

BLACKBIRD PIE

A GENERIC RULES-LIGHT
ROLE PLAYING GAME
FOR COLLABORATIVE
STORYTELLING

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mucked with by Jamie Fristrom

Your Name Here - Please Make Improvements!

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WHY SHOULD I PLAY THIS INSTEAD OF...?

- Because it's generic: if you can't find a game that fits the setting you want to play, you can fall back on this.
- Because it's simple: most other generic systems have lots of rules.
- Because it's open-source: there are some other simple, free generic systems, but with this one, if you don't like something, you can fix it.
- Because it's (sort of) proven: people just love Lady Blackbird, and this tries not to drift too far from the source mechanics.

What is this game NOT?

- It is not GMless.
- It is not intended to be run for more than several sessions.
- It does not have a lot of tactical or strategic options to master.
- It does not have mechanics tailor-made to your setting. "My mother is the moon and my father is the evening wind" is mechanically equivalent to "I have a motorcycle."
- It is not tragic. The PC's don't die, and will eventually win the day. (Though this would be a lot easier to hack in than the other things.)

BLACKBIRD PIE IS "OPEN SOURCE"

Thanks to John Harper making the original Lady Blackbird Creative Commons, we can make this game truly 'open source' just like a software project. Unlike, say, OGL, where your fixes will likely never make it into the official, canonical branch, you can make improvements to the official version of "Blackbird Pie" easily.

The Blackbird Pie official latest version, the "working branch", is on the Story Games wiki at:

http://www.story-games.com/codex/index.php?title=Blackbird_Pie

This is a document anyone can go in and edit and improve.

Want to bring the keys back from Lady Blackbird? Go in and do it.

Want to tweak rules? Go in and do it.

I dare you! I double-dare you!

Add your name to the author list!

Every now and then, Jamie plans to publish the "stable" version as a PDF like this one:

<https://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0B52cQuwRijG8YjllMzg2N2QtOTdhZS00ZGU3LWFkZWmtZmM1MWYwMGNhNGU4&hl=en>

(If you have any advice for him on how to make it purty, e-mail him at [jdfristrom at gmail dot com](mailto:jdfristrom@gmail.com).)



VERY BASIC RULES

I recommend these super-simple rules for playing over IRC or Skype.

Genre / Setting Generation

The GM and players agree on what the game is going to be about, so the players are not creating their characters in a vacuum.

Character Generation

Writing Character Stories

The players agree on whether they are writing 50 or 100 word character stories. 50 word stories, paradoxically, can take more time and be harder to write, but focus the characters. Then the players write the stories for their own PC's. The stories must include how the PC knows at least one other PC, and at least one goal or agenda for the PC.

Traits

Using the stories for inspiration, each player writes 3 to 7 traits for their character. They should be fairly general. "Spellcaster" is too general; "Can cast magic missile" is too specific; "Elemental Witch" is just right. Traits are usually like classes, professions, cliches or races from other games. All of the other players and the GM have veto power over any trait.

The player then divides their 18 points among the traits - each trait can range from 2 to 6 points.

Play

Rolling the Dice

When you try to overcome an obstacle, you roll dice. If you have a trait that can help you, you roll the trait dice. You may only use one trait.

If you don't have a trait, you may roll one die. (This will almost always mean failure unless you're being helped.)

Roll all the dice you've gathered. Each die that shows 4 or higher is a hit. You need hits equal to the difficulty level assigned by the GM (usually 3) to pass the obstacle.

The GM may adjust difficulty depending on what trait a player brings to bear on a problem. For example, both a "Fairy Princess" and an "Elemental Sorcerer" could cast a "Fire" spell - but with an Elemental Sorcerer, it's what they do, and with a Fairy Princess, it's a sideline, so it's going to be 1 or 2 more difficult for the Fairy Princess. Likewise, both a "Sneaky Rogue" and a "Bloodthirsty Barbarian" could kill a monster - but it's going to be 1 or 2 more difficult for the Rogue.

levels: 2 easy—3 medium—4 tough—5 challenging—6 extreme ... 20 one-in-a-million

If you pass, you achieve your goal.

If you don't pass, the GM is allowed to escalate the situation in some way and/or assign negative conditions to your character such as "Injured" and you might be able to try again. Be warned, any time they roll they are exposing themselves to danger, even if it's a seemingly innocuous roll like "I search for secret doors."

Conditions

When events warrant or especially when you fail a roll, the GM may impose a condition on your character, such as: Injured, Dead, Tired, Lost, Hunted, or Trapped. When you take a condition, write it down and say how it comes about. [Note: The "dead" condition just means "presumed dead" unless you say otherwise.]

A condition constrains what the player should say about their character. It's a cue to tell the GM and players to pay attention to that thing and use it as material for the developing fiction. Gaming is just us saying stuff to each other, right? So you're like, "What do I say now?" and you look down and go, "Oh, I'm drunk. I stagger over to Snargle and say, 'I think I'm gonna be sick'...and throw up out the porthole."

The GM may choose to make a roll more difficult due to your conditions. (The most obvious being things like: Disarmed means killing someone with your "Soldier" trait is going to be more difficult.)

Characters can often make rolls to remove conditions. For example, roll to apply first aid if Injured; roll to navigate if Lost; roll to pick the lock if Trapped. Other conditions simply need the right story event - "I sleep" cures Tired.

Pool Of Dice

Each player starts with a pool of 7 dice.

When rolling dice, add any number of dice from your personal pool of dice.

If you pass, discard all the dice you rolled (including any pool dice you used). Don't worry, you can get your pool dice back.

If you don't pass, you get to keep the pool dice you rolled and add another die to your pool.

The GM may wait until you're comfortable with the other rules before introducing the pool dice. When playing without them, the difficulty of everything goes down by 1.

Players are expected to spend a couple dice on each roll, on average.

After each session, a player's pool of dice returns to 7. (Use 'em or lose 'em.)

Helping

If your character is in a position to help another character, you can give them a die from your pool. Say what your character does to help.

If the roll fails, you get your pool die back. If it succeeds, your die is lost.

Any number of characters can help as long as the other players and GM think it makes sense.

NOT-QUITE-AS BASIC RULES

Tags

Instead of just giving traits a raw number of points, each point can be "tagged."

Tags can be highly specific. "Contortionist", individual spells, "Fencing", etc. Tags would be like skills, spells, powers, edges and feats from other games. All of the other players and GM have veto power over any tag.

Once you're playing with tags, when rolling, a PC gets a free die, a die for the one trait they're using, and then an extra die for any tag of that trait that applies. So it's possible to get one more die than they used to in the tag-less rules. But usually not all of their tags will apply to a given conflict.

If you're playing with tags, the GM will not adjust difficulties based on traits. Someone using their Barbarian or their Rogue trait to kill a monster will face the same difficulty - but the Barbarian will have more tags that help him than the Rogue.

Example Traits And Tags

Flags

Each character gets three flags, which should be inspired by their character story. These represent the character's personality. When they're acting in character, following at least one of their flags, they get to roll an extra die in conflicts.

Part of the charm of Lady Blackbird is the PC's all have flags that point to each other in positive helpful ways. To keep that charm in Blackbird Pie, one of the three flags each PC gets must be a positive relationship to another PC, such as, "Loyal to Cyrus", "Secretly in love with Lady Blackbird", "BFF's with Naomi."

The other flags can be broad personality traits such as "Brave", "Foolhardy", "Womanizer", "Destructive"; they can be positive or negative relationships with PCs or NPCs; they can be goals or ambitions ("seeks the holy grail", "wants a promotion"); they can be beliefs ("dwarves are evil").

Tags and flags sometimes overlap. You might have "Daring" as a flag; you might also have "Daring" as a tag on your "Pilot" trait.

Example Flags

(Wait! Where are my keys and secrets?)

"Reveal" Characters As You Play

Although players have to pick their traits and their positive PC relationship before they begin play, they can make up the rest as they go, even as needed. That way you can get started actually playing sooner, and the players can make sure they pick tags and flags that fit the situation. It won't be long before their character sheet is completely filled out and they'll have to live with their choices.

"I pull out my Smith & Wesson and show off my new marksman training," a player might say, adding both Smith & Wesson and Marksman as tags.

Or, "I open the door and dive out onto the freeway. Did I mention I'm reckless?" adding Reckless as a flag.

EXTRA RULES

Optional Rules / Gimmicks / Mix-Ins

Agree with the other players which, if any, of these optional rules you'll adopt - or invent your own and post them here. For "fluency play" don't use any of these until you're fluent with the rules you're already using.

Methods For Creating Your Settings

Pitch Session, To Make Sure You're All Feeling It

Somebody with an idea for what they want the game to be about pitches it to the other players. The pitch could take the form of a One-Sheet; a microdungeon (<http://blog.microdungeons.com/>); some established fiction with the serial numbers filed off (filing off the serial numbers is essential - never do "Star Trek" or "Vampire" - do "something like Star Trek" or "something like Vampire" - this allows all the players to be creative and feel like they own the setting instead of feeling like they have to know everything about someone else's setting); a game with a cool setting, with the rules thrown away and the serial numbers filed off; or maybe just a sentence or two.

Then everyone else votes simultaneously. "On three: 1, 2, 3." They can vote "Yes" (thumb up) if they love the idea, "Support" (flat hand) if they like the idea and promise to bring their A-game to it, or "No" (thumb down) if they're not feeling it, in which case the idea has been vetoed.

In the case of a "No", the person who vetoed now suggests the next setting/genre idea.

There has to be a majority of "Yes"--in a 4 player game that's 3 people--to make sure that there's enough people who love the idea! Otherwise, someone else suggest something.

Archipelago Lite, To Make Sure Everyone's Ok With It But to Get Started Quick

Go around in a circle. Everyone gets to suggest a setting tenet, like "Victorian", "Has Vampires", "Time Travel", "Noir Mystery" or limits to the setting such as "No Elves". If you don't like a tenet, you can veto it by saying <<Try a Different Way>>, and they have to come up with something else. Keep going around until everyone feels like they're ready to create characters.

To get started even quicker, put limits on the number of vetoes you can use, and/or make people give up their turns when they veto. (This makes the tenet phase more like Universalis than Archipelago.)

Refresh

I typically play without this rule because that's the kind of stingy GM that I am. Instead I just give arbitrary pool dice for role-playing.

You can get some number of dice back -- agree beforehand --, up to your original 7 dice by having a refreshment scene with another character. A refreshment scene is a good time to ask questions (in character) so the other player can show off aspects of his or her PC —“Why did you choose this life?”—“What do you think of the Lady?”—“Why did you take this job?” etc.

Refreshment scenes can be flashbacks, too, technically, but this should be a last resort, and it should follow the rules for a good literary flashback. Something about your current situation reminded you of your past situation; and your past situation has some bearing on your present. (In my play this Lady Blackbird feature was overused - a handful of forced flashbacks at weird times -Jamie)

How many refreshments should a PC be allowed per session? Depends on how many other players (not including GM) and how long the session is. I'm guessing (session length in hrs)*2/(number of players)...rounded.

Character Advancement

Between sessions all the PCs get some points of XP (about 1 point / half hour of play is good), which they can use now or save for later. Buying the nth die in a trait costs n xp: so, buying a new trait at level 2 costs 3 XP; increasing a trait from 2 to 3 dice costs 3 XP; increasing a trait from 3 to 4 dice costs 4 XP; etcetera.

You can use XP to increase a trait at any time, but buying a new trait should happen between sessions (unless you want to use the 'how convenient' optional rule). When a character gains a new trait their player must describe why this character growth has occurred.

At some point, and I'm not sure when, because I've only played one- or two-shots with this, enough character advancement will break the game and make it no longer fun. As you get higher-level, your pool dice will matter less and less, the GM will have to come up with new arbitrarily difficult challenges for you to roll against, and rolling the larger piles of dice could become annoying. Using tags should give it more life, but even then. All I can say is once you feel you've hit that point, retire the characters.

Character Epiphany and Growth: Crossing Out Flags

Whenever you use a flag (or tag, if you're using the flags-merged-into-tags rule), whether it's to add to a die or as a liability, put a tally mark next to it. This is how we measure how important flags are to your character.

A character may suddenly change; experience character growth. For example, a character with the flag "Only cares about money" might decide to save their friend even though there's nothing in it for him. At this point - when they go against the flag - they may choose to cross it out. When they do so, they get to add dice to their pool equal to the number of times they've used that flag.

Later, between sessions, they can choose a new flag, such as "Stands up for her friends."

Flags can also be crossed out if they're goals they've achieved. "Revenge on the archduke."

Once you've crossed out a flag, you can never get it back it again. (And if you choose a new flag that is different from, but sounds suspiciously like an old flag, you will be frowned upon.)

If you cross out one of your positive PC relationships, you must add a new positive PC relationship before next session.

Narration Rights

Without this rule, typically the GM will narrate the results of die rolls, though players narrate how they get the conditions he assigns.

With this rule, who describes what happens after a roll depends on how good the roll was:

- More than 1 below target difficulty: GM narrates failure ("No, and furthermore...")
- 1 below target difficulty: Player narrates failure ("No, but...")
- Exactly target difficulty: GM narrates success ("Yes, but...")
- 1 above target difficulty: Player narrates success ("Yes, and furthermore...")

The GM can introduce this rule without even telling the players he's doing it. ("Great roll! Describe what happened.")

Thus, when they are narrating victory, they get to do a "Yes, and..." narration that puts them in a very favorable or positive position, creates NPCs, even creates facts about the world (if they roll to know something or to find secret doors a la Donjon, for example).

Whereas if the GM narrates victory, it will probably be more of a "Yes, but..." Where he describes blowback or fallout from their actions. He should still grant the player their original intent, and he shouldn't impose any negative conditions, but he can be downright mean otherwise. ("You take out the guard, but a guard in the other room hears the noise and sounds the alarm." "Your shapeshift spell misfires! Instead of turning your ally into a monstrous grizzly bear, you turn one of the enemy goblins into a monstrous grizzly bear!")

Players can still forgo their narration rights, though, of course, in which case the GM should be slightly less mean than he would have been if he had won the narration rights fair and square.

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Example of success without player narration:
Player: I try to tell if the guard is lying.
GM: That'll be difficulty 4 - and if you fail I might tell you he's lying even if he's not, or vice versa.
Player rolls and succeeds with 4 hits.
GM: He's not lying.

Example of success with player narration:
Player: I try to tell if the guard is lying.
GM: That'll be difficulty 4 - and if you fail I might tell you he's lying even if he's not, or vice versa.
Player rolls and succeeds with 5 hits.
GM: Ok, what happened?
Player: He *is* lying. We would really be walking into an ambush - but I get the truth out of him, and know where the other guards are, so we can get the drop on them.
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(Granted, even if the first example, the player could always say, "Wait a minute, wouldn't it be more interesting if he was lying, like maybe there's actually an ambush?" But it's nice to have explicit player narration to encourage their contributions.)

Narration rights can help make disadvantageous-seeming traits and tags work for you; you can use those disadvantageous traits to call for rolls in unusual situations and then use the monologue to control narration.

Example:
 A player with Loner - Barfly, Alcoholic: I roll to go find a bar and get really drunk.
 GM: Well, you're in Prague, and you don't speak the language, so...3. No big if you fail.
 Loner rolls 7 (1+3+3 from the pool, because he wants to win by a +1 margin) dice, makes it with 4.
 Loner: Ok, so I wander the streets until I see a place with a neon martini glass, and then I go inside, and point at the whiskey and show them my money. They set me up and keep them coming - and, as I'm about to pass out, in my drunken state, I suddenly realize something that's been nagging at me subconsciously:
 General Cathcart and the fat lady must be the same person! I stagger out of the bar to find her-slash-him.
 (Player, to be a good sport, adds the 'really drunk' condition to his sheet.)

The same goes for defeat. If the player narrates, they could narrate a mitigated defeat. "The creature knocks me off the balcony, and I'm hurt, but I turn on my antigravity field before I fall." And, if they let the GM narrate, he could do a little something extra beyond giving them their negative condition: "The creature knocks you off the balcony - you fall a few stories and you are "stunned". How are you going to get back up to the fight and help your friend?"

Purchasing Narration Rights

An alternative to the above rule. The GM narrates results by default, but the players are allowed to purchase narration for one of their pool dice. (Or two. With the above rule, your expected cost to narrate success is ~2 dice...)

Player Vs. Player

Unless you're playing with this rule, the GM should simply disallow PvP.

Have the players agree to stakes. "If I win, this happens. If you win, this happens." Then they draw upon traits and tags. Other players are invited to help, for single dice, just as described in Helping. The two challengers then take turns adding dice from their pools until they both stand pat. Then they make an opposed roll - the one with the most hits wins. A tie is a push.

GM narrates the results even if you're playing with Monologues of Victory.

Example:
 Kale has gotten distracted by some purloinable goodies in a storeroom on the Hand of Sorrow, and Lady Blackbird wants him to come with them *now.*
 Lady Blackbird's player: I create a windstorm that pushes Kale out into the hallway.
 Kale's player: No you don't.
 Lady Blackbird's player: Let's roll for it.
 Kale's player: What do I get if I win? How about I hold on, but your windstorm slams the door shut, locking me inside with the goodies?
 Lady Blackbird's player: Ok.
 They roll.
 If Lady Blackbird wins, GM would narrate "Ok, Kale was swept out into the hallway."
 If Kale wins, GM would narrate, "Ok, the wind blows the door closed and the valve spins shut."
 If it's a tie, the GM would narrate, "A strong wind blows, but Kale manages to hold on... the door swings in the breeze but doesn't shut."

Sometimes PvP can be used to resolve questions and make facts about the world. This is weird, but it works, if the GM allows it. It's like two characters are pitting their knowledge against each other; the one who wins gets to be right.

Example:
 The players are wondering if one of the soldiers they've captured is a woman, so they can steal some female uniforms as well as male.
 Cyrus Vance's player (who likes to win): They do employ women in the imperial military. I know, I used to be an imperial soldier.
 Naomi's player (who likes a challenge): That doesn't make sense. They're terribly sexist. That's one of the reasons I hate them so.
 Cyrus and Naomi roll off, both drawing upon their experiences in the empire for dice, and bidding up the pool surprisingly high.
 (Guys, you need those dice to escape!)
 Cyrus wins, so it turns out one of the soldiers they captured was, in fact, a woman.

Negotiating Stakes Before Rolls

When the GM assigns difficulty, they also tell the player what the danger is if they miss the roll. Otherwise, the GM isn't allowed to escalate or assign negative conditions after a roll.

This rule can interfere with your flow, but it also can lead to less pissed-off players, because they know what they're getting into before they roll.

Examples:
 Player: I run away from the lone gunman.
 GM: sounds challenging - you need a 4
 Player fails.
 GM: you get shot.
 Player: WHAT? You didn't say I'd get shot.
 GM: oh, you're right, I'm cheating. Okay, some bullets whiz by you, but after ducking through a couple of alleys you haven't managed to lose him. What now?

 The GM probably meant to do this:

 Player: I run away from the lone gunman.
 GM: That'll be a 4 - but if you fail, you'll probably get shot.
 Player: Oof. Actually, I raise my hands and surrender.

Starting With Higher Level Characters

The characters in Lady Blackbird have a lot more tags than starting Blackbird Pie characters and they have secrets to boot. Start with 30 points if you want to have characters that powerful. (But I like 18 because it's easier to get started quickly and I'm stingy.)

Pool Cap

(From Castle Blackbird) If you want to make the characters a little less free-wheeling and less able to do anything, you can put a cap on how far their pool can grow. 10 dice is a good stop.

Limited Pool Use

(From Castle Blackbird) If you want to make the characters a lot less free-wheeling, only allow them to use pool dice if they have tags that fit the situation. This is a way for characters to apply tags from more than just one trait, but can prevent them from using their pool dice on whatever they want.

Merging Flags/Keys Into Tags

(From Castle Blackbird) This requires the "Limited Pool Use" rule, or a rule that you can use two traits instead of just one. Instead of having your flags be a separate kind of trait, you can include them in your Traits and Tags - and, since you're playing with the Limited Pool Use rule, those flags can still be used for your rolls.

Flags, Traits or Tags as Liabilities

(From Castle Blackbird) If your character chooses a non-optimal or disadvantageous course of action because they have a Trait, Tag, or Flag that suggests that's the kind of thing they would do, you may add a die to your pool. Other players or the GM may point out to you courses of action you might take that would earn you dice because of your Traits, Tags, or Flags.

Retraining

Between sessions, a player can retrain on top of getting their 3 XP. You can sell off 1 die of trait to get the XP back. You can sell a trait down to 1 die (where it is effectively useless) for 3 XP; and then next session sell it off completely and erase it for another 2 XP.

When a character loses a trait their player must describe why this character growth has occurred. Losing a trait doesn't necessarily mean you're not that thing anymore; it just means you can't draw dice for it.

If you play with tags, you are allowed to retrain a trait without removing the tags, as long as the tags still make sense for the new trait.

Examples

Examples:
Celeste has sold off her Pixie trait. She's still a Pixie, but now she can't fly or use pixie dust or other Pixieish things. "I disavow being a Pixie, and have Jinx cut off my wings."
Lady Blackbird: "After all that's happened, I disavow the House Blackbird" (crosses off "Imperial Noble") and am now an "Ex-Imperial Noble" (changes trait - all the other tags, such as dancing, still make sense)
Joe: "Man, I've never gotten to use my safecracking or lockpicking skill. They must have gotten pretty rusty." (Crosses them off.)
"But all the running around we've been doing lately!" (Adds Athletic: sprinting)

More Balanced Character Generation

The basic "Meat" rules greatly incent the players to have 3 high-level traits, particularly if they're not using tags, and double-particularly if they're using retraining (they can sell off one of those high dice for more XP). In my opinion, that's ok, it encourages specialists which are more fun for co-op. But it would be less exploitable if instead of starting the players with 20 dice you started them with 70 xp and they had to buy all their traits using the 'between sessions' formula.

That said, if your players are munchkining these soft rules you may have already lost.

Nobody has playtested this afaik.

Cleave!

(Inspired by 3:16)

For wading through a horde or swarm of really mooky creatures, like rats or slimes - or unleashing automatic weapons fire on a horde of aliens - have the number killed be equal to the number of successes. You'll kill ~2-4 enemies at a shot! For much weaker enemies or much more powerful weapons (tactical nukes?), number killed could be the total of face values of successes: you'll kill ~10-20 enemies at a shot.

To keep the game mechanics intact, still treat it as a difficulty 2 or 3 challenge - not enough successes and the enemies counterattack; enough successes and the overall threat posed by the enemies is reduced.

Fan Mail

Every player, not including the GM, gets 1 die per hour the session's going to be which they don't get to use themselves - they're for giving to other players after particularly good roleplaying, narration, or whatever it is the players value.

It might be worthwhile to have these dice be colored differently for each player so they don't get mixed up with your pool dice.

Fan mail only makes sense in games where there are at least 3 players, not including the GM.

Nobody has playtested this afaik.

Whimsy or Plot Twist Cards

At the start of the session, each player, not including the GM, gets a card with some ideas for directions the story could go, vignettes, or plot twists. They can use it to contribute ideas to the story, inspired by what it says on the card. If what they say benefits the party, they don't get another card that session. If what they say is disadvantageous or neutral to the party, they get a new, replacement card.

The value of this is questionable in a game where players already have so much narrative control. Nobody has playtested this afaik.

A Traitor In Our Midst

Stories with undercover cops (Reservoir Dogs) or people who are really robots (Alien, Battlestar Galactica), etc, are cool. If all the players agree, the GM can randomly choose one to be the secret traitor - someone whose real goals will conflict with the rest of the party (a la The Mountain Witch). But allow for the possibility that there is no traitor - if you draw cards, one of which is marked 'traitor', have there be one more card than players. If you roll a die, roll a 4-sided die for 3-players, etc. That way the players can't be sure there is a traitor; and if there is no traitor, you still get to tell a cool story about how "distrust destroyed the team" or how "they came together despite their distrust."

Nobody has playtested this afaik.

Converting Characters From Other Games

At first I tried to have formulae for Risus and PDQ to convert characters over, but since basic characters are so quick to make in this game it doesn't seem worth the effort.

Make a new character based on the same concept.

For example, with OGL characters, your class(es), race, favorite stats, favorite feats, favorite skills, and favorite gear become traits. Divide 18 points between them as you see fit.

For higher-level characters, give yourself an appropriate amount of XP for how long you played the character in the other game.

Running the Game

Tips, tricks, and advice for the GM

This is how Jamie likes to run BP. You're undoubtedly already a hardcore GM with your own style, so do it your way.

Begin in medias res

Don't start at the tavern with the patron giving a mission. Drop your characters in the middle of enemy territory, or a jail cell, or other untenable situation with a threat ticking down and ask them:

- how did you get here?
- now what are you going to do?

Listen & Ask Questions, Don't Plan

When you're the GM, don't try to plan what will happen. Instead, ask questions—lots and lots and make them pointed toward the things you're interested in. Like, Cyrus gives Naomi an order within earshot of Lady Blackbird, but the Lady's player doesn't register it right away. Naomi goes to follow the order. So I ask Lady Blackbird's player, "How do you react when the Captain orders your bodyguard around? Is that okay with you?" And then, when it's totally not okay, "What do you say to him? What do you say to Naomi?" and a few more like that and everyone is yelling at each other and rolling dice to impose their will.

Keep that going at a steady pace and the game flies along pretty well.

Part of the job of the GM is listening to what the players say, catching it, turning it around and looking at it, and seeing if there's anything else to be done with it.

The GM's jobs: listen and reincorporate, play the NPCs with gusto (note: if a player's character isn't in the current scene, it is perfectly ok to ask that player to play one of the NPCs in that scene), create interesting obstacles, and impose conditions as events warrant (especially when rolls fail - but warn the players of the probable consequences before they roll and allow them to choose not to roll.)

Where Are You Drawing "The Line"?

[[1]] Discuss with the other players where you want the line to be between what the GM gets to own and narrate about and what the players get to own. This can range from:

- Traditional - players own their characters thoughts and actions and some of their backstories (subject to approval by the GM); the GM owns everything else. (Like old school D&D. Not recommended.)
 - GM might ask: "That sounds like a bold plan. What's the first step?"
 - GM might ask: "Do the two of you end up somewhere quiet together? Does something happen between you?"
- Collaborative - anybody can make up narration about anything, subject to the GM's approval. (And perhaps approval by the other players: consider using the <<Try a Different Way>> key phrase from Archipelago to prevent people from introducing story elements that others don't like.) (Like Lady Blackbird)
 - GM might ask: "Does anything break when you do this crazy maneuver?"
 - GM might ask: "The fire probably spreads out of control doesn't it?"

(I found it helped, before play with a group that hadn't done this kind of thing before, to say, "Okay, there's not much source material prepared for this, and the reason that works is because you guys all kind of act like GMs too." That's all I had to say and they immediately started contributing: one of them was all, "So, the guards probably hang the keys to the cells on a keyring on the wall, right?" and I was like, "I'm not sure...what do the rest of you think?" -Jamie)

- Mixed - players can narrate in areas their characters know about. Example, Cyrus is ex-military, so his character knows about the layout of Imperial ships, crew compositions, that kind of thing, and his player is allowed to narrate those sorts of details. (Like Apocalypse World)
 - GM might ask: "Do you know anything about the Crimson Sky rebels? What are they like? Is it normal for them to be this far into the Empire?"

Say Yes, Look For the Obstacles

By default, characters can accomplish anything covered by their traits. They're competent and effective people, in other words. It's no fun to ask for a roll when there's no cool obstacle in the way. Just say yes to the action, listen, and ask questions as usual. But also, be on the look out for the opportunity to create obstacles as the action develops. Because you're asking leading questions and listening closely, they'll be all over the place, so it won't be too hard to spot them.

Obstacles can be people (pirates, goblins, imperials, citizens, nobles), weather, monsters (sky squid, flying eels), situations (fires, falling, being shot at, chases, escapes) or anything else you can imagine.

If a character tries something not covered by their traits, that's an obstacle right there: lack of experience and training. Lots of fun things can go wrong when you don't know what you're doing! Also, players will sometimes try things they're bad at so they can fail and add dice to their pool. It's a fine move for them and it gives you the chance to create more trouble, so everyone wins.

Judging Obstacle Difficulty

It's more important to make a decision quickly than to be accurate. If you accidentally make a monster too hard or too easy to kill but the players are playing, that's more fun than if he's just right but they're waiting for you to look up the difficulty level of other monsters in your notes and make calculations. After all, the players can usually back out (or use pool dice, if you're playing with that rule) if they realize something's too difficult; and if something's too easy, the players probably aren't going to complain.

If you're not playing with the Tags rule you may want to adjust difficulty depending on what trait a player brings to bear on a problem. For example, both a "Fairy Princess" and an "Elemental Sorcerer" could cast a "Fire" spell - but with an Elemental Sorcerer, it's what they do, and with a Fairy Princess, it's a sideline. (I'd say it was Diff 1-2 for the Sorcerer and Diff 2-3 for the Princess.) Likewise, both a "Sneaky Rogue" and a "Bloodthirsty Barbarian" could kill a monster - but it's going to be 1 or 2 more difficult for the Rogue. If you're playing with the Tags rule, you don't have to worry about this - the tags take care of what a trait's specialties really are.

When not playing with the Tags rule you may also find players are applying traits that, in hindsight, were overly general. Examples might be "spellcaster" or "psionic": first they cast a spell that does this, then they cast one that does that, and soon every obstacle looks like a nail to their trait's hammer. My solution: for every couple of new spells or powers they reveal under the penumbra of the trait, the difficulty goes up by 1. So their first "firebolt" and "light" spells might be difficulty 3; then their "teleport" and "circle of protection" might be difficulty 4; then their "cure wounds" and "mind control" spells might be difficulty 5. Again, if you use the Tags rule, you don't have to worry about this.

Conditions

For the GM, the conditions can create opportunities or give permissions. "You're Injured, right? The Void Spiders can smell blood. They swarm right at you, ignoring the others." And sometimes a condition will become an Obstacle in its own right, calling for a roll to deal with it.

Unless the players are cool with it, the GM should avoid imposing emotions on the PC's. A GM could impose something like "Sick From Adrenaline" but then it would be up to the player to interpret that as anger, excitement, lust, whatever.

What happened to 'Angry'?

Respect The Flags, Tags, and Stories; Find The Hard Choices

GM, the players traits and flags are what they care about. Create situations that play to them, because that's what the players want. And try to give the players hard choices (Sorcerer calls them Bangs) - set up situations that put the characters traits and flags into conflict with each other, or the mission, or safety.

Flag And Hard Choice Examples

"Announce Future Badness"

(Inspired by Apocalypse World) GM's have been doing this for decades, but Apocalypse World gave it a name. When the PCs aren't active, don't seem to know what to do next - or even if they do - put a threat on the horizon, or have one of your established threats get more threatening. After several "ticks", have the threat manifest.

"There's smoke billowing out of the forest to the east."

"Your sensors are reading vibrations two clicks away. It could be hostiles approaching."

"Alarms sound in the distance."

"The ship shakes. Sounds like the engines can't take more of this."

At first, you don't even have to know what the actual threat you're foreshadowing is. You (or the players, even, with a successful Spot roll and the Narrative Rights rule) can figure it out later.

Bring The Party Together

This is the opposite of the Apocalypse World move Separate Them. Separating Them has its place, particularly for horror games and when you want some PCs to be challenged solo, but for the most part, "Don't Split The Party" is still the best advice: it keeps everyone engaged in the current scene, and allows players with orthogonal talents to aid each other in interesting ways.

Particularly when a new player arrives in the game, he just happens to be in or come onto the scene, for some reason. Have him make it up if you can't think of anything.

If the party splits, let players who aren't in the scene play NPC's that are

Traditionally, it's the GM's role to play all NPC's. What happens if you let the players do it sometimes? Everyone has more fun, IMO. I've yet to see someone abuse this.

HOW TO DO STUFF YOU LIKE FROM OTHER RPGS WITH THIS BARE BONES SYSTEM

What Happened To Keys And Secrets

For people familiar with TSOY or Lady Blackbird, you're probably wondering how you make keys and secrets: you use traits, tags, or flags. For example, instead of "Key of the Paragon: hit your key when you demonstrate superiority," you could add "Demonstrates Superiority" to your "Imperial Noble" trait or your "Charm" trait. Or you could simply create a "Demonstrates Superiority" flag, which is flexible and can be used alongside any of your traits. You don't get XP for it anymore, but you will sometimes get to roll an extra die, and sometimes get a bonus die.

Some secrets, like "Secret of Stormblood" are already in traits and tags - "Master Sorcerer" and "Stormblood". And other secrets, like "Secret of Destruction: You can break things with your bare hands as if you were swinging a sledgehammer. It's scary." can be made into traits, such as: "Destructive: breaks things, sledgehammer hands, scary."

But the once-per-session rules-breaking secrets are simply gone. (For now...)

Initiative

As a general rule: PC's act, NPC's react. NPC's never make rolls. A PC might say, "I scout ahead." If he succeeds, he sees the threat. If he fails, the threat sees him - they attack. But the threat don't roll; the PC rolls to avoid / withstand. Now the ball is in the PC's court again. But let's give his friend a turn first.

There's no rules for which order the players take turns in. I like to make sure screen time gets spread around - if someone isn't being very active, check their flags, and throw a challenge, threat, or choice their way. If you want to be scientific about it, you could count the number of rolls everyone is making.

Levels of Detail on Conflict Resolution

With this system, it's possible to kill a boss villain, or even destroy a whole army, with one roll. What if you want more granularity?

Is up to the players; they might say, "I kill the boss monster" and find out doing that is difficulty 7. So then they might break it down. "I trip him", "I intimidate him", "I shoot him in the eye", or "I throw sand in his face to blind him" - and these rolls might be at medium difficulty, and then lower the overall difficulty. It's an ad hoc way to "bring down the pain" from TSOY.

Some quick math - lowering the difficulty by 1 is about as good as adding 2 helper dice. So if you make a skill check that lowers the difficulty without using your pool dice, that's a big win - and if investing one pool die gives you a >50% success, that's a good expected value too - unless you're risking some serious negative condition.

Social Combat

Convincing, bluffing, intimidating, and seducing all work the same way combat does - a die roll. And a particularly tough sell, "Convince the king to abdicate", normally difficulty 9, might be whittled down if you convince his advisors first or convince him of smaller points.

Contacts / circles checks

Roll to see if you know someone, and then take narration rights to create that someone.

Resources checks

Roll to see if you can acquire something. Or even: roll to see if you remembered to pack some gear.

Gear

Some gear is assumed: lockpicks, medical bag. Some gear is factual stuff in the narrative. "The general gives Leland the Flux Detector." And some gear can be tags, as in: Soldier: marksman, bolt-action rifle. When you lose your bolt-action rifle, you don't cross it off - rather you take the negative condition "disarmed." When you lose your lockpicks, take the negative condition, "Lost lockpicks" - picking locks is more difficult now. When you lose everything, "Unequipped."

NPC Stat Blocks

Monsterish NPCs are going to have a certain sameness to them - some number of successes to kill. One thing that can make them more interesting is in the conditions they can impose on the PCs when the PCs fail to kill them: poisoned, petrified or paralyzed, blinded, stunned, bleeding... And they might have particular vulnerabilities or resistances. "Difficulty 8 to kill with fire, but difficulty 5 to kill with enchanted iron." Or "Can't kill with physical attacks, only magical."

Tactical Combat With Minis And A Wealth of Strategic

Choices And Options

The short answer is you can't. Play Pathfinder or GURPS or 4e or Savage Worlds or WFRP.

But it's great to sketch maps and use your maps as cues for the action and use the action to decide where people and things are on the map.



EXAMPLES

Example of Setting / Genre Building

Example:
(Edited from a series of e-mails before we actually started playing)
Mark threw out a list of ideas he thought were cool, including:
"Cold War multinational team hunt down WWII experimental monstrosities"
Brett: With Terra's affinity for accents, the multinational team sounds good.
Jamie: Are we thinking we're "tame" WW2 monstrosities ourselves, a la Hellboy?
... the monstrosities are science monstrosities or supernatural monstrosities or both?
Mark: Is this a game of shifting trust and alliances? Or can we count on everyone in the "party" acting as a unified group throughout?
Brett: I like the 'coming together for a common cause with distrust' as opposed to 'Jimmy gets shot by his comrades at the end'. ;)
Jamie: I like the possibility there's a traitor, a la Shadows Over Camelot. That way the "distrust" has teeth. And someone might get to make a hard choice, follow orders from their government or do what's truly best for the world...
Mark: I like that also.
Jamie: I'm thinking these are Nazi experiments both in occult and super-science. We're badassess that have already dealt with a handful of these things - and if anyone wants to play declawed / defanged supernatural or super-science creatures I think that would be cool.
(But you won't have any game-mechanic advantage over the regular humans.)
But I think at least half of us should be human, to keep us grounded.
And we need at least one American and at least one Soviet, or the cold war thing won't really bang.
And there could be a traitor in the group, more loyal to their own government than to the mission.
And somebody pick a good cold-war decade.
Terra: I'd totally be down for the Russian char.

Then in play, we settled on 1961, just before the Cuban Missile Crisis, called our United Nations group UNSUNG, and that was basically our one-sheet. Then I thought about some Hellboy and B.P.R.D. comics I read and decided the kicker would be:
an UNSUNG team was lost in Europe investigating Nazi Occult Stuff. And we were off.

Flag And Hard Choice Examples

Example of respecting the flag:
Carl makes a character who specializes in marine biology.
The GM was going to go with a story about evil ghosts, but he sees Carl's character and decides 'things from the sea' would be better.

Example of a Hard Choice:
Carl's character is also sworn to protect the people.
So the GM makes the 'things from the sea' sympathetic - the only reason they're doing bad things is because they're driven from their underwater home.
Now what does Carl do? Make the creatures extinct or find another way?

Example Characters

Cara Loft

Cara Loft, child of the famous archeologists Emily and Watson Loft, grew to inherit her parents wealthy estate after they mysteriously disappeared. She now follows in their footsteps, raiding ancient ruins and tombs, risking life and limb on precarious foothold or death defying leap, for priceless artifacts, saying she does it for sport. But secretly she hopes that her efforts will help her find her parents. In case that day arrives - and her parents met with some wrongdoing - she has also pursued combat training and can usually be found with two pistols strapped to her sides. She also has a younger sister, Elizabeth, whom she would die to protect.

Basic Version

Tomb Raider: 5
Gymnast: 6
Combat Training: 4
Rich: 3

Advanced Version

Tomb Raider: Archeologist, Swimmer, Versed in Ancient Traps And Tricks, Holds Breath, Knows Ancient Lore, Doctorate
Gymnast: Death Defying Leaps, Rock Climber, Duck And Roll, Exquisite Balance, Hangs On By Her Fingernails, The Judges Give Her 10.0, Perfect Landing
Combat Training: Two Pistols, Strafing Run, Hand To Hand, Fill The Air With Lead
Rich: Fabulous Estate, Transport Arranged, Butler

Flags:
* Seeks parents
* Would die to protect sister
* Tomb raiding is a sport

Phlox Anisoptera (aka Notch)

Phlox is a half-elf, half-pixie child of an elven druid/queen. She's similar in height to a coffee table, and has dragonfly-style wings, ideal for short flights or hovering. (They fold back readily to be hidden under a cloak). Tired of simultaneously not being taken seriously enough, and being groomed for mysterious elven conspiracies, she has run away. Since she is a pretty decent shot and appreciates archery, she hopes to use 'Notch' as her street name.

Basic Version

Nimble as bananas: 7
Archery: 6
Fairy princess: 5

Bash

Some say he was just a guy who grew up in a bad town full of miscarried dreams. Others claim he just rose full-grown from the Earth one day, ready to tear any challenger to pieces. All we know is, he answers to the name "Bash"

Basic Version

Brawler: 5
Sense of Smell: 4
Oh God Why Isn't He Going Down: 6
Mountain of a Man: 3

In play, with most PC's, after they miss an attack roll I would usually immediately give them some kind of 'harmed' condition. With Bash, I let him roll "Oh God Why Isn't He Going Down" against difficulty 3 first.

Private Devon Jones, Callsign "Joker"

A private in the space marines, Jones is the class clown of his unit. He's an expert in demolitions, tends to mouth off to his superiors, and, in a pinch, can fly your asses out of there in a commandeered dropship...

Basic Version

Demolitions: 5
Small Arms: 5
The Guys Love Him: 5
Amateur Pilot: 3

Example Traits And Tags

It's recommended that you come up with your own, but if you want to get a feel for them or don't feel very creative:

- Athletic - Run, Fencing, Rapier, Duels, Shooting, Pistol, Acrobatics

- Bloodhunter - Gather Information, Interrogate, Intimidate, Incognito, Recognize Blood, Reflexes, Authority, Firefights
- Bodyguard - Awareness, Threats, Defend, Disarm, Restrain, Carry, Delay, Security, First Aid
- Burglar - Quiet, Sneak, Hide, Dextrous, Locks, Perceptive, Traps, Darkness, Alarms, Distractions
- Charm - Charisma, Presence, Command, Nobles, Servants, Soldiers
- Crew - Gunnery, Aim, Maintenance, Damage Control, Observation, Signals, The Owl, Cargo, Supplies, First Aid, Boarding Action
- Cunning - Deception, Misdirection, Disguise, Codes, Sneak, Hide
- Dreamblood - Sedate, Manipulate Dream, Enter Dream, Hallucination, Blind Fighting, Read Mind
- Ex-Imperial Soldier - Tactics, Command, Soldiers, Rank, Connections, Maps, Imperial War Ships
- Explorer - Curious, Aware, Nimble, Hardy, Ancient Lore, Languages, Ruins, Monsters, Myths, Maps
- Ex-Slave - Sneak, Hide, Run, Tough, Endure, Scrounge, Nobles, Hatred, Iron Will
- Ghostblood - Fly, Possess, Insubstantial, Control Technology, Electrical, Dominate, Terrify, Sneak, Overload
- Goblin - Warp shape, Glide, Nightvision, Agile, Quick, Tumbler, Teeth & Claws, Mimic Shape, Reckless, Connections
- Imperial Noble - Etiquette, Dance, Educated, History, Science, Wealth, Connections, House Blackbird
- Investigator - Search, Deduction, Perceptive, Seduce, Interrogate, Bribe, Coerce, Contacts, Sneak, Deception, Insight, Logic, Fisticuffs, Pistol
- Elemental Sorcerer - Elemental spells, Channeling Essence, Stormblood, Wind, Lightning, Fly, Blast, Sense
- Mechanic - Repair, Engines, Efficiency, Spare Parts, Sabotage, Enhancements, Ship Weapons
- Miner - Tunnels, Labor, Strong, Pickaxe, Dim Light, Hold Breath, Ores, Resist Cold, Endure
- Petty Magic - Light spell, Dark spell, Jump spell, Shatter Spell, Channeling Essence
- Pilot - Daring, Steady, Maneuvering, Evasion, Tricky flying, Navigation, Maps, Atmospherics, The Owl, Battle, Ramming
- Pit-Fighter - Combat Tested, Brutal, Living Weapon, Fast, Hard, Strong, Bone-breaking, Scary Look
- Solid Reputation - Trustworthy, Reliable, Heroic, Honorable, Compassionate
- Sky Pirate - Vicious, Hack & Slash, Cutlass, Knife, Shooting, Boomstick, Gunner, Boarding Action, Crew, Loot, Capture, Drink, Hardy, Treacherous, Intimidating, Contacts, Underworld
- Sky Sailor - Gunnery, Aim, Maintenance, Observation, Signals, Empire, Pirates, Free Worlds, Haven, Repair, Connections

- Sly - Crafty, Sneaky, Distractions, Bluff, Languages, Trade Speak, Sharp, Disguise
- Smuggler - Haggle, Deception, Sneak, Hide, Camouflage, Forgery, Pilot, Navigation, Repair, Gunnery
- Stoneblood - Harden, Make Heavy, Meld Into Stone, Petrify, Immovable, Mauler, Move Through Stone, Shape Rock, Tough
- Survivor - Tough, Run, Scrounge, Endure, Creepy Stare, Intimidate, Medic
- Tricky - Quick, Dirty Fighting, Tumbler, Escape, Contortionist, Sleight of Hand, Acrobatics, Dagger
- Voidblood - Invisibility, Vacuum, Make Weightless, Pass Through, Erase Mind, Counterspell, Disintegrate
- Warrior - Battle-Hardened, Shooting, Two-Gun Style, Pistol, Fencing, Sword, Brawl, Hail of Lead

Example Obstacles

The most important thing for a GM when judging the difficulty of an obstacles is to do it quickly. It's more important to keep the game flowing than to get the "right" difficulty - because players can usually back out of a plan of action, you won't screw them too badly. And if you make things too easy they won't mind! The GM has absolute authority over these - players, if the GM gives you a difficulty that you feel is too high, tough. I'm sure he has his reasons. All of these obstacles assume you're playing with Dice Pools. If you're not, subtract 1

Perception

- Spot something hidden or hard-to-see: 3

Sometimes a player will say something like "I look for secret doors" where you didn't imagine a secret door would be. Judge the difficulty by how badly you don't want a secret door there:

- Secret door in a wicked dungeon: 3
- Secret door in some dude's house: 4
- Secret door in a forest: 5

Then, if they win but you get to narrate, you can say, "You search thoroughly and are sure there's no secret doors here." And if they win and get to narrate - get ready to have a secret door.

Sneaking / Infiltrating

- Pick a lock: 3 (Escalation: alarm)
- Trick a guard: 3 (Escalation: calls more guards)
- Sneak through a ship or other area that has regular patrols: 4 (Escalation: caught! Or separated.)
- Smash a wooden door open: 4 (Escalation: noise or door gets wedged shut)
- Smash a metal gate open: 6

- Smash a metal gate open quietly: 7

Fighting

The following difficulties are to give your opponent(s) debilitating injuries. A second debilitating injury ought to drop them. You could play it two ways - one would be to require your players to tell you when they're trying for the incapacitate/kill (which players rarely do after decades of being conditioned by D&D) in which case you could raise the difficulty +1, or--easier--let them roll to injure and if they beat it by one give them the kill (or let them narrate the kill).

- Fight a mook : 3 (Escalation: he gets a hit in on you, you drop weapon..., others hear the sounds of fighting and come investigate)
- Fight a soldier : 4 (Escalation: he gets a hit in on you)
- Fight 2 soldiers at once: 5 (Escalation: they get a hit in on you)
- Fight 3-4 soldiers at once: 6
- Fight 5-6 soldiers at once: 7
- Fight a subboss or lieutenant, (elite soldier, grizzly bear, special henchman): 5
- Fight a boss-boss (dragon, demon...): 6
- Retreat/ run away from a group of soldiers: 3

Diplomacy:

- Find an underworld den or other source of information/aid: 3
- Intimidate / show you're not someone to miss with: same as fight-to-harm -1.
- Bargain with people who hate you: 5 (Escalation: they attack) [Add 1 for favorable deal, subtract 1 for unfavorable.]
- Bargain with people who are opposed to you: 4 (Escalation: they attack or take a hostage or make a deal they don't intend to keep)
- Bargain with indifferent people: 3 (Escalation: they take a disliking)
- Bargain with friendly people: 2 (Escalation: they take a disliking)
- Spot devious lies: 4 (Escalation: you're tricked)

Random Stuff:

- Escape from tentacles: 5 (Escalation: crushing, thrown, pulled towards...)
- Dodge blasts of magical fire: 3 (Escalation: fire spreads out of control)
- Endure an attack - (only bother rolling if character has some kind of defensive trait): 3

Ship Battle

- Maneuver for a clear shot: 3. (Escalation: they get the drop on you; they bring more ships; sea or air monsters attracted)
- Maneuver against a smaller, faster ship: 4.

- Maneuver to boarding action: 4.
- Fire on enemy ship (to harm): 3. (Escalations: return fire, guns overheat, explode)
- Fire on a smaller, faster ship (to harm): 4.
- Avoid enemy fire: 3. (Escalations: hit. loss of control. slowed.)
- Avoid a lot of enemy fire: 4-5.

Example Flags

- Bold, Brave, Daring, Heroic, Rescuer, Reckless, Underdog, Craves Battle
- Acts Superior (like Key of the Paragon)
- On A Mission To ____ (like Key of the Mission)
- Incognito (like Key of the Imposter)
- Guardian Of ____ (like Key of the Guardian)
- Seeks Revenge On ____ (like Key of Vengeance)
- Loves To Blow Stuff Up
- Bossy
- Secretly In Love With ____
- Outcast
- Lawful Good, Good, Chaotic Good, etc.
- Compassionate
- Prone To Witty Banter
- Greedy
- Adventurous, Loves Travel
- Tinkerer, Loves Tech
- A Pirate's Life For Me
- Vow To ____
- Family Man, Devoted Husband of ____, Loving Father of ____, Deadbeat Brother ____, Loyal Friend to ____
- Loner, Alcoholic, Addict, Sexist, Racist, Misanthrope
- Fearless, Reckless, Ruthless, Underhanded, Dangerous, Deadly, Cruel, Unpredictable, Trustworthy, Reliable, Heroic, Honorable, Compassionate
- Vicious, Treacherous

DESIGN NOTES

I put this together after Lady Blackbird made me realize that role-playing can actually be what I always thought it was supposed to be. I wanted to try and apply it to other settings see if it would still work. My favorite things about Lady Blackbird, which I tried to keep intact:

- in medias res. (Beginning in the middle.) I've played games where people had keys but didn't begin 'in medias res', and games where people didn't have keys but did begin 'in medias res', and 'in medias res' usually works (but not always - I played one game where the first thing the players did in the face of adversity was turn on each other!) to get the party working together and having fun, whereas 'just keys' have been a crapshoot.
- Mike Holmes's Antipool. Lady Blackbird is not so much a hack of The Pool, which is really a brutal game, where winners win big and losers get stuck. Rather, it's a hack of Antipool, where you are rewarded for losing, which not only balances things out but it builds drama right into the game - each failure, each escalation, each negative condition, gives you a larger and larger die pool with which you're almost guaranteed to eventually win. It's like D. Vincent Baker said - we go into the movie knowing the protagonist is going to win - the only thing we don't know is how much it's going to cost them.
- simplicity. Making the rules bone-simple means we spend more time playing and less time figuring out the rules.
- gravitas. Most rules-light games sell themselves short in the text: they don't consider themselves good for 'serious' roleplaying, but are for being silly or cartoonish. Lady Blackbird shows you can be simple without being silly. (Not that there isn't comedy in Lady Blackbird - comedy is a spice in Blackbird rather than the main course.)
- with setting, less is more. We don't have to memorize reams of setting material, or have arguments about what's canon and what isn't. We get to use our own imaginations and own the setting. Less work, more engagement.
- the keys/flags need to be positive attachments. Players often like to give themselves 'lone wolf' sorts of flags, and even players I've played with a lot and respect greatly like to play antagonistic sons of bitches. They act hostile to each other (and then OOC they might say, "Sorry Joe's such a hard-ass, it's just part of his character") and the party argues and splits. With Lady Blackbird, every character has some key that motivates them to help or work with another character.
- creative commons. The Pool, Risus, or PDQ could have been the starting point for this - they're all games with player-defined traits and GM-assigned obstacle difficulties, but they're not creative commons. Lady Blackbird was.

So why did I have the hubris to mess with perfection, and take the keys out? I discussed it here:

<http://story-games.com/forums/comments.php?DiscussionID=12668>

In short, I think character flags and stories are important - saying "I'm going to play this character this way" before you start playing is important - but having in-game rewards for it, can be clunky and might be unnecessary. The players I've played with will roleplay, as long as the game doesn't actively discourage them. I haven't asked John Harper but I suspect he might agree, because his later games didn't have in-game incentives for roleplaying...