war with occasional local flare-ups making it difficult to navigate through all of the tariffs, custom requirements, and secured "no fly" zones. As such we'd occasionally supplement our business with more legally-gray activities.

Currently we had just departed Mars Colony after a major refit with a cargo Max picked up for which we were being paid a huge amount relative to the cargo's declared value. Max figured his natural talent and charm had just enabled him to negotiate a good deal. Ulysses was more suspicious. For a theme we selected the entanglements of politics. No matter how hard we'd try to stay out of them, we'd keep getting involved; with especial emphasis on the futility of the conflict in general.

The first scene started with an immediate Complication: alarm klaxons going off in the engine room, and warnings about a pressure build up in the hyperdrive. I was the Originator and Mike, in control of Ulysses, was the target. Mike won the Complication but rather than fix the engines he used his free Coins to Originate a new Complication. He stated that there was nothing wrong with the drive system so there must be some problem external to the ship. He made Max the Target as he was in the cockpit.

I was in control of Max so I drew upon Shiela's Role as a Science Officer for a die and purchased the Trait of "Advanced Sensors X2" for the ship for another 2 dice. Mike purchased facts for the game world that sensors didn't function to the aft where the engines were and used that to add more dice to the Complication. I therefor decided that Max (being reckless) would slew the ship around in "Crazy Ivan / Bootlegger Reverse" fashion and drew dice from Reckless, Lucky, and the Pilot Role.

I won the Complication by a huge margin and used my successes to identify the source of the problem. A small drone ship with TUP customs markings was pursuing us. It had caught us in a Hyper Interferon Beam, trying to force us to drop out of hyperspace.

For this final Complication, Mike took control of Max and Shiela and the Ship and I targeted all of them with the newly created drone ship. Mike bought *Quick Thinking* as a Trait for Ulysses and Created Rollo the *Ship's Computer* to help him out. Max tried to go for a full burn on the engines at the exact moment that Ulysses modulated the drive's Calax Frequency in the hope of breaking free of the beam.

He lost the Complication, and as a result had to shut down the engines to avoid implosion. The ship dropped out of hyperspace and was face to face with a Terran Unified Polity customs vessel...while carrying a suspicious cargo.

We called the game at this point as it had been only an early test, but both of us had been so engaged by the story creation process we knew then that this was a game we wanted to see to completion.

### **Featured Effect, Suspense:**

Traditionally in role-playing, suspense has meant the GM keeping secrets from the players and the players not knowing what the GM was going to spring on them next. It quickly became obvious to us that that paradigm wouldn't work in Universalis. We were afraid that with all players having GM level power there would be no suspense or surprises..."If I have total control over everything, how can I ever be surprised?"

The answer surprised us. There was actually a greater degree of suspense in a Universalis game because all of the players have power over the story. Instead of being in a game with 4 players, each of you wondering what nasty surprise the single GM has up his sleeve; in Universalis you're in a game where each of you are wondering what any of the 4 other players might have up their sleeve. With 4 creative minds working on it you never know what to expect.

This is exemplified even in the brief 2 player game example above. The first complication of the scene was originated by me... something was wrong in the engine room. What was wrong in the engine room? Not only was Mike not expecting this problem and so it was a surprise to him, I had no predetermined list of "bad effects" and so it was equally suspenseful for me to see what he'd do with it.

Likewise, when I defined the "external problem" as being a TUP customs ship, that was a total surprise...to both of us. Here we were on our way from Mars and the next thing we knew we were being pulled over by the federales. That was no preplanned set encounter from a scenario book, that was completely spur of the moment improvisation that had riveted both of our attentions, because neither of us had any idea how it would turn out. What did the patrol ship want? What was our cargo anyway? Who were we supposed to deliver it to? We as players of the game didn't know any more than a movie audience would know about what was about to happen, and that was exciting.



# Zombie Summer

**This game was played with just two players. The genre was to be a high school slasher horror flick, and the action set in an old abandoned mining town a few miles from where the kids lived.**

The action started with a car-full of kids arriving at the town in an old convertible owned by Rick. In the car was Bobby, captain of the football team, Rick, a rebel without a clue, Lisa, a cheerleader type, and Wayne, an unpopular kid who Bobby had invited along because he owed Wayne for doing his homework.

The kids had a bottle of booze, and were a little drunk to start off, with the exception of Wayne who kept his wits about him. They got out of the car, and headed into a nearby house, which was in a dilapidated condition. Bobby and Lisa started making out, and Ricky hitting the bottle pretty hard. The kids hear a noise coming from a closet, and, upon investigation, are scared witless by the grizzled old man that lurches out of it at them.

Turns out that it's just old Zeke, a miner who never left the town after it was abandoned. He confronts the characters, telling them to get out of "his" house. Apparently he feels that squatting here makes it his. He also says that they should get out of town. The kids, however, just move to another room, and continue partying.

After a bit, there is more noise out back. Figuring that it's Zeke again, Wayne and Rick decide to check it out. They discover an old shed out back with the door open, and peer inside. They note that there is a shaft leading down into the ground with a ladder protruding from it, and what look to be a pair of human skulls on the ground.

The first complication then occurs. Just as they turn around, a walking corpse, dripping in some black goop attacks them, knocking down Wayne, and taking a big bite out of Rick. Just when it seems that the kids have had it, a blast goes off, taking off the Zombie's head. It's Zeke, with his trusty shotgun, just in time to save the kids.

The boys ask him about the shaft, and he relates that it leads to some of the mineshafts that riddle the town. He tells them yet again that they should leave, "before it's too late."

But do they? Of course not. They go back into the house to tell Bobby and Lisa that they are going to investigate the shaft. Bobby decides to come with, but Lisa doesn't want to go. Rick says he's "not feeling well", and stays behind.

Upon returning to the shed, it would appear that Zeke has gone down the shaft. Wayne and Bobby follow, and investigate the shaft. They go a ways, and hear a shotgun blast ahead of them, and sounds of a fight. They proceed forward and after a bit discover Zeke's body, horribly gnawed and definitely dead. They decide to press on, taking the shotgun with them along with shells they get off Zeke's body.

Meanwhile, back in the house, Lisa is investigating the upstairs, and finds a bureau with a mirror, and a nice old brush inside. She decides to pretty herself up. After a moment, she notes Rick coming up behind her with his hands out. Lisa warns him that she thinks he's cute, but that she can't risk losing Bobby. Just before Rick sinks his teeth into her. As a result of the complication, Rick kills Lisa easily.

Back in the mine, after a bit Wayne and Bobby come across some of the goop on the floor of the mineshaft. They are panicked when it starts to move, and tries to crawl up Bobby's shoes, starting a complication. Bobby lets loose with a shotgun blast that begins a cave-in, in which Wayne barely gets away. Bobby is caught under a rock, on the other side, and Wayne can hear his screams as the goop covers him.

Unable to return to the surface the way he came down, Wayne starts searching about. He quietly finds the source of the zombies after a bit, a huge pool of the black goop filling an entire cavern, with hundreds of bodies floating in it. In the following complication, using his wits, Wayne figures out quickly a way to dispatch the creatures. He uses the mine's still functioning electrical system to electrocute the goop, which bursts into flame. Wayne runs as the mine fills with flames, and barely makes it out of the main entrance alive.

Wayne returns to the house to find his other friends dead and lifeless. With nothing left to do, he takes the keys from Rick's pockets, gets into the convertible, and rides off into the sunset. Presumably a more self-confident individual than before.

## **Featured Effect: Two-Player Play**

No doubt about it, it's a bit harder to play Universalis with only two players. Not so hard as to make it impossible or un-enjoyable, however. I've played with two players on a few occasions, and the sessions go fine. But fewer players means that the creativity is split less ways, and the synergistic effects show up less.

What you have to look out for are the moments where you'll both be out of ideas. As such, it's good to have a source from which to draw. Try playing in some setting that you both know really well. When you feel a slowdown occurring, just look to the setting, and inject some character, creature, place, whatever, from it. If you don't use a preplanned setting, then rely a lot on the clichés of the setting and genre selected. If it's fantasy, for example, have a dragon show up. Out of the blue.

Randomness is OK in Universalis to an extent. When you throw something in, just work out through play the reason for the interjection. You still want to create a story. But don't let the worry of unexplained events slow you down. They will probably get explained later, or perhaps not. Which is not the end of the world. In fact, if you play a multi-session game, those loose plot angles give you something to work into in follow on sessions.

If you just accept that slowdowns in play may happen before hand, and relax about it, that can help get through these slowdowns. Nothing exacerbates a block like this as much as pressuring yourself too hard to come up with something. If you just wing it, and have fun, the pace will be fine; making Universalis perfectly suitable for two players

# Zombie Western

## DemonCon 2002

The game started out innocently enough. I was hankerin' to play a Western, so with the first turn that's the Tenet I proposed. The next player set us in a mining town named Dark Gulch, and the player after that made sure the boom times had already turned bust. That's when it started to get a little weird.

The first characters in the story were the crotchety old prospector Dirty Pete, and the skinny piano player. After that came Ruby the *saloon girl, with a past*. Ruby (plying her trade) had gotten wind of a new, but as yet unclaimed silver strike in one of the abandoned mine shafts. She needed the prospector's help to claim the strike...only problem was, the area was crawling with zombies...yes zombies.

Fortunately, also in the saloon, was the Reverend Ulysses, a *drunken, ex-minister* turned *zombie hunter*. Plied with drink and a share of the stake, The Reverend agreed to help clear out the zombies. Unfortunately for them, the prospector was a little drunk himself, and by the time he was done recruiting Ulysses, the whole town had heard of the plan.

Zeke, a *rival zombie hunter* and his *side kick* Ronnie heard about it and decided to collect the bounties on the zombies for himself. Bruce Ashwood, a *local miner, equipped with a steam powered mining pick* named Betty decided to head out first and jump the claim. Meanwhile Sheriff Brody had sent a telegraph to a man known simply as Dirk...the *most famous Zombie Hunter in the west*. Unbeknownst to us at the time but to be revealed later was that Dirk and Ruby had been *married before a nasty break-up*, and the Sheriff's daughter Sally had a *huge crush* on the mysterious hunter.

Ruby, the prospector, and the Reverend Ulysses went to the town's abandoned church which Ulysses used as his headquarters to collect their gear, but zombies had already infiltrated the town. Alerted by Ulysses' pet dog Ghost (who was quite literally a ghost) the characters managed to blast their way through the zombies without getting their brains eaten.

They traveled to the mine site where a tremendous horde of zombies were mindlessly making their way into the mine shaft, drawn by the sound of mysterious music. The Reverend was preparing to lay a wild west smack down on the undead when Zeke and the Sheriff Brody arrived on the scene. Wanting the zombie bounties all to himself, Zeke had let the Sheriff know that Reverend Ulysses was hunting without a license. Fortunately the Sheriff had a copy of the necessary paperwork (in triplicate) with him which Ulysses dutifully filled out. Unfortunately the license wasn't active until it had been properly filed. Scowling, The Reverend turned to his gas powered camp stove and threw the paperwork in the fire. Watching the smoke rise to the heavens, the Reverend informed all present that he'd filed the paperwork with God and anyone having a problem with that could take it up with him.

At that point a commotion got their attention. Bruce was bailing out of the mine shaft with a mule cart full of ill gotten silver ore. The zombies made short work of the poor mule and Bruce, seeing the fire of the camp stove, made a bee line towards the safety of Reverend Ulysses and his posse with the zombies not far behind. The strange music was growing louder.

As the group prepared to mount a defense, they failed to notice that Bruce had been bitten while in the mine shaft and was *turning into a zombie* himself. Now fully transformed he attacked Ruby with his steam pick. She managed to shoot it out of his hand...turns out she was a *crack shot, taught by Dirk* himself.

The Reverend, Sheriff Brody, Zeke, Ronnie, and the old prospector Dirty Pete tried to hold off the zombie hordes, but it was a losing battle and Pete went down. His fall did manage to occupy several zombies who were intent on eating his brains. Several more turned their attention on Ronnie. Seeing the odds, Zeke abandoned his side kick Ronnie to a painful death and while they were gnawing through his skull he high tailed it back to town. Still the music continued.

At that moment Sally showed up with Dirk in tow. She had met her beau at the train station and led him to the mine. Tossing a few sticks of dynamite around sent zombie parts flying, briefly gaining control of the situation. But Ruby was in trouble. Bruce had gained the upper hand and was about to slay the saloon girl, when Dirk...moved by feelings for his old flame, leapt in to rescue her. Ruby was saved, and Bruce put down, but Dirk had been *bitten*. He helped finish off the last of the nearby zombies but when he felt himself transforming he told Ruby she had to kill him.

Ruby was preparing to do so, but Sally leapt in and stopped her, throwing herself over Dirk to protect him. Dirk, now *fully a zombie*, promptly ripped out Sally's throat before Ruby put him down with a shot that took off half his head.

At this point the strange music had reached a thundering crescendo. Rising out of the mine on a hydraulic lift was a platform containing a steam powered organ. The skinny piano player from the saloon was playing that organ and through its music he was raising and controlling the zombies. As it turns out, he had loved Ruby for years, but she had always scorned him. So he went in quest of dark occult arts that would let him get his revenge.

As a fresh wave of zombies came out of the mine, Ruby and Reverend Ulysses made good their escape. Sheriff Brody, *shattered with grief* over the loss of his beloved Sally went berserk and killed many zombies before he ran out of ammo and was torn apart by the undead.

### Featured Effect, Story Elements:

Story Elements are the type of Tenet which governs what a story is going to be about. The rules specify that each player in turn can propose one and only one Tenet at a time. This ensures that all players have input into the type of game being played. However, it can also result in something of a mishmash of different genres and styles as each player puts his own twist on the game. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Some of our best games have involved some wildly disparate Story Elements all being thrown into the same pot and stirred together.

This effect can be seen in this play example as the story moved from being a traditional western set in a small mining town to a "weird" western complete with zombies and occultists. As it turned out this wasn't a bad direction and the game was quite fun with few survivors. However, there are a few tricks to keeping Universalis games more genre pure if desired.

The most obvious is to be prepared to Challenge players who introduce elements outside of the genre expectations that have been established. Not only can this mechanic serve as a straw poll of other players as to whether they'd like or dislike the new direction, but if the new element has never been formally proposed as a Story Element the Challenger can most likely claim the existing Story Elements as Facts with which to oppose the new direction. "This is a 'western'. There aren't zombies in westerns"

However, more important is to recognize the importance of the Game Preparation phase outlined in Chapter 2. In our example above I defined the genre as being "western". It did not then get narrowed down to "traditional western". If players are truly concerned about genre purity they should take pains to be very specific up front before the first scene is played about exactly what those genre expectations are.

Also, feel free to make use of negating Story Elements. Knowing the popularity of zombies and "weird" westerns recently, players in this game could have ensured that these things didn't creep into their game by proposing Story Elements such as "No occult" or "No undead gunslingers" and such. In another game we've played that was set in a science fiction universe a player made good use of this technique to declare that there was no virtual reality cyberspace in that setting.



## Alien Love

### GenCon 2002 Demo

This game was one of the more interesting and challenging to run. Challenging because it didn't have an immediate action oriented premise which makes a demo game a little difficult to keep moving. Interesting because it had a couple of players who were overtly attempting to outdo each other with convoluted plot twists while another couple of players were trying to reign things in.

This was evident right from the pre-game which started out (as all demos I ran at GenCon this year did for some reason) as a Science Fiction game. It was to be a story about a first contact situation where aliens were arriving on Earth for the first time. Then they started twisting it. The aliens were not going to be humanoid, they were going to be energy beings who could possess the bodies of humans. But not just any humans, senior citizens. And not just any senior citizens, recently deceased senior citizens. Further the game was to be set in prohibition era Chicago. Finally, the main thrust of the story was that the aliens were in love. One of them was lost on Earth and the other one was searching for him.

The first scene started with a bit of a flash back to the point where the first alien came to Earth. It began with the assassination of mob boss Don Finito by a rival family. The Don was elderly, and recently deceased. Lo and behold, the assassination attempt must have failed because Don Finito was still alive. Of course, that was due to his corpse being possessed by one of the aliens, an alien who very much enjoyed his new role as a crime syndicate king pin.

The second scene took place in a grimy gym where several boxers were training. Big Tony, a manager and fight promoter, called over one of his star boxers, a wiry middle weight by the name of Little Joe. Tony had some bad news. It seems that he'd just gotten word that Joe's mother, who'd been hospitalized for some time, had just passed away at a local hospital. Joe lost no time rushing to the hospital. As he left Tony reminded him that he had a big fight the next day.

At the hospital we have a brief flashback, to a scene where a number of doctors and nurses are desperately trying to save the life of an elderly woman. We know they failed when the EKG machine flat lines, they draw the sheet over her head and solemnly leave the room. We know an alien has entered her body, when the meter begins to beep again and the sheets begin to stir. [Note: we had no idea at the time whether EKG machines were around in the 20s and 30s but it made no difference for our purposes at the time. Groups desiring a more authentic setting may want to look facts like this up in advance. A subsequent web search revealed that the first EKG machine was invented at the University of Iowa in 1920, but used an actual saline bath for conductivity. The wires and electrodes weren't added until 1940...oh well...on with the story]

The action then cut back to Little Joe in a heated discussion with a nurse who wouldn't let him past the lobby when suddenly everyone is interrupted by an elderly woman in a hospital gown striding purposefully towards the door...shocked doctors in pursuit. Joe joyfully confronts his mother whom he thought was dead but she doesn't recognize him at all, instead she keeps saying that she's looking for someone and has to find him. This alien retained no memories of the host body. As Joe engages the doctors in another heated discussion, his mother slips away unnoticed, disappearing in the night.

The next scene cut ahead a couple of days with a beleaguered and unkempt Little Joe being led to see Don Finito on the Don's patio. The Don, who runs the neighborhood, had had a large amount of money riding on Little Joe and was furious that Joe had never shown up for the big fight. When Joe told the story about his mother who was still missing, the Don ordered his Concigliere, Vincent to find her. Vincent sent two goons, Guido and Vito (inseparable brothers) to get her and bring her back to the Don. During this scene it was also established as another twist that the alien that Joe's mother was looking for was *not* the one who possess Don Finito but rather a third alien we hadn't yet seen.

In the final scene we ran, Guido and Vito indeed found Little Joe's alien possessed mother in an ally. She told them she was looking for someone and asked if they could help her find him. The pair said no, but that she was coming with them to meet Don Finito. That was the wrong answer. Glowing with alien energy, the old woman sent the two bruisers flying across the ally into a wall. At this point in time a car drove up with three more goons, these from the rival family who'd tried to assassinate Don Finito. They'd heard Finito was looking for this woman and figured she must be someone important, so they planned on getting to her first. Glowing even more brightly now she cut the three thugs down with blasts of white light setting their car on fire and causing it to explode.

At this point we called the demo due to time but did a brief post game wrap-up to try to make some sense of the story. What we decided was this: The alien who possessed Don Finito was a criminal among his own people who fled to Earth looking for a place to hide. The mysterious third alien was actually the second to arrive on Earth. He was there to bring the first alien to justice, but things went awry and he disappeared. The alien who'd possessed Little Joe's mother was the life mate of the third alien who'd come to find him after he was written off as lost. Her possession hadn't gone well and she hadn't absorbed the memories of her host and so didn't know how to get along on Earth among humans. We decided that the third alien had run afoul of the U.S. Military in some sort of Roswell-esque incident and was a prisoner of the government who were studying him, perhaps with the idea of using his self sustaining energy form as a source of power. Further we decided that Guido and Vito's description of the incident would tip Don Finito off that another alien was around. An alien he'd now have to kill. Little Joe would find out about the Don's plan and save his mother and somehow come to discover the truth about her. Together with some as yet uncreated girl friend they'd set out in search of the alien's lost love.

#### **Featured Element, Plot Flexibility:**

At times during the actual session, the play of the demo seemed to drag a bit, but this I think was largely because I had gotten used to a much more rapid fire action oriented type of demo and the soap opera like pace of this session threw me for a loop at first. In the end I sold 2 copies based on this demo, so it must have been well received by the players.

What struck me most about the session was how easily the game mechanics adapted to the sometimes bizarre direction the story was going. Even with two players bound and determined to out do each other for the next big plot twist, the Coin mechanics worked powerfully well to limit just how much they could do at a time and allowed the more staid players (including myself) to maintain some sanity in the story line. Despite all of the convolutions, our post game wrap-up demonstrated how easily the session could have been turned into a coherent story if we'd had time to play it out. The elements we introduced in the wrap-up could have been brought out during play and while its likely that a few challenges might have been necessary to keep things from getting too zany or obscure I was really impressed with the tale that we told in a 45 minute session with 4 first time players. We went almost the entire time without a single complication until I finally forced one into the last scene for the sole purpose of demoing how it works. What at the time seemed one of the harder demos to play in retrospect is one of the ones I'm most pleased with.



# The Psionic Mines

## GenCon 2002 Demo

This demo for potential customers, like many at the con, began with the genre of Science Fiction. Our setting for the game was a mining colony on a distant world. It was to be a gritty realistic setting with no virtual reality cyberspace, or other cyberpunk extremes.

There were, however, psionics. The humans were there to mine psi crystals which were extraordinarily valuable for they allowed people to tap into latent psychic powers. The humans had wrested control of the planet from the native species of alien beings whose psionic powers were so developed that they'd never developed a need for advanced technology themselves. There were two problems, however. One, exposure to that many crystals over time could enhance a man's psychic powers to extraordinary levels...while simultaneously driving him insane. Two, the aliens who'd been driven away from the colony site wanted it back, and the psychically deranged human miners were their ticket home.

My instructions to this group of players was the same as I'd used many times. To think in terms of a powerful opening scene for a movie. When a player thought enough background had been developed to give them an idea for one, the game would move to the first scene. Being a demo, we developed the background much more sketchily than I normally do for games meant to be played over several sessions, but this proved to be a perfect amount to promote quick, movie-like, one-shots.

The first scene of the game opened in a deep shaft of the mine. There were several miners in *enviro suits* equipped with *sonicvibe mining tools*. One of them, a man named Kurtz, had been in the mines too long and his *latent psionic ability* had just burst forth. *Wracked with pain* and *Screaming Crazy*, Kurtz lashed out at he stumbled around the mine shaft. A nearby miner died with the tip of Kurtz's vibro tool bursting through his chest.

Against the far wall of the mine shaft, standing on a high platform of scaffolding was Engineer Blackthorn. He was in charge of this mining crew and this wasn't the first time he'd seen a miner go berserk. He was prepared for it and drew forth a heavy gun loaded with powerful tranquilizing darts.

In the Complication that followed, Blackthorn managed to shoot Kurtz with a dart, but it wasn't enough to put the miner down. Enraged, Kurtz ripped apart the metal scaffolding with unleashed telekinetic powers sending Blackthorn plummeting to the floor far below. As Kurtz escaped deeper into the mine shafts we saw Blackthorn's fall slow and stop. The Engineer hovered just off of the ground before landing on his feet. Blackthorn, its revealed, is a *powerful telekinetic* himself.

In the next scene, the Framing Player flashed forward in time several days paying each of the other players 1 Coin to do so. The location was a detention center in an orbiting space station above the planet. Kurtz was imprisoned, ineffectually raging, in an energy field. Blackthorn, revealed as an *undercover psi cop*, was reporting to his superior officer.

We ended the game session with a dialog on the dangerous increase in violent psychic reactions among the miners and what it could possibly mean. All in all it was a powerful opening for a continuing campaign in just a brief 30 minute demo with first time players.

### **Featured Element, Flash Forward:**

The ability to set the time of any scene is one of the most powerful tools in Universalis. For most scenes players will use the default free setting of having the scene occur immediately after or concurrently with the previous one. But on occasion, a well framed flash back can be key to really opening up depth in the story.

In this demo a first time player demonstrated a skillful use of the more difficult-to-master: flash forward. Thinking like a movie director cutting the scene (or more accurately the movie editor), this player skipped ahead to the important stuff. The second scene could have been a continuation of the first, with a scene of Kurtz running through the mineshafts being hunted by Blackthorn and various security elements complete with lots of violence to innocent miners and equipment and plenty of psionic special effects. But the player intuitively recognized that the story was not about this confrontation between Kurtz and Blackthorn. This was just a taste to cue the audience on what was to come. The real story lay in uncovering the alien plot and dealing with what was likely to be a full psionic war complete with mind controlled deranged miners. There would be plenty of opportunity for high FX scenes of wanton violence in the mines later on.

So even though this was just a brief demo played right in the booth in the exhibitor hall, and we ended the game with the scene in the orbital station, it was obvious that we had the makings of a pretty decent story; complete with a group of players who understood the concept of scene framing and pacing. Even though I needed to end the demo to get back to other things, I was left really wondering what this group would have come up with for a third and fourth scene.



# The Gangs of New New York

## GenCon 2002 Demo

GenCon 2002 was a blitz of Science Fiction based demos for me and this was no exception. The setting was a gritty, post apocalyptic world with pockets of intense radiation scattered throughout the city. The imagery was very Judge Dredd. The situation was to be one of rival gangs battling for control of the city. In an interesting twist, 2 Rules Gimmicks came up right in the preparation phase. First each player (there were 4 of us) would be responsible for detailing 1 gang during set-up. Second, each gang was to have a leader, and the leaders were to be former friends, who were unable to confront each other directly but only through agents like the gangs they controlled. The sense was that these leaders were somehow larger than life and the gangs themselves were just tools they used to strike at each other. A very cool concept. Unfortunately being a demo it was one we didn't get to explore in detail and only 1 of the 4 leaders even got created.

The last gang to get created wound up being the focal point for the session so I'll detail it first. They were the Post-Messianics. A religious cult who believed the second coming of Christ had already occurred and those who were to be saved in the Rapture had already departed. They believed they were truly living in apocalyptic times and that the people who were left were those that got left behind to suffer. They blamed technology heralding in the end times, destroying peoples faith and opening the door for the antichrist. They were essentially militant, hyper violent Luddites, destroying technology wherever it was found.

Their headquarters was in the middle of a radiation zone. They, having repudiated all science and knowledge, had no concept of this, but knew that in certain areas they got sick (from the radiation). Their headquarters housed a holy idol which protects the cultists from the sickness as long as they are near its vicinity. They believed it to be a divinely powered artifact, but in reality it was a high tech detoxifier and radiation dampening device. In other words...technology.

The next most important gang to the session was an Akira-style biker gang of mercenaries and bounty hunters. Part of this gang was a group of Juicer Ninjas, assassin/infiltrators hyped up on reflex stimulants and combat drugs. They were designed as a Master Component with the Traits of: *Stealthed Bikes, Drug Enhanced Reflexes, Laser Edged Weapons, Built in Radio Chips, and Chameleon Suit*. As part of a challenge over how powerful these guys were it was decided that they had *limited irreplaceable numbers (100)*. However, the high tech components that made them up were *recyclable* and if recovered could be implanted in a new ninja.

The first gang created were an organization of serial killers and murderers. They had fully renounced God. Not that they didn't believe in him, their attitude was "screw-him" and they were dedicated to opposing all facets of Christian morality. They had no role in the session we played, but their leader was the *enigmatic*, and *mysterious*, *Red Dragon*. He was later revealed to be the *secret leader of the Juicer Ninjas*.

The gang I created was "The Law". A group of heavily armored and equipped, very Judge Dredd-like law enforcement officers who patrolled the twisted streets of the city as best as they are able.

The first scene of the game had the bikers out stirring up trouble with random acts of violence as a distraction while a team of Juicer Ninjas infiltrated the cultists headquarters to steal their holy idol (leaving them at the mercy of the radiation). They had timed the raid perfectly, to a time when virtually all of the cultists were away, and so the HQ was virtually empty. What they did not know (because another player introduced it) was that the reason the cultists were absent is because they were out raiding the various supplies of juicer drugs cached around the city, destroying most of them and replacing select amounts with caustic acid.

They also did not know that the holy idol had been booby trapped. While trying to remove the central icon (a small key component of the device) one of the juicers fell into a pit of fire, where he was vaporized by his own flammable chemicals. The last two juicers used their acrobatic reflexes to leap over the pit and take the icon, but alarms were sounding and both the cultists and the law were on the way.

In the second scene the cultists returned to discover the icon missing. The Law was already on location, and the cultists blamed them for the theft. The Law Troopers were unaware of the cultists closing in as they patrolled the neighborhood in their armored squad car. Their infrared sensors detected the stealthed ninjas leaping from roof top to roof top. With a warrant to kill all juicers on sight the troopers opened fire; one manning a mini gun mounted on the roof and the other with an assault rifle behind an open squad car door. With automatic shells chewing up the roof tops the ninjas resorted to amazing feats of aerobatics to dodge the bullets. Ultimately they were cut down dropping the icon into a dark crevice...but not before one of the ninjas managed to radio back the precise location of both the icon and their bodies. Meanwhile the cultists, armed only with knives and pipes had encircled the occupied troopers and proceeded to bludgeon them to death destroying the squad car and all gear. They never knew the ninjas had the icon to begin with and, since they were stealthed, hadn't seen them on the roof; and so fanned out to look for the icon. The only other witness to the location of the icon was a strange feral child, known as Wolf Boy, who hung around the neighborhood and had been hitching a ride on the back of the squad car.

At this point we called the demo. The Ninjas were sending reinforcements to get the icon, the cultists were out in force trying to recover it and The Law had a full assault team on the way as back-up. Ultimately though, we felt it was probably the secretive and, as yet unheard from, Red Scorpion who would probably wind up claiming the prize...but to what end.

### Featured Element, Challenges:

This demo saw more Challenges than any other I ran at GenCon. This excited me because the players had pretty much figured out how Challenges would work before I'd even fully explained them. That speaks well for the intuitiveness of the mechanic.

The first thing to get Challenged was the Juicer Ninjas who were turning into an incredibly powerful force before anyone else had even begun to define such things. The Challenge involved their strength and if we really wanted to embark in what would amount to a Coin spending arms race between the gangs. In the end, this Challenge never went to bidding. A solution was negotiated whereby there was only a limited number of Ninja, & they were depended upon vulnerable supplies of drugs for much of their abilities. To mitigate these weaknesses somewhat, they were replaceable if the bodies could be recovered to recycle the technology.

The second Challenge involved the Red Scorpion as secret leader of the Ninjas. A player proclaimed the leader of one gang was the real power behind a large segment of another gang, this got Challenged quickly. This Challenge did go to bidding, and the Red Scorpion player won after Coins had been spent all around. The other two of us figured that not only would that be a great plot hook to introduce at some future time, but having a conflict like that could only result in a lot of dead ninjas.

The third Challenge involved me in control of the Law Troopers having just killed the two escaping ninjas. I spent Coins to describe how the mini gun had turned the ninjas to hamburger eliminating any possibility of them being recycled. This Challenge would have gone to bidding, but a straw poll indicated that all other players preferred to see the corpses left intact so they could be the focus of a rescue attempt. Faced with such a coalition, I withdrew my Challenge before wasting Coins on one I couldn't win.



# Pulp Apocalypse

Submitted by: Roy Penrod

Number of Players: 3  
Number of Sessions: 2  
Total Playing Time: 4 hours  
Number of Starting Coins: 25  
Number of Refreshment Coins: 5

Our game preparation looked like this:

- Story Element: Post-Apocalyptic Setting.
- Story Element: No spaceships.
- Story Element: Some household androids went berserk and turned on humans.
- Story Element: No aliens.
- Story Element: Food and water are scarce.
- Rules Gimmick: Dice used against a Component during a Complication are always added to the Opposing Dice Pool.
- Story Element: Mutants exist.
- Story Element: Modern firearms exist but modern technology (like cell phones) have been lost.

## SCENE 1

The location is a lonely street littered with rubble in a ruined city at dusk. A man in a long black leather duster with dark sunglasses is walking down the street.

A woman walks up to him and asks him if he's the one she's supposed to meet. He quickly pulls out a revolver and puts it to her head. He wants to see if she'll sweat under the pressure or if she's an android sent to kill him.

The woman ducks under the revolver and dives behind a large dumpster. A vicious mutant dog comes out of a building behind her and crouches for an attack.

The woman backs into the street. The man levels his revolver at her. The mutant dog jumps for her throat, but the man blows the hell out of the dog in mid-leap.

The man lowers his gun and looks to the woman. "Yeah, I'm your man. Let's get out of here. The street's no place for a lady," he says.

## SCENE 2

The location is a ruined diner at midnight. The man, Lee Edwards, and the woman, Alinda, are sitting and drinking coffee. In the background, a young couple are sitting, drinking coffee, and talking.

Alinda tells Lee that the leader of her community, Chief Romano, went out looking for food a couple of days ago. He never returned. She tells Lee that the community wants to hire him to find the Chief.

Lee says he'll take the job "if the price is right."

Alinda offers Lee her horse, but he tells her a horse is just another mouth to feed. He wants a share of the food that Chief Romano was after. Alinda agrees to it.

The scene fades to black.

## SCENE 3

The location is the street in front of the abandoned warehouse that Chief Romano was looking for food in. It's dawn. Lee Edwards is standing in front of the building.

Lee looks both ways but the street is clear. He walks up to the warehouse door and kicks it in with his size 13 snakeskin boot.

Alinda comes running around the corner of the building and tells Lee that she's coming with him. Lee argues with her, then shoves her to the ground as he sees movement out of the corner of his eye.

A bullet whizzes by Lee's head. Lee sees a man running through the warehouse.

Lee shoots the man, wounding him. Lee follows the blood trail and traps the man between the wall and rows of crates. The shooter is the young man from the diner!

## SCENE 4

The location is the interior of the warehouse a few moments after Lee Edwards found the shooter. Lee Edwards is facing the shooter.

Alinda runs up and stops beside Lee. Alinda is shocked and asks the shooter, Richard, why he is shooting at them.

Fire fills Richard's eyes as he smirks. "You'll never stop him. He's too powerful. Soon he'll rule the entire city."

"Who in the hell are you talking about, boy," asks Lee.

"The Reverend. The Reverend's going to take it all and I'll be right there with him. I've been Chosen," says Richard proudly.

## SCENE 5

The location is the interior of the warehouse a few moments after Lee Edwards and Alinda found Richard, the shooter. Lee and Alinda are still facing Richard.

A woman wearing a gas mask sneaks up behind Lee and Alinda. She throws a canister of tear gas in front of Lee.

Lee spins around and tackles the woman wearing the gas mask, pinning her arms to the ground.

Richard pistol whips Alinda, knocking her out.

Tears stream down Richard's face, but the Reverend's conditioning program helps him resist the effects of the gas. Richard points the gun at Lee's back as he cocks the hammer. "I'd suggest you get off my wife."

## SCENE 6

The location is just outside the city a few hours later. Richard and his wife Alexandria are standing while they wait for the Reverend. Lee and Alinda are sitting on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs.

Lee looks up at Richard. "What the hell are you waiting for, boy?"

Richard turns and kicks Lee in the face, knocking Lee to his back. "You'll find out soon enough," says Richard, laughing.

Lee sits up as three figures approach, the bright sun behind them hiding their faces.

A young man and woman step aside as a large man walks between them. He smiles down at Alinda.

Alinda gasps. "Chief Romano! You're alive!"

The large man smiles sweetly at her. "That's the Reverend to you, young lady. Of course I'm alive. Who else will lead my Chosen to claim the Promised Land tonight?"

Alinda spits at Chief Romano, the Reverend. "You bastard!"

The Reverend just laughs at her. "May God have mercy on your wretched souls, lest you spend eternity burning in the very depths of Hell when you're crucified in front of the Chosen Ones tonight!"

Lee looks the Reverend straight in the eye. "I'll be waiting for you."

The Reverend laughs then turns to Richard and Alexandria. "Get them up."

Richard grabs Lee and roughly stands him up as Alexandria reaches for Alinda.

Lee leans back and slams his shoulder into Richard, knocking him off balance. Richard raises his gun in front of him, but Lee kicks it out of his hand.

Alinda kicks out at Alexandria and knocks her to the ground. Alinda leaps to her feet and runs away.

The Reverend tackles Lee and knocks him out with a solid right to the jaw. "Get that bitch!"

## SCENE 7

The location is a small cluster of trees with a clearing just a little while later. Alinda is standing behind a tree, holding a large dead tree branch. Alexandria and Richard are approaching the trees slowly, their guns raised before them.

Richard hears a twig break somewhere off in the distance. He walks right past the tree Alinda is hiding behind.

Alinda swings the branch down, knocking the gun from his hand. Richard cries out in pain even as the branch crushes his temple, shattering his skull. Richard's limp body falls to the ground.

Alinda bends down, picks up Richard's gun, and takes a step toward Alexandria. Alinda raises the gun just as Alexandria turns to face her.

Suddenly, Richard jumps up and shoves Alinda to the ground. Alinda's shot goes wide and hits Alexandria in the shoulder, spinning her to the ground. Richard picks up the tree branch and lifts it over his head, preparing to split Alinda's skull open. Richard's dead body tumbles backward as Alinda fires three shots into his chest.

Alinda slowly gets up and walks over to Alexandria.

Alexandria looks up at Alinda, the haze of shock and pain in her eyes. "You shot me, you bitch!"

Alinda's foot connects squarely with Alexandria's jaw, knocking her out cold. Alinda puts Richard's gun into her waistband, then takes off her leather belt and ties Alexandria's hands behind her back. Alinda picks up Alexandria's gun and chambers a bullet. "I think it's time we pay the Reverend a little visit," says Alinda to the gun.

## SCENE 8

The location is an abandoned auditorium deep within the ruined city late at night. The Reverend is standing on the stage, whipping a horde of his Chosen into a frenzy. Lee Edwards is tied to a cross behind the Reverend. The captured members of Alinda's community are in wooden cages on both sides of Lee.

"I have delivered you unto the Promised Land," shouts the Reverend. The cheers of his Chosen erupt.

The Reverend lifts a torch over his head. "Let us purify the spirit of this Unbeliever with the Flames of Righeousness!" Again, the cheers of his Chosen erupt.

The Reverend turns to Lee. "May God have mercy on your soul."

Lee smiles at the Reverend. "I'll save you a nice warm spot in Hell."

A woman right in front of the stage pushes a hat off her head. Alinda pulls a gun out from under her overcoat. "Oh, Reverend."

The Reverend's eyes widen as he hears Alinda's voice. Slowly, he turns to face her.

"Nobody calls me a bitch," says Alinda as she pulls the trigger.

Blood splatters Lee as the Reverend falls backwards, a bullet hole in his forehead.

Lee smiles down at Alinda. "What took you so long?"

Alinda shoots the ropes binding Lee's hands then quickly climbs up on the stage. "I thought you were supposed to be the hero."

Lee just smiles as he finishes untying his legs.

A young woman runs toward Alinda, screaming like a banshee. "You killed the Reverend! You killed him!"

Alinda calmly puts a bullet in her head.

"I'm your leader now," shouts Alinda to the gathered crowd. "Anybody have a problem with that?"

The scene fades to black. The End.





# Temple of Bast

Submitted by: **Bob McNamee**

**Temple of Bast – Universalis Game – Session 1- (2hrs approx)**  
**Players: Bob, Pat**

**Scene 1**  
Location: The Temple of Bast  
Time: Midnight  
Characters: Pi Wa Ket, Seer of Bast, Lo-Set, Group of Temple Cats

Pi Wa Ket, the temple servant, prepares the Temple for tomorrows service. Lo-Set, a Cat, is among the cats who frequent the Temple.

The Seer of Bast enters the altar room for her midnight meditation. She slips deep into prayerful meditation.

The flickering torchlight casts dancing shadows about the Temple walls. Hidden by the dancing shadows, a Snake slithers and sneaks up behind the meditating Seer. Suddenly, the unseen Snake lashes out, bites the Seer. She cries out in momentary pain, before she succumbs to the poison in her, and collapses to the floor.

Pi Wa Ket rushes toward her, sees the snake, and the nasty bite. The snake rears menacingly. She pauses out of its reach, then she calls upon her ability to communicate with Cats. She commands Lo-Set to “Go get a Healer, quick!”

Lo-Set runs off out of the Temple.

End of Scene 1

**Scene 2**  
Time: immediately after Scene 1  
Place/People: (Scene 1 continued) Pi Wa Ket, Seer of Bast, Group of Temple Cats, Snake

Pi Wa Ket runs to the nearest wall, grabs a torch, and daringly thrusts it at the snake. Her efforts succeed at driving the Snake away from the Seer. It rears up aggressively trying to move forward. She then know she must kill the snake, but is afraid.

Stepping back, she calls on the group of cats currently frequenting the Temple to help her by killing the Snake, while she distracts it with the torch. Pi Wa Ket agilely weaves an intricate pattern with the burning torch and daringly leaps forward in front of the serpent distracting it, allowing the cats to circle and attack. In moments, the snake is pinned by multiple cats along its length. They quickly and efficiently sever its spine, for they often hunt and kill snakes for fun and food.

Pi Wa Ket then goes to the fallen body of the Seer, checking for signs of life. Suddenly ,the fallen Seer stirs, opens her unfocused eyes and speaks in the voice of prophecy, “I See the City overrun by the forces of the Evil Snake God, unearthed by the wild tribes of the far desert.”

Her eyes roll up and she lapses back into poisoned unconsciousness.

Pi Wa Ket supports her, laying her back to the floor. Recognizing My-Kat, a Temple Cat who can speak to high-ranking Priestesses, amongst the gathered group of cats, Pi Wa Ket commands “Go My-Kat! Rouse the Elders of the church. Tell them of the Prophecy!”

My-Kat trots off into the depths of the Temple.

End of Scene 2

**Scene 3**  
Time: Concurrent with Scene 2  
Location: Herbalist shop of Juba, down the street from the Temple  
Who: Lo-Set, Juba

Lo-Set dashes throughout the Herbalist’s shop, rushing about setting jars and containers to wobbling.

Juba, the Fat Healer, startled out of his nightly habits, gets up from grinding some herbs to chase this unexpected furry annoyance. Suddenly, Lo-Set bounds over behind a counter where Juba had taken off his charm bracelet and cleverly slips it over his head.

Lo-set, the Thief Cat, pauses for just a moment, allowing Juba a good look at him. Then, he bounds off out of the Herbalist’s shop running for the Temple. An angry Juba puffing along behind trailing him.

End of Scene 3    [Notes on Session 1](#)

**Temple of Bast – Universalis Game – Session 2**  
**Players: Bob, Pat, Sue (visiting player)**

**Scene 4**  
Location: The Temple of Bast  
Time: immediately following Scene 2/3  
Characters present from Scene 2: Pi Wa Ket, Seer of Bast, Group of Temple Cats

Pi Wa Ket , the Temple Servant, is attempting to comfort the poisoned Seer when Lo- Set, the “Thief Cat”, comes bounding up the steps to her, wearing the Charm Bracelet around his neck like a collar. She removes it before he realizes, and says “Thank you, Lo-Set, but I don’t know what use this will be... These look like runes...”

From the entrance...“What’s going on? May I look at that?” says a strangers voice. Kenarsis, the Scribe/Magician, crosses the floor to her. “I was was just passing by the Temple steps when suddenly a cat passed through my legs wearing that strange collar, my curiosity demanded that I investigate” She shows him the bracelet , a strange band of shaped crystals, each inscribed with a Rune.

Noticing the poisoned Seer, Kenarsis offers his services “I am not a great Healer, but I do have a great knowledge of Runes, perhaps I can help heal her with this charm” He is about to try something when the huffing , puffy Juba, the fat Herbalist, enters yelling “Stop! They must be used in a specific order to be safe!... I will Heal her...that’s MY charm bracelet!”

Just then My-Kat, the Temple Cat enters, with Kan’ Du, the Priestess Healer of Bast, following close behind. “This is a Temple matter! And no one will tend our Seer but those of the Temple!” she proclaims.

The visitors back a few steps away from the Seer and temple-folk.

The Priestess Healer calls upon the holy healing forces of Bast to heal the Seer. The Seer is cleansed of Poison, but is locked in a state of Trance.

Kan’ Du turns to the others, introduces herself, then picks up the bracelet. “Where did you get this? she demands of Juba. Juba does not answer. “This bracelet is a sacred artifact of a Primary Node”, she states.

Ignored until now, Lo-Set sneaks around the group, then makes a sudden leap upward towards the bracelet. His head passes deftly through his new “collar”, and his hurtling body weight neatly pops the bracelet free of Kan’ Du’s hands. The crafty cat is off and running before any human can react, and streaks from the Temple.

“You damned Cat...”, mutters the Priestess Healer

Only the My-Kat can react before he is gone, bounding off out of the Temple in pursuit of him.

End of Scene 4

**Scene 5**  
Location: A rooftop near the Temple of Bast  
Time: Immediately after Scene 4  
Characters: Lo-Set, My-Kat

“Why did you do that?” My-Kat confronts Lo-Set.

Lo-Set answers. “It is well understood in the city streets, and by those Cats who follow the Wild Ways, that corruption rules the Temple of Bast even at the highest levels, and the Temple rules our city of Bast-Met. I will not relinquish the bracelet to the Temple.”

My-Kat agrees, “As a Temple Cat, I can attest that not all who are of the Temple are to be Trusted. Still, the bracelet must be returned to its proper place at the Primary Node, for the power of the Ley lines of the node are diminished by its lack.”

Lo-Set says,“This can be done, but I will need help, for it is not a task which can be successfully completely by Cat alone. We will need Humans for help and protection”

“Alright, but, there needs to be Temple representation in this undertaking,” My-Kat counters.

Lo-Set responds, “I do not trust the Priestesses.”

“Perhaps one who is not a Priestess, perhaps the Servant, Pi Wa Ket, who speaks with our kind” offers My-Kat.

“Agreed, I like her,” purrs Lo-Set, ”Perhaps Juba and that newcomer as well?”

“Not Juba, he is not fit for this trial nor will he provide much protection” argues My-Kat “but, I know of a man who is pure of heart and purpose, a body guard of a true believer, who would suit. After we ask the humans at the Temple, we should ask this man Bigg-Uhn, agreed?”

“I agree! Let our partnership begin, let us restore the Node! Now, let us see how the Humans react,” exclaims Lo-Set as both he and My-Kat begin to run along the rooftop.

End of Scene 5    [Notes on Session 2](#)

Bob McNamee



# Masasume Blades

**Submitted by: Tony Irwin**

Being the only one of 6 to own the rule book I skipped all the pre-game collaborative world creation and rules and stuff: "Think Crouching Tiger folks. If it would work in the movie then it will work in our game."

I took the first scene, we kicked off in the famous Jade Temple with our hero "Wu-Shen", and his wise old mentor (who also had some made up name I forget). One of our players, Liam, was brave enough to offer to take control of the mentor and the resulting dialogue helped us establish how Wu-Shen was found as a babe abandoned on the steps of the Temple, and had been brought up in the martial arts becoming one of the greatest swordsmen in China.

Now that I'd demonstrated how to add traits, everyone started interrupting with lots of ideas of their own. Wu-Shen was brave, handsome, swordsmenx3, you know the package. "Wu-Shen is schizophrenic" was a shot out the blue, and then Shona went on to give a name and a bunch of nasty repelling traits to Wu-Shen's other personality. Here I introduced everyone to the challenge technique. Was Wu-Shen's alter ego to be a drunkard or opium addict? Drunkard might provide lots of comic opportunities, but long pipes and blue smoke might be more fitting to the setting.

After that \*everything\* got challenged. Everyone had their own take on Wu-Shen (and also his mentor who changed gender twice). But when I explained to them all the idea of Master Components, my fellow players became strangely silent as their brains schemed away at their own ideas and they carefully counted their tokens.

"A Masasume Blade is a master component. Its a sword that is unbreakable, unnaturally sharp, there is only one known to be in existence." For just 5 beads I'd created something very cool. "Now it only costs me one bead to say that Wu-Shen has a Masasume blade." Gasp! Sudden intakes of breath! Immediately Wu-Shen was old school, everyone realized that the way to go was create their own kewl character with his own kewl history and his own kewl weapon. But then why spend 5 beads when you could just spend one to use my ideas?! Quickly the uniqueness of the Masasume blade was revoked (I had not enough beads and absolutely no allies to help me challenge this!) and more were soon to appear on newly created characters.

The actual story wasn't moving anywhere so someone did the old "A messenger runs into the room. He says bandits are attacking the villagers!". It was the perfect chance to mess around with mini-scenes and introduce tons of new components, cutting to the village being raided by bandits, to the hillside where the Raccoon and Frog clan armies camped opposite each other preparing for war, and of course to the Masasume armed ronin who was strolling the town looking for work. Story threads were sewn left and right; the bandits had slain initiates heading for the temple, the chief bandit was Wu-Shen's long lost twin (who of course also had a Masasume blade), a gypsy woman was the mentor's daughter and also the ronin's lover, the ronin was actually a triplet with Wu-Shen and the bandit chief. Meanwhile the cult of the sword grew and grew: "A Masasume blade can never be wielded against someone else who carries one, a Masasume blade will always try and seek out the other two blades," and so on...

Finally once we'd spent all our beads in a mad frenzy of creation (all except Paul, who was obviously saving them up for some serious Raccoon Clan Army action) we ended the scene. We went over the bidding mechanic and how no one can interrupt the person who frames the next scene until they have played their first event. Everyone was reluctant to be the first to demonstrate this so I won the bid by default (everyone else bid zero). First I took them all to Nobunaga mountain on the other side of China. "A Dragon can fly, a dragon has an elemental attunement, a dragon has a breath weapon appropriate to its element, a dragon can move through substances made (or akin) to its element, there are only 6 dragons in China." Suddenly the Earth Dragon was born, bursting through the side of the mountain it soared into the clouds roaring "Today I hunger for man flesh!".

The dragon (apart from adding great mythological colour to the game) was simply a fall back plan in case the Raccoon Clan Army ended up marching upon the little villages and people that everyone had invested so much in, but obviously Liam was worried that the dragon might just be another Raccoon Army in disguise so he gave it a quest. "Before the Earth Dragon can hunt he must find his 5 other dragon brothers". This of course reminded everyone that there were five other dragon traits up for grab! "Dragons are shape shifters.", "Komal (the ronin) has the Dragon trait but does not know his true nature." "The father of the triplets was the Water Dragon but when he died Wu-Shen became the Water Dragon but is so far unaware of his true nature". A few more Dragons were fleshed out and the Dragon master component got "Ancient Wisdom", and "Fierce some Strength"

Now that the power of framing the scene had been demonstrated, Paul used a massive bid to take us to the Raccoon Army Camp where he was able to flesh out his army uninterrupted and give them a General with divine ancestry (but no dragon blood this time!). In the next scene Alan took us to his ronin at the armoury, overseeing the sharpening of his famous sword. In the scene after that Shona created a little shop in the village run by man and wife. I took control of the woman and we had an entertaining little argument about curtains. Stuart interrupted, introduced his Gypsy into the store and announced that the gypsy had some shoplifting in mind. I reached for the rulebook and we figured out how to run our very first Complication...

Wow. The gypsy only had a couple of relationship traits (and no sword or a dragon for a dad) but with the \*incredible\* quantity of beads won from the complication, a legendary gypsy thief was born! She was someone, we mused, who might even be nimble-fingered enough to steal a Masasume blade...



# Chateau de Sorcerie

Submitted by: Roy Penrod

## Part the First

Number of Players: 2  
Number of Sessions: 1 (so far)  
Total Playing Time: 1 1/2 hours  
Number of Starting Coins: 25  
Number of Refreshment Coins: 5

Our game preparation looked like this:

- Story Element: Based loosely on Sorcerer by Ron Edwards.
- Story Element: Setting is a dark version of France during the Renaissance.
- Story Element: Demons should have Latin names to keep them out of place.
- Rules Gimmick: Coins refresh to 25 before the first scene is bid on (applies to first session only).
- Rules Gimmick: This game is a continuing serial. We must leave at least one plot thread dangling to be picked up at the start of the next session.

We decided to create the main character before the story began. Since the game is based loosely on Ron's excellent Sorcerer RPG, we also decided to create the demon bound to the main character. Here are the Components we ended up with before the story began:

Component Type: Character  
Character Name: Edmund DeVille  
Role: Baron of Château Le'Brion  
Sorcerer  
Cynical  
Taught sorcery (how to summon, bind, and control demons) by his father  
Father died after a long illness  
Mother died during childbirth  
Owns his father's rapier  
Vissago (a demon) is bound to him

Component Type: Character  
Character Name: Vissago  
Role: Demon bound to Edmund DeVille  
Takes the form of the DeVille signet ring  
Desires to see Power wielded over others  
Needs to feed on the Fear of others  
Can boost Edmund's strength and stamina  
Can cloak himself and Edmund from others  
Has a link to Edmund so that they can see what goes on around each other  
Can help Edmund heal faster by removing wounds from him  
The signet ring is carved from a Tiger's Eye stone. When Vissago is using one of his powers, the stone swirls.

### SCENE 1

The location is Edmund's bedroom in the Château Le'Brion. The time is shortly after midnight. Edmund awakes to the sound of loud knocking at his bedroom door.

Edmund quickly puts on a robe and hurries to the door, jerking it open. A man, Edmund's servant, stands in the hallway.

"I'm sorry to disturb your rest, Monseigneur. But it's your wife ... please come ... I think she might be hurt."

Edmund rushes down the hallway, following his servant.

The scene ends.

### SCENE 2

The location is a meadow just outside the Château Le'Brion. The time is just a few minutes later. Edmund leaps down from his horse and runs to his wife's prone form. Edmund's servant reins up beside him.

Edmund cradles his wife, Antoinette, in his arms and makes sure she's alive. She is breathing, but unconscious.

Edmund picks Antoinette up, carries her to his horse, and lays her across his saddle. He climbs up behind her and turns the horse to ride back to the Château Le'Brion, but he catches a brief glimpse of a shadowy figure among some trees.

Edmund quietly commands Vissago to follow the shadowy figure.

The scene ends.

### SCENE 3

The location is the master bedroom in the Château Le'Brion. The time is several hours later. Edmund is standing beside Antoinette's bed as she regains consciousness. Jacque, Edmund's servant, is standing beside his master.

Edmund sends Jacque to fetch some brandy.

Edmund sits on the bed beside Antoinette. "Where were you?"

Antoinette turns away from Edmund. "It's none of your concern."

Edmund grabs Antoinette by the shoulders and turns her to face him. "Tell me, damn you!"

Antoinette struggles with Edmund. "Get away from me," she cries as she shoves Edmund backwards with all of her fury.

Edmund trips over the bedsheets and falls hard to the floor. Furious, he leaps to his feet and starts toward his wife.

Antoinette pulls a dagger from beneath her pillow and holds it in front of her. "Get away! I would rather die than have you touch me!"

Jacque opens the door and nearly drops the brandy in surprise. "M'lord! M'lady!"

Edmund visibly regains control of himself. "You think I do not know where you have been? I will kill him before you go to him again!"

Antoinette cries and drops the dagger. "No, Edmund! No!"

Edmund tears from the room, knocking Jacque out of the doorway. The decanter of brandy crashes to the floor, the dark liquid spilling slowly across the carpet as though it were blood.

The scene ends. The first session ends. [Notes on Session One](#)





# Notes on Chateau de Sorcerie

Submitted by: Roy Penrod

## NOTES ON SESSION 1

We based this game of Universalis loosely on the Sorcerer RPG by Ron Edwards. In Sorcerer, you play a normal person with one little special ability: you know how to summon and bind demons.

Sorcerer is one of those brilliant games that affects your roleplaying for the rest of your life. You owe it to yourself to [check out the official Sorcerer website](#).

In order to do justice to Sorcerer, we knew we wanted to tell a story about a man's struggle with his own Humanity. We had just finished watching "The Count of Monte Christo" (excellent movie), so we had a great idea for the character he could become if he fell "into the pit" and lost himself "to the monster within".

We also knew we wanted to play a campaign game of Universalis and the serial model fit very well.

We wanted a lot of collaboration when developing our "star character", so we added the Rules Gimmick that gave us our full 25 Coins back before we bid on the first scene. This worked great and gave us every reason to get creative right from the start since we didn't gain anything by hoarding our Coins.

## NOTES ON SCENE 1

Realizing that we'll probably need several servants before the story is told, we created a Servant Master Component:

Component Type: Character  
Role: Servant  
Master Component

We also added a "married" Trait to Edmund.

## NOTES ON SCENE 2

We fleshed Edmund's wife out as a separate Component:

Component Type: Character  
Character Name: Antoinette DeVille  
Role: Edmund's wife, Baroness of Château Le'Brion  
Unconscious

We changed Edmund's "married" Trait to "married to Antoinette DeVille".

Although we established that Vissago took the form of a signet ring before play, my wife decided it would be better for Vissago to just live within the ring. I didn't Challenge this, so my wife changed Vissago's "takes the form of the DeVille signet ring" Trait to "lives within Edmund's DeVille signet ring, but can leave it when commanded".

## NOTES ON SCENE 3

Edmund's servant kept showing up in every scene, so my wife decided it was time he had a name. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of a good French name, so she paid the Coin to add the name and asked me to name him. Jacques was born.

I removed the "unconscious" Trait from Antoinette and added the "upset" Trait to her.

My wife added the Traits "angry" and "jealous" to Edmund.

This scene featured our first and only Complication of the evening. My wife was controlling Edmund and I was controlling Antoinette when I announced she was trying to shove him away from her. Interestingly enough, my wife won the Complication and narrated Edmund tripping over the covers (which is exactly what I was going to narrate if I won the Complication). That's one of the great things about Universalis; some scenes just end up writing themselves.



# The Pregnant Pope

## Thanksgiving 2002 Actual Play

Over the Thanksgiving holiday I had the opportunity to play a game of Universalis with Ron Edwards of [Adept Press](#), Jake Norwood of [Driftwood Publishing](#) and Jake’s wife Earta. Unfortunately, the game took place fairly late at night after a very busy day and we were all a little off form, but even so we produced one of the best stories I’ve had the pleasure to play in.

The game started with the usual Preparation Phase. Earta was to set the tone for the whole game with just two simple Coins.

**Jake:** “This game will involve swords somehow” [yeah, we gave him a bit of ribbing about that one]  
**Earta:** “And it will involve the pope.” [bomb #1]  
**Ron:** “And there will be a heresy trial.”  
**Me:** And here on my first turn would be the first of several challenges in this game. I had wanted to set the game in the near future involving the successor to our current pope, but everyone else was less than enthused about that. But I was determined to not use a general medieval setting, so instead I went with the New World in the 16th century.  
**Jake:** “I’m creating the character of Rodrigo, a Jesuit Priest”.  
**Earta:** “The pope...is pregnant”. [With that second bombshell the fabric of the entire game was shaped. As an interesting rules commentary we ruled that just as “Jack is Jill’s brother” gives an automatic corollary Fact of “Jill is Jack’s sister” that “the pope is pregnant” gives the automatic corollary of “the pope is a woman”.]

The preparation phase continued for a bit and we established a few more features: The actual story would take place in Cartagena. The character of Cardinal Immanuel was Created. Immanuel had been, and Rodrigo was, the pope’s lover. And that out of jealousy at being replaced, Immanuel had sent Rodrigo to the new world as a missionary to convert the natives. We also established that the Cardinal was a skilled swordsman who was in possession of an heirloom sword stolen from Rodrigo’s family. Jake added an interesting twist in that the entire story would be told from the perspective of the pope’s loyal personal bodyguard.

In the first scene Ron created a very cool rules gimmick. In order to meet Jake’s Tenet about the bodyguard, Ron ruled that all scenes would open with a narrative by the bodyguard. The “audience” would see a much older bodyguard writing a letter in a small room at a Spanish mission in California in which he was describing the events of the story. This cost him 1 for the gimmick, but it also counted as a flash forward since it established that the bodyguard would definitely have to survive the story, and so he had to pay each of us 1 Coin. The most fascinating thing about this gimmick, is that it wound up being used in two very different ways. First it proved to be a fantastic way to deliver a good bit of important factual exposition quickly without needing an actual scene which would have been rather boring (exactly why this technique is used in movies). But second it became almost like an Inspectres Confessional. Not wanting to give too much away about the scene (and thus have to pay for the flash forward) several scenes opened with a vague sort of commentary. Like the cryptic comments of a Confessional then, the players would be motivated to work towards including this element into the scene in some fashion. I’ll try to paraphrase these opening narratives as best as I can remember them.

***I write these words by my own hand from the mission at San Pablo Capistrano in Spanish California. They are a true and accurate record of my time as bodyguard to Pope Ignatius III. When we were safely ensconced in our apartments in Cartagena and the pope had removed her outer garments I could see that she was starting to show and would not long be able to conceal her pregnancy. Yes, Pope Ignatius was actually a woman named Anna Marie and she was with child. But I get ahead of myself...***

The first scene opened with the pope and her bodyguard traveling incognito disguised as a merchant and his servant disembarking a ship having managed to slip out of Rome secretly. She had traveled to the new world seeking Rodrigo her lover. When they arrived, they found a city in turmoil with soldiers and civilians rushing around, some panicked and some with purpose. After asking around they learned that a great chief of the native people named Umanhotep was arriving with an armed delegation demanding to speak with the governor. The audience had been granted and people were either fleeing from the savages or crowding in to witness the event. Anna Marie and her bodyguard were swept along with the crowd to the plaza outside the governor’s mansion.

It seems Rodrigo fancied himself more of a soldier of God than a diplomat and had begun his conversion of the natives by marching soldiers into nearby villages and forcibly baptizing the children. Umanhotep was demanding that this practice cease. As the governor and Rodrigo addressed the chief from the balcony of the manse, Rodrigo received a small token from a servant which he was told had come from the servant of a merchant in the crowd seeking audience. Rodrigo immediately recognized the token as coming from the pope and completely lost his composure. He abandoned the summit and rushed to meet the merchant and see him safely and secretly ensconced in private apartments in the mansion. The chief left furious and the governor was horrified at the prospect of hordes of screaming savages descending on Cartagena.

***Unbeknownst to us at the time, but soon to shape the destiny of us all, Cardinal Immanuel had also come to Cartagena. Alone in Rome he knew where the pope had gone and had followed us here to ensure his own plans.***

The second scene opened with a silver caravan trudging from the mines through jungle trails to Cartagena to be shipped to Spain. Cardinal Immanuel and two of his special guards had ridden out to the caravan where he had a secret meeting with Chief Umanhotep in the jungle. The Cardinal was prepared to pay the chief in silver if the chief would attack Cartagena and kidnap Rodrigo and the woman Anna Marie. He would arrange things so the warrior could gain entrance to the fort with ease. The Cardinal had two plans. First, he hoped that if he could get Rodrigo out of the way once and for all that he could convince Anna Marie to return to Rome as Pope and return to him as lover and together they would be the most powerful force in Europe. Failing that, however, he could not allow the Pope to be revealed as a woman, for it had been him who had cast the deciding vote for her papacy. He would be ruined. Getting her out of the city, and into a jungle filled with savages should make her more amenable to his plan, or at least more easily disposed of. The chief was to do anything he liked with Rodrigo, but he was not to harm the woman. Umanhotep had other ideas, however. He had a penchant for white women, and any woman that such a powerful man was willing to pay so much silver for had to be something truly special. He intended to kidnap her as planned, but then keep her for himself. Rodrigo he would enjoy killing slow. He and his warriors hated the Jesuit for casting the water spell of his god on their children. Nothing would keep him from getting his vengeance on him.

The scene closed with the two men in agreement and the Cardinal saying “take your payment then”. At that, a screaming horde of native warriors burst upon the caravan from out of the jungle and slaughtered the Spanish soldiers guarding it. In resolving the complication it was determined that one soldier survived the encounter and even managed to scar the chief with his sword. It is a mark of our tired condition that this poor soldier was forgotten and we never returned to him.

***Rodrigo's handling of the native savages had been incomprehensible. We should probably have not attempted to contact him at that time, but I had never known him to act so foolishly. When they finally met, my lady would not be pleased. I was beginning to see that coming to Cartagena was going to be an even bigger mistake than I had expected.***

The third scene was back at the pope’s apartments where Rodrigo had finally come to meet the merchant who had brought word of his lover. This was handled using the dialog rules. He was stunned to learn that it was not a merchant at all but the pope herself come all the way from Rome to see him. He was even more stunned to learned that she was with child. But what truly sent him over the edge was learning that Anna Marie had decided that she had had enough of being the pope, wanted instead to be a woman and a mother, and expected Rodrigo to leave the church and become her husband..

Meanwhile, the Cardinal had returned to Cartagena and sought audience with the governor. His first act was to demand control of the fort’s garrison in order to organize action against the natives. This would enable him to make arrangements that would ensure the success of Umanhotep’s attack. His second act was inform the governor that Rodrigo’s actions towards the natives had diminished the sanctity of the sacrament of baptism and defied church doctrine and that he intended to have the Jesuit arrested and charged with heresy. The timid governor, who had visions of half naked savages swarming the streets of the city was only too happy to have the trouble making Rodrigo removed and acquiesced to both demands. They went in search of the rogue priest.

In the apartment, Anna Marie had grown furious with Rodrigo’s less than enthusiastic response. He had no desire to leave the church whatsoever. And that was when the Cardinal, Governor and guards burst in. Rodrigo was placed under arrest, and when he referred to this woman as the Pope, the governor knew the priest was totally insane. A female pope was too outrageous to even comprehend. The Cardinal, of course, knew exactly who she was. Everything was proceeding according to his plan.

***Rodrigo’s trial was a foregone conclusion. No real evidence was presented, no blasphemous activities were exposed, for Rodrigo was nothing if not fanatically devout. But it didn’t matter. He had crossed both the church and the state and the governor and Cardinal both wanted him dead, so guilty he would be. My lady perchance may have saved him. She had the vestments and articles of her authority with her and as pope could have demanded his release. But, perhaps in fear that she would be exposed here, far away from her power base; or perhaps to teach the lover who had scorned her a lesson, she did nothing.***

In the fourth scene we used the opening narration to largely skip having an actual trial scene. Rodrigo was escorted off to a cell and Immanuel went to the pope’s apartments to outline his plans for them. After a great deal of dialog between the pope and cardinal we learned that while Anna Marie respected and admired the Cardinal, she did truly love Rodrigo. Throughout this, the Cardinal was becoming more and more upset, and when she revealed she was pregnant he became fully enraged. Even though she realized her mistake and tried to pretend it wasn’t Rodrigo’s baby Immanuel knew it was. He decided then and there to have his way with his former lover one last time before the savages (who even then were infiltrating the fort) came and took her to her fate.

The loyal bodyguard, of course, had other ideas. A complication ensued with me Controlling the dastardly Cardinal and Jake Controlling the bodyguard. We learn that the bodyguard was a veteran of many wars and is something of a romantic. He has a Don Quixote like belief that he is a gallant knight of old serving his noble and gracious queen. We also learn that the Cardinal fights dirty and wields a poisoned dagger in his off hand. I turn the tables on Jake’s added “veteran” Trait by using it as justification for the Trait of “Blind in one eye” which I added to the bodyguard to reduce his pool by one. I win the Complication by a large margin but am prohibited from actually killing the bodyguard by Ron’s flash forward in the first scene. So the duel is “to the pain”. Brought to near paralysis by the poison dagger, the bodyguard is sliced a dozen times by the masterful sword work of the cruel Cardinal. However, during the fighting, Anna Marie slipped away. She has realized how much she loves Rodrigo and has run off to rescue him. Cardinal Immanuel, of course, knows exactly where she went.

During this scene we had another significant Challenge. Earta wanted the Indians to burst in on the duel and attack the Cardinal. I thought the duel with the bodyguard was too important to interrupt, and for the first time in the game I was beginning to have a good idea of where I wanted the story to end up, and it didn’t involve the Cardinal being killed just yet. Up until now I had added only bits and pieces to the story allowing the other players to push it along. I had put the pope and her bodyguard in disguise arriving in port, but Earta and Jake had come up with the governor’s meeting with the chief and the token. I had set up the silver caravan in the Jungle, but it had been Jake who brought in the Cardinal to plot with the Umanhotep. Jake had run the trial and Ron had made sure that the Cardinal had taken control and confronted the pope. So at this point I had saved up a fairly dominant number of Coins. Negotiation could not bring the Earta's Challenge to an acceptable compromise so I simply told her to spend as many Coins as she wanted and I’d spend 1 more and win. In the end, she saved her Coins and winning the Challenge cost me only 1. This was a perfect example of the balance between story power now vs. story power saved for the future. Earta, Jake, and Ron had assembled a story dramatically different from where I would have taken it, but now I was in the driver’s seat bringing it to a close.

***Even though I was not there to see it, it would be a very bloody night***

The fifth scene had us in the prison outside of Rodrigo’s cell. Anna Marie had been unable to find the key to set him free and was frantically grasping him through the bars. “Are you looking for this key?” the Cardinal asked as he caught up to her at last, holding Rodrigo’s family sword, still covered with the bodyguard’s blood. Filled with hate, the Cardinal cast the pope aside and opened the cell, striding in to kill Rodrigo. At that, Earta brought in her Indians. Jake had the debilitated but fanatically loyal bodyguard stagger after his “queen”. He managed to kill one Indian before falling unconscious. The dying Indian stumbled down the stairs, falling at the gates of the cell with the bodyguard’s sword still in him.

The Indians were there to kidnap Rodrigo and the woman exactly as they had planned. In one of those continuity issues that creep into such stories, I later wondered how they knew where Rodrigo and Anna Marie would be found. We were too tired at this point in the game to have picked up on the slight plot hole, but had we been more alert it would have been a simple matter to describe how it had all been arranged that Rodrigo would be in this particular cell and the woman here to visit him at this particular time. Earta helped my desired ending by having the Indians nab and make off with Anna Marie. Ron, however, decided that at this point the Cardinal was so full of hate that he had determined to forgo his original plan and kill Rodrigo himself. He thus found himself fighting off 4 Indians to keep them away from Rodrigo. At last he was disarmed and overpowered, but before they killed him, Rodrigo scooped up his family’s sword and saved Immanuel. Immanuel then recovered the bodyguard’s sword from the body of the first dead Indian and together they drove back the remaining “savages” and went off in pursuit of the captured pope. Immanuel had acquired a desperate desire for Anna Marie in the last scene and couldn’t go through with his second plan to just let the Indian’s dispose of her for him. Since Immanuel and Rodrigo were the only characters still in the scene, a single Coin was enough to change the location and bring the two along in their chase.

After I had ensured that Umanhotep had escaped with his prize, Earta had Rodrigo kill Immanuel, by stabbing him in the back with the sword Immanuel had stolen from him long ago. It was after midnight at this point and this part of the scene fell a little flat. However, I imagine that if it had been earlier it would have included dialog between Rodrigo and Immanuel in which Immanuel, desiring to rescue Anna Marie, would have revealed that he knew exactly where the Indians were going, and in so doing would have revealed that he had been behind the entire attack. When they discovered that Umanhotep had double crossed him and the pope was lost, it would have been then, overcome with grief and rage, that Rodrigo would have struck the Cardinal down. As it was, we had begun to rush the game a bit because we were all well past exhausted.

To start the sixth and final scene I proffered a rules gimmick which altered Ron’s initial gimmick such that the narrative by the bodyguard would be at the end of this scene instead of the beginning. I had at this point a clear idea of how I wanted to end the story tragically. It didn’t go quite as I had planned, despite my still having the most Coins; but Earta's and Jake’s additions would prove to make it much better.

Months had passed, and Rodrigo had finally managed to track down where the savages were. He had tracked them to their new village but was captured at the outskirts. To celebrate the capture of their hated enemy, the Jesuit priest, Umanhotep held a great feast. Rodrigo was to be the main course. Anna Marie had been living as the chief’s kept concubine, and she was forced to watch as her lover, and the father of her child was slow roasted on a spit and then devoured by Umanhotep and his warriors. After months of ill treatment, this sent her over the edge.

We then learn that the loyal bodyguard, mostly recovered from his injuries had secretly followed Rodrigo to the village, but had done a better job at remaining unseen. He watched the feast in hiding and that night, when the chief took Anna Marie to his tent he slipped in to rescue her. Anna Marie had concealed a dagger from the feast, and the bodyguard arrived just in time to see her plunge it into Umanhotep in the midst of his passion. She stabbed him over and over, long after he was dead, until the bodyguard moved to stop her. It was then that he saw into her eyes. The months of mistreatment, the horrible death of Rodrigo, the committing of violent murder. It had been too much for her. The queen that he loved and cherished was gone, replaced only with madness. He knew what he had to do. Drawing his knife across her throat, he put her out of her misery. Anna Marie, Pope Ignatius III was dead.

It was then he heard the crying. It was a baby. Umanhotep had intended to kill the white baby when it was born, but instead decided it would provide added leverage and control over his favorite concubine. The bodyguard discovered that baby and took it to raise as his own.

In exhaustion we ended the story there, and I never did give the closing narrative for the scene. If I had, it would have revealed that the letter the bodyguard (who was intentionally never named in the story) was writing years later, was to that boy, who himself had joined the priesthood, explaining to him his true parentage, and why he’d been raised hidden away in a mission in California.

### Featured Element, Story

I never cease to be amazed at the quality of the stories that Universalis produces. Despite all the twists and turns, the story had a clear introduction, build-up, climax, and denouement. It was driven on constantly with few sidetracks towards a distinct ending. However, it did so without the least bit of preparation or railroading. Its hard to imagine the above story being told in a traditional RPG without large parts of it having been plotted in advance by the GM. Its hard to imagine getting from a female pope arriving incognito in Cartagena to dying at the hands of her own loyal body guard after months of being raped by a savage native chieftain without involving a tremendous amount of railroading or a GM with a near superhuman ability to manage games through Intuitive Continuity. Yet using Universalis we managed to create this story late at night, while exceedingly tired, with hardly any stress or strain besides a few awkward (but very brief) moments where none of us was clear what to do next.

We started the game knowing only that the pope was pregnant, that Rodrigo and Immanuel had been her lovers, that she was traveling incognito to Cartagena, and that at some point there had to be both a sword fight and a heresy trial. Other than that, we knew nothing about where the story was going. We didn’t know whether the baby was Rodrigo’s or Immanuel’s, or even some unknown third party. In fact, we briefly flirted with the idea of the baby being the bodyguard’s but quickly nixed it in the interest of time. We didn’t know who was going to be on trial for heresy. Early on, the obvious choice seemed to be the pope herself after having been revealed to be a woman. I myself actually toyed with the idea of making the trial be of Umanhotep, in a very different version of the game where he had agreed to be baptized to make peace, and then in anger uttered words that were considered blasphemous. The other players had their own ideas that ensured that the game never got anywhere near those events. We had no idea who would live or who (if anyone) would die (with the exception of the bodyguard who had to live in order to write the letter). In fact, right up to the last scene, Ron and Jake were discussing how they were going to manage to rescue the pope from the Indians.

I never managed to convince them that a dark, somewhat twisted ending was best, but even my planned for ending didn’t happen the way I had envisioned. I had envisioned the pope never being found, living out her days as concubine to the chief, secretly raising her son to be the instrument of her vengeance in events to be detailed in some as yet unplanned for sequel. Ron, Earta, and Jake were unanimous in their opposition to that ending, although they did go along with ending it tragically. Earta insisted that any ending that didn’t involve Anna Marie killing Umanhotep was unsatisfactory to her, and Jake recognized that if the ending of the story was to be recorded as part of the narrative letter, that the bodyguard needed to be brought in as witness to it. He assured me that he had an ending in mind that would satisfy my desire for twisted depravity, and he didn’t disappoint. The scene where he described the bodyguard as realizing that the fairy tale was over and where he had him broken-heartedly slit the pope’s throat was the climactic highlight of the whole story.

Ron had visibly faded towards the end of the evening (it had been a very long day) but was instrumental early on in the story when we were flailing around not certain where to go next. He made sure, whenever the story started to stall, to throw in a new bang that we had no choice but to address. Ron introduced the concept of bangs in his game Sorcerer and they really are the key to “story now”. They are much more than simple hooks. They are situations that are impossible for players to avoid reacting to in some way. Yet they are open ended enough that while they force the players to act, they in no way tell them how to act. It was through how we chose to act regarding the various bangs we threw out that caused the initial story to take shape.

Watching the story unfold was almost like watching a pottery wheel. It started as this misshapen lump of clay and gradually began to look like something, but we didn’t know what. Then came the point when it became clear what it was we were making. For me, who spent most of the game cluelessly about where this thing was going, it came after Ron and Jake’s dialog as Cardinal and Pope in scene four. At that point, for the first time, the loose ends made sense to me and I could clearly see where the story needed to go. I also had enough Coins to take it there, but as I described above, even having an overwhelming number of Coins didn’t give me carte blanche to control everything.

This is how I’ve found most games of Universalis to go. The first part of the game involves adding stuff. Throwing in characters and plot elements and different branches and hooks until at some point, for some player at the table, it all clicks. That player then usually begins working to tie everything together and take the story in a specific direction. At this point the other players usually clue in, see where he’s going, and begin to help and add their own subtle variations until a definitive ending is reached.

--Ralph Mazza



# Space Pirates

**Actual Play 4/5/03**

This was a three player game with myself Seth Ben-Ezra of Dark Omen Games and Seth's wife Crystal. Since we only had a couple of hours we skipped through most of the story in the preparation phase and got right to the climax.

This was to be a story about the crew of the space galleon "Empty Bottle". It was a space ship alright, but in a very Spell Jammer or Space 1889 kind of way. The ship was a wooden galleon, sailing between the stars on a sea of ether. The pirates were searching for buried treasure following a map that had been tattooed to the skin of a young girl. The treasure was said to be an Emerald the size of a man's fist.

As they approached the small planet where the treasure was said to be buried they encountered an area of inky blackness. The dark nebulae was the home of a Arwen Demon Queen of Nightmares, a cross between a Cthulhu Old One, a Little Fears Closet Land King, and a Noble from Nobilis.

The nebulae was her domain, and within it, all of your worst fears gained substance. Crystal drew her inspiration directly from one of the islands in the Chronicles of Narnia: Voyage of the Dawn Treader.

Arwen killed the crew and the captain of the ship as they approached her home; but that was not the end of it. Trapped there in the dark, the pirates did not die and the "Empty Bottle" sailed on a ghost ship, crewed by the spirits of the dead sailors. All except the girl, who had hid below decks and was spared.

The ship sailed on, rescuing a woman who's ship had been capsized by one of the frequent electrical storms of neon purple eldritch energy. Unknown to the crew, the woman was actually Arwen in disguise trying to discover why her efforts had not stopped the pirates completely.

When the ship arrived at a small planetoid where the treasure was said to be, they lowered the ships boats and began to row for shore. The captain made a copy of the map so the girl could be left safe on board with the rescued woman.

Before they reached the planet they were beset by one of the eldritch storms which lashed the boats furiously. Fortunately, having experienced these storms before, the boats had been equipped with lightning rods and they made it to land safely, though not without severe damage to the boats.

To stop them, Arwen teleported to land and summoned a pack of wild dream beasts to attack the crew. Each taking the form of whatever their victim feared most, the crew was hard pressed. Thanks to their electrified cutlasses, space muskets, and a small gatling laser cannon, the beasts were all slain, but their blood had stained the crew red, and as long as it lasted they would be shaken and afraid.

Moving inland they followed the map to a skull shaped mountain where the treasure was said to be. Arwen was desperate now to stop them, for the emerald housed her power. She returned to the ship, took the girl and teleported to Skull Mountain. There her powers kept the crew cowering and afraid.

The captain, Ivan Blackbeard (who made his crew drink vodka instead of rum) went on alone, following the map to a secret entrance. He knew that obtaining the emerald was the key to finally having the tormented spirits of he and his crew laid to rest and he was determined to get it.

Just inside the entrance he encountered a hallucination of the demon who tried to block his path, but he cut the illusion down with his sword and strode on to the treasure chamber. Taking the gem he returned to his men and led them to the beach.

But nothing happened. Finally the captain realized that it was not enough to have copied the map from the girl. She was the key to the emeralds powers and needed to be present in person...but she had been captured by the demon, who fortunately did not yet know about the girl's destiny.

Just then the Queen appeared, with the girl and another pack of Dream Beasts. They attacked the ill prepared crew just as another eldritch storm struck. At first the pirates managed to fend off the beasts, but when a bolt of purple lighting destroyed the gatling cannon, the crew were overwhelmed, their souls devoured by the beasts.

The captain had engaged Arwen herself and managed to rescue the girl. Only then did the demon queen remember an ancient prophesy about the girl who would be the key to her demise. She lunged for the girl, but it was too late, Ivan's sword pierced her through the heart.

Another flash of lightning struck the sword at that moment and blew the captain backwards. Pulling the blade painfully from her body, the queen swung once, and decapitated the girl.

Greatly weakened Arwen recovered the gem and returned to her lair. Without the girl, the Ivan Blackbeard was doomed to eternity as a wandering spirit unable to find final rest knowing that the souls of his faithful crew, having been devoured by the dream beasts, were spending that eternity in nightmarish torment.

The end.

## **Featured Element, Story and New Players**

It occurred to me as I played this game, how differently the story progresses with players who are veterans of the game vs. new players. Both Seth and Crystal are long time role players, but this was their first time with Universalis.

When the game started, I had wanted a game of pirates: walking the plank, bottles of rum, chests of doubloons on the Spanish Main. Instead the story became a kind of bizarre conglomeration of different ideas. The story itself, wound up pretty cool. One of the strengths of the game, I think is the way it takes a mish mash of ideas and weaves them into a coherent narrative.

But what occurred to me was this. If I'd been playing with people who were already fans of the game, I would have taken a much more aggressive role with challenges and well placed complications and a lot of Facts to try and establish more of the game I wanted. In other words, I would have "fought" harder for the story. To put it another way, I would have made greater use of Negotiation to get the other players on board with my vision, and greater use of Scene Framing to make sure I built in the elements I wanted to see.

But since my purpose in the game was to introduce the rules and make sure the players were enjoying themselves I took a much less up front role. I let most of the mish mash of tenets stand without challenge (I drew the line at making it a "Romance") and the majority of the scenes were framed by the newer players.

This leads, I think, to new players gaining a better understanding of the rules and the power they have at their disposal with their Coins. For me to take charge right off the bat, would limit the new players to being my audience since they would lack the familiarity with the rules to know what they could be doing. The other side to this is a story that tends to resemble a chimera of genre tropes and takes some bizarre twists and turns before finally settling on a direction.

With experienced players I've found the game to have a greater shared vision, the players tend to have an easier time getting and staying within the same imaginary space.

I'd love to read your comments on whether you've experienced a similar phenomenon on our discussion forum.



# Space Patrol

## GenCon 2003 Demo

The tenets of this game began with a "Sci Fi" setting in which "Earth is No More" and humanity has been reduced to a "Caravan of Dispossessed Vagabonds". Human tech is "primitive" and the caravan is "being pursued by pirates" who want to harvest human organs. In an interesting twist, one of the players declared that the *pirates* were actually the protagonists of the story, not the humans. This led to some interesting twists as we tried to reach a conclusion where the pirates were more important characters than the humans.

The first scene started with a lone straggling human ship being attacked by a trio of pirate vessels including the "K'tara". The K'tara was captained by an alien named Jorel who was "Cunning", "Sly", and a "Total Bastard".

As one of the pirate ships docked with the fleeing human vessel and began to board her, a mutiny was taking place on the K'tara. The crew of the K'tara, feeling that their captain was an "Evil Slave Driver" wanted to leave piracy and join the Space Patrol. They had taken control of much of the ship and had sent a message to the Space Patrol of their intentions. The Space Patrol Cruisers "Steel Claw" and "Jade Falcon" were dispatched to the scene with orders to aid the pirate crew to defect and protect the humans.

There were a few loyalists among the crew and they had notified Jorel of the impending mutiny and so the crew had failed to secure the ship before the Patrol Cruisers arrived. The Steel Claw was captained by one of the few humans to join the Space Patrol, Captain "Red Jenkins". He despised the alien pirates who preyed on humanity and despite his Executive order reminding him of his orders to aid the pirates, he determined to attack and destroy all of them.

Unbenownst to him, however, the captain and crew of the Jade Falcon were on the pirates payroll and so maneuvered to interfere with the attack.

Finally the crew of the K'tara overpowered the Jorell and his remaining loyalists taking complete control of the ship. Meanwhile the Steel Claw finally managed to line up an attack run and drive off the third pirate ship.

At that moment an all alert priority one message was received from Space Patrol Command ordering the Steel Claw to terminate its current mission immediately and return to base. Priority One Alerts cannot be refused and Jenkin's XO intimated that he would be forced to relieve him of his command if he disobeyed and continued with his attack. Both the Steel Claw and Jade Falcon left the scene, leaving the humans to fend for themselves. They did manage to defeat the pirate boarding party with heavy casualties.

Meanwhile, the K'tara had frozen Jorell in carbonite and dumped him into space. They then headed off to a neutral port to refit their ship and rename it the "Leviathan".

When the Steel Claw and Jade Falcon returned to base, they discovered that the Space Patrol had been disbanded for lack of funding. The captain and crew of the Jade Falcon turned to piracy while Captain Red Jenkins became the founder of a new independent Space Patrol. The first volunteer members of the new Patrol were the crew of the Leviathan.

### **Featured Element, Giant Complication**

The most amazing thing about this demo was that the entire story above, all of it, was told with a *single* giant Complication. After the tenets were established I won the first scene and opened with the lone straggling human ship. This quickly led to the introduction of the pirates and a Complication between them and the humans. Every other even of the above story, (with the exception of the epilogue regarding the founding of the new Space Patrol and the Leviathan volunteering) was told as part of that Complication. There was no second scene.

Each of the elements -- from the mutiny, to the loyalists, to the arrival of the Patrol ships, to the Jade Falcon being on the take, to Red Jenkins being a human wanting to kill the pirates, to his XO desire to follow orders, to the orders themselves -- were all Components invented and Traits added and justifications for dice purchases prior to the actual roll. When all was said and done there was a three way contest between Jorell and the pirates, the mutinous crew, and the Steel Claw the smallest pool of which was 10 and the largest 18 dice.

Everything after that, from the mutineer victory, to the emergency orders from Space Patrol Command, to the stare down between Jenkins and his XO, to the human victory against the pirate boarders, to the spacing of Jorell was part of the spending of the Coins won in the Complication.

This was something I'd never seen before. An entire story from beginning to end narrated within a single Complication and a single set of rolls. It was fascinating to watch as each of the three players maneuvered to try and get the biggest pool and determine how the story would end, while simultaneously trying to figure out how to make the pirates be the protagonists. Ultimately it would be the mutinous crew who became the main characters, but it could just as easily been Jorell, or perhaps even the crew of the Jade Claw. Each of the three of us continuously tried to trump each other with counters and counter counters. I, representing the Space Patrol introduced the Claw. Jorell trumped me by introducing the Falcon and making them support the pirates. The mutineers tried to drag me onto their side with orders from Space Patrol to help the mutineers "defect". I trumped that by making the captain of the Claw a displaced human who would kill all pirates on sight. They countered me by creating Captain Jenkins' XO as a by the book officer who insisted on following orders. The mutineers went after Jorell by launching a surprise mutiny. Jorell countered this by Creating a faction of Loyalists who revealed the mutinous plot and so on.

It was truly one of the most impressive displays of Complication cleverness I've witnessed, and by two first time demo players to boot.

---Ralph Mazza



# Hobbits are for Eating

## GenCon 2003 Demo

For this game I got to demo Universalis for John Wick, designer of such games as Legend of the Five Rings, 7th Sea, and Orkworld. As I own and have played the heck out of all of these, this was really quite a thrill. An even greater thrill was when he came back the next day to play in another demo with Mike Holmes, and brought friends with him, including Tom Denmark, artist of Orkworld and designer/artist of Dungeoneer. John commented on Universalis in his [Live Journal](#).

Enough fan boy gushing. John started off the game by announcing that this session was to be a Fantasy story. We later learned that there'd be Orcs and an Orc Cult which worshipped Pain. At this point John saw I was writing Orc with a "C" and immediately implemented a fact that in this game Orc would be spelled with a "K". After laughing about the joke, I immediately was forced to rewrite everything as "Ork".

We then established there were Hobbits. At this point I assigned Hobbits a few Traits including: "Hobbits are for Eating", "1 Hobbit can feed 3 Orks", "Hobbits are Fat and Lazy", and they are "Weakling Cowards".

The Ork Army meanwhile was "Unruly", "a Horde x2", and armed with "Nasty Rusty Swords". John Challenged me on that and wanted to have the Orks armed with spears, but I declared that these weren't no pansy spear wielding Orks and won the Challenge. Nothing quite like sharing Orkworld jokes with the designer of the game. The Ork Leader, "Zrograr" was "Buff x2", and "Clever".

The Hobbit Army was inferior in numbers and armed with "Slings" (of course). They did hold a solid "Ambush position" and had several rapid firing boulder throwing engines.

At this point a unit of elven sharpshooters were added. They were "Hiding in the woods" and "aiming at the Ork Leader, Zrograr". They were led by Elf Leader who "Hates Orks", because his "Lover was Killed by Orks". The Elf Leader was given a name of so many syllables that it was recorded simply as "Really Long Name". He was armed with a "Magic Blood Bow" whose arrows had been "Dipped in the Blood of his Slain Lover".

The battle started off with the elven archers opening fire on Zrograr. With all of Mr. Long Name's Traits added in, Zrograr was in trouble. Until the Enchantress Enscalla revealed herself. She of the "Stunning Green Hair" had "Arcane Powers x3", and an "Aura of Protection on Zrograr". The Ork Leader barely won the Complication. The elven arrows struck Zrograr repeatedly but were mostly thwarted by the arcane shield. Zrograr was left with a "flesh wound" and became "enraged x2". The flare of the magic shield shot back along the path the arrows had come revealing the elves hidden position and deleting their "Hiding in Woods" Trait. Enscalla, however, was put into a magical sleep by her exertions.

At this point the Ork Bugler equipped with a "Ramshorn" sounded the advance against the Elven Position. A "Treacherous" Hobbit Spy named "Bob" had warned Zrograr of the Hobbit Ambush, and so a unit of "Warg Riders" was sent to "Sweep behind the Hobbit Position".

In the ensuing conflict between the Orks and the Elfves, the Elves won. The Elf player used all of his Coins to slay Zrograr and send the Ork army into chaotic "Disarray". But not before the Loser used his Coins slay all of the elven sharpshooters and cause the Leader to flee. The loser also had the Ork Lieutenant who was "Faithful" take command and erase the "Disarray" Trait.

The second scene was framed into the future, following the abject slaughter of the pathetic hobbits and the feasting on their fat lazy corpses. The location of the scene was a nearby shrine where the Apprentices of the Sorceress Enscalla had taken her sleeping body to revive her. The elf leader, fleeing the recent battle "Filled with Remorse" from his defeat, stumbled upon the shrine and determined to slay the evil Sorceress.

Unfortunately that ended our demo. Jake Norwood needed the table to run a demo of [The Riddle of Steel](#) (one of the all time best Fantasy RPGs) and so we had to call it. The demo was a success, copies were sold, and Jake sold 4 copies to each of his 4 demo participants so I can't hold a grudge for him bumping me. But it would have been fun to find out what happened to the elf with the "Really Long Name".

### Featured Element, Combat Tactics

One of our design goals with Universalis was to create a game where the level of gritty detail was completely customizable by play group. For some groups I've played with entire stories were told with characters who were rarely given more than 1 or 2 broad Traits. The above combat could have been narrated completely quickly "And the Hobbits were wiped out and eaten". Instead we took a more detailed approach where some individual units (like Elven sharpshooters and Orkan Warg riders) were independently detailed. Tactics like ambushes, and arrow volleys, and flanking maneuvers, and charges were used to add Traits and dice and flavor to the overall battle scene.

If desired we could have gotten even more detailed. We could have made several units with several Traits each that would have taken many Coins (and several Complication rolls) to defeat. We could have made even more use of descriptive "Tactics" that provided dice to the pools and made rules gimmicks that limited how many such "tactic dice" could be added to a pool based on the quality of the troops and leader. We could have used index cards to represent the units and made rules gimmicks about moving them around the table like a quick and dirty miniatures game with a gimmick that stated that a Complication occurs whenever cards move into "base to base" contact with rules for adding dice for such factors as "frontage" and "flanking attacks" and "unit depth" and such.

In short we could have used written an entire little wargame to play out our Ork and Hobbit encounter, either on the fly, or using a standard set of Add-on rules that we return to for such situations. Instead we chose the middle ground on relying mostly on flavorful descriptions to give our battle character. Regardless of whether we took a simple narration, flavorful description in multiple Complications, or a miniature war game approach the battle would have been played out in Universalis terms, customized to the level of detail the group desires.



# The Buffalo Hunters

**Submitted by: John Kirk**

The story is to be a mystery in the age of cave-men. One person proposed that dinosaurs should be included as well, (as a sort of land-of-the-lost adventure). But, this was challenged by those players that wanted to exclude dinosaurs from the game. After conflict resolution, the "no dinosaurs" decision prevailed.

Next, it was decided that the mystery involved figuring out why the buffalo had not appeared this year. It was established that our meat stores are running low (and that we're tired of eating prairie-dog meat).

Further, we established that the story is to take place on the prairie and that our clan's totem is the buffalo and that of our enemy is the crow. There is a river between the lands of the Buffalo clan and the Crow clan. And, the Crow clan built an enclosure to trap the buffalo. It was decided that the fact that the crow clan actually *had* trapped the buffalo had not been established (since that would prematurely solve the mystery), only that they had constructed this enclosure to do so.

It was established that there was a Shaman named "Infinel" who had recently and unsuccessfully called the buffalo. She has mystical powers, but is currently missing some key herbs to perform the rites properly. She has an apprentice named "Jama" that has only been living with her for 3 weeks. Jama has a brother named "Koda" who is considered to be the Buffalo clan's best hunter.

A Master Component of "Shaman" was created and it was established that all Shaman are women and that they must be celibate.

At this point some twists were introduced. Infinel has had sex with Koda (Jama's brother) and believes Jama to be her daughter (but through negotiation it was agreed that the fact that Jama actually *was* her daughter had not been established - nor had it been established that Infinel considered Jama to be her biological daughter, she might just believe Jama to be her daughter in a spiritual (i.e. mentor to pupil) sense).

Some more Master Components were created: hunters and toolmakers. Hunters are stealthy and use spears. Nothing was really attributed to the toolmakers yet, which seemed odd to me, but that's what happened.

More characters were introduced at this point. There is a toolmaker named Talvas in the crow clan that had raped Infinel years ago.

At this point, everyone was satisfied with the background and the bidding for the first scene began.

The winner started the first scene in a cave. Infinel and Jama were present and Jama's brother Koda runs frantically into the cave. He approaches Infinel and tells her that there is a fire on the other side of the river, in the land of the Crow. The three exit the cave and look to the east to see a column of smoke rising. It is established that the river dividing the lands of the Buffalo clan and Crow clan runs north-south. The Buffalo clan is on the west side of the river. At this point a new character is introduced. Tor, the Buffalo clan leader approaches followed by "Group of five hunters of Buffalo Clan". Tor consults the shaman and it is decided that a group needs to be sent to investigate the fire. Scene I ends.

The second scene initially started on the Buffalo side of the river with Infinel, Jama, Koda, and "Group of Five Hunters". Nothing much happened and so the scenery shifted to the nearby location of the fire on the other side of the river, where the whole group was hiding in the bushes. They initially saw that there were a group of Crow dancing around a bonfire, but this was quickly changed to a "Group of Crow" who were "running frantically around a burning building". Infinel lets out a short \*gasp\* as she spots the Crow toolmaker (Talvas) that raped her years ago. He is exiting the burning building carrying a bundle and looking back and forth as if making sure nobody sees him. Talvas exits the scene into a nearby clump of trees beside the river and Infinel decides to follow him. Scene II ends.

The third scene is set a short time later in the nearby clump of trees. Talvas is inspecting the contents of his bundle and Infinel recognizes it as the sacred White Buffalo totem stolen from her clan years ago. It is carved from ivory. At this point "Group of Five Hunters" enters the scene, crawling up behind Infinel. They spotted her leaving the previous scene and decided to follow her. Infinel explains that the man in the trees holds the stolen White Buffalo totem. Consequently, "Group of Five Hunters" come out from hiding and demand Talvas hand over the totem. At this point, Talvas is given the attributes of "Runner" and "Very fast runner". He grabs the totem and takes off. The "Group of Five Hunters" is given the trait "Accurate with throwing spears". During the conflict resolution it was determined that the ground is soft and muddy, being near the river and that five spears against one target is allowed a bonus of one die. On the other hand, Talvas is very familiar with the territory and has the cover of the surrounding trees. The dice are rolled and it is determined that Talvas is hit with a spear. Talvas is given the new trait "wound in butt". Talvas falls to the ground and looks back at the approaching hunters in terror. Fade to black. Scene III ends.

The time was late and the session ended at this point.

## **Featured Element, Changing Players**

I should point out that one of the players showed up late (actually, didn't know we were playing until she showed up). And, one of the players dropped out after the first scene because she thought things were dragging a bit. As far as that is concerned, the first scene we played did drag, but that was mainly due to the fact that we didn't fully understand the rules and we hadn't gotten into the "flow" of the game yet. The second and third scenes went much smoother. All total, we had 6 players.

All agreed that we had a fun time and that it sure was different from what we were used to. Even the player that dropped out agreed that setting up the background was fun, it was just that one scene that dragged. So, I wouldn't consider that any kind of testament to the playability of Universalis, only our inexperience with it. Some of the players stated that they wished that control of one character per player could be permanent. In that regard, they really like traditional role-play. It didn't occur to any of us that we could probably have set up some kind of a Rule Gimmick to cover this.

[Ralph] There is a bit of a learning curve to Universalis. While we tried to keep the rules as intuitive as possible play can be radically different from what players of traditional RPGs are used to. In fact the initial desire for a more traditional player character is a frequent response. Its been my experience, however, that most of this is a result of "reaching for a life preserver" so to speak. A desire to add something more familiar in the midst of unfamiliar territory. Most groups I've heard this from have gone on to continue to play Universalis without any desire for PCs, but for those who prefer the more traditional PC situation, several [Player Character Rules Gimmicks](#) have been proposed.

What I found especially interesting in this play example is that right here in John's first session one of the key design goals of Universalis is placed front and center. Players joined and left, not just mid campaign, but mid session and this had virtually no impact on play. In fact in one of our 2003 GenCon demos we had the demoer and 2 players. Over the course of that demo, the demoer changed, 1 of the players had to leave for an event. Another player took that players place and a then a third player joined us. The two new players were quickly brought up to speed and play continued without a hiccup.



# The Great GenCon Plot

## GenCon 2003 Demo

The first scene of this demo opened knowing nothing more about the story than it would take place at GenCon2003 on Saturday. It began in the dealer room with an 11 year old boy having just purchased an old boxed Avalon Hill game from Crazy Igors. After the boy leaves, a man in black Vampire costume and sunglasses approaches the booth and surreptitiously inquires of Igor himself for a particular game that was supposed to be held for him. The very same game sold accidentally to the boy not moments before...dun, dun, daaaa

Meanwhile the boy was lost. People kept bumping into him as if he wasn't even there and no one he asked for directions paid any attention to him at all. It was as if he was completely invisible. He clutched his game purchase tighter and began frantically searching for a way out of the hall. But the hall was laid out like a maze and there was no possibility of actually navigating the isles without a map and compass.

The man in black saw the boy and went after him, grabbing for the game. The boy, realizing the man was trying to steal his game, tried to escape but no one could see him struggle. No one that is except Lydia, the blue fairy girl with her chain mail bikini, wings, and large glittery butterfly glasses. You see somehow the boy had been rendered invisible to everyone except those wearing costume eyewear

Lydia got the boy away from the goth wannabe and tried to lead him safely out of the hall, but before she could she was accosted by Sailor Bubba. Sailor Bubba, a large hairy man with a sizeable beer gut straining against his Sailor Moon costume thought Lydia was all that and wanted to "admire her costume up close". Before Lydia could extricate herself from his sweaty clutches the boy had disappeared.

At this point the scene shifts to a dark back room at Jillians where that evil cabal known as the Diana Jones Award Committee were holding a secret meeting. There we see Ron Edwards, part time Sorcerer / full time Cult leader; Matt Forbeck, breeder of his own private army of future game designers; Peter Adkinson, corporate mastermind who single-handedly managed to figure out how to keep overcrowding down at the con by trapping most of the attendees in line outside; and newly initiated member Jordan Weisman, creator of an army of mutant clix that have been sold around the world and are even now waiting to be activated.

They are plotting to take over the world.

Unfortunately for them, the secret plans outlining their nefarious plot have been stolen by agents of the Origins Awards and secretly hidden in an old Avalon Hill game to be picked up by their vampire agent. They had thought this would be a safe hiding place since "no one plays those musty old war game things anymore". They equipped the box with an invisibility device that would activate once the box was sold so that their agent could escape unmolested.

But their efforts were thwarted by a young 11 year old boy who had seen the light. This boy, this miraculous boy, has cast aside collectable cards, over priced and over sized minis, and rubber clicky things. He has scorned cheap games that come in paper envelopes, and games from foreign lands whose rules have nothing whatsoever to do with the picture on the box. He refuses to have any association with pale poorly dressed people who run around with crossed arms shouting "you can't see me, you can't see me". He has seen the true roots of gaming holiness...hexes and cardboard counters. Perhaps if he can escape the clutches of his pursuers with his prize he will single handedly save gaming and usher in a new generation of real gamers...

But wait, one of the many hooded and deceitful members of the Cult of Ron has reported that the box and boy were last scene with blue-chainmail-fairy-chick and she has been located. Already Diana Jones operatives are moving into position to intercept her.

"Excellent" says Herr Professor Edwards, his fingers steepled and his trademark evil grin upon his face. "Everything is proceeding as **I** have foreseen"

Meanwhile in the elevator lobby of the Westin hotel Lydia waits to return to her room. Suddenly a faint clicking sound is heard. The sound grows louder and more numerous until the air is filled with the sound of a million clicking beetles.

They aren't beetles! Its a horde of mutant clicks. They crawl, walk, and even fly, swarming around Lydia and poking her with their little rubber swords and punching her with their little rubber fists. Lydia tries to defend herself, frantically grabbing them one by one and twisting them till they show triple skulls...but there are far too many points in this army.

Suddenly, a hulking shape looms out of the shadows. Its Sailor Bubba! Trying to work up the courage to ask blue-chainmail-fairy-chick for a date, he arrived just in time. Running at a full sprint (just about the speed of an 80 year old man with a walker) Sailor Bubba heaves his bulk into the air. As a high jump, he might have cleared a two foot bar...but fortunately Clix aren't that tall. With a mighty belly flop...the splat of which reverberates around the lobby, Bubba crushes hundreds of Clix at a time. Rolling about on the floor like some sort of break dancing manatee in a pleated skirt, he demolishes the Clix horde giving Lydia time to make her escape.

What will happen now? Will Lydia save the boy? Will the boy escape to realize his destiny of bringing back true gaming to the masses? Will the corporate shills of the Origins Award Committee succeed in thwarting the plans of their Diana Jones rivals? Will the evil master minds of Diana Jones succeed in taking over the world, unleashing cosmic destruction? Will we ever find out who this Diana Jones person is anyway?

Who knows. Shortly thereafter this demo was shut down by agents of evil and all participants were hauled off to some empty foreclosed Wizards-Attic warehouse where even now they are undergoing unspeakable tortures involving thousands of Break Keys. Only I escaped to bring you this warning.

Be afraid, be very afraid.

**Featured Element, Yeah, this was a real demo:**

No lie.

---Ralph Mazza



# A New York Mob Story

## GenCon 2004 Demo

For this demo we established that the story would be a conspiracy involving the mayor of New York, the New York Mob, Sicilians, Indonesian Gangsters, and a prominent New York family.

The first scene opens at a wedding reception. Christina Wheatley has just married Joseph Radford. Both the Wheatleys and the Radfords are important players in New York politics and the Mayor is there to woo their support for his upcoming campaign. This campaign looks to be hotly contested as the mayor's primary opponent has been questioning his track record on crime. Those questions are hitting a little too close to home as the mayor has long been in bed with the NY mob.

Now both the mayor and the mob are feeling the pressure. A new syndicate of Indonesian gangsters are pushing into the city using violence and killing sprees to carve themselves out a territory. This is not good either for mayor's election or the NY families. Of course, the mayor is well aware that many of his opponent's campaign contributions can be traced back to Indonesian sources. Not coincidentally, the mayor is introduced to a Sicilian gentleman, a guest of the Radford's. The mayor knows him to be connected. He gets the impression the Radfords know it too.

At the reception the mayor is attempting to win the campaign support of matriarch Julia Wheatley with charm, flattery, and expensive wedding gifts; but Julia is too distracted to notice. She seems nervous, even anxious, and not the sort of nervousness normally associated with the mother of a bride.

The groom, Joseph Radford, seems similarly distracted, although he is not apparently aware of his new mother-in-law's anxiety. He has eyes only for Christina who seems to go out of her way to avoid any contact or intimacy with Joseph.

The second scene opens the next morning in the mayor's office. We see him pacing impatiently in front of his desk talking animatedly on the phone with a man named Tony; who we gather from the conversation must be mobster. We hear the Mayor explain that the bride and groom never made it to their hotel following the reception last night. He suspects they've been kidnapped by the Indonesian gang in order to pressure the Wheatleys and Radfords to withdraw their support from him. Tony knows that the organized crime business his family runs in New York has benefited greatly from having a friend in the mayor's office and knows that the mayor's opponent's tough stance on crime will just be an excuse to break the New York families down enough to let his foreign backers take over. They agree that Tony has to find the socialites and get them back.

The scene shifts to a seedy pub which Tony knows has connections to the Indonesians. He and his muscle are all set to pressure the owner but they don't need to. The owner hands them a letter with instructions and a photograph of Christina holding today's Times. Unnoticed by Tony at the time, but caught by the camera, we can see a crumpled towel in the corner of the picture. The towel has the monogram of the Ritz Carlton hotel.

The scene shifts again to a hotel room at the Ritz Carlton. We see Christina there. She runs into the embrace of a young Indonesian man. We hear her confessing her love to him as sunlight glints off of Joseph Radford's enormous engagement ring.

### **Featured Effect, Guiding Tenets:**

It generally takes some time for players to grasp the nuances of Universalis play. Early on Tenets tend to be very broad genre or flavor statements like "High Fantasy" or "the Occult". This provides a lot of flexibility and a quick and easy springboard to get started with play, but it also typically results in a fairly eclectic mix of characters and events and locations mixing together in the game.

As players get more experienced I've noticed they tend to use Tenets differently, not just to establish broad parameters but also to provide solid elements of plot direction. This tends to provide a more tightly fitting narrative. It was interesting for me to notice the players in this game grasp that idea almost immediately.

The first Tenets included some pretty broad features like "Modern Day", and "Involves a Conspiracy". But later Tenets added some much more focused story elements like "The Indonesian Gangsters are backing the mayor's campaign opponent" and "The story will feature a wealthy NY family whose support is vital to either candidate in order to win the election"

Tenets like this serve as a great set of marching orders for player's to spin off of. There is still plenty of room for twists and turns (like Christina's Indonesian love interest) but the player's are much more able to stay on track with the added guidance.



# War in Hell

## GenCon 2004 Demo

There is unrest in heaven. In the midst of this distraction, souls of the dead have been misjudged. The Innocent and the faithful have been sentenced to hell. The Archangel Michael has led an invasion of hell to get them back. His forces have carved out a beach head, a bastion of safety in the heart of the abyss. But the invasion has foundered.

A high level betrayal led to an entire battalion of angels being captured and imprisoned. The unrest in heaven has grown worse and now Michael and his forces are cut off. They have lost contact with heaven. They are isolated. An age of man has passed and they are alone in Hell. The tenuous terms of a ceasefire have allowed the weakened angels to hold on to their beach head, but something major is brewing.

Scene one opens with the camera high above the sphere of Earth. We zoom in closer, through the atmosphere, towards the surface. We hear the buzz of human speech and thoughts. They are full of doubt, questions, and unanswered prayers. We continue down far beneath the surface; down into hell. It is the hell of the Inferno. Erupting volcanoes and rivers of lava light the scene with a red glare. Giant, mile long, segmented, many legged worms burst up through the surface before arcing back down again. Spouts of fire and clouds of smoke fill the air.

In the distance we see an enormous city of brass and bronze climbing from the cracked surface like a many tiered mountain. It is a city of demons and devils. The camera shifts to a much grubbier place. A ramshackle settlement barely more than a camp, fortified with piles of rubble, craters, and the bones of fallen enemies. This is the beach head. The only place in hell where the demon's don't hold sway. The angels have dubbed it Purgatory. But for the lost souls gathered here it is the closest to heaven they've been and their last chance for salvation.

In a dark alley of Purgatory we see Michael the Archangel, general of heaven's troops. He is tired and almost broken. He is wingless; his wings having been torn off by a greater fiend in a pointless battle centuries ago. He is meeting with one of his angelic scouts. We see the scout change shape into a form without wings out of respect for his commander. The scout reports that the legions of hell are massing, but not for an attack on Purgatory.

Whatever the unrest is in heaven, its made the demons bold. They plan to invade the surface and enslave the world of men. Lucifer would never have been so reckless, but the lords of hell overthrew him long ago and now hell is ruled by an oligarchy of loosely aligned and constantly jockeying princes. Someone is looking to claim the throne of hell by winning the throne of earth.

We cut to an enormous edifice of grim stone and heavy iron far beyond Purgatory. We come through many walls, locked doors, and barred gates. It is the Brimstone Prison where the captured angels are held. Deep within a winged angel sits behind a desk doing paperwork. It is Furion the Betrayer, or so he is called by the inmates he oversees in the prison.

Furion made a deal with hell. When his battalion was cut off and surrounded he bargained for their safety. That is why they are here in prison instead of laying slaughtered on the battle field. Hell's price was that he would serve them and that he could never speak of the terms of the contract. Hell is run on contracts, and once signed they cannot be broken. Now Hell can never kill the angels of Brimstone Prison and Furion can never tell them that it was not he who betrayed them but rather he who saved them from certain death. No one is more hated by the angels of Brimstone then Furion whose been assigned as their overseer for the centuries since their capture.

Into Furion's office comes Xanphar the demonic warden of Brimstone Prison. Xanphar has discovered that Furion has been smuggling water to the prisoners above their meager allotment. The angels who curse Furion for allowing them so little water have no idea how much less they were supposed to have. Xanphar accuses Furion of violating his contract and so he is being reassigned.

Furion will be assigned to the front ranks of suicide shock troops when the legion of hell invades the surface. He will fight his own kind, angels who defend the earth, and if he falls, all of the prisoners in Brimstone will be tortured for eternity with the most horrific punishments the torturers of hell can devise.

Before Furion leaves the prison he stops by the cell of Josiah. Josiah has been his comrade and best friend since before the universe was formed. Josiah believes Furion betrayed them. He hates and despises him with unconcealed fury. Furion can not tell him the truth. The best he can do is apologize that they would no longer be receiving the extra water he'd been smuggling to them.

Josiah is enraged. He takes up his remaining water ration and hurls it at Furion who can only walk sadly away. Behind him, gaunt angels throw themselves down on their bellies to lick the spilled water off of the steaming stone floor.

In the next scene we see Michael preparing his remaining angelic forces for battle. The invasion preparations have left them with an opportunity to strike at Brimstone Prison and free their comrades.

This is where we had to end the demo

### **Featured Effect, Group Discussion:**

This demo was run for a group of friends who've gamed together for some time. It was their habit in their campaigns to stop play from time to time and discuss, out of character, where each of them thought the story needed to go and what they'd like to see happen in the future. They did this multiple times during the above session and so fluidly did Universalis accommodate this that to an observer it would have been difficult to tell where the line between actual game play and brainstorming sessions was. It was during one of these sessions that we learned that angels curse by taking the Lord's name in vain. The Commandments of man do not apply to them.

Being a demo we could not play through to the end, but the last of these brainstorming sessions revealed the likely direction for the story. An epic battle for Brimstone Prison would be fought. Furion would be revealed as the source of much of Michael's intelligence and scouting reports on the enemy, and he would have provided information on hell's invasion plans before departing for the front. The prisoners would have been set free and, filled with the repressed passions of the ages, the inspired force of angels would have engaged hell's legions and thwarted the invasion. During this battle, Josiah would have encountered Furion, and not knowing the truth of the betrayal would have cut him down. After the battle, Michael would have revealed Furion's secret and out of shame and regret and love Josiah would have dedicated himself to service in Furion's memory. We didn't know what direction the War in Hell would have gone after that, but we knew that Josiah would be the main protagonist of it.

At one point one of the players stopped and asked me if it was ok that they actually had these out of character discussions about what each of them wanted to get out of play. I just smiled and said "of course".

---Ralph Mazza



# The Rise of Set

## GenCon 2004 Demo

For this demo we established that the story would be a fantasy set in ancient Egypt. The Pharaoh's son has been kidnapped. There is a prophecy about the return of the evil god Set which will be fulfilled if the son is not returned in 10 days. We knew from the beginning, as part of the Tenets, that the villain behind this prophecy would be the Pharaoh's chief advisor, Sekhem. We also knew that one of the advisor's chief servants is having second thoughts about his participation in this plot and has left a map to the son's whereabouts.

The first scene opens in the throne room where the Pharaoh has just given orders to the captain of the guard to find his son. Sekhem assigns his servant to help in the search, and to sabotage it as necessary. But the servant instead warns the guard captain of the advisor's plot. He saw Sekhem reading the rituals to summon Set back to Egypt from an ancient scroll.

The captain reports this to Pharaoh who doesn't believe the ridiculous story and orders the servant thrown in chains. The queen isn't so sure, and orders Sekhem to be brought before her. But Sekhem slips away down a secret passage.

Anuka, a Priestess of Isis, informs the queen of the prophecy and her suspicions of Sekhem's role in it. When Sekhem's servant reveals the location of the secret passage, Pharaoh orders his guards to go down it, and Anuka secretly follows them. The route leads down into catacombs beneath the palace and as the guards follow the servant's map they set off a trap which collapses the passage way. All of the guards but the captain are killed and Anuka must find another way around.

Meanwhile, Sekhem has reached the Pharaoh's son and has taken him to a natural cavern beyond the catacombs. An inky dark river runs through the center of the cavern. There is something stirring beneath the surface. The son is shackled to a post at the river's edge.

Here it is revealed that Set is trapped in this underground river. If one of the royal dynastic bloodline is drown in its waters before the next planetary alignment (in 10 days), the prophecy will be fulfilled and Set will be free to bring a new age of darkness upon the land.

While Sekhem is busy preparing the ritual, Anuka reaches the chamber. She has had a vision from Isis that has led her here and knows what the return of Set means. She cannot allow the Pharaoh's son to be drowned in that river. She also knows she is not powerful enough to defeat Sekhem's sorcery. So before the advisor can stop her she reaches the boy and with her ceremonial dagger slits his throat. Already dead, he cannot fulfill the prophecy.

Set arises from the river in rage. He speaks words of doom and dark magic. The priestess desperately tries to ward off his power with her charms.

At this point, the lost guard captain enters the chamber. The advisor is in the midst of casting a dark spell when the captain strikes him unconscious and throws him into the river. He then tries to take the boy out of the chamber.

Here it is revealed that Sekhem, the Chief Advisor to Pharaoh, is actually of the royal bloodline himself and was seeking to usurp his cousin's throne. As he drowns in the river his own death fulfills the prophecy. Set is unleashed to bring darkness upon the land.

### Featured Effect, Twists and Turns:

This demo was characterized by the many twists the story took. From the beginning we knew what the problem was (the son and the prophecy), we knew who the villain was (Sekhem the chief advisor), and we knew how to start solving the problem (the map to the son's location). All of this was outlined in advance and known to all of the players right from the tenet phase.

Yet it was from there that all of the interesting stuff happened. In traditional play it is common place for the GM to try to keep secrets from the players so they won't figure out the mystery too soon and ruin the story. Here, however, we started already knowing most of the key secrets, and due to the authority given to the individual players to direct events still wound up with plenty of suspense and plot twists.

The Pharaoh sends the guards to find his son. Twist: Sekhem sends his servant to sabotage the guards efforts. Twist: the servant betrays Sekhem to the guards. Twist: the Pharaoh doesn't believe him. Twist: the queen does. Twist: Sekhem escapes down a secret passage. Twist: the servant knows the passage and in fact that's what the map is of. Twist: Sekhem moves the son's location so now the map is useless.

The guards and the priestess set off after Sekhem. Twist: a trap collapses the passage. Twist: a vision allows the priestess to arrive anyway. Twist: Sekhem's already on the verge of fulfilling the prophecy by drowning the boy. Twist: the Priestess kills the boy herself so the prophecy can't be fulfilled.

Most of the guards were killed by the trap in the passage. Twist: the Guard Captain survived and arrives in time to defeat Sekhem. Twist: throwing Sekhem in the river fulfills the prophecy anyway.

The entire demo was an example of playing hot potato with the plot. In appearance it resembles play where a GM has a huge multi-branching storyline and the players choose one branch or another as they move through it. But the big difference is that the branching story line was created in play dynamically in real time. The chosen branches were developed further and the non chosen branches where never developed at all. The process was at once both cooperative and, with this group of players, (which included co-designer Mike Holmes) rife with one-ups-manship as each player strove to be the one to come up with the absolute coolest ending for the story.



# More Space Pirates

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Space pirates are a popular genre in Universalis and this GenCon was no exception. Our Tenet phase left us with a band of 5 misfit pirates on a faulty broken down ship in pursuit of the biggest score of their lives. A quantum field collapser capable of generating infinite free energy forever. The value of such a device is astronomical and all of the Big Energy companies in the galaxy are desperate to steal or destroy it before it puts them out of business.

The opening scene begins with disabling laser fire from the pirate ship towards their prey. But they are not the only ones after this juicy target. The Galactic Space Police is also present in a large number of one and two man patrol cruisers. But they aren't escorting the energy source, they're attacking it. It seems the GSP has been bought off by Big Energy after all.

Seven of the small patrol craft break off to intercept the pirates. They're targeted laser fire disables the engines and the craft move in, attach to the ship and begin to board. The pirates will make perfect scapegoats for the destruction of the energy source.

On board the pirate ship, Dr. Bob the ship's physician and sometimes mechanic rushes to the engine room to try and bring the engines on line. He is accompanied by a second younger pirate known to the crew only as "Bob's Helper". Bob's Helper doesn't say much but fortunately for the pirates he's a genius mechanic because isn't all that good with a wrench.

In moments Bob's Helper has diagnosed the problem and knows just how to fix it. But he decides not to tell Bob and make Bob figure it out himself, since Bob will just claim credit for it anyway. After some struggle Bob does manage to bring the engines back on-line. Sure enough he rubs it in saying "Stick with me, son, and soon you'll make a half decent assistant. But not yet, no not yet. Now you're just one step away from useless. Hand me that spanner".

As the engine kicks on and brings the ship to hyper acceleration, the police cruisers docked to the hull are all ripped off and destroyed. But unknown to the pirates, 4 of the police officers have managed to board the ship.

The demo ended with the misfit pirates back in pursuit of their prey.

### **Featured Effect, Narrating Complications:**

One of the things new players have to get accustomed to in Universalis is that the Complication roll is not a skill test or a success or failure check. It determines which players get to say how much and in what order about how the situation resolves. The players are constrained to act generally in favor of the side that won or to the detriment of the side that lost but there is no absolute rule regarding failure or success. The players in this demo had no trouble with this concept.

Repairing the engines was the only Complication in the story. All of the laser fire and the police boarding was handled strictly through narration. The Complication was initially between Dr. Bob and the broken engine (backed by the ship's Faulty Trait and dice purchased for laser fire damage). One of the other players invented Bob's Helper. With a little Negotiation it was agreed that "Bob's Helper" was not a Role Trait but actually the characters formal name.

The player rolling for Bob's Helper on behalf of the pirates fixing the engine rolled more dice and got more successes than Bob's player. In fact, without Bob's Helper the Complication would have been won by the broken engine.

Armed with far more free Coins than Bob's player had Bob's Helper set about narrating many things. We learn more about Bob's Helper and his relationship to Bob as illustrated by the narration of their interaction during the Complication. We learn more about the ship and the pirates and how the engines work. All things that would be considered reasonably related to the task at hand.

But none of which actually involves succeeding at the Complication. In fact, while the player of Bob's Helper narrates that he does know exactly how to fix the engine, he specifically pays Coins for the Fact that he *doesn't* fix it, nor does he tell Bob how.

The big winner of the Complication, spending all of his Coins without ever actually narrating a resolution to the Complication, leaving the resolution wide open for others to narrate. Beautiful.



## Shrek III

### GenCon 2004 Demo

This demo began with only 4 simple Tenets. The story was to be a sequel to Shrek II. It was to involve Shrek and Fiona's children. There would be a talking crow who got the children in trouble and Shrek and Fiona would be dead. Yes dead. 2 minutes into play and we'd already killed off two animated screen icons beloved by children everywhere.

The first scene opens in the swamp with two ogre children, Brian and Jenny, weeping in front of the gravestones of their parents. Its been exactly 1 year since Shrek and Fiona were betrayed and killed by the dastardly Puss-in-Boots. They've been living with Donkey and his half donkey - half dragon children Benny and June. Donkey and Dragon have gotten divorced although the kids still fly off to see their mother every other weekend and on holidays.

A large black crow named Crackle has become a playmate to the four children. He's something of a trouble maker but the kids trust him as the only adult they know other than Donkey. He swoops in and tells the children not to cry. There may be a chance to get their parents back. He just overheard his old pal Bubo the Owl say something that makes him think they still might be alive. Crackle suggests they go and ask the wicked witch who lives in the Gingerbread House in the middle of the haunted woods. She may be able to look in her crystal ball and help out. Apparently that whole Hansel and Grettle thing was just a big misunderstanding.

In the next scene we see Brian and Jenny riding on their flying donkey playmates Benny and June swoop down into a clearing in the haunted woods, right next to the Gingerbread House. Flying donkeys are awfully convenient.

Bubo the owl is sitting on the roof and challenges the visitors with a "whoooo goes there". When he sees Crackle he calls him various nasty names. Here we have to pause play for a Challenge where we reassert that this is to be a PG movie and replay that part. Crackle swoops down with his claws outstretched. Apparently they aren't such good pals after all. Bubo beats the air with his massive wings, causing a gust of wind that blows Crackle backwards, but not before he snags a key that hangs from a chain around Bubo's neck.

A grandmotherly lady come from the cottage and calms the birds down. Inside the cottage Brian and Jenny are treated to a bowl of hot porridge while Benny and June wait outside. Bubo, being a psychic owl, has already informed the witch of why the children are there. Here, movie goers would be treated to a montage of images from the first two Shrek movies as the witch summarizes their events. She then informs them that Puss-in-Boots was indeed convicted of the crime of killing Shrek and Fiona and was banished to Never Never Land. She's not sure, however, that he actually did it, nor that the parents were actually killed. Their bodies were never found.

Brian and Jenny resolve to find Puss-in-Boots and try to learn the truth. When they ask the witch how to get to Never Never Land she replies "second star on the right and straight on till morning, of course".

Our next scene involves the four children arriving in Never Never Land. I told you flying donkeys are awfully convenient. Below them is the Hollow Tree where the Lost Boys live. They see Puss is chained up dangling from the tree while Peter Pan and the Lost Boys have him on trial. Puss has been caught stealing food and now Pan is going to pronounce sentence.

Smee is there representing Hook and the Pirates. He is asking Pan to turn the cat over to them. They will feed him to the crocodile and while the croc is distracted finally be able to escape from it for awhile.

Brian and Jenny swoop down proclaiming that they need Puss to tell them about their parents. The Lost Boys aren't all that interested in parents and Pan gravely informs them that they're in the wrong fairy tale. While Jenny keeps Pan distracted, Brian and June fly over to Puss, but they can't release him until Crackle remembers the key he stole from Bubo which unlocks the chains. Puss promises them that he can lead them to their parents.

At that moment the pirates show up in their flying pirate ship. Hook is determined to get Puss by fair means or foul and a great battle between the pirates and the Lost Boys ensue. The pirate ship fires its cannon at the Hollow Tree, but Benny and June (being half dragon) fly around and use their flame breath to melt the cannon balls before they hit.

While Peter and Hook are dueling on the deck of the ship, Tinker Bell sneaks below. The pirate ship can fly because Hook has imprisoned a large number of fairies in great glass lanterns and their trapped magic is what keeps the ship floating. Tinker Bell releases the fairies and causes the ship to crash.

Most of the pirates were trapped under the wreckage of the ship, but Hook was thrown clear.

In the confusion Brian and Jenny escape with Puss on the backs of Benny and June flying up towards the star that will lead them home.

But Smee isn't done. He manages to capture Tinker Bell in a sack, and using her trapped magic to fly, he flies after the children.

Hook sees his cat, the key to being free at last from the crocodile, escaping and begins to think many evil nasty thoughts. Everyone knows that Peter Pan can fly by thinking happy thoughts. We now discover that thinking evil nasty thoughts makes Hook happy. He begins to fly and chases after Smee.

The crocodile has been lurking in the water nearby. He has been enchanted to follow Hook where ever he goes. Since Hook is now flying up towards the stars, the Croc follows after him.

In the chase Brian gets confused and picks the wrong star. The ogre children riding on flying donkeys arrive in the sky above modern day New York. They are followed by Smee with Tinkerbell, Captain Hook thinking evil happy thoughts, and the ticking Crocodile.

We figure this would make a good pilot movie for a TV series on the Disney Channel. Each week, the children would crash through a different fairy tale until ultimately discovering what happened to Shrek and Fiona.

#### **Featured Effect, Universalis and New Role Players:**

This demo was run for a girl who was helping her parents out at a nearby booth and who'd come over to see what was going on at ours. She hadn't really done any role-playing and at first was a little hesitant about how to start. This isn't all that unusual in Universalis where the ability to "create anything" can be somewhat intimidating.

The routine I'd hit upon for running demos at GenCon was to introduce the mindset required for playing the game as imagining that all of the players are screen writers in Hollywood brainstorming up a script for a new movie or TV pilot. This proved effective overall at getting past the traditional GM and Player Characters division of most role-playing games. It also proved effective at getting non role-players to grasp the point of play quickly. Much more so than the typical "its like playing cops and robbers or cowboys and indians" text we often see.

In this case in particular it was a particularly effective approach. The player hit on a movie she liked, in this case Shrek, and we were off to the races. After the first couple of rounds around the table she had picked up the basic mechanics and was fully into the game throwing out ideas and plot twists with the best of us. She also quickly got the hang of the Challenge mechanics refusing to back down on the idea that Shrek and Fiona were dead or that Puss in Boots had killed them and skillfully getting other players to add their Coins to hers to defend it.

Its tempting to think that role-playing requires a higher than usual level of creativity and that non role-players don't role-play because they're not creative enough. But really, role-players hardly have a monopoly on interactive creativity. We just have an unusual way of applying structure and game rules to it. Often its that structure and those game rules that keep non role-players away from role-playing. That and the often unusual cultish culture that surrounds our hobby.

I've found Universalis to be especially appealing to non role-players because the structure of play is much more in line with what they consider a normal game structure; as opposed to the rather byzantine and somewhat opaque structure that has grown up around traditional RPGs.



# Guadalupe the Pirate

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Guadalupe Smith is a pirate. He is looking for the Skeleton of Cadavra. He is looking for the Skeleton of Cadavra because Cadavra killed his father. He'd be looking for Cadavra himself, but Cadavra is dead, so Guadalupe Smith has to settle for Cadavra's skeleton.

Captain Blind is also looking for the Skeleton of Cadavra. He is called Captain Blind because he is blind. We know he is blind because he has a pirate eye patch on both eyes. Captain Blind has a seeing eye dog named Dead Dog. The seeing eye dog is named Dead Dog, because it is dead. Captain Blind doesn't know his dog is dead because he's blind and can't see; and because he's really really drunk. Captain Blind has forgotten his dog's real name, but everyone else keeps saying its a dead dog, so now Captain Blind calls it Dead Dog too..

Captain Blind has a map to the Skeleton of Cadavra. He can't read this map because he's blind. He also can't read this map because its tattooed on his ass. It was tattooed on his ass in a special code that can only be read by a cross eyed donkey. Captain Blind was really really *really* drunk that day. Captain Blind would like to call up his friend Guadalupe Smith because Guadalupe owns a cross eyed donkey. Maybe Guadalupe Smith's cross eyed donkey can read the map tattooed on his ass, because he's a cross eyed donkey and the map can only be read by cross eyed donkeys. Plus its hard to see because its on his ass. But that's ok because he can't see it anyway being blind. But he can't reach his friend Guadalupe Smith because his cell phone is broken. So he'll have to sail over to Guadalupe's island.

Guadalupe is alone in his hut by the ocean on a tiny island. Guadalupe has been living alone on this island ever since he lost his marbles many years ago. Guadalupe owns a cross eyed donkey. He is trying to call up his old friend Captain Blind so he can have his ass read his ass, but he can't get through because Captain Blind's cell phone is broken.

Guadalupe sees Captain Blind sailing his boat over to his island. Captain Blind tries to dock the boat, but he doesn't do a very good job because he's blind; and because he's really drunk. The boat crashes on a reef. Captain Blind wades to shore pulling his dead dog Dead Dog on a leash behind him.

Captain Blind has a new pet parrot. Captain's Blind's new pet parrot is named New Pet Parrot because that's what people call him. Captain Blind's new pet parrot likes to crap on people's heads. Captain Blind's new pet parrot, New Pet Parrot tries to crap on Guadalupe's head. Guadalupe runs around and around but its no use. New Pet Parrot craps on his head.

Guadalupe sticks his head in the sand to wash off the parrot crap. It would probably be easier for Guadalupe to wash off the parrot crap in the ocean, but Guadalupe lost his marbles many years ago and now only washes using sand.

Fortunately when Guadalupe sticks his head under the sand, he spies his lost marbles. After all these years Guadalupe has his marbles back. *Thanks* New Pet Parrot.

Nearby the cross eyed donkey starts laughing.

### **Featured Effect, the Bizarre:**

This demo wins the prize for single most bizarre game ever played in by me. It resembled listening to a bunch of really drunk people trying to tell a story, structured like reading a Dick and Jane book.

It made no sense, it didn't need to make any sense. Its was just bizarre, almost surreal.

Universalis games sometimes get silly. Often this is because players are nervous at the amount of power they have over the story. They're anxious that they might screw the story up so their first inclination is often to retreat into silly humor. Its ok if your friends laugh at you when you're doing silly humor. Its not okay if they laugh at you when you're trying to be seriously dramatic. So being silly is much safer. Usually this wears off after a couple of games and a little bit of practice. The players realize they aren't going to screw anything up and can actually tell a good story themselves.

Other times the game gets silly simply because its *time* to be a little silly. Maybe its late, everyone is tired, but no one wants to break up the session just yet. Maybe everyone just has a case of the giggles.. Whatever the reason, Universalis is a fine game to play when you're just in the mood for something ridiculous. You're not "ruining" a GM's carefully planned scenario by being silly. There is no prep time being squandered. Just pick up some Coins and let the free association start flowing.

It won't be high drama, but it can be strangely cathartic.

# Zombies in Vegas

## GenCon 2004 Demo

Games of Universalis will often wind up dragging in a fair number of cross genre elements. We've seen zombie westerns, zombies in space, even zombie ninjas (yes, ninja with an "s", its somehow more appropriate that way). This group wasn't messing around. The very first Tenet out of the gate was one word, "Zombies".

The Tenet phase informed us that this game would involve zombies, Las Vegas, a brothel, an ancient curse on the city, a bus load of convicts, and of course...the King.

The first scene begins on a dark highway. The convicts have just taken control of the bus when they stop to pick up a lone hitch hiker in a white sequined jump suit. Its the King. He needs a ride. He suggests stopping off at a great place he knows on the way where the girls are all clean and *real* friendly.

When the bus arrives at the brothel they see a big sign that says "No Elvises allowed". The convicts demand to know why, they're all down with the King.

The madam explains about an ancient curse that lays on the city. Many centuries ago an evil tribal shaman put a curse on a kingdom that used to be located here so that the people's king would turn into a zombie. The curse had laid dormant ever since that ancient kingdom collapsed. But now it has become active and is once again turning the people's king into zombies. There's since been a rash of undead Elvis impersonators plaguing Vegas.

Jack Quick the New York Pimp don't wanna mess with no zombies. He's all for getting back on the bus, leaving off Elvis right here and high tailing it out of the state in a hurry. But the rest of the convicts overrule him. After all, the girls are clean and friendly and Elvis offered to pay for everyone, he really *is* the King.

As the convicts all make their way into the brothel, we see one lone convict still on the bus. Carl the Cannibal locked in a cage. Even his fellow convicts weren't about to let *him* out. Carl coughs up a paper clip, opens the door to his cage and makes his way alone down the dark highway.

Inside the brothel the girls really *are* clean and friendly and soon the convicts have all dispersed to private rooms. Jack the Quick is being hit on by a girl named Cinnamon. But Jack is totally smitten. Its not just about a "Quick" roll any more. This is the girl he's always dreamed of. So while the rest of the convicts are off getting busy, Jack is talking too much, and Cinnamon is getting bored.

Suddenly, Jack sees Elvis down the hall. He is leaving one of the girl's rooms. He is covered in gore and shambling slightly as he crosses the hall and enters another room.

Now we discover that the Elvis hitch hiker really was hit by the curse. It also happens that in the close quarters of the bus ride, all of the other convicts were infected too, and they're all starting to turn into zombies.

The hookers are ready for them. This has happened before and they all have guns and weapons nearby.

Jack screams like a girl.

When Zombie Elvis enters the room across the hall he catches a shot gun blast to the head from the girl inside. The convict in bed with her promptly chews her throat out. There's a huge gun fight. Bullets fly everywhere. The brothel is all shot to hell. Jack screams like a girl.

Cinnamon draws a big ass pistol from her purse and begins blasting away. Blood and gore fly everywhere. Jack screams like a girl.

Jack grabs Cinnamon and knocks the gun away. He's turning into a Zombie too. He gnaws Cinnamon's leg off at the thigh. Cinnamon is loosing buckets of blood but manages to get to her gun and blow Jack's head off.

Jack dies screaming like a girl.

Finally the last of the zombie convicts are put down.

Alone in the night Carl the Cannibal is walking down the dark highway. He starts to shamble.

The end.

### Featured Effect, Big Complications:

Of course the big fight at the end was one giant complication. The major Components were Zombie Elvis, the Zombie Convicts as a single group Component, Cinnamon the bad ass hooker, and the brothel prostitutes as a single group Component.

Interestingly one player wound up in control of Cinnamon and the Convicts while another wound up in Control of Elvis and the prostitutes. We decided to use a the alternative dice pool method that lets each player keep and roll their own Dice Pool. Thus we wound up with the above 4 main pools plus each of the other players had a small pool of their own.

In the end, the Prostitutes won. Interestingly, the same player who was spending Coins for Cinnamon would later be also spending Coin for the Convicts; and the same player who was spending Coins for the Prostitutes would also be spending Coins for Zombie Elvis.

It appeared like a hugely confusing tangle at first, but by carefully keeping each pool separate, remembering which Components went into which pool, and then narrating each pool one at a time in the proper order, the whole Complication got narrated out quite nicely.