

our frustration

a game by tim denee

birth

"Every evening I died, and every evening, I was born"
- *Fight Club*, by Chuck Palahniuk

This is a game about fucking the system. About the underdogs. About fighting back. It is a role-playing game. It needs one person to be The Man and one or more people to play a character each.

The Man, for the most part, controls and plays all the non-player characters. You need some paper, some pens, and at least two six-sided dice. Preferably two dice per player, but you can get by with less.

character

"So we steal, so what, so far, so good / We're Robin Hoods, for the good of the losers / The boozers, the ugly, the crazy / The drunks and the punks / The perverts, the lazy... / The trouble here is that trouble never happens / There's bubbles to burst, so making trouble's a first / Rhythm and rhyme, partners in crime / Going for the prime time - I'm gonna get mine." - Pop Will Eat Itself

There have always been the ones who wouldn't sit down, who fought. The punks and the rebels.

They are the movers of history, the shakers of the world. And you are one of them.

Write down the following for your character:

Face: the spirit, the heart of who your character is. Your character's face can be as abstract as you like. A character's face is accompanied by one or more 'marks'; the concrete manifestations of the abstract concept.

examples - scar tissue (marks: dead eyes, twisted psyche, cigarette burns); Jesus Christ (marks: long brown hair, wears old bath robes); mongrel dog (marks: intimidating stare, small but tough, menacing growl).

Skin: a quick description. Can describe manner, appearance, background; whatever you think is appropriate.

example - *Frank wears a tough, grubby pairs of jeans, a battered old leather jacket, and black boots. He's uneducated and speaks like it. He moved out of home when he was 15 and is currently living in a damp, cramped one-room apartment. He's stubborn, stupid, and angry, but he's also fiercely loyal.*

Rage: the anger inside you.

Survival: your sense of self-preservation.

Soul: how much you think about things, how willing you are to change.

Rage, Survival, and Soul range from 0 to 3. Divide six points between them.

Remember though - they are not relative; having a rage of 2 and a soul of 3 means nothing concrete. You are still a fighter and you are still a thinker.

Rather, these values show how much narrative emphasis you want to place on that part of your character's story. "*Self improvement is masturbation. Now self destruction...*"

Family: the people you love most in the world; your real family, not necessarily biological. Write down those people close to your character, and assign them a value between 0 and 3. Again, this is the narrative emphasis you want to place on those family members, not how much you love them.

You should probably take zero to three family members, but more is fine.

example - *Jack (2): he's the closest thing I have to an older brother. He taught me to hate.*

Hell: this is your character's future. It is where they are headed if they don't change.

example - *the lifeless existence of a factory worker. A wife I don't love, children I hate. I work nine-to-five Monday-to-Friday every week for thirty years. I go to the same place for my two weeks annual holiday, every year. I get made redundant when I'm 41 and commit suicide.*

Snap: something has recently happened to your character to snap them out of their mundane, oppressed existence. Not just something that breaks the character out, but that keeps them out. Something that **forces** action.

example - *I burn down my apartment and everything in it with gasoline.*



Steam Gauge: you have a steam gauge. It is a measure of your frustration and anger. It runs from 0 - 6, and starts at 0. Draw a little gauge on your character sheet like the one pictured and keep track of current steam with a pebble.

resolution

"Politics walks on all fours / And the scores on the doors are the cause of the wars / 'Cos this pen-pushing bill-passing bullshit still proves lethal / Communication is only possible between equals" - AOS3

A scene where the characters are proactive, making some sort of statement, is a *rage* scene.

example - throwing a brick through a butcher's window.

A scene where the characters are reacting, trying to protect themselves or someone else, is a *survival* scene.

example - escaping safely, avoiding police or discovery.

A scene where the characters are doing some contemplation or growth is a *soul* scene.

example - collapsing when you realize that your anger is still there.

Before starting a new scene, decide what sort of scene it will be.

If it is a rage scene, the players have to decide how they want to rage. They then declare their intentions. The Man then declares the scene opener, cutting to the conflict.

If it is a survival scene, The Man sets up the conflict. The players then declare their intentions.

If it is a soul scene, the player(s) involved do all the work. Soul scenes should be pretty minimalist, so not much planning is needed.

For the most part, the game is run on what you might call a system of *drama*. The players declare their intentions, The Man weighs things up, and declares outcomes.

However, the players do have power.

At the start of the scene, the players all roll two six-sided dice and take the lowest. Add the relative trait. This is the number of *rights* you get for that scene.

Rights let *you*, the player, decide outcomes. They are your weapon.

When something happens, you may say before hand that you are spending a right, and you then get to narrate the outcome. When The Man declares an outcome, you can spend a right to change the outcome.

You may want to represent rights with little beads or poker chips or stones or something.

An important note: if you roll a double on the dice, you get that many rights, (do not add the value). But whereas you have complete freedom with normal rolls, on a double roll things have to get screwed.

example - While the other characters are inside planting the explosives, Capital S is watching the street for cops. At the start of the scene, his player rolled double threes. He has two of these 'bad rights' remaining, so he uses them up now: "A few police

cars pull up in front of me. One of the pigs gets out and tosses me a brown envelope. I look inside and nod. [the cops have some sort of deal with Capital S - first right]. I let the cops in quietly, then disappear down a back alley [Capital S sneaks away - second right].

A scene cannot end until all bad rights are used up, so don't go hoarding them. This *does not* mean a scene *must* end when all the bad right are used up. The Man is the one who declares when a scene is over; when everything's wrapped up, the conflict's over.

'No': This is a mechanic purely for The Man. Any time a player uses a right, The Man can say 'no' (perhaps with a smug, patronizing, "let's-all-be-friends" smile). This means the character's right is disregarded. The right is still spent, but it doesn't have any effect. The Man can do this whenever he wants, as many times as he wants. However, every time The Man says 'no', the player rolls a die. If they roll a five or six, their steam-gauge goes up by one. Once it gets to six, The Man can't say 'no' to that player for the rest of the game.

growth

"automatons with business suits clinging black boxes / sequestering the blueprints of daily life / contented, free of care, they rejoice in morning ritual / as they file like drone ant colonies to their office in the sky / I don't ask questions, don't promote demonstrations / don't look for new consensus, don't stray from constitution / if I pierce the complexity I won't find salvation / just the bald and overt truth of the evil and deception" - Bad Religion

soul

Each character player only gets to roll their soul once per game.

The Man cannot interfere in soul scenes.

A soul scene can only take place after a rage or survival scene (but does not have to).

You may use family members to have additional soul scenes. The scene must include both your character and the family member. You use that family member's value as your soul value for that scene. You can use each family member once (but that family member can be in other scenes; it just doesn't give you facts).

The players decide when a soul scene is over.

hell

Keep track of how many rights you get during your soul/family scene(s) for the entire session.

Every five family/soul rights gives you a hell-shift. A hell-shift allows you to rewrite one thing after the session about your hell. Your hell should change slowly, fact by fact, never making huge jumps in quality. It will probably never be perfect.

example - part of Emily's hell involves dying in a low-grade retirement home at the age of 72. She has a soul scene at her brother's funeral, and gets five rights. This gives her one hell-shift. She changes her hell to 'shot by police during a riot at the age of 29'.

rage

Keep track of the number of rights you use in a rage scene. For every five rage rights, you get to decide one Consequence. Unlike hell-shifts, this is **per scene**. So, if you get less than five rights in a rage scene, there is no consequence.

The Man does not get to decide consequences.

A consequence, as you might've guessed, is the effect of what you just did in that rage scene. It should be something reasonably concrete; someone dies, a shop closes down, and so on. It can be related to your action in a very loose, abstract way, (if you want).

example - William was part of a rage scene where he attacked a local politician with a baseball bat. He got six rage rights, and decides the consequence of "the politician becomes paranoid; hiring body-guards, buying reinforced steel doors, the whole works. He ends up living even less of a life than he was before"

survival

The Man gets one Reaction for every consequence (keep track of this on a piece of paper). During a survival scene, The Man can use any number of reaction points (so survival scenes can only come after rage scenes; yes, this means that the first scene of every game has to be a rage scene).

At the start of the scene, The Man states what Bad Thing is going to happen to the player characters or the player characters' world for each reaction point.

During the scene, the character can only survive or lessen the Bad Things; no matter what they do, they aren't allowed to negate them. In fact, if you roll doubles you may make the reaction *worse*.

example - The Man has one reaction: "the police are going to arrest you". During the scene, the characters almost escape, but do get caught. However, during the process they manage to hit one pig in the head with a brick, step hard on the foot of another, and spit in a third's face.

end

At the start of each session feel free to jiggle the numbers around. Perhaps you want to place more emphasis of your rage this session, or you want to focus more on your relationship with your father.

"but...": at the end of each session, take a little break. After this, The Man sums up your achievements for that session. Then he adds "but..." to the end; he shows how, while you have won some battles, in reality you had little impact, (especially in relation to your losses).

example - you destroyed a limo, smashed all the windows at city hall, and cut the power to a large portion of suburbia for several days. But the limo gets replaced. The windows get fixed. The power gets put back on. After a month, everyone forgets it ever happened. It's like you never did anything. Not only that, but you spend two years in prison for these crimes.

"fuck that": if one of the players can't stand the "but", they can say "fuck that" to The Man. Now, each of the other players writes either 'stand up' or 'stay down' in secret on a piece of paper and gives it to The Man. The Man reads them.

- If even just one player stays down, the "fuck that" is ignored. Not only that, but all the players who stood up, as well as the player who said "fuck that", get 'off screen' reactions. Each of the 'guilty' characters has one bad thing happen to them. This is up to The Man to decide. In effect, The Man makes their hell a little worse.
- If all the players stand up, the 'but' is ignored. The player who originally said 'fuck that' gets to decide the conclusion. However, The Man still gets to add one last little 'but' to your new conclusion...

*example 1 - one of the players says "fuck that", and all the other players stand up. They change the conclusion to "the man who owned the limo is genuinely **frightened** by what happened. When they fix the windows at city hall, they put in bars. And the suburbanites lose a little more faith in the system..."*

example 2 - one of the players says "fuck that", and only one player of the other three stands up. The original "but..." stays as it was. The Man adds that the character of the player who said "fuck that" develops lung cancer when he's thirty, and dies bid-ridden two years later. The character of the only player who stood up is arrested for conspiracy at the age of 31 and spends eight years in prison.

frames

"Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis"
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Before play even begins, you're going to come up with a *frame*. A context for the game, a tool to make sure everyone playing is on the same page.

It doesn't matter who does this; The Man, a character player, all of you. Just so long as you all agree and understand what the game is.

The following are what the frame is made up of.

title: a name for your game. There's a lot in a name, so don't rush this; perhaps leave it until the end. Feel free to rip your title from a book, song, or movie.

think: the inspiration for the game. Books, movies, songs; whatever helps evoke the feeling of what this game is.

setting: um, what the setting is. What the world is like, when the world is like. General stuff.

oppression: what force(s) will be oppressing the player characters? What is the source of the character's anger? What are you fucked off *with*?

character: what part of society to the player character's come from? What sort of

people should they be? What sort of ideals should they have?

hell: what sort of hells the player characters should have, perhaps with some examples. Should they be focussed or can they be general? Is it a problem to stray from what you've suggested?

Keep the frame sharp and snappy. People have short attention spans.

theory

"And we could spend our whole lives waiting for the thunderbolt to come / We could spend our whole lives waiting for some justice to be done / Unless we make our own..." - New Model Army

Here are some example frames, just to give you an idea of how they work. I highly recommend, however, writing your own frame.

title: hotwire

think: cyberpunk, the works of William Gibson, Bladerunner.

setting: a huge city at some point in the near(ish) future. A crap-heap of drugs, corruption, technology, hackers, criminals, and general filth.

oppression: the mega-corporations, and the conformity they impose. The thoroughly corrupt government, (and the brutal police force). The back-stabbing criminals.

character: people who are sick of either going with the flow of oppression or of feeding off it. Individuals, or people who want to be individuals. Perhaps street-level, (punks and hackers, for example), perhaps higher up, (e.g. executives and middle class 'no-hopers').

hell: a life of drudgery and conformity. Being oppressed, ordered around, pigeon-holed.

title: katanapunk

think: old samurai manga comics; elegant lines, falling blossom petals, sombre characters.

setting: pseudo-historical 19th century Japan. The feudal system has ended, industrialization and modern efficiency is coming.

oppression: technology, lack of humanity, efficiency. The new government, the new way of thinking.

character: samurai, now leaderless, not content to simply survive in this new world. They want the old ways back; honour, tradition, respect.

hell: getting broken by the new ways; becoming undignified, crooked old labourers. Losing the ways of bushido.

title: young blood

think: Fight Club, Rage Against the Machine, shit... anything punk.

setting: a large, nameless modern city, at the street level.

oppression: the bureaucracies of the government. The apathy of society. The capitalist, exploitative corporations. *Consumerism*.

character: young people who aren't going to lie down and take it. Who are going to

fight.

hell: becoming another apathetic, lifeless husk grinding through the wheels of society.

title: darker than blue

think: Black Samson, blaxploitation flicks, Shaft, reggae, soul, funk, ska, dub, Rastafarianism.

setting: the ghetto of a large city in the seventies. Specifically, a single close-knit community centred around one good man's bar.

oppression: the corruption of the youth, of our family. Crack dealers, pimps, organized crime.

character: folks connected to the bar, (perhaps even the owner). You want to protect your community, your family, and your pride.

hell: the community getting over-run, becoming squalid and dangerous. The kids going bad. The bar closing down.