



Standoff

A game about telling ridiculous stories together

Matthew R.F. Balousek

Standoff

A game about telling ridiculous stories together,
by Matthew R.F. Balousek.

Illustrations by Carey Pietsch
Book Design by Joviana Carrillo

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[About This Game](#)

[1. The World](#)

[1.1 Restrictions](#)

[1.2 Seeds](#)

[2. Characters](#)

[2.1 Character Cards](#)

[2.2 Creating Characters](#)

[2.2.1 The Antagonist](#)

[2.2.2 The Protagonist](#)

[2.2.3 Supporting Cast: Allies and Minions](#)

[3. Scenes](#)

[3.1 Beginning a Scene](#)

[3.2 Playing A Scene](#)

[3.3 Ending A Scene](#)

[3.4 Example Scene](#)

[4. Examples](#)

[4.1 Example Seeds](#)

[4.2 Example Characters](#)

[4.3 Example Goals](#)



TAFT'S DAGGER DIPLOMACY

The necromancer shrieks with cruel laughter, plunging the glowing dagger into the warrior's heart. Armor and bone tear like paper before the might of The Cursed Dagger of Ag'tekk. As the blood drains from the wound, Taft gloats, "Fool! All your struggle was for naught. Your soul will be but a tasty morsel for my dark master!"

He starts to pull the dagger out, but finds his wrist stopped cold by Francesca's iron grip. She stares back with an icy glare. Taft stammers, "I—Impossible! I caught you right in the heart!" A glint of light catches the necromancer's eye, and he looks down to see the talisman of protection. "But that means..."

Wresting the dagger from the necromancer's cold hands, Francesca grins. "That's right—I hid all my vital organs in a pocket dimension!" Taking a free hand to dip a finger in what appeared to be blood, she tastes it and chortles. "You wasted the ichor of Ag'tekk on nothing more than a large ketchup packet!"

My sincere appreciation to all the wonderful folks who have playtested and given feedback on this game—without your brains and creativity I'd be nowhere. And thanks to Melanie and Joseph for going on a bizarre adventure with me.

You're all the best.

— mrfb

ABOUT THIS GAME

Standoff is a game where everyone works together to tell a ridiculous story full of twists, ripostes, counter-feints, and triple-double-crosses.

Before playing, you'll need at least two, but ideally four to six players. You'll also need some writing implements, and at least a dozen blank index cards.

The general structure of the game is:

1. SETUP

Everyone works together to establish the world that the story takes place in and some of the characters that inhabit it.

2. PLAY

Everyone tells the story through a series of scenes that are based on improvisation and creative reversals.

1. THE WORLD

OVERVIEW

Everyone sketches out the world that the story will take place in.

Recommended time: 5-10 minutes total.

1. RESTRICTIONS

Story elements that are forbidden.
Add to as needed.

2. SEEDS

Story elements that might be included.
Lock-or-Change.

1.1 RESTRICTIONS

Write Restrictions in the top left of a blank card.

Add Restrictions as needed, unilaterally. If at any time a player isn't happy with an element that has been introduced or they think might be introduced into the story, that player can add that element to the Restrictions card.

Make everyone happy with the story being told. Elements on the Restrictions card should not be introduced into the story by anyone. These can be used to set aside uncomfortable topics, or as a tool to avoid common story elements.

1.2 SEEDS

Write Seeds in the top left of a blank card.

Seeds are story suggestions. A Seed is an element to suggest what might be in the story. This can be anything a player can think of, but is often something like a location, object, character, theme, emotion, or so on.

Lock-or-Change Seeds. The player closest to the Seeds card announces a Seed and passes the card to their left. Then, each player in order chooses to either Lock or Change the most recent Seed. Lock a Seed by writing it down and announcing a new one. Change a Seed by announcing an altered or inverted version of the Seed. Repeat this until everyone has Locked or the card is full.

If anyone can't think of a Seed to contribute, use the Example Seeds table (§4.1).

Here are some examples of what the Restrictions and Seeds cards might look like.

RESTRICTIONS
no zombies no swords no damsels in distress no not offering tea to guests

SEEDS
talking horses an ungallant knight dead presidents magic machines organic heirloom tomatoes

2. CHARACTERS

OVERVIEW

Characters involved in the story.

1. ANTAGONIST

Has a Sinister Goal.
Doomed to
ultimately fail.

2. PROTAGONIST

Embodies a Noble
Value. Destined to
stop Antagonist.

3. MINIONS

Characters
who serve the
Antagonist.

4. ALLIES

Characters loyal to
the Protagonist.

OVERVIEW

Adding characters to the story.

Recommended time: 1-3 minutes per character.

1. NAME

It'll be awkward
otherwise.
Lock-or-Change.

2. SUMMARY

A one-sentence
description.
Lock-or-Change.

3. POWERS

How they change
the world.
Add during scenes.

4. LIMITS

Constraints on
Powers.
Add during conflicts.

2.1 CHARACTER CARDS

Important characters are represented with cards. Although any kind of character can be introduced for any reason, only make cards for the Antagonist, the Protagonist, or the characters loyal to them. Before play starts, you'll make an Antagonist and a Protagonist.

Characters don't belong to anyone. During play, anyone can narrate the actions or speak in the voice of any character.

Inhabit a character to take additional control of them. If someone is holding a character's card, that player is inhabiting that character and has ownership of that character's actions and speech for as long as they hold the card.

Inhabitation is negotiable. Players may take, request, relinquish, or exchange character cards at any time. Be nice. Collaborate. Share.

2.2 CREATING CHARACTERS

Determine a character's basics using Lock-or-Change. Using the same process for writing down Seeds, determine a name and one-sentence summary for the character.

Unilaterally add Powers during scenes. Powers can be something fantastical or mundane, but they're something relatively unique that the character can do. Players can add Powers to characters during scenes or conflicts.

Unilaterally add Limits during conflicts. Limits are caveats on specific Powers. Any player may assign a Limit to a character's Power as part of resolving a conflict.

If anyone can't think of a character detail, use the Example Characters table (§4.2).

2.2.1 THE ANTAGONIST

Write an A at the top-right of a blank card to distinguish this character.

Motivated by a Sinister Goal. In addition to their summary, the Antagonist has a second sentence which summarizes the heinous ends they're trying to achieve.

Unbeatable. The Antagonist is incredibly powerful, and their defeat is inconceivable...

Doomed to fail. ...but the story nevertheless ends with them being defeated. Use Lock-or-Change to determine the antagonist's name, summary, and Sinister Goal.

2.2.2 THE PROTAGONIST

Write a P at the top-right of a blank card to distinguish this character.

Guided by a Noble Value. In addition to their summary, the Protagonist has a second sentence which describes a virtue they embody.

Unstoppable. The Protagonist will always overcome whatever obstacles are put in their way. The Protagonist cannot be killed—or at least not permanently.

Destined to win. The Protagonist will go to any lengths to stop the antagonist from accomplishing their Sinister Goal, and will eventually succeed.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine the protagonist's name, summary, and Noble Value.

2.2.3 SUPPORTING CAST: ALLIES & MINIONS

Loyal to a cause. Both the Protagonist and the Antagonist get by with a little help from their friends. Allies are characters who are loyal to the protagonist, while Minions are characters who serve the Antagonist.

Write a lowercase p or a in the top-right corner to indicate loyalty.

Loyalty can change. Allies can become Minions and vice versa at any time.

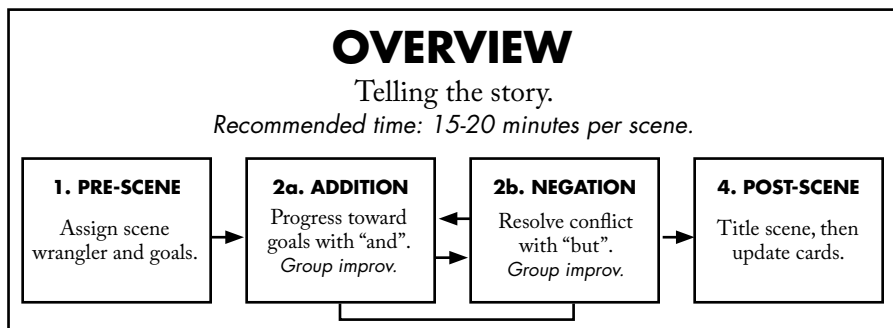
Minimize character paperwork during scenes. When a new character is introduced, have one person write their name down on a blank index card. When the scene is over, use Lock-or-Change to determine their character summary.

Here are some examples of what character cards might look like before play begins.

LORD NEFARIOUS	A
<p>A hooded figure who operates from behind the scenes. Wants to use the Soul Gems to power the Iron Phoenix.</p>	

FRANCESCA Q. GIMBAL	P
<p>A half-elven gun-knight and champion of Eldramck, the true Elvish Queen. She strives to uphold balance.</p>	

3. SCENES



The rest of the game proceeds as a series of freeform improvisational storytelling scenes.

Make a Mode card. Write “and” & “but” on opposite sides of an index card.

Scenes have prophetic goals. Before beginning a scene, everyone will decide what the goals of the scene are. Goals are the high-level beats that will happen during the scene. Rather than being summaries of what will happen, they should be abstract enough that the way the goal is fulfilled is open to interpretation.

3.1 BEGINNING A SCENE

Choose a scene wrangler to keep everything on track. One player is the scene wrangler for each scene. Their task is to keep the scene from going on too long or getting severely sidetracked. They also guide the scene to a conclusion once all of its goals have been completed. Have them start by writing the number of the next scene at the top of a blank index card.

Write a conflict on the scene card. The first goal of the scene must be a conflict which involves at least two characters, and may briefly mention how the conflict is resolved. Two conflicts are already predetermined:

FIRST SCENE

One of the Antagonist’s Minions is defeated by the Protagonist’s powers.

FINAL SCENE

The Protagonist defeats the Antagonist, thwarting their sinister goal.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine scene goals. Add goals to the scene card until every player has locked one goal or the scene wrangler says to stop.

If anyone can't think of a goal, use the Example Goals table (§4.3).

3.2 PLAYING A SCENE

Don't stop for paperwork. During a scene, writing on cards should be minimal and unobtrusive. If new character details are added, wait until the scene is over to write them down on their card.

Use "yes, and" to progress the story. When the mode card shows "and", the story should be moving forward. Each player can talk freely and assert something about the story as true, unless it involves a character whose card is being held by someone else. Don't contradict anything anyone else has said.

Use "yes, but" to resolve conflicts. When anything someone has asserted might be contested by another character, flip the mode card over. At this point, each statement should be about negating, reversing, or foiling the previous statement. When nobody has any more ideas, the conflict is resolved. Flip the mode card back over.

3.3 ENDING A SCENE

Wrap up and title. When all of a scene's goals have been fulfilled, the scene wrangler should end it with some closing narration. Finally, the scene wrangler writes a title for the scene at the top of the scene card.

Update cards. Take a second to write a summary for any allies that were introduced, as well as any new powers or limits.

3.4 EXAMPLE SCENE

Joseph, Holly, and Diego are playing together. Joseph volunteers to be the scene wrangler for their first scene in the game.

Joseph: Francesca has been tracking the wizard who stole the Soul Gem, and has finally come to a hermitage deep in the woods. She thinks she might be able to take the old man by surprise by being nice and feigning to just be someone passing through.

Holly: Yes, and she calls out a loud greeting and is met by Roosevelt, a kindly old man in a plain robe. He says, “Oh my, a guest! Come in, come in—would you like some tea?”

(Holly writes down “Roosevelt” at the top of a blank card.)

Diego: *(Taking Francesca’s card.)* “Absolutely! Do you have any black tea?”

Joseph: He shows Francesca inside, remembering the message from Lord Nefarious warning him that she would be coming after the Soul Gem. While pretending to add milk to the tea, he slips in a drop of poison!

Holly: *(Flipping the Mode card over from “and” to “but”.)* Conflict!

Diego: Yes, but her emotion vision lets her see Roosevelt’s oily hatred mixed into the tea! She throws the tea at the wizard, then draws her gun and shoots!

Joseph: Roosevelt conjures a magic shield that deflects the tea and the bullet!


Diego: But Roosevelt always yells out the names of his spells, so Francesca adjusts by doing a trick shot off the shield and wall to hit him from the side!

Holly: Not so fast! He yells “Teleport!” and vanishes in a puff of smoke... appearing right behind Francesca!

Diego: But he was too distracted from the ricochet to notice that Francesca backed up to the wall! Now he’s magically merged with the wall and stuck!

(Nobody has any ideas on how to get Roosevelt out of this pickle, so the conflict ends and the mode card flips over. All the scene's goals have been completed, so Joseph says some closing narration and the game continues with a different scene.)

Here are some examples of what some cards might look like after a scene.

SCENE 1: FRANNIE GET YOUR GUN	
	A minion loyal to the Antagonist is defeated by the Protagonist's Power.

FRANCESCA Q. GIMBAL	P
<p>A half-elven knight who serves Eldramck, the true Elvish Queen. She strives to uphold balance.</p> <p>enchanted pistol / emotion vision /</p>	

ROOSEVELT	a
<p>Wizard working for Lord Nefarious; nice guy, but a wallflower.</p> <p>wizardry/ yells out his spells</p>	

4. EXAMPLES

Gimme a number. To use these tables, ask someone¹ to pick a number between 1 and 48—the corresponding number is your result.

4.1 EXAMPLE SEEDS

Places

1. a secret moon
2. an underground observatory
3. a sentient crystal planet
4. a magic consignment shop
5. dark art school
6. a sideways city
7. 3,959 miles underground
8. a baseball diamond

Types of Characters

9. demon architects
10. malfunctioning robots
11. wizard lords
12. magical spiders
13. infernal bureaucrats
14. soul couriers
15. queens of the mountain realm
16. sentient boats

Time

17. the week leading up to prom
18. winter
19. eighty million years from now
20. the day after the war ended
21. the ungilded era
22. 1880
23. laundry day
24. one year before The Ascension

Stuff

25. the greatest treasures of all²
26. cursed un-mirrors
27. weaponized cosmic horrors
28. magical instruments
29. the prize behind door No. 3
30. reality fibers
31. plant-animal hybrids
32. a baseball-sized diamond

Types of Powers

33. shadow mutations
34. hedge magic
35. exquisite equitation
36. emotional visualization
37. *very* specific transmutations
38. ideology cannons
39. academic achievement
40. machine sorcery

Mood

41. cute
42. spooky
43. cool
44. awkward
45. thirsty
46. sparkly
47. grim
48. bizarre

¹ You can also ask Siri to do this, or roll a d6 to pick a category and then a d8 to pick an item in that category.

² Besides love and friendship.

4.2 EXAMPLE CHARACTERS

Antagonist Name

1. Ronald Reagan
2. Kevin Blechdom
3. Daniel Deacon
4. Solenoid Pépin
5. Monad Megan
6. Money Pendant
7. Georgia O'Keeffe
8. Johnald Pregnant

Antagonist Detail

9. deeply curious
10. magnanimous
11. mild gluten allergy
12. embarrassed by obscenities
13. impeccably glamorous
14. student of architecture
15. humble to a fault
16. an excellent dancer

Antagonist's Sinister Goal

17. destroy The Golden Throne
18. assassinate Quing Wembley
19. assemble relic fragments
20. obliterate the western reaches
21. reclaim *The Yamato*
22. conquer the midlands
23. reach The West Pole first
24. break the vending machine

Protagonist Name

25. Janine Jaquette
26. Turnbow Turnip
27. Brenda Bresson
28. Enrique Ennis
29. Ferne Ferrera
30. Roosevelt Rohloff
31. Elinore Ellers
32. Ramon Rastad

Protagonist Detail

33. quick to anger
34. a hooligan
35. mistrustful
36. self-important
37. an excellent knitter
38. forgetful
39. awkward
40. ignorant

Protagonist's Noble Value

41. grace
42. benevolence
43. love
44. honor
45. beauty
46. knowledge
47. justice
48. truth

4.3 EXAMPLE GOALS

The protagonist...

1. gains a new power
2. makes an impossible choice
3. is transformed
4. is temporarily stopped
5. makes a mistake
6. has an insight
7. makes a huge advance
8. takes an incredible risk

An ally...

9. shows up just in time
10. makes a sacrifice
11. gets separated
12. makes a promise
13. has a secret identity
14. is secretly a minion
15. has a revelation
16. sets the group back

A power...

17. complements another
18. is super effective
19. behaves unusually
20. is the inverse of another
21. is the same as another
22. doesn't work
23. is unusable until the last second
24. changes into something new

The antagonist...

25. exploits a Noble Value
26. reveals one of their powers
27. nearly defeats the protagonist
28. defeats an ally
29. overcomes their own limits
30. escapes from a conflict
31. becomes warped
32. has a temporary setback

A minion...

33. returns unexpectedly
34. defeats themselves
35. is betrayed
36. gets overconfident
37. is unceremoniously defeated
38. realizes the error of their ways
39. takes something precious
40. sets a trap

A limit...

41. renders a power useless
42. causes its owner's defeat
43. does not exist
44. has a workaround
45. is horse-related
46. affects someone else
47. is falsely communicated
48. becomes a kind of strength