

Interim Stage

By Ben Lehman

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*These child soldiers
kill and die
for our games*

*Let their blood
sanctify a new age
beyond war
beyond peace*

Bliss Stage

This text is copyright Anno Domini MMV
to MMVII
By Ben Lehman in Nostalgia Studio

This is our game.

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The ANIMa and remote sketches are by Jake Richmond, and are copyright him.

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For Emily and Alexis

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Introduction

Hello! Nice to meet you. My name is Ben, and I wrote the book which is in your hands right now, and now it falls to me to welcome you to this book.

Welcome! It's a pretty simple book, I'm afraid. That's because its purpose is not to be entertaining on its own, rather its purpose is to teach you how to play a game. Detailed in this book are that game's procedures, techniques, tricks, and strategies.

It's not a lot of fun to just read about a game without playing it. I recommend you call up some friends right now and arranging a time to play it. If I've done my job, you should

be able to understand the game just by reading the book once through, and it's not that long of a book.

But maybe I haven't done my job well enough. Do you need help understanding the rules? Finding people to play with? With something else? I'm happy to help. Write me an e-mail at taogames@gmail.com and ask. Did you play the game? Write to me at the same address and let me know how it went.

Alternatively, you could post at the TAO Games forum at indie-rpgs.com and tao-games.com. There, me and lots of other people can talk to you about your game, or help you in getting it started.

What is this game and how do you play it?

Bliss Stage is a game, but it has more in common to a game that you would play with toys than a card game or a sporting event. It's a role-playing game, so the end goal of the game is to tell a story together with your friends. While a certain amount of competition will naturally exist between the players, the ultimate goal will be to share the authorship of a story. In *Bliss Stage* this story is the story of a small group of teenagers and children waging a desperate war for the future of the world.

It is quite likely that you are already familiar with role-playing games in at least one of the myriad forms that they take: Massively multiplayer games such as World of

Warcraft or EVE, forum or journal roleplay, MUSHes or other such live online games, live action games like Vampire or NERO, or other tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons or Dogs in the Vineyard. In all cases, you will find much familiar about *Bliss Stage*, but there will also be number of differences, so keep your eyes open and don't make assumptions about how things work.

If you're not familiar with role-playing games, you're in for a treat: role-playing is one of the most fun organized social activities available anywhere. It's no more and no less that telling stories together with your friends.

Storytelling can be more than a little scary. It's not something that we're all skilled at. Improvised story-telling is worse, because improvising, especially in front of an audience of friends, can tax even the most creative imagination. But the experience of sharing stories can make old friends into better friends and strangers into new ones.

Role-playing was created as an answer to that fear -- we've made a game out of telling stories with your friends. The game's rules require everyone to contribute, so there's not pressure on one person to get it right, and also provide a structure to ensure your story will be interesting and speak from your heart into the hearts of your friends.

During a role-playing game, like with most other creative media, we imagine fictional characters interacting and relating and doing exciting things. In a role-playing game, we're actively taking the role of the creators of this fiction: inventing. what the characters do, how they do it, and

everything else in the story. We might describe this at a distance -- “he gets up and opens the door” -- or we might act out the conversations and interactions of the characters: that doesn’t matter so much. Event to event, action to action, we’ll watch this story unfold, and it’ll be our story, that we’ve created together.

It requires a little more work than reading a novel or watching a show, but I hope you’ll give it a try. If it isn’t more fun than any of those, I haven’t done my job.

The Structure of the Game

Since the story of *Bliss Stage* is about a war, the whole story of the game taken together is called a campaign. A campaign of *Bliss Stage* is like a television series or a manga serial: it will take a long time to play out! You can’t play it all in one night. You’ll need to divide up your play into engagements. Each time you get together to play *Bliss Stage*, that’s an engagement. Depending on how you play the game, a campaign should take between four and ten engagements of two or three hours each.

So after you’ve played the game once, make sure to schedule with everyone there for your next engagement. How this works out is up to you. Some people like to schedule their *Bliss Stage* play on particular days (everyone other Thursday we play *Bliss Stage*) and others who have more hectic lives may just play when they find the time, with no set schedule.

Engagements are going to be the big social division of your play. An engagement is itself divided up into smaller units: actions. Actions are the fundamental unit of play in *Bliss Stage*. During an action, different players control different characters inside the game world, and we see them doing things, dealing with each other, and any other parts of their fictional lives. An action is roughly the length of a scene in a play, or a chapter in a manga serial. It's a little shorter than a chapter in a book, and lot shorter than an episode of a television series. An engagement will usually consist of about 10-20 actions, but if you do less or more that's not a problem, it just means that your campaign will be shorter or longer.

Introducing the Example Players

One technique I'll be using throughout the book is having these four example players speak up and give you advice for how to play the game well. I guess I should just let them introduce themselves.

Maria: So, since I'm the GM, I guess it falls to me to introduce us. We're the example players of the the game. Throughout the book, you'll be seeing little segments of our play, and we'll also be offering commentary in the text. Some of us are fictional people that Ben totally made up, others of us are based on real playtesters of the game.

Maria: Hi, everyone. I'm Maria. I'm the Game Master (GM for short) for the group, which means that I'm the leader and arbiter. I'll be jumping

in to share advice for other people who might GM the game.

Damien: I'm Damien. I'm totally new to playing role-playing games at all. I'm here because my friend Maria thought I might like it. Since I'm new, I might be kind of quiet lots of the time, but I'm going to be asking questions whenever I get confused by something.

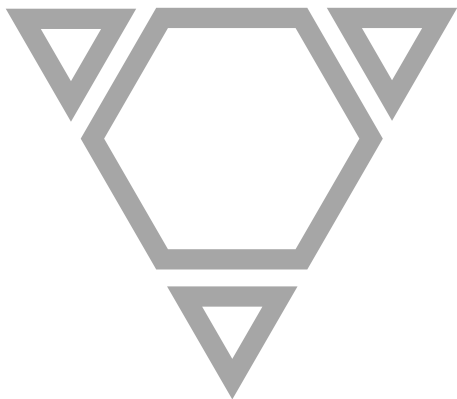
Chris: Hello to all you people out there in reader-land. I'm Chris. I'm another player of the game, a friend of Maria's from when I directed a series of Primetime Adventures a couple of months back. I'll be stepping in now and again to point out some of the subtleties of the rules, and other random stuff.

Phoebe: I'm Phoebe, nice to meet you. I'm another player of the game, a friend of Chris's from way back. I'll be stepping in from time to time to point out some things you might otherwise miss, and also just to be chatty.

The Structure of the Book

First things first, this book is going to give you some of the fictional background for *Bliss Stage*. Then, we'll take you through everything you need to know to play the game for the first time, step-by-step, and teach you most of the rules of the game along the way. After that, they'll be some bits about other things that might come up during your play, have a little bit more about the fictional background of play, and then give an extended example of set-up and on-going play of the game. Lastly, they'll be a conclusion and some record sheets you can copy to help you play the game.

So, without further ado, let's start.



Background

The story of *Bliss Stage* is about hope and love and war in the near future, about the struggle of teenagers to define their own world, and about titanic battles between giant war machines and their alien opponents.

This chapter will serve to give some background to that story, so that you will understand how this war came about and why these desperate soldiers are fighting it despite the price.

Maria: Not everyone needs to know all the rules of the game to play it: they can learn that as they move along. But it would be a good idea if they were all at least a little familiar with the contents of this chapter.

Seven Years

Humanity has been through seven years of darkness, seven years of want, seven years of violence and death and suffering and dreams. After all this time, finally we have a chance to strike back against our oppressors. There has never been a war more desperate than this war: fought at the greatest risk with the greatest costs for the greatest gain. Your story will be about that war. But this story part is not about that war. That war is your story. This is about how it came to pass.

Right now, this moment, the very moment that you sit down to play the game, humanity is struck by an unprecedented and mysterious alien attack which the survivors will name the Bliss. The Bliss is sinister, immediate, and worldwide: adults are struck by a sudden tiredness, and those that go to sleep do not awaken. They seem to be in pleasant dreams, but react to no external stimulus. Within a week, nearly all of the adult population of the earth is incapacitated. Society, particularly industrialized society, falls into total chaos. For the first few months, children are mostly shell-shocked, and try their best to live out their ordinary lives. But, as food runs scarce, and the reality of the situation becomes apparent, the survivors turn to looting, violence, and gang warfare. As food and supplies become scarcer, the suffering becomes more terrible. Disease and animal attacks claim even more lives than warfare. Those that grow too old fall into the Bliss much as their parents did.

To make matters worse, within two years the aliens develop or simply deploy their remote drone technology. While the

aliens are unable to easily affect our world from their home in the dream world, their remotes bridge that gap in a terrifying and effective way. Existing in both the dream world and the real world, they are gigantic automatons wrought in flesh and metal. With fiery rays and noxious smokes, these remotes lay waste to any outposts of human civilization. Heavily armored, they are effectively invulnerable. You must run or you must die. Within a year, there is no place in the world still safe for humanity.

And that is life for the next five years -- a life lived in tunnels and pits, running and hiding, full of violence and disease and fear and doubt, wretchedly clawing for survival, a dwindling species of children with a future of darkness, fire, and pain.

But that is not the end of the story. There is still hope for humanity's future. A small group of survivors, led by a still-waking adult, have managed to reverse engineer the alien remotes, and have used this technology to make a new generation of weapons that can be used to strike at humanity's enemies in their world of dreams. This weapon is called an Alien Numina Inversion Machine -- or ANIMa -- and it allows a teenaged pilot to enter the dream world and form a mechanized battle-suit out of the spirits of her friends, lovers, and enemies. With this weapon, she can fight the aliens on their own terms, striking at the very heart of their occupation. Now, after seven years of despair, this brave group of soldiers are striking the first blows of a war that will determine the fate of humanity, earth, and their own hearts.

In the game of *Bliss Stage*, you will tell their story.

Why I am a Pilot

"I'm a pilot because my father was a marine, and his father was a marine, and his father was a marine. Marines never lose, marines never surrender, and I'm never going to give up this fight."

"I'm a pilot because I don't want my little sister to ever have to go through what I went through. She deserves a better world than the one I've got."

"I'm a pilot because I've got a two year old son, and if I could protect him I don't know what I'd do."

"I'm a pilot because I'm damned good at it, and there's no way I'm leaving it up you yahoos to save the human race."

"I'm a pilot because the aliens took everything from me -- my family, my friends, my life, and now I'm damned well going to take everything from them."

"I'm a pilot because my dreams are the only place I can ever get things done."

"I'm a pilot because I can get some sleep."

"I'm a pilot because there's no way in hell I'm giving up now, after all I've been through."

BE AN ANIMa PILOT



SAVE HUMANITY

Meet at the intersection of Main and 7th at sundown on Saturdays. Do not try to attack the meeting site. Our representatives will bring no food or supplies, and we will respond with **OVERWHELMING FORCE** if necessary.

The ANIMa

The ANIMa creche is a complicated piece of technology. To operate it requires two participants: A pilot, who is always a teenager, and an anchor, who often is as well. To operate it requires an enormous degree of skill, finesse, special training, and natural talent.

The pilot must be dressed in a special suit, plugged into a startling array of monitoring technology, suspended into a vat of motion resistant goo (else he will sleepwalk) and then fed induced brainwaves on an alien frequency that is not well understood or easily controlled.

At the core of the creche, obscured by all the superstition and machinery, are large chunks of the brain of an alien drone. Perhaps these are actually the things that make the ANIMa work, and the rest is just for show. Who knows? The whole thing is elaborate, and built mostly from guesswork, intuition, and more than a little faith.

When it is in operation, the pilot is being fed complicated brainwave patterns that he is struggling to keep up with. The anchor, meanwhile, is in the waking world, monitoring the pilot's vital signs and speaks to him via a special close-circuit radio headset, carefully guiding him through the dream and interpreting the readings that she is taking as sensory images so that the pilot may process them.

The pilot, meanwhile, is deeply in the dream, barely aware of the outside world at all. To support them in the nightmarish world, he calls on his friends, lovers, and enemies

in the shape of a personalized suit of mechanical armor, which is colloquially also called an ANIMa. While most of these suits look similar, they are highly customized depending on the relationship between the anchor and the pilot, and the relationships that the pilot brings into the dream with him.

Once in the dream, the pilot can be easily lost, and once lost, often suffers a heart attack, mental collapse, or other stress-related injuries. Thus, the anchor is given a “panic button” which hits the pilot with a heavy but not quite serious electrical shock, waking him from the dream. Ideally, the anchor can bring the dream to a natural conclusion, waking the pilot slowly back into the world. In practice, though, the panic button is often used by lazy or cautious anchors, and such “natural wakings” are quite rare.

A Timeline

Right now

Nearly all of the adult humans in the world succumb to a strange attack -- they fall asleep and cannot be awakened. They are not dead, nor do they seem to be suffering from hunger, thirst, or fear. In fact, they seem pleasantly happy. Because of this, it is called the Bliss.

+ 1 month

Electricity, water, and sewage have all stopped working. Society begins to fray.

+1 year

The surviving children have established themselves in a new, loose social order of gangs. Some begin to rebuild, some are content to loot, murder, and rape. The effects of the Bliss on older teenagers are seen. Adolescents report seeing and even communicating with strange creatures in their own dreams.

+2 years

Targetted attacks into the real world, launched by dream-creatures, begin. These attacks are carried out via remote drones -- some are planes or other vehicles but most take a giant human shape. The tenuous society that children have formed is shattered.

+5 years

A small but organized group, backed by a surviving adult, manages to destroy an alien remote -- the first victory in a five year war.

+6 years

Using technology scavenged from destroyed and captured remotes, a resistance cell manages to create an ANIMa creche: a device which a teenager may use to enter the dream physically. Initial experiments are disastrous.

+7 years

Present time. Over the last year, trial and error has produced a technique by which pilots (as they are now called) can create an ANIMa, an armor for protection against the dream and a weapon to attack the dream aliens. Now, for the first time in seven years, there is a chance to for humanity to strike back. Now, for the first time in seven years, there is hope.

Why I am an Anchor

"I'm an anchor because I wasn't quick enough to be a pilot, but I couldn't just sit back and do nothing."

"I'm an anchor because I've always been really good at math, and it really helps to have someone who can read all the displays."

"I'm an anchor because I built this machine from the ground up, and no one else knows how to read it like I do."

"I'm an anchor because I love him."

"I'm an anchor because I would never leave her alone in that place, in those dreams."

"I'm an anchor because I'm never going to let another pilot die on me."

"I'm an anchor because it sure as hell beats running away from gangs, tribes, and wild dogs."

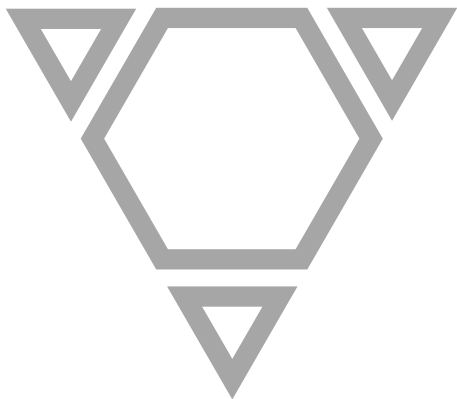
"I don't have time for this. Shut up and leave me alone!"

GIANTS



With your help, we can drive off the alien menace once and for all!

Meet at the intersection of Main and 7th at sundown on Saturdays. Do not try to attack the meeting site. Our representatives will bring no food or supplies, and we will respond with **OVERWHELMING FORCE** if necessary.



The First Engagement

This is a general guide for the first time you're sitting down to play *Bliss Stage*: how to go about setting up the game. If you're starting a new game (either because you're playing with a different group or you've finished another one), you'll want to refer back to this section, too.

Before You Start

Invite some friends to play! There should be 3-7 of you, all together. For a first game, a smaller number is probably better. Pick friends who you like, get along with, you think would enjoy the game, and most importantly pick friends whose creativity you respect: You're going to be collaborating with them on a pretty big project, after all.

You're going to need to get your tools together, too. Download and print out the play sheets from www.tao-games.com, and have some pencils, some dice (the ordinary sort will do) and erasers handy.

Before you start playing, take time to socialize a bit with each other. Catch up on your ordinary lives. If there's anyone who doesn't know everyone, make sure that they get introduced. I like to cook, so I always cook a big fancy meal for my *Bliss Stage* players. I know people who do some theater warm-ups. You could do anything that helps you relax and get comfortable with each other, but make sure that you don't skip it. Every engagement, you should have something to do as people outside of the game. *Bliss Stage* engagements are primarily social engagements, and you should take time to relate to each other as people and not just fellow players.

Picking a GM

Once you're settled down and ready to play, pick a game master (GM). Let's be honest: since you're the one with the book, it's probably going to be you. But, if you've played a

table-top role-playing game before, don't worry! It's way less of a headache to be a GM for *Bliss Stage* than you might otherwise expect.

Like in many other tabletop games and in MMOs, the primary responsibility of the game master is to keep the game running. In *Bliss Stage*, this means that she facilitates consensus between the players, comes up with the general shape of the fictional conflicts of the game, and is ready with an idea when everyone else is stumped. Secondly, she controls the authority figure, the character who leads the resistance group.

Chris: Here's a shout to old-hands at table-top roleplaying games: a GM in *Bliss Stage* isn't the same as a GM in a lot of other games. For example, the primary job of the GM in *Bliss Stage* is to facilitate consensus amongst the players, rather than to throw out their own ideas. Keep an eye out for these things, and don't assume that the GM has a different role, different responsibilities, or a different relationship to the rules just because that's the way that other games do things.

Pick someone to be the GM who has some experience with the game, or is trusted a lot by everyone in the group, or most especially someone who wants to do it. Once you've picked a GM, move on to group set-up.

Maria: So, even though Chris probably knows this game better than me, I'm going to be the GM this time since it was my idea. Everyone okay with that?

Damien: Uh, sure...

Phoebe: Yup!

Chris: Duh.

Setting up

Once you've picked a GM, take some time to talk about the resistance group that your story is going to be about, and the world that they live in. It's a resistance group near where you live, they have at least 10 or so members, they have access to technology which allows them to enter the dream world and form ANIMa to fight aliens with, and they are led by a still-waking adult. The other elements are up to you.

Here are some questions to get you talking. Cover enough of them that you all feel comfortable with the world that your story in. Don't feel like you have to stick to all of them. The discussion should take about 20-40 minutes.

Where is the group located?

It has to be located near where you are playing. So, where nearby would be a good place for a group of survivors to congregate after society falls apart? If you're in a rural area, it might be a farm or even just a patch of wilderness that the group has developed. In a city, it might be an apartment complex, a subway station, or a police station. If you're near a military base or university, what about that?

What resources does the group have at its disposal?

The group clearly has at least one ANIMa creche and the means to operate it, but what about food, water, sanitation, medical supplies, electricity, shelter, clothing, and so on? Probably the group will have easy access to some of these things, and have a more difficult time with other things. How do they get the resources that they need?

Are there other groups of survivors in the area?

What are relations with them like? Does the group use its ANIMa to protect others? Do the other groups have ANIMa of their own? What non-human threats does the group face in the real world?

What non-piloting and anchoring tasks does the group need?

Depending on the circumstances, it might need any of farmers, weavers, scouts, warriors for fighting with real-life enemies, animal husbands, technicians, smiths, machinists, story-tellers, artists, religious leaders, scientists. Probably people will fill more than one role. What does the group lack, what do they have too much of?

What are the aliens like?

Are they like people? Are they giant horrid monstrosities? Words written on air? Collections of eyes and wings and fire, like angels in the bible? Black tentacled things from out of HP Lovecraft's nightmares? Screaming faces shaped into

people? Draw out from your own nightmares and scary stories.

What is the dream world like?

While the dream world is accessible to humans only through their dreams and an ANIMa creche, that does not mean that it is ephemeral or random like a modern human dream. Dreams have changed after the Bliss. The dream world is more immediately physical, more consistent, more shared. The exact detail of this are up to you, however. The dream world could be an exact mapping of physical space, but changed and different somehow. It could be an entirely separate world unrelated to the waking world. It could be full of forests, or made of human faces, or the world as if no person had ever lived there. What's your dreamworld like? Like with the aliens, draw from your own nightmares and scary dreams and you won't go wrong.

What dream emanations are present?

Just as our waking world leaks through into our dreams, the alien's dream world leaks through into our waking world. The post-Bliss world of *Bliss Stage* has many wonderful and terrible dream-things in it, of which the alien's drones are a single example. What sort of things like this are near you? How does the group interact with them, if at all?

Water, in particular, seems to attract these phenomena. What are the large bodies of water near you and how have they been changed?

Maria: Okay, so for the next step, we need to decide where our group is located and some general things about how the world has changed since the apocalypse. Our group is located somewhere near where we're playing, so probably somewhere in Oakland. What do people think?

Phoebe: I dunno, this seems like a pretty sturdy building, it's close to Lake Merritt so there'd be fresh water and some space to farm in. How about we just set it right here?

Chris: In my apartment? That's fucked up.

Phoebe: Really? Well, we can do something else ...

Chris: No, no, I like it, it's just fucked up.

Maria: Damien, you haven't said anything, how does that sound to you?

Damien: Fine, I guess...

Maria: Great. Of course, since the Bliss is supposed to hit as soon as we start playing the game, the first thing we'll have to figure out is what happened to our sleeping bodies ...

All: EWW!

Maria: Or not! I guess some things can just get brushed aside. So let's talk about our group's general situation. What resources do they have? What resources do they need? Stuff like that.

Chris: I think that there'd be a lot of territory wars between gangs for the areas right around the lake, since that's basically the only big stretch of arable land in the city. Since we're a really little group, we probably couldn't compete. So maybe we have a lot of trading arrangements, like we protect them from the aliens and they provide us with so much food.

Damien: Wouldn't there be a lot of political tension, then?

Phoebe: I think that's probably good. It could be fodder for interlude actions.

Maria: What about medical supplies and electricity? Damien, do you want to suggest something?

Damien: Uh, well, there's a hospital pretty close by, so let's say that we've actually got a really good supply of medical equipment -- even things like latex gloves and clean needles and so on.

Chris: Yeah, and maybe we got some solar panels of their roof, so we've got some electricity, but basically just enough to keep the ANIMA running.

Phoebe: Okay, but someone maybe hooked up some bicycles for emergency electricity, too.

Maria: Nice!

Damien: Great.

Maria: Okay, so what other changes have we seen in the world? There's supposed to be strange stuff around water.

Phoebe: I've got it! We're totally cut off from San Francisco. Anyone who tries to cross over the bridge just doesn't come back. Also, bits and pieces of people's dreams are floating around in the bay.

Chris: People totally fish them out to trade with!

Damien: Huh. Maybe that's something we need for our ANIMa-things?

Phoebe: Awesome! So we have to trade for this dream stuff.

Maria: I think that San Francisco is the local alien outpost. You're always seeing remotes patrolling the other shore, and there's strange lights coming up and night. So what are the aliens like.

...

Maria: Anyone? Just draw on your nightmares and stuff.

Damien: Oh, crap, I had this crazy dream the other night. There were these people that were made up of other, tinier people.

Phoebe: Like a nesting doll?

Damien: No, more like there were a bunch of tiny people arranged in the shape of a big person.

Chris: Oh, so like fractal people! What if the tiny people are made of tinier people? So it's like fractal people!

Maria: Oh, yeah, and they could make really huge people, too. Yeah, in the dream world, you see huge people dancing around SF.

Chris: Crazy.

Maria: Okay, last thing, let's make up characters. Who's the authority figure and who are the pilots and so on?

Making up Characters

Now you're going to make up the people that compose your resistance group: the leaders and soldiers in humanity's war against the dream aliens. When you're doing this, you should make time to note possibly important relationships between the characters as you come up with them. In particular keep track of which characters, if any, have an immediate blood relationship (brother or sister, son or daughter, mother or father.)

Altogether, you should have no more than thirteen characters in the resistance group, to start. New characters can always join up afterwards.

You don't have to answer all of the questions about each type of character. The questions are there to give you a useful place to start talking about the character, their background, and their role in the group. Once you've got a little bit of information about them, stop and move along. Don't tell their whole story ahead of time.

The authority figure

The first character you should all make up is the authority figure. The authority figure is a still-waking adult who organizes and leads the group, although he himself cannot pilot an ANIMa, serve as an anchor, and quite possibly has only a dim understand of how these battles are actually fought. An authority figure can be officious or friendly, cowardly or heroic, bold or desperate, but they must necessarily be in charge.

Here are some questions about the authority figure

What's his name? How old is he? What did he do in his previous life? How did he come to organize this group? How does he go about organizing the group? How does he stay awake? How does he generally act towards pilots? Although I use the male form for the authority figure, in practice, they can be either male or female.

Pilots

Once you've talked about the authority figure, talk about pilots and anchors. Pilots are any teenagers in the group that have the capability or the training to go into the dream world, form an ANIMa, and fight with it. There should be at least two pilots in your group, at most enough so that there is one for every non-GM player. If this is your first time playing, make sure that there are enough pilots for everyone.

Here are some questions about each pilot

What's her name? How did he survive until now? Has she been a member of the group for a long time and, if not, how did he join? How does he feel about piloting an ANIMa? Why is she a pilot? Pick a pilot template for the character (see pg 51).

Picking Anchors

The GM should pick a number of anchors somewhere around the number of pilots, at least two and no more than one for each non-GM player. Just pick the special abilities (see pg 58), and give them the names of your unrequited crushes.

Here are some questions about each anchor

Is she an experienced anchor? Has she seen pilots die before? How old is she (most anchors are teenagers, but some might be younger)? Why is she an anchor? How does she feel about it? How does she relate to pilots? What other roles, if any, does she have in the group?

Secondary characters

After you have pilots, anchors, and the authority figure, fill out the rest of your group with secondary characters. Try to keep the group size between ten and thirteen. Secondary characters are people who aren't anchors or pilots, but are important members of the group anyway.

Here are some questions about each secondary character

How did he join the group? What kind of person is she? How old is he? What sort of role, if any, does she fill for the group? What's his name? Why isn't she a pilot or an anchor? What are his feelings about the pilots and the anchors?

Distribute Ownership

Once you've worked out the characters, decide who is going to own what character to start. They'll be more about ownership of a character later (pg 61 and pg 172), but for right now let's just say that ownership means that you take responsibility for that character while you're playing the game: you say what she says and how she acts.

A few simple rules for distributing ownership over the characters

- The GM must own the authority figure. The GM may not own any pilots or anchors.
- No player may own more than one pilot. No player should own more than one anchor.
- No player should own two characters who have a close relationship: If two characters are lovers, or are brother and sister, or some such, they should not be owned by the same player.
- Try to make sure that each player owns a roughly equal number of characters. Err on the side of the GM owning more characters.

Don't worry too much about this! Ownership can change during the game if you don't like how it's working out.

Choose Your Starting Relationships

Once you've populated your group and chosen pilot types, you should select the starting relationships for your pilots. Each pilot template has a number of starting relationships, just assign these to each other character in the resistance group. Then add one intimacy to all direct blood relationships. Do up a pilot record sheet (see the TAO Games website: www.tao-games.com) for each pilot and note everything down there.

For relationships between pilots, use the relationship with the higher intimacy. Then subtract one trust. If this results in a broken relationship, add bliss as normal. (see more about this on pg 66)

The intimacy and trust values of the starting relationships tell you something about the relationships between the characters. Consult the intimacy-building chart (on pg 69 and 120) and see what sort of relationships people have.

Maria: The first thing we need to do is come up with the authority figure. What do you guys think?

Damien: Authority figure?

Chris: The authority figure is an adult who's managed to keep himself awake -- uh, or herself -- and is the leader of the resistance group that we're in.

Damien: Huh.

Phoebe: I'd kinda like to have a tough-guy sort ... maybe a former cop?

Chris: Maybe he wanted to be a cop ... but he couldn't make it.

Maria: Chris, you always want to make authority figures so pathetic. No, I like the idea of a former cop.

Chris: Geez, fine.

Maria: Okay, how is he keeping himself awake?

Damien: Huh ...

Chris: Hrm ...

Damien: Okay, so, tell me if this is too weird, but he's an ex-cop, right? That means that he has access to all the drugs that the cops impound. So he's got nearly a limitless supply of meth.

Phoebe: Oh, shit.

Maria: Now that, I like. So, we've got this guy, Jim Preston let's say, an ex-cop, wants to be a strong leader manly football-coach sort but he falls down on it a lot because he's strung out on speed.

Chris: That's fucked up.

Phoebe: Awesome.

Damien: Wow...

Maria: So, moving on, how many pilots do we want to have? I think we should have three so each of you can have a pilot.

Damien: Should I own a pilot? It's my first time playing and it sounds a little hard.

Chris: Absolutely! The pilots are the central characters of *Bliss Stage*, and owning one is a lot of fun. Once you're a more advanced player, you might want to sit back, but for your first game, absolutely have a pilot.

Maria: Yeah, seriously, Damien, play pilot.

Damien: Okay, but ... maybe I could play a pilot who doesn't really know what's going on? I'm kinda worried about that level of responsibility.

Maria: Sure! There's a perfect template for that, called the Innocent Sweetheart. But we're getting ahead of ourselves... Why don't we just talk some about the pilots' backgrounds.

Chris: I think that there should be a pilot who used to be a gang leader, so that we can have some conflict of authority with Jim.

Phoebe: Chris, can I use that idea? It's close to something I was thinking about already.

Chris: Knock yourself out.

Phoebe: Okay, I'm thinking an older girl -- probably I'll use the seasoned veteran template - - who was a strong gang leader, owning a lot of the local territory, before she was recruited as

a pilot. Some of the other characters are former members of her gang, and there's tension between the two groups.

Maria: Sounds good. What's her name?

Phoebe: Oh, I'm horrible with names ... uh ... uh ...

Maria: Anna?

Phoebe: Anna, yeah! Anna Lin.

Maria: So we're going to cut this short, but Damien ends up playing an inexperienced pilot named Sara Smith with the Innocent Sweetheart template, Chris ends up playing the authority figure's estranged son, Josh Preston, with the Eager Young Soldier template, and Phoebe ends up playing Anna with the Seasoned Veteran template.

Maria: Okay, so for anchors I'm going to go with Jenny, Megan, and Nathan. Any objections?

Chris: No.

Damien: I don't even know why I'd object.

Maria: Normally, we'd rename the anchors after people we had crushes on in high school, but since we're fictional characters for the example game we don't actually have them. So we're going to skip that step. But you, the readers, totally shouldn't.

Maria: Okay, now we need to come up with some secondary characters. These are just anyone in

the group who isn't a pilot or an anchor or the authority figure.

Phoebe: Anna has a son, he's two years old, and his name is Archer.

Maria: Okay. Great.

Chris: There should be some members of Anna's gang, too. Maybe another girl, one of your lieutenants?

Maria: Yeah, let's just give her a name... Laura. But that's two people with strong relationships to Anna. What about the rest of you?

Damien: I think that there should be some guy who's an older more experienced romantic interest for Sara.

Chris: Ooh... nice. Let's call him Keenan, and he's kind of a player.

Maria: Great. Chris? Anyone for Josh?

Chris: For right now, I feel basically okay. I'm going to have a jacked up relationship with my dad, anyway.

Maria: Point. Okay, now who wants to own what character? I'm the GM, so I can't have a pilot or an anchor. I'll take Archer and Keenan, if no one else minds.

Chris: No, I was going to take Keenan, but this way he and Josh can be rivals.

Damien: Rivals?

Chris: I'll take Laura instead. I don't see Josh as having much to do with her.

Damien: So that's no one for me?

Maria: Well, you've got an anchor, and once you feel more comfortable, we'll introduce new characters.

Damien: Great.

Maria: Speaking of which: ownership over the anchors.

Chris: I'll take Nathan.

Damien: I'll take Jenny.

Phoebe: I guess I've got Megan, then.

Maria: Great! We're almost set. Just have to assign your relationships and pick out hopes.

Maria: Hey, people reading this. We're going to skip over the assigning relationships bit.

Picking Out Your Hopes

There's one last piece that we have to talk about. What is your group fighting for? What sort of future are they going to shape? These sorts of things are summarized by the group's hopes. Hopes are simply a few statements about the goals and direction of the group. The most important thing is that hopes may not be fulfilled until they are resolved (see pg 153) so, if you have a hope "I hope we win a decisive battle" then your game cannot contain a decisive battle until the hope is resolved. The hopes, then, set the scale of your game, so choose them carefully and don't pick something too large or too small.

You should pick a number of hopes equal to the number of pilot characters, minus one. Here is the list of hopes, you should pick from it, preferably spreading your hopes amongst the categories:

Hopes for the winning the war

- I hope we defeat the alien leader
- I hope we win a decisive battle
- I hope we can defeat the aliens
- I hope that there are other resistance groups
- I hope we can organize a unified military front
- I hope we develop a super-weapon
- I hope we find allies

Hopes for understanding the world

- I hope we find out what's up with the bliss

- I hope we understand the aliens
- I hope we can communicate with the aliens
- I hope we learn about the dream world
- I hope we understand why the aliens attacked us

Hopes for humanity's future

- I hope we can raise a second generation
- I hope that there is a place for humanity in the future of the world
- I hope we can get things back they way they were
- I hope we can make a better civilization
- I hope that we can help the other children in our area
- I hope we find a way to wake the sleepers

Other hopes

- Make up one (and only one) of your own

Try to pick hopes that you care about, because they are like signposts for what directions your story is going to take. However, if some hopes turn out not to be such a great idea, you can change them between engagements if everyone agrees.

Now you're done and ready to play! The next two sections are going to talk a little bit about what each of the numbers means, and the general things about how to play, then we'll get into the action.

Maria: Okay, just one more bit before we start playing. We need to pick out hopes. A hope is basically a goal that the resistance cell is strug-

gling for, whether to defeat the aliens, make the world a better place, or anything else like that. We have to pick the hopes off of a list, but we can make up one of our own if we want.

Damien: Okay, I'm confused. Is this stuff like "liberte, fraternite, egalite?"

Chris: Note quite. More specific things. Stuff like "I hope we can understand the Bliss." Take a look at the book.

Damien: Ah, okay.

Maria: Since we have three pilots, we have two hopes. Any suggestions?

Chris: I'm really grooving on this thing with Anna's kid. Maybe we could use "I hope we can raise a second generation?"

Phoebe: Great with me. I'd like something militaristic, though.

Maria: How about "I hope we can defeat the aliens?" That's broad and definitely military.

Phoebe: Sounds great.

Maria: Damien, are you okay with these?

Damien: Sure, whatever. I don't quite get how these work yet, but I'm sure it'll be okay.

Maria: Great, then we can start playing!

Pilot Templates

On the next few pages are listed the six pilot templates. As a player, you just need to pick out a template, assign your relationships, and play.

Innocent Sweetheart

"People say that I'm too young to pilot an ANIMA, but I just want to do my best... for everyone!"

The *Innocent Sweetheart* is the youngest pilot, under trained and inexperienced. She makes up for it with a heart of gold and an energetic spirit that just won't quit. Although most people don't have a lot of confidence in her abilities, who can help be catch her infectious enthusiasm?

Starting Relationships

Name	Intimacy	Trust
	3	2
	3	2
	2	5
	2	4
	2	1
	1	3
Everyone else	1	2

Special Ability

- Add one Trust to any relationship

Suggested Age: 13

Eager Young Soldier

“You don’t need to worry about me. Those aliens won’t stand a chance. Bring’em on!”

The *Eager Young Soldier* is still a novice ANIMA pilot, but excited to do his part in the war. A history of fighting for survival has toughened him, but his determination has yet to be tested in the dream world. For one so young, his heart is filled with anger.

Starting Relationships

Name	Intimacy	Trust
	4	1
	3	2
	2	3
	2	2
	2	1
	1	4
Everyone else	1	2

Special Ability

- Add one trust or one intimacy to the relationship with the authority figure.

Suggested Age: 14

Devoted Lover

"Every time I fight... everything I do... I'm thinking of you. I do it all for you. No one else understands me. If anything happened to you, I just couldn't go on."

A **Devoted Lover** is a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. In the real world, they are deeply tied up in their love, and in the dream world, they use it as a terrible weapon. But can a teenage love affair survive the harsh realities of combat?

Starting Relationships

Name	Intimacy	Trust
	5	3
	3	2
	2	3
	2	3
	2	1
	1	3
Everyone else	1	2

Special Abilities

- Starts with a very powerful relationship (already included)
- Add one stress to any two relationships

Suggested Age: 15

Rising Hero

“Every time I go on a mission, everyone acts like I’m so important because I pilot an ANIMA. But each and every one of us is important. I’m not a hero. I’m just doing the best I can.”

The **Rising Hero** doesn’t know it, but everyone in the group looks up to her and respects her, not only for the job that she does, but for the decency and respect with which she treats others. But since she mostly stays close with a small group of friends, she doesn’t realize the esteem that they hold her in.

Starting Relationships

Name	Intimacy	Trust
	4	2
	4	1
	3	1
	2	2
	2	1
	1	1
Everyone else	1	3

Special Abilities

- Add one trust to all relationships with other pilots
- More powerful default relationships (already included)

Suggested Age: 16

Carefree Hedonist

"Hi there, Sara. Oh, yeah, about last night -- don't take it too seriously, okay? I mean, it was fun, but I don't think we should let ourselves get too tied down, y'know? Oh, don't start crying again..."

The **Carefree Hedonist** says that he has no regrets. He flits from party to party and lover to lover without so much a second thought for anyone's feelings. Perhaps he is hurting on the inside, or perhaps he simply realizes that he doesn't have long to live. Whatever the reason, he is terrifying on the battlefield, but at what cost to his own heart?

Starting Relationships

Name	Intimacy	Trust
	4	2
	4	1
	3	2
	3	1
	3	1
	2	2
	1	4
Everyone else	1	2

Special Abilities

- Add one intimacy to any relationship.
- Extra starting relationship (already included)

Suggested Age: 16

Seasoned Veteran

"I've seen better men than you destroyed by worse things than you can imagine. Don't think you're a hero and don't think we're friends."

The **Seasoned Veteran** is the oldest pilot. She is bitter and haggard from battle; the scars on her heart and soul may never heal. Her closest relationships have been devastated, and she clings to the few friends she has left with increasing desperation. She may talk tough, but inside she is afraid – of her impending death, or of what might happen if she doesn't die.

Starting Relationships

Name	Intimacy	Trust
	5	1
	4	2
	3	3
	3	2
	3	1
	2	4
Everyone else	1	2

Special Abilities

- Pick any two relationships and destroy them.
- Starts with 1 trauma.

Suggested age: 17

Anchor Templates

Each anchor is distinguished from the other anchors by account of her special ability, which allows her to help or hinder the pilot on his missions. These abilities, with some default anchor names attached, are listed on the next page.

Don't use the default anchor names! Anchors should be named after people you or the other players had unrequited crushes on in middle school or high school. Don't use the names of people that you still know, though! That's just creepy.

Nell is driven

At her option, after the pilot has placed his dice, she may reroll one or more die placed in mission.

Nathan is kind

At his option, after the pilot has placed her dice, he may reroll one or more die placed in nightmare.

Megan is temptestuous

At her option, after the pilot has placed his dice, she may reroll one or more die placed into her own relationship.

Jenny is savvy

At her option, after the pilot has placed his dice, she may reroll one or more die placed into someone else's relationship.

Grace is comforting

At her option, after the pilot has placed his dice, she may reroll one or more die placed into a threatened or endangered category.

Iris is experienced

At her option, after the pilot has placed his dice, she may add one stress to her relationship to the pilot to reroll any one die.

Chapter Summary

- 1) Before you start, take some time to just hang out.
- 2) Pick a player to be the game master (GM). This should usually be the most experienced player, or the one who owns the book, or the person who is most excited about the game.
- 3) Your resistance group is located somewhere near where you are playing. Figure out where. Figure out their situation.
- 4) Figure out other details about your world: what the aliens look like, other strange effects in the world.
- 5) Make up characters: An authority figure, some pilots, some anchors, some secondary characters. Assign ownership over the characters.
- 6) Pick a pilot type for each pilot and assign their starting relationships.
- 7) Pick out a number of hopes equal to your number of pilots, minus one.



The Basics

This section covers the very basics of how to play the game of *Bliss Stage*: Character ownership, speaking in voice, and how to handle numerical values for various characters. With these tools in hand, you should be able to play through the rest of the game without serious difficulty.

Character Ownership

In the set-up section, we talked about character ownership. Any given character is owned by a particular player. Sometimes in this book, we'll also talk about a player "controlling" a character, which means exactly the same thing.

Ownership is quite simple: during any action, the player who owns a character makes decisions for the character and gets say over what that character does and says. Playing is quite simply a matter of stating what the character does, and sometimes speaking in voice.

Problems can arise when one player owns two characters both of which are part of an action. If this sort of thing is a problem, it is no trouble for one character to loan another character to a different player for the duration of the action. Loaning a character just gives another player short-term ownership over that character. In general, however, pilot characters and the authority figure should not be loaned.

In some situations, it makes sense for ownership of a character to change hands. This could be because of mechanical restrictions (a character controlled by the GM becomes a pilot or anchor) or it could be because one player owns too many characters, or it could be because the character was lent for one action and everyone liked what the other player did with it. It is not a problem to transfer ownership of characters, although it should be avoided in cases of pilots or the authority figure.

If there are new characters who do not have established owners, they are considered owned by the GM until they join the group. Once they join the group, the GM may keep control or may give the characters to a different player.

Speaking in Voice

At times throughout the book, players will be called to speak in the voice of a character they own. When you are called upon to speak in voice, you must simply say the words that your character says, as if you were a voice-actor reading lines, rather than adding in any sort of removed narration, even in the first person.

The primary time when players speak in voice is the anchor's player, during a mission action. In this case, the anchor's descriptions of the environment are understood to actually be the environment that the pilot sees and interacts with. An anchor holds enormous power over the pilot's perceptions, and can twist the dream in a multitude of different ways.

For most players, during most actions, you can opt to speak in voice but you can also describe your character's actions at a remove. Most of the time, you will effortlessly slide between the two.

Chapter Summary

- 1)Owning a character means that you get to decide what that character says and does.
- 2)No one can own more than one pilot. No one should own more than one anchor. The GM cannot own pilots or anchors.
- 3)Don't worry! You can pass ownership around if you want.
- 4)When called on to "speak in voice" that just means say what the character is saying, in the character's voice.



Values

Characters and, more importantly, relationships between characters are assigned certain numerical values during the play of the game. These values are at the heart of play and show you what direction things are headed towards.

Pilot's values measure how close they are to death, both from the physical and mental strains of piloting and from exposure to the harmful alien brainwaves that bring about the Bliss.

The values of relationships measure the strengths of those relationships and the difficulties that they are presently facing, whether interpersonal or brought about by damage within the dream world.

A Pilot's Values: Trauma, Terror, and Bliss

Pilots have three values which measure their internal state: Terror, Trauma, and Bliss. All of these values represent damage to the pilot, either from his contact with the dream world, from events in the waking world, or both.

Trauma

Trauma measures the lasting damage -- either physical or mental -- that the pilot has sustained. Trauma varies from 0 to 6. Trauma is used by the GM to make mission actions more difficult, and if the pilot ever has more than 6 trauma, he is killed (see pg 150). Trauma is gained during mission actions and sometimes during briefing actions, and is reduced by some interlude actions.

Terror

Terror is a measure of the immediate danger that the pilot is in during a mission action. In rare circumstances, terror can also be gained outside of mission actions, in which case it represents the general danger to the pilot. Terror varies from 0 to 7. Terror itself has no effect. However, if the terror value ever is higher than the trauma value, drop terror to zero and raise trauma by one. Terror is gained during mission actions and rarely during briefing actions. When the mission ends, drop the terror value to zero.

Bliss

Bliss is a measure of the pilot's exposure to the dream world and the aliens. It is gained primarily during mission

actions, but also when a pilot's relationships are destroyed. Bliss varies from 13 to 108. Bliss never goes down, it only goes up. When bliss passes 108, the pilot can no longer be a pilot, and must die or leave the group. (see pg 152)

A Relationship's Values: Intimacy, Trust, and Stress

The most important values in *Bliss Stage* aren't attached to any character at all. Rather, they belong to the relationships between characters, and they measure the strengths and challenges of those relationships. Initially, only the pilots' relationships will have values. Over the course of play, however, relationships between non-pilot characters may be developed. The values for relationships are Intimacy, Trust and Stress.

Relationships are always reciprocal. If Sara has a 4 intimacy, 2 trust, 1 stress relationship with Keenan, Keenan's relationship with Sara is identical. The best way to think of this is to think of the relationship as a thing which exists on its own, external to the two characters.

If a relationship's Trust score drops to zero, the relationship is destroyed. Destroyed relationships effectively have a zero value for both intimacy and trust, and may not be used in missions. When a relationship is destroyed, any pilot involved in the relationship gains Bliss equal to three times the intimacy of that relationship.

Chris: The only time a broken relationship can be used during a mission is when the pilot has a

broken relationship with his anchor. This is seriously bad news. For more about how this works, see page 107 in the Mission Actions chapter.

Intimacy

Intimacy measures the amount of physical and emotional closeness in the relationship. Intimacy varies from 1 to 5. The intimacy value of a relationship gives the pilot power in mission actions, and is gained during some interlude actions. Intimacy never goes down, it only goes up. When it reaches five, it can't increase any more. A relationship's intimacy implies that the characters have done a certain amount of intimate actions, but a low intimacy does not imply that they have not. The required actions are a minimum, not a maximum.

Phoebe: So, for example, there could be two characters who have had sex, but still only have a one intimacy. Perhaps they just met somewhere and hooked up, and have no other relationship.

Characters with a direct blood relationship have an additional point of intimacy above and beyond what is listed above. They still have a maximum total intimacy of 5 (you are not rewarded for incest.)

Trust

Trust measures the durability of the relationship in the face of hardship. Trust varies from 1 to 5. The trust value of a relationship lets the relationship last in the face of damage during mission actions and also betrayals during actions in the waking world. Trust goes up in some interlude actions, although never above 5. If a relationship's trust reaches

Intimacy Levels Chart

Intimacy	Level Name	Required Action
One	Names and Eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exchange Names• Make Eye Contact
Two	Hands and Mouths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical contact• Involved conversation• Sing together• Work on a project together• Share food together
Three	Touch and Mess	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Affectionate physical contact• Personal conversation• Make food together• Get drunk together• Get into a fight
Four	Blood and Spit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kiss• Touch Sexually• See each other naked• Exchange blood• Physically fight for real
Five	Sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have sex

zero, the relationship is destroyed. A destroyed relationship cannot be used in missions. A destroyed relationship gives any pilot involved three times the relationship's intimacy value in bliss.

Stress

Stress measures the immediate problems with the relationship, and how close it is to suffering permanent damage. Stress varies from 0 to 6. The stress value of a relationship represents the damage that the relationship has taken, particularly during mission actions. Stress goes down in some interlude actions. If stress is ever higher than trust, stress drops to zero and trust decreases by one.

Non-Pilots: Harm and Death

A pilot's death is dictated by his trauma and bliss values, but other characters' deaths are not so stringently dictated. However, there is a way that other characters can be brought closer to death without actually killing them: Harm. Harm represents that this character has been seriously damaged in some way.

A character may be harmed in a number of ways. A character's harm can come as the result of a failed mission goal, as a result of broken relationships, or directly from the actions of another character.

The first time a non-pilot character's relationship is destroyed, they are harmed. If all their relationships are destroyed, they are killed.

There are no mechanical limitations on a character who is harmed. However, if they are ever harmed again, they are killed.

When a character dies, none of their relationships have value. They are useless for missions. Also, whenever a character dies, all pilots gain bliss equal to three times the intimacy value of their relationship with the dead character, just as if the relationship was broken.

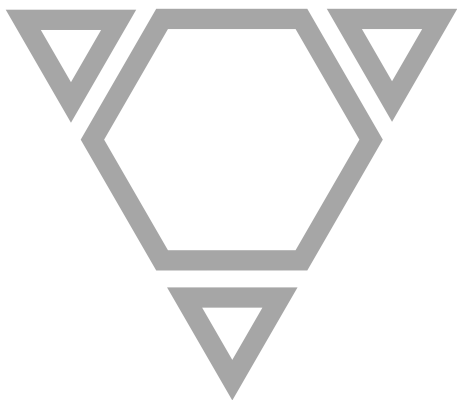
Chapter Summary

1) Values are numbers assigned to characters are relationships between characters during the game of *Bliss Stage*.

2) Pilot's values measure the amount of damage they have sustained from their missions, in terms of actual harm and exposure to the dream world. These values are terror, trauma, and bliss.

3) Relationship's values measure the strengths of the relationship as well as its present condition. These values are intimacy, trust, and stress.

4) Non pilots do not have any values. However, they may be harmed or killed in various ways. Any character who is harmed that suffers harm again is killed.



Actions

A campaign of *Bliss Stage* a series of short units of play, called actions. An action is roughly equivalent to a scene in a movie or TV show, or a short chapter of a manga. During an action, some players will portray the fictional characters that you developed during your set-up, some players will portray aliens and other threats, some players will control the environment, and other players will simply watch the action unfolding and offer their opinion of it. Taking part in actions and watching them is the core joy of a game of *Bliss Stage*, because as you move from action to action, you will be making interesting stories about the characters you have dreamt up.

Damien: Short? How short?

Phoebe: Generally, they should be between 2-5 minutes long. The longer actions can take up to ten minutes.

Chris: Another way to think about it is that an action is just enough time for one important thing to happen.

The Common Structure of Actions

During a game of *Bliss Stage*, several different types of actions will be performed. Each type of action has its own particular rules and concerns, but they share a basic common structure. What follows is a brief overview of this structure structure.

In every action

- 1) One player calls for an action
- 2) The players involved in the action initiate that action
- 3) The players involved play out the action, controlling the characters performing the action, the environment that it takes place in, and any consequences of this action.
- 4) The action is called to a close, and the mechanical effects of the action are recorded.
- 5) Based on this or another previous action, a player calls for a new action.

An *Bliss Stage* engagement is just stringing actions together like this, one after another, until your engagement

is over. A *Bliss Stage* campaign is simply enough of these engagements that the story gets its mechanical end.

Types of Actions

There are two common types of actions in a game of *Bliss Stage*: mission actions and interlude actions. There are also several other types of actions, including briefing actions, final actions, resolution actions, and so on. The following several chapters are going to talk specifically about each type of action in turn, going into exact detail about how to perform each type of action and the specific rules in each case, but right now let's just talk briefly about each type of action.

Mission Actions

Mission actions take place when a pilot character is hooked into an ANIMa and an anchor is guiding him through the dream world. The anchor calls for mission actions, although in general they follow one after another in sequence until the mission is over. During mission actions, the anchor's player controls the environment and guides the pilot's actions, the pilot's player controls the pilot, and the GM and other players control the aliens, nightmares, and other hostile elements of the dream world. Mission actions reach a climax either when the pilot is endangered, has an opportunity to complete a mission objective, or both. After the resolution of the climax, the action is brought to a close, often segueing directly into another mission action

Example mission actions

- Fighting an alien warrior in single combat.
- Clearing a path to the alien outpost.
- Gathering information on the aliens' activities.
- Preventing aliens from reaching your headquarters.
- Traversing a dangerous and unstable part of the dream-world.
- Swept undersea by a giant wave, where does the pilot end up?

Interlude Actions

Interlude actions take place in the real world, when the characters involved are not actively on a mission. The GM or another player with the privilege can call for an interlude action, and the action is initiated by the players who control the characters involved in the action. One player who is not otherwise involved will judge the outcome of the action. During interlude actions, the characters involved interact socially, and their controlling players try to show or develop some aspect of their relationship. Interlude actions are closed when the judge calls them closed. Sometimes, when an interlude results in broken trust, another interlude action is played out as a follow-up.

Example interlude actions

- The end of the big date. Will it be her first kiss?
- Hanging out together on the roof, talking about the world.
- He's crying alone in the back of the library. Will someone comfort him?

- He's confronting the guy who slept with his girlfriend. Will there be a fight?
- They just keep yelling at each other, night after night. Is this the fight that will break them up?
- Making a big dinner for everyone to share.
- Scavenging amidst the wreckage of the city, how will they survive an attack by a roving gang of other children?

Fallout Actions

Fallout actions are a special type of interlude action, called for by the player of a character who caused broken trust in a prior interlude action, but otherwise identical to a normal interlude.

Briefing Actions

Briefing actions serve as an introduction to missions. During a briefing action, one character (usually the authority figure) goes over an outline of the mission goals and objectives, as well as any special conditions that apply. A pilot and an anchor are chosen for the mission, either by the authority figure or because someone volunteers. When a pilot and anchor are selected, and the mission goals have been made clear, the action is closed with the anchor describing to the pilot how she preps for him for the mission.

Example briefing actions

- "We need a volunteer to make a direct run at the enemy base, doing as much damage as possible and creating a diversion."

- “Keenan, you’ll be scouting the local area for signs of alien activity.”
- “We’ll be performing an experiment to try to determine the nature of Faith’s visions. Angela, you’ll be keeping watch over her while she sleeps.”
- “The base is under attack! Scramble every available ANIMa immediately!”

Breakdown Actions

Breakdown actions serve to demonstrate the end of a relationship. They are called for by either member of the broken relationship, and initiated by the same. A breakdown action is played much like an interlude, but it has no mechanical effects and thus no judge. It closes when the participants are done.

Example breakdown actions

- “I’m leaving!” “You can’t leave me, I’m leaving you!”
- At the end, there’s nothing left to say.
- “Remember when we were friends?” “No, fucker, we were never friends.”

Final Actions

Final actions serve to demonstrate the end of a pilot’s career as a pilot, and quite possibly the end of that pilot’s life. They are triggered by a pilot getting over 108 bliss or over 6 trauma. During a final action, the pilot’s player has final say over everything that happens. Final actions over-ride the usual structure of missions and interludes.

Resolution Actions

Resolution actions are used to resolve one of the game's hopes. They are triggered when a pilot surpasses 108 bliss, after his final action, or when there is only one pilot remaining. Like in a final action, the pilot has final control of the contents and events of a resolution action, within certain limitations.

Example final and resolution actions

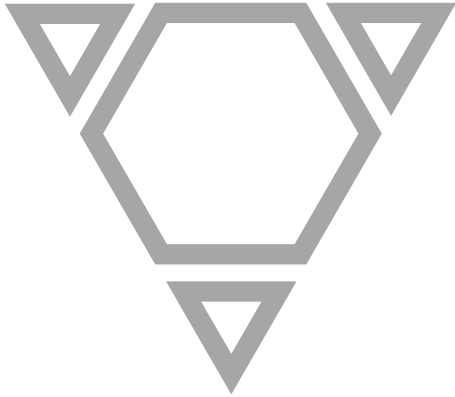
- Outnumbered on all sides, he sacrifices himself to give her a chance to escape.
- The enemy ace gets off a lucky shot, and she's flatlined before she can react.
- His sacrifice provides a diversion for the caravan to get through.
- Deep inside the alien base, he merges with the alien hive mind and gains true understanding.
- There are deeper truths about the dream than what we imagined: it is humanity's crucible, by which they will be made perfect.
- Floating alone in the void, he looks out at the stars and realizes that all of them are squirming with alien life. Though we defeated this army, a million more will follow.
- Holding a child in her arms, she sets off for the hills, for an unknown fate.
- 20 years later, assassins find him and execute him for his war crimes.

Chris: All right, that's enough of that! In the next few chapters, we're going to be going over each type of action in detail.

Maria: While we're doing that, keep in mind that playing *Bliss Stage* is just a question stringing together these actions together, one after another, like a string of beads.

Chapter Summary

- 1)The game of *Bliss Stage* is made up of a series of actions.
- 2)Actions come in different types, but share a similar underlying structure.
- 3)The most common types of actions are mission actions and interlude actions.
- 4)Other types of actions are briefing actions, fallout actions, breakdown actions, final actions, and resolution actions.



The First Action

Maria: The first action of your game is a briefing action. The general rules for briefing actions will come later on in the book. For right now we're just going to go over how to set up the first action of your game. This chapter will cover how to do it, step by step.

Chris: If you've played the game a couple of times and have your feet under you, you might want to try a different first action, like starting off with an interlude action or having a different first mission. This time, though, don't try changing things around.

Outline of the First Action of the Game

The first action of the game is always very much the same. Follow this structure closely.

- 1)The GM starts the game by describing the beginning of the briefing action. She should describe all the pilots and anchors together, where they've been called by the authority figure.
- 2)The GM should speak in the voice of the authority figure, who should announce that a group of alien remotes have been spotted approaching the group's headquarters. He should specify that all pilots will be needed for this mission, and that they should suit up as soon as possible. Assign anchors based on which anchors have the strongest relationships with which pilots.
- 3)The authority figure should say that each pilot, in turn, will take on a part of this mission. Each pilot has two mission objectives: "Prevent alien from reaching the base" and "Defeat enemy pilot."The GM should explain that failing either of these will result in harm to one character of the GM's choice.
- 4)Choosing one pilot to start, close the action by having the appropriate describe prepping the pilot for ANIMA use, and then move on to the mission actions.
- 5)After the mission is finished, every player gets a privileged interlude action if they want it. From there, move on into more interlude actions or another briefing action.

Once you've set up the action and played it to completion, move to the next section to see how to play out a mission action.

Maria: Okay, so you're all in the base, doing what it is you would normally do on a day that you have free time. Suddenly, the klaxons start blaring. In the areas where you've set up flashing emergency lights, the emergency lights are flashing. The base is under attack.

As you run to Jim's office, which is down on the first floor where the super has an office right now, he's outside screaming "This is not a drill! This is not a drill!" at the top of his lungs.

"We're under attack" he screams. "Since we only have one ANIMA rig functioning, you need to spell each other. Josh, I need you suited up and ready to go right away. Anna, you're next, Sara, you're last. Jenny and Megan are already near the creches set up to anchor you."

Okay, guys. The mission goals for each of you here are "Prevent the aliens from reaching the base" and "Defeat an enemy pilot." If you fail either of these, your perimeter is breached and someone will be harmed. If you want to hotshot, you could also take other people's targets. Everything clear?

Damien: Uh, not exactly ...

Chris: I'm up first, so why don't you watch me and Phoebe do it and ask us afterward if you still can't see how it works?

Damine: Sure, okay.

Chris: So I'm tearing off my clothes as I run down into the ANIMa creches, trying to change into my pilot's suit as quickly as I can.

Phoebe: Megan is totally waiting for you right at the bottom of the stairs, holding out a suit. "Good luck!" she manages to belt out before you jump into the tank.

Chris: "Roger that!"

Phoebe: I'm testing the radio. "Testing. Testing. Josh can you hear me?"

Maria: Great. Let's move into the mission action.

Chapter Summary

- 1)The first action of the game is always the same.
- 2)It is a briefing action.
- 3)The assigned mission is for all pilots, to stop the invasion of the base.
- 4)Once this mission is done, move into interlude actions or another briefing, whichever you like.



Mission Actions

Mission actions take place largely inside the dream world, featuring a pilot inside his ANIMa attempting to accomplish something in the dream world, while being guided through the dream by an anchor and challenged by aliens, nightmares, and his own doubts and fears. In the real world, the pilot is half-asleep, put into the trance by the ANIMa technology.

During a mission action, the pilot may succeed or fail at his goals, and the pilot or any of his relationships might be damaged. The dream world may also be transformed and reshaped.

During a mission action, the anchor's player will guide the pilot's player step-by-step through the mission, using her character's voice the entire time. Meanwhile, the pilot's player will talk back and forth with the anchor using the pilot's voice, and also describe the pilot's actions to the group at large. The GM and other players describe the presence and actions of the aliens, local nightmares, and other hostile dream elements. The GM additionally has a role providing difficulty for traumatized pilots.

Mission actions are usually taken strung together back-to-back, as a series. One such series of mission actions (one trip to the dream world) is sometimes called "a mission," so when you read that know that it just means "a series of mission actions."

Calling for a Mission Action

Since mission generally immediately and naturally follow from either a briefing action or a previous mission action, there is not often a need to call for a mission action specifically. It simply naturally follows from the first part.

There are two exceptions to this. First, if a pilot is hotshotting (see below), he is in effect calling for a new mission action, either by telling the anchor in character voice what he's going to try to do or by describing his actions and what he wants to accomplish with them to the group at large. Second, if there is a break in the middle of a mission, the GM, pilot, or anchor can call for a return to the mission at any time that another action isn't going on.

Initiating a Mission Action

For the first mission action in a mission, the anchor's player, using the anchor's voice, describes the initial dream environment that the pilot sees around him. The pilot's character then describes the pilot creating his ANIMA, and the relationships that he uses to do so, starting with the pilot's relationship to his anchor, which forms the basic humanoid chassis, then adding on additional parts made from additional relationships. Each relationship usually has a single form that it takes, which does not change from mission to mission. Relationships, once integrated, may not be "sent away" or disincorporated until the end of the mission or until they suffer malfunction.

Then, the anchor, still using character voice, describes the mission objective that the pilot will be trying with this action.

For later mission actions, who-ever has control over the dream (either the anchor or the other players) describes the dream environment that the pilot finds himself in. Then the anchor tells the pilot what the next objective will be, and starts guiding him towards it.

Playing out a Mission Action

In the simplest case, where the anchor has retained complete control over the dream, a mission action plays out quite simply. The anchor describes and explains the contents of the dream world, guiding the pilot from place to place, while the pilot responds to the anchor either in

character voice or by describing his actions. If there are any aliens, nightmares, or other dangers present the GM and the rest of the players describe them.

Phoebe: If you like, as an anchor, you can ask the pilot questions about what he sees, notices, or detects. Like this "I'm getting strange signals... there's something in front of you! What is it?" I like to do this, because it lets the pilot's player take control over the course of the action.

If, in the consequences of the last mission action, the anchor partially lost control over the dream, the process is largely as described above, except that the GM and other players have license to interject alien or nightmarish elements into the anchor's descriptions, or to alter them to make them more dangerous. In very real ways, the anchor can be wrong about the dreamworld.

If, in the consequences of the last mission action, the anchor totally lost control of the dream, the anchor may not describe the elements of the dreamworld at all, and indeed may only speak at the discretion of the GM and other players. Instead, the GM and other players tell the pilot what he is seeing and experiencing, which is usually horrible and nightmarish. The pilot says how he reacts.

Adding to the ANIMa

During the whole course of this, if the pilot wishes to add parts to his ANIMa, he does so simply by describing the relationship and the part that it forms. The pilot may add any part which is not presently in use, or did not suffer a malfunction earlier in the mission.

Cancelling the Mission

If the anchor has not totally lost control of the dream, the anchor may cancel the mission at any time before it reaches climax. To do this, the anchor simply says that she is cancelling the mission, and describes the means by which she wakes the pilot from his dream.

Reaching Climax

When the anchor has brought things to a point where the pilot is in serious danger, the pilot could achieve a mission objective, or both, the mission action has reached a climax. If the anchor has no control, the climax is simply the first time that the pilot is in serious danger or could complete a mission objective. Move on to the next section.

Phoebe (as Megan): Testing, testing. Josh can you hear me?

Chris (as Josh): Loud and clear.

Phoebe: Okay, good. Now, I want you to open your eyes, really slowly, like there's lead weights attached to them. When you open your eyes you're going to see the outside of the base, but with the blurring and the shifting that we've seen in the practice runs. Are you with me?

Chris: Yes. I'm going to form my ANIMA now.

Phoebe: Good. Do that.

Chris (addressing the other players): Megan's chassis is bright red, with big shoulder pads and flames painted on it. I'm also going to bring in

Sara, who's a jetback unit, and ... let's see ... my dad, who's a great big gun. That's 10 total intimacy.

Phoebe: Okay, let's go.

Chris: I'm jetpacking towards the aliens, shouting "Die, fuckers" and blasting away at them with my gun. Let's roll.

In a later mission, Josh (played by Chris) is attempting to cross the Bay Bridge. Megan (played by Phoebe) is anchoring. In the last action, she lost partial control of the dream, so the other players (Maria and Damien) can add in nightmarish elements.

Phoebe: Can you still hear me?

Chris: Loud and clear.

Phoebe: Good. Now I want you to head towards the bridge.

Chris: Right. I'm heading there now.

Phoebe: The bridge is basically like it is now...

Maria (cutting in): The bridge is on fire.

Chris: Uh, Megan, I can't cross the bridge.

Phoebe: All readings are nominal, Josh. Don't chicken out.

Chris: Don't chicken out?! The bridge is on fire!

Damien: The fire's getting hotter.

Phoebe: Look, just cross the bridge!

Chris: Okay, I'm going to try to jetpack over it.

Maria: Sounds like a climax. Chris, get your dice.

Phoebe: No, wait! I'm getting abnormal readings here, Josh. I'm pulling the plug.

Chris: Crap.

Maria: Okay, that's the end of the mission.

In the next action, Josh has crossed the bridge, but Megan has totally lost control of the dream and it has descended into nightmare.

Maria: As soon as you step off the bridge, your radio cuts out. Phoebe, Megan can't talk anymore. All you're getting is static.

Chris: Megan? Megan? This is Beta to base. This is Beta to base. Come in Base!

Damien: The soil that you're stepping on is made of tiny faceless people.

Chris: Oh shit... I look away.

Maria: You look up and you see this huge person leaning above you, made out of other faceless people, of course. But this one has a face. It's calling to you in some language you can't understand.

Damien: It has a hole in it: right here. (taps his heart.)

Chris: Oh, man, I am definitely getting away.

Maria: It's grabbing for you. Looks like this is the climax.

The Climax of a Mission Action

At the climax of the mission action, we roll dice to determine whether the pilot has succeeded in his mission goal, and what damage he and his ANIMa sustain in the process. The pilot will roll a number of dice, and from those pick dice that govern his success in his mission, his personal safety, and the safety of his relationships.

First, the pilot picks up a number of dice equal to the total intimacy of all the relationships that make up his ANIMa.

Chris: You can use either ordinary dice or special dice called Fudge dice which have two sides that read "-", two sides that read "+," and two sides that are blank.

Trauma and Threatening

If the pilot is traumatized, the GM then uses the pilot's trauma to make the mission more difficult. As a default, the GM may **threaten a category** (mission success, pilot safety, or single relationship) for each point of trauma that the pilot has. When picking dice for a threatened category, the pilot must pick two, and only read the lowest value. When threatening categories, the GM must say, briefly, why those categories are particularly threatened.

By forgoing threatening two categories, the GM may instead **force a relationship**. The GM picks a relationship not presently active. The pilot must also pick a die for the safety of that relationship, as if it were a part of his ANIMa. At his option, the pilot may incorporate this relationship into his ANIMa, thus gaining the dice for it.

By forgoing threatening three categories, the GM may instead **endanger a category**. The GM picks one category. The pilot must select three dice for this category, and read only the lowest one.

If the pilot has three or more trauma, the GM may forgo all threatening or other use of trauma to cause **total panic**. All "0" results that the pilot rolls are discarded, and a single "+" result is added to his roll.

After the GM has used the pilot's trauma against him, the pilot rolls all his dice. From those dice, he picks out one die (or two or three, as defined by his trauma) for each category and places it on that category on his pilot record sheet. Once he has placed all his dice (which might take

time) the consequences of the mission action should be established and recorded.

If the pilot does not have enough dice to fill every category, every category he does not pick a die for is considered a "-."

Chris: If you want to speed this up, do it this way...

First, figure out how many dice you will need to place. This is usually the number of relationships that you've brought in plus your trauma plus two. If the GM chose to endanger a category or force a relationship, that's one less die. If the GM chose to cause panic, ignore your trauma.

Second, split the dice into pluses, blanks, and minuses.

Third, take as many pluses as you have. Is that enough to fill all your categories? If it isn't, fill the rest with blanks. If that isn't enough, place minuses.

The Consequences of a Mission Action

The consequences of the mission action are determined by what dice the pilot picked for into what categories. Consult the charts below. For "Die" simply look at the value of the die that the pilot picked for that category. If there is more than one die, read only the lowest.

Mission Success

Die Result	Game Result
+ (5-6)	Success! The pilot successfully completes the mission goal.
0 (3-4)	The mission moves along. The pilot does not complete the goal now, but may try again.
- (1-2)	This mission goal is stalled. The pilot may not complete the goal in the next roll (read all + results in mission success as 0 results). At the pilot's option, the mission goal is simply failed.

Pilot's Safety

Die Result	Game Result
+ (5-6)	The pilot stays safe. The anchor retains control over the dream.
0 (3-4)	The pilot's safety is jeopardized. The pilot gains one terror. The anchor loses some control of the dream: the GM and other players may introduce nightmarish or alien elements.
- (1-2)	The pilot's safety is abandoned. The pilot gains one trauma and one terror. The anchor loses control of the dream entirely.

Relationship's Safety

Each relationship has its own category, and the pilot must pick a die for each of them (more if the relationship is threatened or endangered.)

Die Result	Game Result
+ (5-6)	Relationship is unharmed. ANIMa part functions perfectly.
0 (3-4)	Relationship gains one stress. ANIMa part is damaged by attack or over-use.
- (1-2)	Relationship suffers malfunction, gaining one stress and losing one trust. ANIMa part is rendered useless or destroyed utterly. If it is not the anchor's relationship, this relationship is no longer part of the pilot's ANIMa. It gives no dice, does not require the pilot to place a die, and may not be called back for the duration of the mission.

Pilot's Bliss

All dice which are not placed into a category are used to count how much bliss the pilot gains from this mission action. Consult the table below for every die not used.

Die Result	Game Result
+ (5-6)	Pilot gains three bliss.
0 (3-4)	Pilot gains no bliss.
- (1-2)	Pilot gains one bliss.

After the pilot has placed his dice, read their results on these charts and record the consequences. Check to see if any relationships have stress higher than trust. Those relationships should lose trust and drop stress to zero. Check to see if the pilot has more terror than trauma. If he does, raise trauma by one and drop terror to zero.

If there were additional consequences to success or failure for the mission goal, these take effect immediately. If the group at large feels that there ought to be additional consequences for succeeding or failing at the present mission goal, they may discuss it and, if they can agree on any such effects, should note them down.

On the mission sheet, note whether the goal succeeded or failed.

Maria: For more about additional consequences to mission goals, see page 141. If the group agrees to any additional consequences on the fly, they must conform to the guidelines set out on page 141.

Drawing from our first example action, Josh (played by Chris) is charging the aliens. He has three relationships active (Sara, Megan, and his father Jim) with a total intimacy of 10. He rolls 10 dice, with a result of:

+, +, 0, 0, 0, 0, -, =, =, =

Chris: Wow. Bad roll.

Phoebe: Oh, it's not that bad. You can deal.

Chris: Right. Okay. I'm going to put a plus into mission (moves it) and a plus into my relationship with Sara (moves it). I guess that leaves zeroes in nightmare and my other two relationships. (marks down stress in his relationships with Megan and Jim.)

Phoebe: And one terror rolls over into one trauma (marks it down on the mission sheet.) And those four unassigned minuses are four bliss (marks that down.)

Maria: Okay, so you cruise in, guns blazing, blowing up aliens right and left, and generally routing the group troops. They're screeching and boiling away into tiny little people.

Chris: Take that! And that!

Phoebe: Josh, calm down and focus on the mission for once!

Chris: Hah! Look at 'em run.

Maria: Yeah, you route them. There are tiny people clinging to your gun and your visor, mindlessly screaming at you.

Chris: Aw, man... I wipe them off in disgust.

Damien: Eww...

Closing a Mission Action and Bridging to Another Mission Action

After you've identified the consequences of the climax, close the mission action by playing out the climax. During this time, the pilot's player says what the pilot does to try to accomplish the mission objective and protect himself, the GM and other players say that the aliens and other nightmarish things do to try to stop him or get in his way, and the anchor's player offers advice to the pilot in her character's voice. You know how it's going to work out, so play towards that.

When you've finished that, you're done with that mission action. If there's more mission goals left, move directly into a new mission action. If that was the last mission goal, the mission ends, and the anchor's player describes waking up the pilot.

Maria: If a mission for one pilot is really long, you might want to take a break in the middle to do an interlude action for other characters. That's okay.

Drawing from our third example action, Josh is fleeing from a giant heartless alien that is trying to swallow him up. The only remaining mission objective is to infiltrate the enemy base. Josh's anima is presently made up of his relationship with Megan, his relationship with Anna, his relationship with Laura and his relationship with Nathan for a total intimacy of 11.

Maria: Okay, you've got four trauma. I'm going to use that to threaten mission, nightmare, your relationship with Megan, and your relationship with Nathan.

Chris: Oof, that's mean.

He rolls 11 dice with a result of:

+, +, +, 0, 0, 0, 0, -, -, =, =

Chris: Of all the luck! I'm putting two plusses into Mission, because this needs to end now. I'll put a plus and a blank into nightmare, because I can soak the terror. Blanks for both Anna and Lauren. A blank and a minus for Megan, and two minuses for Nathan. Damn, that's rough. At least I didn't take much bliss.

Phoebe: Okay, I'm using my special ability to re-roll one die in our relationship. (rerolls the minus). I got a plus! Well, we can take the stress.

Chris: Okay, so my relationship with Nathan was at one stress and two trust. With the dropped trust and extra stress, it's broken. Since we had two intimacy, that gets me four bliss. Looks like I drop down to two trust with Laura, too. Everyone else is just stress.

Phoebe: No point in recording the Terror. That's five total bliss for this action?

Chris: Right.

Maria: Okay, so you're flying away and he grabs you and starts pulling you towards him. You can see all sorts of squirming, murmuring little alien people crawling out of his heart.

Chris: Oh, shit. I blast at them.

Damien: They seem to suck it up. No effect.

Phoebe (as Megan): Okay, Josh, I get it! The alien that's chasing you? That's the base! I want you to get inside that hole.

Chris (as Josh): The hell? Okay, whatever you say.

Damien: I think as your going in the fins on your back get torn off you. Bye-bye, Nathan.

Chris: Right. I'm just going to climb up.

Maria: The little alien poeple that make it up squish and scream in your hands.

Chris: Ugh... this is getting old.

Maria: Finally, you make it to the top. You're here in the alien base, but you can't understand anything that's going on. People are flowing in and out like blood, each one squealing in a different note...

Chris: Okay, I'm going to hot-shot a new goal: Figure out how the aliens communicate.

(For rules on hot-shotting, see the "special considerations" section of this chapter)

All: Again?!

Phoebe (as Megan): Josh! Josh! You can't stay there! We've got to wake you up now!

Chris: Just hold on a second. I'm getting something.

Phoebe: God-damnit, Josh, I'm getting something, too. I'm getting some meter readings off the charts!

Chris: I'm digging around in the arteries, trying to figure out the sound.

Maria: All these little people are pouring over you, you can't see, they're grabbing you, screaming, screaming... and I think we're at climax again.

Special Considerations for Mission Actions

Hotshotting

At any time during a mission, the pilot may declare his own mission goals and set off to achieve them, either by telling the anchor in character voice what he's going to try to do or by describing his actions and what he wants to accomplish with them to the group at large. In effect, the pilot is calling for a new mission action with a mission goal of his

own authorship. Extra consequences for these goals (see pg 141) are up the group at large.

Hotshotting cannot obviate the ordinary mission goals. When a pilot declares that he is hotshotting, the next mission action addresses his new mission goal. The anchor may cancel the mission to stop him, but may not require the pilot to perform other actions first.

A Broken Relationship with the Anchor

If the pilot has a broken relationship with his anchor, things are very bad indeed. The anchor's very life is now at risk! Add a new category for dice in the climax: Anchor's Safety.

Anchor's Safety

Die Result	Game Result
+ (5-6)	Anchor is fine.
0 (3-4)	Feedback. The anchor is harmed. Elements of the dream leak into reality.
- (1-2)	Backlash. The anchor is killed. Inhabitants of the dream enter reality.

Id dice and having no ANIMa

If the pilot has no relationships at all to compose his ANIMa, he is abandoned naked to the dream world. This is very dangerous!

Since the pilot has no dice to roll from intimacy, he instead rolls Id dice. The pilot may roll a number of Id dice up to four times their Trauma score.

The pilot must pick dice for only three categories: Mission Success, Pilot's Safety, and Anchor's Safety. The GM uses trauma as normal.

All dice rolled, not just unassigned dice, give Bliss. Unassigned "0" dice give one terror.

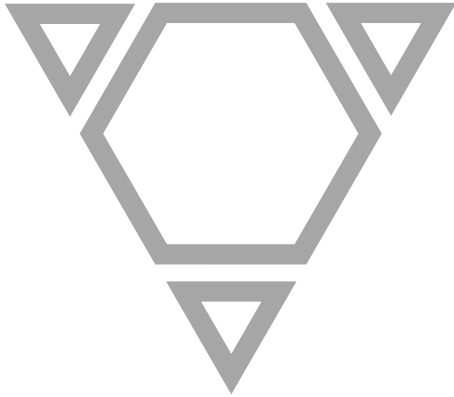
Flashbacks

If an unlucky pilot places a "-" in both the mission category and his own safety, he may call for a flashback. A flashback is a special, privileged interlude action. If the flashback results in intimacy building for a relationship which does not right now form part of his ANIMa, and the pilot brings in that relationship as part of his ANIMa immediately, the pilot may choose to read the "-" in the mission category as a "0."

Even if trust is broken, there can be no fallout actions from flashbacks.

Chapter Summary

- 1) Mission actions are when the pilots enter the dream world, form their ANIMa, and fight aliens. They are led and monitored by an anchor.
- 2) Most mission actions are automatically called for.
- 3) To open a mission action, the anchor describes the pilot's immediate surroundings and situation. If it is the first action, the pilot then forms his ANIMa. If the anchor has lost control of the dream, the GM and other players may contribute to the description.
- 4) When the pilot is either in danger or might accomplish a mission objective, the action has reached a climax. Before this, the anchor may cancel the mission if she has control.
- 5) At the climax, the pilot takes up dice equal to the total intimacy of all relationships in his ANIMa.
- 6) The GM can use the pilot's Trauma to make this roll more difficult in a number of ways.
- 7) The pilot then rolls dice and chooses which dice to use for the categories of mission success, pilot's safety, and relationship safety for each relationship.
- 8) The players involved describe the outcome, and bridge to another mission action.



Interlude Actions

Any action that takes place outside of the immediate context of missions and fighting aliens is probably going to be an interlude action. The goal of an interlude is to highlight, discover, or develop the relationships amongst the characters, particularly the pilots.

In the course of an interlude action, a relationship will be tested and transformed. In addition, trust may be broken, there may be harm and injury, and other important events may transpire. In general, interludes are beneficial for relationships, counteracting the stress and damage that they sustain during mission actions.

During an interlude, some players will control characters that they own, telling everyone what these characters say and do. The GM will additionally control the environment and surroundings, and one player will be chosen to make a judgement on the mechanical outcome of the action.

Interludes usually take place between missions, jumping between different sets of characters to see what they're up to. Sometimes, if there is a break in trust, there can be a series of actions that follows the aftermath of the broken trust within the resistance group.

Calling for an Interlude Action

The GM may call for an interlude action at any time except during another action. Generally, interludes occur between missions, but in some circumstances interludes can be played during a mission. Additionally, there are certain situations where a player is given the privilege of calling for an interlude action. Most commonly, the last player who went out on a mission has the privilege of calling for an interlude.

Chris: In case you were wondering, here are all the ways that a player can get the privilege to call for an interlude action: Completing a mission successfully, a flashback (pg 108), a follow-up action from broken trust (pg 122), or a denouement at the end of a relationship (pg 123).

If the GM calls for an interlude action, she simply says which characters are involved in the action. At least one

pilot must be present. The players who control those characters then decide where and how the characters meet.

Non-GM players are also sometimes given a privileged interlude action. Most commonly this is because their pilot has completed a mission. This privilege allows them to call for an interlude action on their own. This action must include their pilot, but all other characters are only included at the player's option. After they have named the participants, the players who control those characters decide where and how their characters meet. The pilot's player must use this privilege before another mission is started.

In other cases when a non-GM player gets the privilege of calling for an interlude, it must be used immediately or it is lost. The specific rules for each are explained where appropriate.

Selecting a Judge and Initiating an Interlude Action

Once a player has called for an interlude, the first thing you should do is select a judge for the Interlude. The judge is a player set aside to make a judgement on the mechanical outcome of the interlude action. Usually, the judge should be the last player who benefitted from an interlude. In times where this is unclear, the GM should judge or pick a judge. Under no circumstances should the judge be the same player who called for the action, and under no

circumstances should the judge control a character during the interlude action.

Before the action starts, the Judge should look at the characters' record sheets and discuss the possible outcomes of the action.

Chris: For more on the restrictions to outcomes of interludes, see pgs 108-109.

Once all this is set, the players involved in the interlude action briefly discuss under what circumstances their characters would like meet, what they're doing together, and the general state of things before the action starts. The GM then initiates the action by describing the exact situation in which the action starts, and the players begin to play the action.

Maria: Hey, Damien. I'm about to call for another briefing action and you still haven't used your privileged interlude yet. Want to?

Damien: Uh, I dunno.

Maria: All you have to do is say who you want involved in the action and we'll go from there.

Damien: Okay, let's do an action with Sara and Megan, since she's my primary anchor.

Maria: Great! ... Hmm ... can anyone remember who had the last interlude?

Chris: Nope.

Phoebe: Huh ... no.

Damien: Don't look at me.

Maria: Okay, I guess I'm the judge for this action, then. Phoebe and Damien, where do Sara and Megan meet?

Phoebe: Maybe there's a party after the successful mission and we're there?

Damien: Okay, but I think Sara would get overwhelmed. Maybe she's sitting outside and you come out to check up on her.

Phoebe: Great.

Maria: Okay, so you're sitting down on the front steps. There's a party going on inside, there's lights and music which is a huge extravagance, and the sound of lots of people talking. It gets louder for a second as Megan opens the door, then it quiets down again as she shuts it.

Playing out an Interlude Action

During an interlude action, all players who own characters taking part in the action tell us what their characters do and say. Largely, the actions should simply consist of the characters' interactions. If it's necessary (like if a character moves to a new location), the GM controls and describes the environment of the action.

Phoebe: When you play out an interlude, you don't need to feel bound into the initial situation that the GM sets up for the interlude. If your character would want to go and do something else, just say so.

Chris: But if you walk off and leave someone hanging, they might not like you very much.

Damien: What do you do if the characters split up?

Maria: Often, that means it's the end of the action. If it isn't, it's best to follow the pilot.

Damien: What if some people get into a competition or a fight? Who wins?

Chris: It's not a big deal, really.

Maria: True, but generally that's the GM's call. The pilot with the higher bliss should usually come out ahead on confrontations during interlude actions, though.

At the GM or controlling players' option, new characters can be added to the action, except if the action is a privileged action, in which case this is at the option of the player who called for the action.

Chris: Sometimes, when you play out an interlude action as a pilot, you'll have a specific result that you want. In that case, you'll want to try to steer interactions towards a specific type. But other times, you'll just want to let things play out and see what develops.

Because they aren't mechanically complex, interlude actions don't take a lot of time to play out. Generally speaking, an interlude action shouldn't last more than 5 minutes. In some rare cases, it might go as high as ten. The ideal interlude action takes 2 or 3 minutes to play out. Once the characters have had some significant, meaningful interaction, cut it short. The Judge is the player who has the final authority over when the action ends.

Closing the Action: Trust Breaking, Judging, and Consequences

After the Judge calls the action to a close, it's time to resolve the consequences of the interlude. There are two parts to this decision.

First, any player may say that one of the characters that they control had their trust broken by another character's actions during that action. If this is the case, the trust in the relationship goes down by one, with attendant consequences. This results in a follow-up action, as well.

Only one relationship can suffer a trust loss from any given action. If multiple people claim that their trust was broken, the Judge decides which betrayal was more central to the action, and that one has mechanical effect.

After there has been an opportunity to discuss trust breaking, the Judge decides on an outcome for the action,

depending on the actions and behavior of the characters. There are four common types of actions, as well as some additional sorts that will be mentioned later. The four common types are described below.

Trauma Relief

If the action has focused largely on the pilot dealing with his own problems and fears and concerns, rather than on the relationship between him and another character, and the Pilot has any Trauma, the action can be a Trauma relief action for that Pilot. Trauma relief reduces the Pilot's Trauma by one.

Stress Relief

If the action is focused on problems in a relationship, whether newly emerging or long-held, and that relationship has any Stress, the action can be a Stress relief action for that relationship. Stress relief reduces the Stress on the relationship to zero.

Trust Building

If the action is focused on developing, defining, or reaffirming the core of the relationship and that relationship has less than five Trust and no Stress, the action can be a Trust building action for that relationship. Trust building increases the Trust of that relationship by one.

Intimacy Building

If the action is focused on escalating intimacy in a relationship, in any way, and the relationship has less than five Intimacy, the action might be an Intimacy Building action

for that relationship. Intimacy building raises the intimacy for that relationship by one.

There are also additional restrictions on intimacy building. Depend on the present intimacy of the relationship, a certain minimum of action must be taken to increase intimacy. These are only minimums, and are listed in the chart on the next page.

Maria: It's important to remember that the Judge may not determine that the action has "no outcome." Every interlude action has some affect on its participants.

The Judge's choice is final. If she wants, she may ask questions of the other players watching the action or even those that controlled characters during the action in order to make the decision, but once it is made it is fixed.

Chris: Sometimes you don't get what you want out of an action. That's okay!

After the Judge has decided what sort of outcome the action has had, mark down the mechanical changes to the affected relationships. Check to see if Stress is now higher than Trust -- if it is, you must drop Trust by one and reduce Stress to zero.

Intimacy	Level Name	Required Action
One	Names and Eyes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange Names • Make Eye Contact
Two	Hands and Mouths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical contact • Involved conversation • Sing together • Work on a project together • Share food together
Three	Touch and Mess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affectionate physical contact • Personal conversation • Make food together • Get drunk together • Get into a fight
Four	Blood and Spit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kiss • Touch Sexually • See each other naked • Exchange blood • Physically fight for real
Five	Sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have sex

Phoebe (as Megan): Sara, what's wrong? Are you angry at me for something?

Damien (as Sara): I take her hands and then just hug her. "I'm sorry, it's just that ... I'm sorry. Don't go back in there. Stay with me."

Phoebe: I... people will notice!

Damien: Who cares if people notice! I love you! I don't care if anyone knows it. I start shouting "I love you!"

Phoebe: "Be quiet be ..." Megan storms off.

Maria (as judge): And let's end the action there. I think that that was definitely stress relief.

Damien: I think my trust was broken.

Phoebe: Okay, that means I get a follow-up action...

Maria (as GM): Okay, so we're in the back of an old convenience store. It's mostly been looted, but we've come across a huge flat of old cheap canned beer and have been laying into it. We're both well past drunk already.

Chris (as Josh): Dude, what's up between you and Sara, anyway?

Maria (as Keenan): Ahw, hell, I dunno, I mean, nothing really, she's just gotten all weird and girly on me all of a sudden.

Chris: Uh ... what do you mean by that?

Maria: She's pretty cute and all, but she's really not all that. Lousy lay, and now she wants to talk about 'our relationship' all the time. Fuck her.

Chris: Oh, fuck that noise! I haul back and hit him.

Maria: What the hell man?!

Chris: I don't listen, I just keep hitting him. "Don't talk about her like that! You don't get to talk about her like that!"

Maria: I'm not hitting back, I'm just trying to defend myself. "Jesus, dude, get a handle on yourself."

Damien (as Judge): Okay, let's cut there. You're definitely fighting for real, so that's intimacy building.

Maria: Was anyone's trust broken?

Chris: Nah, not really. I trust Keenan about as far as I can throw him, anyway.

Trust Breaking and Follow-up Actions

If there was Trust-breaking in the action, who-ever controlled the character whose behavior caused the break gets the privilege of calling for a follow-up action. A follow-up

action can involve any characters at all (it need not even feature pilots). The follow up action should be connected, loosely or directly, to the trust-breaking which initiated it.

Special Considerations

Denouement

A denouement is a special interlude action which occurs after a relationship has been destroyed, at the option of the controllers of the characters in that relationship. It is called for by them, focuses on the ending of their relationship, and has no mechanical effect.

Rebuilding Actions

If the action has two characters with a destroyed relationship, a possible outcome of the action is Rebuilding. This starts a new relationship between the characters rated at one intimacy and one trust.

Humanization actions

If there are no pilot characters in the action, it is a humanization action, which focuses on the relationship between two non-pilot characters. A humanization action starts a special relationship between two non-pilot characters, which has Intimacy equal to whatever is demonstrated during the action and Trust set to two. Further humanization action raise Trust by one.

Absent Characters

If a character is absent from the group, it's not generally appropriate to call for an action with him.

Declining Actions

A player may always opt not to call for an interlude action even if the rules say that they are allowed to. Generally, if you do not take a action when it is allowed, the opportunity is lost. If a pilot's player does not use her privileged action between one mission and the next, she loses that privilege. However, she may call for it at any time, even right before a briefing starts.

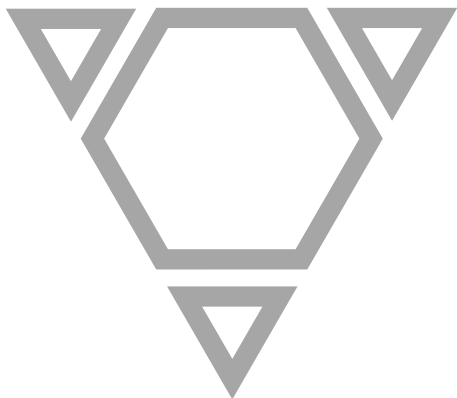
Causing Harm and Death during Interludes

A heavily traumatized pilot may cause harm or even death to non-pilot characters during an interlude action. Whether or not harm was caused is up to the Judge, although it should generally be quite obvious. A pilot with three trauma may cause harm during an interlude action (and kill harmed characters), a pilot with five or more trauma may kill a non-pilot character during an interlude action. Causing death or harm may cancel out the ordinary effects of the action, depending on the context.

Pilots with less trauma simply cannot bring themselves to carry out such actions.

Chapter Summary

- 1) Interlude actions focus on the pilot's relationships.
- 2) Generally, the GM calls for interlude actions, but pilots who have completed a mission also gain that privilege. Privilege can also be gained in other ways.
- 3) To call for an action, simply name the characters involved, and the owners of those characters decide the situation that they meet in.
- 4) The judge of an action may not control a character in the action, and is generally the player who last benefitted from an interlude.
- 5) To open the action, the GM describes the environment.
- 6) The players of the characters show them interacting, describing what they say and do.
- 7) When the judge has decided on the result of the action, she calls the action to a close.
- 8) The possible results are intimacy building, trust building, trauma relief and stress relief. "No result" is not possible. There are other restrictions on when certain results may be given.
- 9) Anyone can declare that the trust of any character that they own was broken during the action. The trust in that relationship goes down by one, and the player who broke trust gets the privilege to immediately call for a follow-up action.
- 10) Keep calling for interludes until the GM calls for a new briefing action.



Briefing Actions

Briefing actions are the third most common type of action in the game of *Bliss Stage*, and are considerably more restrained in their structure and contents than either mission or interlude actions. Briefing actions serve to introduce a mission. They usually happen in the authority figure's office or in some sort of operations room, although as you become more experienced you might branch out into other settings for a briefing action.

During a briefing action, the GM (usually in the voice of the authority figure) will explain the basics of the mission, delineate the mission goals, and pick a pilot and anchor for the mission or ask for volunteers. Pilots and anchors will ask questions about the mission, and pilots will decide whether to accept the mission or shirk it. The main me-

chanical impact of a briefing action is the establish a new mission and pick a pilot and anchor for it, but there may also be other effects.

After a briefing action, move directly into the first mission action of the mission that you've just established, unless no one accepted the mission, in which case have more interlude actions or move straight into another briefing action.

Calling for a Briefing Action

The GM may call for a briefing action at any time that another action is not in progress. Any other player who has the privilege to call for an action may interrupt to call for their privileged action instead -- as soon as a briefing action starts, all these privileges are lost. Once all such privileged actions have been resolved, the briefing action begins.

Phoebe: These privileged actions must be resolved before the briefing action takes place. For instance, if Maria says "Klaxons are blazing -- the base is under attack" and I have a privileged action left, my action should take place as we're scrambling to get ready.

Chris: There are three ways that someone can have this sort of privileged action, as follows:

- They can have a privileged interlude action because they were a pilot on the last mission.
- They can have a follow-up action because they broke someone's trust

- They can have a final action and a resolution action because their pilot has died or passed 108 bliss.

Initiating a Briefing Action

The GM describes how all the characters are called the location of the briefing (are there klaxons blaring? are they all called to a secret location in the middle of the night? etc) and says what anchors are present. Players may opt to not have their characters present for the action if that makes sense. At the GM's discretion, pilots who are not present may suffer as if they shirked the action (see below.)

Playing out a Briefing Action

The GM, usually in the character of the Authority Figure, describes the mission in general terms, and then specifies each of the the mission's objectives.

If any mission objective has a special relationship with other mission objectives, or has a special consequence tied to its success or failure, the GM should either mention this at this time or note them secretly. If the GM opts to keep these secret, he must mention to the players the possible effect, although he need not mention what goal it is tied to or who it targets.

During this time, the pilots may ask questions about the exact nature of the mission and its goals, which the authority figure answers according to his knowledge and discretion.

After the mission has been explained, the mission goals and consequences laid out, and any questions are answered, the authority figure must either pick a pilot and an anchor for the mission, or must ask for volunteers.

All anchors always accept the mission. Pilots, however, may choose to accept or reject the mission. If they choose to shirk the mission, there are various consequences, and the authority figure must pick another pilot for the mission. If all pilots shirk, the mission is simply failed. Likewise, if the authority figure asks for volunteers, and none come forward, the consequences of shirking are applied to all pilots.

Closing a Briefing Action

After a pilot and an anchor have been chosen for the mission, the anchor's player describes to the pilot's player how the anchor prepares the pilot for the mission, talking in the anchor's voice and working through the beginnings of engaging the pilot's ANIMA and bringing the pilot into the dream. This can just work directly into the first part of the mission action.

Maria: Okay, a couple of days later, Jim calls you all into his office. "We've been picking up some very strange readings from across the bay," he says, "and we need an experienced pilot investigate it. The mission's objectives are to cross the bridge, going undetected the entire time, and take as much reconnaissance as you can. Anna, you're it."

Phoebe (as Anna): No.

Maria: "No?" He stands up. "What the fuck do you mean, 'no?'"

Phoebe: Josh already got perfectly good data that we haven't even started going through yet. You just don't want to admit ... GRah! I storm off.

Maria: Sara, get suited up. Nathan will anchor you. Anna and I need to ... have a talk.

For another example briefing action, see the First Action chapter on page 83.

Consequences of Shirking

The main consequence of a briefing action is to establish the goal of the next mission and to choose a pilot and an anchor for the next mission. However, if one or more pilots opted to shirk the mission, there are attendant consequences for those pilots. Any shirking pilots have their relationship with the authority figure gain one stress, and also those pilots gain one trauma. If a pilot shirks multiple missions in a row, these effects are cumulative (for the second consecutive shirking, two stress and two trauma, for the third, three stress and three trauma, and so on.)

Maria: So, Anna totally shirked her mission in that last action. This is the first time she's done that in a while, so it's one trauma, one stress, right.

Phoebe (marks it down): Yeah. That brings me up to three stress with Jim. One more and we'll lose some trust.

Special Considerations

Briefings not given by the authority figure

Other characters will have things that they want the pilots to do, and some of them will try to get the pilots to enter their ANIMa without the permission or knowledge of the authority figure. Other times, the authority figure may be absent or unable to give a briefing, and someone else must give it in his stead.

If the secondary characters involved are controlled by the GM, the briefing action can proceed as normal, with that character taking the role of the authority figure. In other cases, the GM may ask for the loan of that character for the duration of the action or the GM may specify the mission goals and structure to another player, who then briefs the pilot (and anchor).

Secret briefings

It is possible that there will be situations in which the authority figure briefs a single pilot for a special mission that he does not call all the pilots together for. In these cases, the other pilots should not be penalized for shirking.

Broken relationship with the authority figure

In the case that the pilot's relationship with the authority figure is broken, and he still shirks a mission, he takes terror equal to the stress he would have otherwise taken.

Chapter Summary

- 1) A briefing action serves to introduce a mission.
- 2) It is always called for by the GM.
- 3) In the briefing action, the authority figure informs the pilots and anchors about the nature of the mission.
- 4) Additionally, the GM should clarify any consequences of the mission, and answer questions from the players. If there are secret consequences, she should inform the players.
- 5) When a pilot and anchor are chosen, the action ends.
- 6) A pilot chosen for a mission may decline, at the cost of damaging his relationship to the authority figure and taking on some trauma.



Mission Planning

One of the foremost tasks of the GM in a game of *Bliss Stage* is to plan the game's missions. Usually, for this, the GM is going to be presenting missions that, in the fiction of the game, the authority figure himself has planned for the pilots to undertake. Sometimes, the GM will be presenting missions that other people have planned, or that have to be undertaken in times of emergency.

Missions are generally quite simple to plan -- they consist of 2-8 mission objectives, possibly inter-related, possibly with consequences for failure or success. If you can't think of your own missions, though, you can use one of the examples that's provided for you at the end of this section.

Basic Techniques

Theme

The first thing to do for a mission is get a general sense of the theme of the mission. This is just a summary of the mission in general: where it takes place and what the pilot is trying to do. “Defend the base from attackers,” “scout enemy headquarters,” “test the new stealth array” and “come to the assistance of our allies in the west” are all perfectly reasonable mission themes.

The mission’s theme should be tied to at least one of the group’s hopes. For instance, a group that had the hope “I hope we can defeat the aliens militarily” could have many missions with themes like “fight off the aliens,” “attack an enemy outpost,” or “track down and assassinate enemy commander.” A group that had the hope “I hope we understand the Bliss” could have mission goals like “protect Simon while he sleeps,” “test new scientific equipment” and “scout the surrounding dream world.”

Phoebe: Something I’ve seen GMs do, which I like, is to give each mission an evocative title, something like “Once Around the Sun” or “Surprise Party.” This is fun: It makes the game feel like a manga or TV series, cut up into these little chunks.

Goals

A mission is, in short, a series of two to eight goals. These goals are simply various possible things that the pilot could accomplish that are in keeping with the theme of the mis-

sion. Each goal will be the subject of one or more mission actions, so try not to make them too trivial or too large. In general, try to keep the goals separately achievable, so that if one goal is failed the mission may still continue. Also, try to keep the goals so that they are worthwhile to achieve.

For instance, imagine a mission with the theme “protect Simon while he sleeps,” like was mentioned above. A bad set of goals would be “Keep the aliens from getting to Simon for the first hour,” “keep the aliens from getting to Simon for the second hour,” and “keep the aliens from getting to Simon for the third hour.” These goals are intertwined -- if you fail the first, there is not much point in even trying the other two. Also, they are basically identical. A good set of goals for the same mission would be “gather scientific readings,” “observe alien behavior” and “keep Simon safe.” These goals are all separately achievable and they are all noticeably different from each other.

The number of goals in a mission also determines its difficulty. A mission with two goals is quite easy. A mission with eight goals will have enormous costs to victory. Most missions should be around four or five goals.

Maria: That’s it for the basics of mission design! The stuff ahead is more complicated: If it’s your first time *GMing Bliss Stage*, you only need to know about theme and goals, above. Skip ahead to the examples on page 144.

Advanced Techniques

Multiple Pilots on a Mission

There are many circumstances when a mission might require multiple pilots. Perhaps it is so difficult it needs more than one ANIMa to attempt it. Perhaps all the pilots are scrambled to repel an invading army. Perhaps one pilot has, unauthorized, entered the dream world in order to help another pilot.

There are three basic ways of having two pilots on a mission: Totally separately, with shared goals, or acting together.

The simplest is simply to have the pilots operate totally separately. Both pilots have their own list of goals which they are operating on their own to accomplish. In an extreme case, perhaps one pilot takes the first half of the mission, another pilot the second half of the mission. For a little more connection, the two pilots mission goals might be related to each other (see below): The first pilot succeeding in a goal might open new possible goals for a second pilot.

Another possibility is to have mission goals which either pilot can accomplish. For instance, in a otherwise completely separate mission, there might be four alien fighters, which any pilot on can destroy with a successful mission action. Thus there are four mission goals that any pilot can take up if they (and their anchor) want to. A mission can have this sort of shared goal in addition to individual goals, or all the mission goals can be shared.

The last possibility is to have some mission goals which can only be achieved by the cooperation of two or more pilots. For these mission goals, things are a little more complicated. The anchors involved lead the pilots up to the point where they can accomplish the goal, then all pilots involved hit the climax of their action simultaneously. The GM uses the highest trauma in the group to threaten with. Additionally, the mission success and pilot's safety categories require one additional die for each pilot involved in the action beyond the first. All pilots roll their dice and can place them into any category, even the relationships of other pilots. Once all dice have been placed, read the results as normal, but mission success and pilot's safety results apply to all pilots, not just one.

These three possibilities are not incompatible: A mission with multiple pilots might have some goals which are individual for each pilot, some goals which are generally available, and some goals which require cooperation between pilots.

Every pilot who took at least one action in a multiple pilot mission is given a privileged action at the end of it.

Maria: Note that multiple pilot missions should have more goals than standard pilot missions, so that there's enough for everyone to do, and enough risk to go around.

Related Goals

Goals are generally unrelated from each other -- any one of them can be accomplished even if previous goals have been failed. However, sometimes the GM may want to

establish related goals, so that the success or failure of one goal affects other goals. Here are some ways to do this.

Sequence of events

The mission goals come in a specific order. One goal must be attempted before another goal can be attempted. It does not matter if the first goal succeeds or fails, only that it is attempted at all.

Chain reaction

Failing a particular goal automatically causes one or more other goals to fail.

Prerequisites

A goal must be achieved before another goal may even be attempted at all.

Plan B

Failing a particular goal allows another goal to be attempted.

This isn't the limit of ways to relate different goals! There's lots of other combinations.

Chris: Be really careful about using related goals. In general, if there's any way at all that you can think the goals could be accomplished separately, they should not be related.

Rewards and Consequences

Sometimes, it's appropriate for the success or failure of a mission goal to have mechanical consequences outside of this particular mission. These sorts of effects can be assigned in one of three ways. The GM may announce them during the mission briefing, the GM may write them down secretly during the briefing, or the group may decide that they are appropriate when resolving the effects of a mission action.

If the GM writes down secret consequences during the briefing, she must announce that there are secret consequences to some goals of this mission. She must announce the largest scale of these consequences. If there are secret rewards, she only needs to say that there are secret rewards.

Listed below are the possible consequences for failure and rewards for success. You can make up your own, but under absolutely no circumstances can the success or failure of a mission goal affect any values: bliss, terror, trauma, intimacy, trust, or stress.

In general, positive rewards should be attached to success, negative rewards should be attached to failure. If the situation merits it, however, these might be reversed.

Rewards and consequences may be attached to more than one goal. For instance, you could say "if these two goals succeed, this effect occurs." Or "If any of these goals are failed, this effect occurs.

Listed below are the possible rewards for success. While rewards aren't limited to just these, no reward should directly change any values, either a pilot's values or a relationship's values.

New Face

A new character is introduced to the group. This character has a default starting relationship with everyone, except the pilot that accomplished the mission goal in question.

Recovery

A harmed character is restored to normal status.

Return

An absent character is returned to the group.

Anchor Training

A secondary character now can function as an anchor, if necessary.

Pilot Training

A secondary character now can function as a pilot. Only use this in a longer campaign. (See "Longer Campaigns" on pg 164)

New Technology

New types of missions are now possible.

Next we're going to take a look at the possible consequences of failure. Like with rewards, you can make up your

own consequences. However, they should never directly change any values.

Harm

A non-pilot character is harmed. If a character suffers harm a second time, they are killed.

Death

A non-pilot character is killed.

Bliss

A non-pilot character falls into the Bliss. Like death, this destroys all relationships.

Absence

A character leaves the group.

Secret Goals

Like with secret consequences and rewards, the GM might have secret goals which are not revealed until midway through the mission, or are perhaps related to the success and failure of other goals. This is fine, but like with the consequences and rewards, she must write them down before the mission starts.

Wild Card Goals

A wild card goal is a mission goal like “do whatever is necessary.” Essentially, a wild card goal requires that the pilot declare a hotshot goal (see pg 106) based on their present understanding of the situation.

Out of Dream Missions

Once you're very comfortable with the structure of missions, you might try some missions which take place partially in the real world. For these missions, there is no anchor. Relationships only give dice if that person is helpful to the pilot, directly or indirectly. The world is always described by the GM, the pilot's safety category is interpreted as physical or emotional harm to the pilot.

Example Missions

Here are some example missions to get you started. You can use these wholesale or take inspiration from them and design your own.

Defend the Base!

- Keep aliens away from the base

 - If failed, character is harmed

- Duel with alien ace fighter

- Decimate alien forces

- Sneak attack!

 - If failed, a character is killed

 - This is a secret goal.

Test the new ANIMa platform

- Form ANIMa

- Walking test

- Sensors test

- Weapons test

- Test new disguise array

 - If successful, diguise missions are possible

- Engage enemy patrol

Investigate Mysterious Phenomena

Set up sensor array

Locate dream disturbance

Don't get caught in the disturbances

Fight nightmare creatures

Take readings

Recon deep in enemy territory

Evade patrols

If failed, then fight patrols

Map the area

Find good ambush sites

Locate secret base

If successful, then infiltrate base

Anchor Training

Form ANIMa

Visualization test

Guidance test

If all mission objectives successful, character is now an anchor

Assault Enemy Base

Approach enemy base stealthily

If failed, then fight patrols

Defeat external defenses

Enter the base

If failed, remaining goals fail

Locate intelligence headquarters

If succeeded, obtain files

If obtain files fails, destroy fails

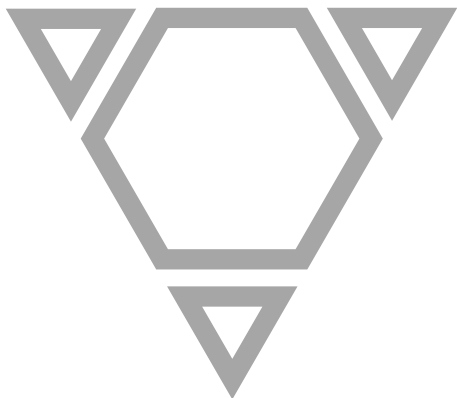
Locate core command

If succeeded, destroy core command

Escape base

Chapter Summary

- 1) One of the central tasks of GMing a campaign of *Bliss Stage* is planning the missions.
- 2) All missions should have a general theme: where the pilot is, what he is doing, or anything like that.
- 3) Each mission is made up of a series of goals, each one of which will be the focus of at least one mission action.
- 4) In addition, there are many ways to elaborate on the basic mission design.



Final and Resolution Actions

Final actions and resolution actions are only taken when a pilot's trauma exceeds 6 or his bliss exceeds 108. After the pilot's final action, he will henceforth be dead or absent, and then that pilot's player gets the privilege of resolving one of the group's Hopes in a resolution action.

Final actions are the way that the group says goodbye to a pilot character. Resolution actions are the way that the

group sees the effects of their struggle on the world at large.

Traumatic Death

When a pilot passes 6 trauma, that pilot's player must immediately call for a final action. This occurs immediately following whatever caused his trauma to raise past 6 (usually during a mission action) and the pilot is free to specify any details. The action plays out quite simply: the pilot's player says what happens. Other players may state actions of characters that they normally control, but these are taken as only suggestions. There are only two limitations to this: the first is that the pilot's player cannot directly control other player's pilots, nor kill them, nor alter any relationships, although they can still be involved in the action; and the second is that no more than two non-pilot characters may be harmed or killed. The action climaxes with the character's death, and should close (again, at the pilot's player's discretion) shortly afterwards.

If this final action resolves a hope, mark that hope off and note how it resolved. If it does not resolve a hope, the pilot's player picks a hope and scratches it off. This hope may not be resolved during this game, even during final resolution.

Phoebe: Sometimes, rarely, a pilot might get a traumatic death outside of a mission. If that happens, the pilot's traumatic death might be less immediate. Nonetheless, it should be the next action.

Maria: When a character dies, remember to check the bliss generated by the broken relationships that they leave in their wake.

Anna, played by Phoebe, is fighting her way to the core of the alien base. Jenny, played by Damien, is anchoring her. Outgunned and overwhelmed, plus some unlucky rolling by Phoebe, and Anna's trauma passes 6.

Phoebe: Yup, that last point of terror did it. That's it for Anna.

Damien: Sad.

Maria: Yup, but you still get your traumatic death action.

Phoebe: What are the hopes again?

Chris: I hope we can raise a second generation and I hope we can defeat the aliens.

Phoebe: Okay, so I'm crashing around inside the alien base, totally overwhelmed by the hordes attacking me.

Damien (as Jenny): You got to get out! You've got to get out!

Phoebe (as Anna): "I can see it's brain from here! If I can just make it." I pause for a second. "Tell Archer about me, okay, Jenny? Promise?"

Damien: No! Stop! Don't do it!

Phoebe: I'm rocketing towards the brain and blowing myself up, taking the base out with me.

Chris: Awesome.

Maria: Wow. Cool. I guess that does resolve "I hope we can defeat the aliens."

Phoebe: Yeah...

Bliss Out:

If a pilot passes 108 bliss, he is said to have "blissed out," which can mean any number of things, at the pilot's discretion. The default assumption is that the pilot drifts off into the bliss, never to awaken, but a great number of other final actions are possible. The only limitation is that (with one exception) the pilot may no longer be a member of this particular resistance group, nor can they continue as a significant character in the game. Here are some possibilities for the final action:

- The pilot falls asleep, never to awaken.
- The pilot gets lost in the dream world.
- The pilot merges with or allies with the aliens.
- The pilot goes off to start another resistance group.
- Disgusted, the pilot leaves the group, never to return.
- The pilot is killed.
- The pilot's ANIMa enters the real world, rampaging around before finally being stopped.
- Something else

- The pilot replaces the authority figure as the head of the resistance.

In all cases but the last, treat the pilot's relationships as broken, and count the bliss they generate. In the last case, the pilot's player replaces the current GM as the Game Master, handing the old GM control over all his remaining anchor characters. (see page 163)

Like in a traumatic death, the pilot's player has complete discretion over his final action if he blisses out, although he may not directly control other people's pilots, nor may he adjust relationships, nor may he harm nor kill more than two secondary characters.

If the pilot's player resolved a hope with his final action, note how it was resolved and mark it off. If no hope was resolved, the player must now take a resolution action (see below.)

Resolution Actions

The player of a pilot who blissed out and did not resolve a hope with his final action is entitled to a resolution action. This must immediately follow from their pilot's final action.

To call for a resolution action, the pilot picks an undressed hope to resolve and announces it to the entire group. Then he initiates the resolution action by describing a scene where we will see this hope resolved or where we will see the after effects of its resolution.

Like with a final action, the pilot's controls much of the resolution action, although he can yield control of various characters to other players (often their normal owners.) The pilot's player is the ultimate authority, however. Once the hope is satisfactorily resolved, the action closes.

Phoebe: Make sure that, when you resolve a hope, you don't also resolve other related hopes. That's important to watch out for.

Sara, played by Damien, and Josh, played by Chris, are involved in an interlude action where they have a horrible fight. Sara storms out.

Damien: I think you broke my trust, there.

Chris: Yeah, and that kills our relationship. With four intimacy, that gives us both eight bliss.

Damien: Oh, man, that puts Sara over 108.

Maria: Okay, so now you get a resolution action. Anything you want, but the one remaining hope is "can we raise a second generation" so it should address that.

Damien: Okay, I've got a plan. I think that later that night, Sara sneaks into Archer's room.

Maria (as Archer): Ma... ma?

Damien (as Sara): Shhh... yes, I'm your mama now. C'mon... I pick him up... mama's gonna take you really far away from here, somewhere where we'll

both be safe and you won't have to worry anymore, okay?

Maria: He falls asleep on your shoulder.

Damien: Okay, I just quietly carry him out of the base and go off. None of your ever see me again. The answer to the hope, I guess, is that we can't raise a second generation, but maybe I can.

Phoebe: Wow.

Chris: That was really cool.

Maria: Nice.

Damien: Uh, thanks.

Final Resolution Action

When there is only one pilot remaining, that pilot's player may call for the final resolution action. By this point, all of your hopes have already been erased or resolved, so the final resolution does not resolve any hopes. Rather, it serves to tie together all the existing resolutions, and give a clear ending to the campaign.

Like with any other resolution action, everything is up to the discretion of the pilot, in this case the last pilot in the game.

There is no need to wait until the pilot passes 6 trauma or 108 bliss to begin final resolution. However, if the pilot does

reach either of these states, final resolution must happen immediately.

Chris: Okay, I'm just going to go into final resolution right away, if no one minds.

Phoebe: Go ahead.

Damien: Knock yourself out.

Chris: So, I think that about a week passes since we defeated the last of the aliens. The gangs begin to notice that the remotes aren't striking any more, and no one has fallen asleep from the Bliss. They're all up here, with me as a de facto leader after my dad died, trying to figure out what to do. Why don't all of you be leaders and we'll play it out a bit?

Maria: Okay.

Phoebe: Look, what are you saying, exactly?

Chris: They're all dead. We beat them. They're never coming back.

Damien: So where does that leave us? I mean, that's not going to feed anyone.

Chris: Nope.

Maria: And there's fighting in the streets now. No one knows what to do. Everyone thinks it's the end of the world.

Chris: Yup.

Phoebe: So what are you going to do about it?

Chris: Not my job.

Maria: Not your job? You can't just!

Chris: I stand up and look as mean as I can.
"Look, people, it's not my job. I just fought a war. You sort out your own problems!" and I storm out of the room.

Chris: I think that people gradually settle back into life as it was before the Bliss. Borders get redrawn, but no one really learns anything. There's still tons of wars and crap everywhere. And I don't think that Josh has anything to do with it. I think he holes up in some old city and just lives alone until he dies.

Maria: Yikes.

Phoebe: Cool.

Chris: Yeah, that's it. I just can't see him doing anything else after all that.

Damien: I think it was basically what we were heading towards.

Maria: Okay, awesome, people, that's the end of it.

About resolving hopes

Before initiating a final action or a resolution action, take a look at the hopes that might be resolved by that action. In particular, look at the old mission sheets for the missions which were related to those hopes. The resolving player should take a moment to think about these previous actions and missions, and how they relate to the hope in question. Resolving a hope is the biggest decision in *Bliss Stage*, make your decision about how the hope resolves based on the history of the game you've played.

That's not to say that the past must dictate how the hope resolves. It is totally possible that you might meet with failure after failure only to succeed at the last moment, or meet with success after success only to find that it was all for naught. The final decision is left to you, the player of the game, as to what is appropriate for the game's ending.

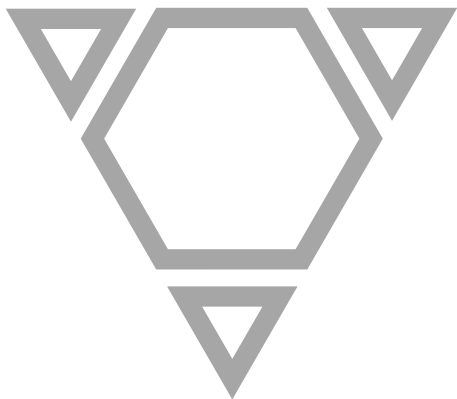
Special Considerations

Longer or Shorter Campaigns

In longer or shorter campaigns, these rules may work differently. That's covered by the appropriate alternate rules section on pg 164.

Chapter Summary

- 1) A pilot can go out by passing 6 trauma or 108 bliss.
- 2) If a pilot passes 6 trauma, they die a traumatic death. When a pilot dies a traumatic death, their player gets to go into all the details of how they die violently right then and there. If, in doing so, a hope is resolved, that's all good. If a hope is not resolved, the pilot's player picks one of the hopes and crosses it off. It will never be resolved.
- 3) If a pilot passes 108 bliss, they immediately get to decide how the pilot goes out, in any way that means that they are no longer part of the resistance cell, or in any way that they become the new authority figure. Afterwards, they may stage an action which resolves any one hope.
- 4) Once all hopes are resolved, the one remaining pilot may initiate final resolution at any time. Final resolution ties up all the hopes and gives a vision of the future of humanity. It is the last action of the game.
- 5) When resolving hopes, be sure not to negate previous resolutions of different hopes.



Special Circumstances

Many special circumstances might come up in your play. Characters will die, leave the group, become pregnant. The power structures in your resistance cell might change. Similarly, you might find yourself in a situation with too many players, or too few. Or you might decide that you want to play an on-going campaign which has no definite ending. Or, perhaps, you only have a few engagements to play the campaign to its finish.

This chapter offers suggestions and rules for dealing with these situations as they emerge during your play.

Death

Characters can die in many ways: Pilots can die from passing 108 bliss or 6 trauma, anchors can die from missions gone wrong, and any non-pilot character can be harmed or killed in a number of other ways.

If a character dies, all of that character's relationships are broken. As per normal for broken relationships, the other characters in the relationships gain bliss equal to twice the intimacy of the relationship.

Relationships with dead characters cannot be used in actions. Dead characters may not be brought back to life.

Pregnancy and Birth

A female character who is sexually active might become pregnant, at the agreement of the playing who owns that character and the GM. A mother has an initial relationship with her unborn child of 3 intimacy / 3 trust, which includes the +1 intimacy for direct blood relationships. The father has a relationship of 2 intimacy / 2 trust, again including the +1 intimacy for direct blood relationships. All other character have a relationship of 1 intimacy, 1 trust with the child.

If the mother's relationship with the child is broken, the pregnancy miscarries and the child is killed.

Becoming an Anchor

A character may become an anchor via anchor training missions. When a character becomes an anchor, select a special ability for them and, if the GM owns them, give ownership to a non-GM player.

The GM should endeavor to have at least two anchors in the group.

Becoming a Pilot

In a long game, a character may become a pilot via a pilot training mission. For such a character, keep all existing relationships (including bliss gain from broken relationships), and pick a pilot template to fill in the rest. Relationships with other pilots lose one trust, immediately.

Changing Authority Figures

Either via a pilot's final action or in the normal course of play, the authority figure may end up being usurped or replaced. The character replacing the authority figure cannot be a pilot or an anchor and, if they previously were, cannot continue in that role.

When this happens, the player who owns the new authority figure becomes the new GM of the game. The old GM takes over any anchor or pilot characters that the new GM owns.

Alternatively, if the other player does not wish to be the GM, the old GM may simply take ownership of the new authority figure.

If this happens and the old authority figure is still alive, they lose one trust in all characters.

Changing Hopes

Sometimes it becomes clear in play that a hope was inappropriate for the campaign. Maybe it was too large in scope, maybe it was too small in scope, maybe it was just the tip of a more important question. Regardless, if this is the case, hopes may be changed between engagements by mutual consent of all the players of the game. When you do this, either elaborate on the old hope or pick a new hope from the list, as appropriate.

Longer Campaigns

Some groups like to play extraordinarily long role-playing campaigns, lasting for months and years. If you want to play a longer game of *Bliss Stage*, here's how to go about it.

In the beginning of the game, select two hopes (regardless of the number of players). Whenever a pilot dies or blisses out, he may resolve or remove one of these hopes, and then picks a new hope (not previously resolved) from the list to be resolved. That player may, at their option, create a new character to be a new pilot or promote an existing character to pilot status via a pilot training mission.

When you decide to end the campaign, simply do not pick new hopes. When all hopes have been resolved or removed, the non-GM player who resolved or removed the least hopes gets the privilege of final resolution.

Shorter Campaigns

For a marginally shorter campaign, give every pilot a point of bliss after each interlude action.

For a substantially shorter game, have less players choose to play pilots. Players without pilots should play the anchors.

One Pilot Games

It is possible to play a campaign with a single pilot. This campaign will be significantly shorter than standard *Bliss Stage* campaign. If you want it to go on a long time, allow the pilot to reach higher-than-normal bliss before ending the game.

One player controls the pilot, and no other characters. Another player is the GM, controlling the authority figure. All other characters are divided between the GM and the remaining players.

A one-pilot game has one hope. After the hope has been resolved, the non-pilot players collaborate on the final resolution.

Two Player Campaign

Bliss Stage may be played with only two players. A two player game is naturally a single-pilot game (see above.) One player owns the pilot, the other player is the GM and portrays all other characters, including anchors.

During interlude actions, the pilot's player plays the pilot and the GM plays all other characters. During a humanization action, the GM loans control of one or more characters to the other player.

For the climax of mission actions, replace "The Pilot is Safe" with the table below.

Pilot's Safety

Die Result	Game Result
+ (5-6)	The pilot stays safe. The anchor retains control over the dream.
0 (3-4)	The pilot's safety is jeopardized. The pilot gains one terror. The anchor loses some control of the dream: the pilot sees and hears things that the anchor did not describe to him.
- (1-2)	The pilot's safety is abandoned. The pilot gains one trauma and one terror. The anchor loses all control, and must sit helpless as the pilot describes the nightmarish things he sees and does.

Absent players

If a player is absent, their pilot does not go on any missions or participate in any interlude actions. Any anchors that they control should not be used for missions. Their secondary characters may be lent to other players for use in interlude actions.

If a player is absent long-term (and will not come back), either give permanent control of their pilot and anchor characters to a new player (remember that each player may not own more than one pilot, and the GM may not own a pilot) or say that their characters have left the group, breaking all relationships.

Guest Players

If you have a player who will not normally be visiting your group playing with you for a single engagement, they can still participate in the game, albeit in a more limited way. Here are some general avenues that you might want to pursue in such a situation.

Secondary Characters

Loan the player control of some secondary characters for the duration of play. This will allow them to participate in interlude actions. You might want to pay particular attention to these characters' relationships during this engagement.

Guest Pilot

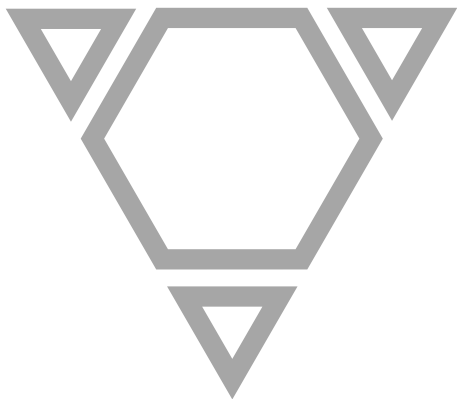
If your resistance group is one of many other resistance groups in the world, you might have the guest own a pilot character who has come in from one of these other groups to assist your local group with its military effort. In this case, the GM should prepare an appropriate pilot (probably using one of the templates) and definitely should pick this pilot for at least one mission during the engagement.

An Unstable Group

Some groups are simply unstable -- you don't know who will be able to show up, or when, or why. Although it isn't ideal, it's still possible to play *Bliss Stage* in such an environment.

The best approach to take here is to play a one pilot game, as discussed above. Choose the player who can most reliably attend engagements as the pilot. Choose the second-most reliable person as the GM. All other characters are controlled by who-ever is handy to control them.

Keep very good notes about what happened in each game, so you can fill in anyone who wasn't there.



Advice for Play

This chapter contains a few miscellaneous essays on how to play the game of *Bliss Stage*. These are not necessary for your play and should not be held as rigid rules. They are simply here to serve as inspiration, insight, and general discussion.

Maria: For this chapter, Ben is going to abandon talking through us characters and directly speak to you in his own voice, author to reader. It's a break from the style of the last few chapters, but frankly we could use the break. I hope that you can work things out without us! See ya!

Chris, Damien, Phoebe: Bye, everybody! Thanks for reading!

Owning Your Character and the Heart of the Game

There is a temptation, when playing a role-playing game which gives numerical values to things like trauma and trust, to allow the numbers written down for your character and his relationships to dictate your portrayal of that character and those relationships. So, if a relationship has a low trust value, to portray that relationship as untrusting or, if a character has a high trauma value, to portray that character as the spitting image of the traumatized victim (infantilized, quiet, and crying.)

There are some role-playing games where this sort of play is expect, in the regular course of playing the game. However, *Bliss Stage* does not have this expectation. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The values given for the characters and the relationships should never dictate your portrayal of what those characters say and do except inas-much as you make strategic decisions regarding them.

So, what do the values in the game do? Well, there are the immediate game mechanical effects (stress keeps you from building trust, intimacy gives power in missions, and so on) but, additionally and more importantly, they serve as a record of the character's past actions. A highly traumatized pilot has been through terrible things during their missions, but their reaction to it is entirely up to you, the player. If anyone tries to use the mechanics of the game to limit your portrayal or say that you shouldn't portray a character in some way, point them at this section and tell them to be quiet.

This is not to say that you should necessarily try to play against type for your character. To take the example of the highly traumatized character, the best course of action for that character's player is to be cautious during missions and attempt for trauma relief from their interlude actions, so there may be a lot of fear, gibbering, screaming, crying and self-centered conversations. But you might decide that your pilot is going to keep a stiff upper lip and not break down. That's an awesome decision! What the game's numbers will do is show you the consequences of that decision: likely a spiral of trauma and death.

In a way, allowing the cold numbers to dictate your characters' actions takes the heart out of the game. The heart of the game is that we, the players, are given control of these desperate kids in a desperate situation. They have impossible choices set before them: Who do you love more, your lover or your family? Will you kill yourself to save the world? and so on ... and they have to face them and make up their minds and live with the consequences. If you don't step in and make decisions for your characters, you're abdicating your responsibility as a player to step up and engage with these paradoxes at the heart of the game.

The single most important responsibility you have as a player of *Bliss Stage* is to take responsibility for the actions of your characters. It's also the most fun thing about playing the game. So dig in!

How to Own a Pilot

When you play a pilot, you're the primary focus of the action. During a mission, you're going to need to communicate with the anchor, make important decisions about your personal priorities versus the priorities of the authority figure and the group as a whole. In general, you and everyone will have more fun during missions if you make your decisions based on your gut feelings about what to do, rather than taking a long time to work out all the possible ways to assign your dice and which will help you the most. It's not that taking a strategic approach is bad for the game -- it won't really help or hurt you very much -- but that snap decision making makes for faster-moving and more entertaining fiction.

During interlude actions, you'll have the focus of the action be on you. Again, it's a good idea to be active. A passive pilot isn't going to get many action results except for trauma relief. It's better for everyone to actively try to get what you need out of the relationship (you should be able to see that clearly by looking at the relationship's values). If you really don't know what to do, it's sometimes good to sit back and let the other players take the lead, but during an interlude action the impetus is on your to keep things moving.

During a briefing action, you're largely just there to listen. Make sure to ask questions of the authority figure and nail down the exact course of the mission. Volunteer or shirk as you see fit.

During the final resolution actions the focus will be totally on you. You get total control over how the pilot goes out,

make sure it's appropriate and cool. Likewise, you will probably be able to resolve a hope. The thing to do here is to look honestly at all the past missions which have involved this hope, then resolve the hope in a way that clearly emerges from looking at the past. This doesn't mean that you should feel trapped by previous decisions: you aren't limited by anything. A string of failed missions can yield a last minute victory, a string of glorious successes can be eclipsed by a final failure. Rather, it just means that your resolution must acknowledge them, respect them, show what they've brought about, and then resolve the hope once and for all. There's some examples in the chapter on resolution (pg 149), and if you feel uncertain don't be afraid to ask the other players for advice.

When you're playing your pilot's action it's your time to shine. Shine!

This is what it's like for Pilots

You're it. If you can succeed, if you can overcome your own shortcomings, then humanity maybe can survive. Maybe you can do better. Maybe the world can, someday, be normal again. But if you fail, it's over. Not just for you, for everyone.

And they all know it. You can see it when he looks at you -- with a scorn barely masking his fear that a bunch of kids are going to make the difference between life and death -- or even, sometimes, when he can barely hide his pride. You can tell it in her tears after you make love, when she thinks you're sleeping, or when she runs

to embrace you after a mission and you can still see the terror in her eyes. Why can't she love you enough to show you her pain?

Most of all, you can know it from the way they look at you as you walk by them, with awe and maybe a little trepidation, like you're a thousand times cooler than a saturday morning cartoon, like you're Luke Skywalker and Jesus Christ all rolled together into the most amazing hero in the world. You know it from when she told you, with a smile, that she wanted to pilot an ANIMA when she grew up, to be a pilot just like you. The admiration, the longing, the worship in your sister's voice was so clear that it was all you could do to hide your emotion. You spent that whole night dry sobbing and dry heaving at the thought.

Try not to think that you're already hurting her. Try not to think that you use her as a shield every time you go into a fight. Try not to think of the nightmares she has, every night, worse and worse. Try to imagine that things will be better, that if you fight harder someday things will be better.

There have never been battles more terrible than these battles. There has never been a war more important than this war. But you're not fighting this war so that your little sister can go out and fight it again. No one deserves to see the things you've had seen. No one deserves to do the things you've had to do. Least of all her. If you can do it, if you can win, then no one will have to fight, ever again. Not like this. Not against these things.

And, if you lose, it's not like it will matter anyway.

How to Own the Authority Figure

The authority figure's presence looms large over the game. Even in actions that he's not physically present during will often revolve around him, his idea, his goals, and his personality. So although the authority figure is portrayed like an ordinary secondary character during interlude actions and as your mouthpiece during briefing actions, he casts a long shadow over the entire game, and how you portray him is important.

Here's the good news: Just like GMing, you can't do it wrong. The ideal authority figure is like the ideal boss, the ideal principal, the ideal commander: removed yet engaged, responsible but not meddling, firm but receptive to criticism, patient yet always busy, a leader who allows his followers to do the greatest work for him. He listens, and when he speaks, everyone listens.

Your authority figure is inevitably going to fail in some of these aspects, succeed in some others, and muddle along in most of them. How does he fulfill these ideals? How does he delude himself about them? What things does he just not have time?

Because if there's one thing that an authority figure doesn't have enough of, it's time.

This is what it's like for the Authority Figure

So here's what it is like to be an authority figure. Have you ever taken care of kids before? I mean, like, a big group of teenagers and you just know that you were never as cool and pretty as they ever were, and they hate you except when they're worshipping you? That's what it's like to be an authority figure, except for it's every damn day, and you never have a single interaction with another adult or a peer.

If you're trained for it, like if you're a teacher or a youth group leader, you can handle it. But you weren't trained for it. You survived into it, and chances are that kids are the last thing you wanted to ever deal with.

Because, you see, you're an adult who survived the Bliss. All the adults who survived had one trait in common -- insomnia. Either from stress or from drugs or from mental illness and, let's face it, by this point it's five years without sleep and, yeah, now it's "all of the above." It'd be good to know, playing the character, what he does to stay awake. Reads all the time? Pops pills? Meditation and chanting? Watches the same damn tape of Gilligan's Island over and over and over?

So here you are, in charge for all you know the last humans on the whole planet, all alone in a group of people who need you and hate you, you haven't slept in five years and studies show that, like, what, it's 72 hours before the suicidal de-

pression hits? Chances are you're having sex with at least one of the kids, and chances are that you hate yourself for that and for everything else.

That's what it's like.

How to Own your Secondary Characters

It's wonderful to play a secondary character, because you can relax. It's during an interlude, but the spotlight is not on you. While you can do all sorts of interesting things, you are not required to do anything but sympathetically portray the character's reactions to the pilot's actions.

Let me spend a little bit of the page explaining "sympathetically" in more detail. The key thing to understand about secondary characters is that you should see them as real characters with real desires, fears, hopes, and dreams that are in no way lesser than those of pilots, anchors, and the authority figure. To portray them well, you should sympathize with them. Any secondary character is, at the least, an abandoned child. They have huge, gaping emotional needs, and they're going to be looking for someone to fill them. So whenever a secondary character is involved in an action, they'll have things that they want from the pilots and other characters, and it's up to you whether and how they act on these desires.

So you have a huge opportunity when you're playing a secondary character. If you want, you can introduce huge

dramatic things, beg and cry or smirk or destroy a pilot's life. But if you'd rather sit back and play reactively and let the pilot take the spotlight, you can also do that. Both are totally suitable for the game, and if you go with whatever you're in the mood for it'll be more fun for everyone involved.

This is what it's like for kids

More than any other child, from any other society from any other point in history, you weren't ready for this. All your life you've just been shuttled to school and activities, plied with toys, video games, and TV to keep you quiet, coddled and educated and shaped into some sort of beautiful useless thing. You probably didn't even spend a lot of time around other kids, and certainly not unsupervised -- unsupervised play is dangerous. Someone might get hurt!

So you don't know how to make food, how to get around, even how to interact with other humans who aren't your parents and teachers. That's the sort of kid you are. And then, wham, no warning, they're all dead.

Well, not dead. Just sleeping, but good as dead, really. And after you had your fun few days of eating candy down at the corner store, staying up 'til dawn playing video-games, and getting in painful torturous conflicts with your brother; and after you had your grief, crying and shaking your gently breathing mom, mom who was the whole world and the one who cooked and screaming for your dad right in his ear, and he doesn't even say any-

thing and just that smile they have, and after you ran away because it was too scary and cried yourself to sleep under a park bench somewhere; after all that, yeah, sure, but what's important here, and what you didn't understand when you ate all those snickers and mac and cheese boxes is that you don't have any god-damn food.

And fucked if you know how to grow it.

Somehow, you survived, and in surviving I'll bet that you did some really horrible things. I bet that there isn't a kid alive today who hasn't killed over a can of beans, or at least had someone else do the killing for them. Maybe you ran off to the countryside (or you're from the countryside) and managed to get some food to grow. Maybe you were in scouts, and maybe even not the shitty scouts they've got in the cities where they don't teach you anything but order, and so you knew how make your way in the woods, and you took your friends and ran. Maybe you were a roving gang of thugs and hoodlums, staking out turf and canned food in the city center. I don't know how you make it, but you do. Those years, those first years when everything was hard, those are ingrained on the back of your head.

Not to mention the remotes. 'cause you probably saw them just as they landed -- searing red balls of metal and flesh from the sky that unfolded into some strange nightmare of your old toys -- and who knows what you thought for those first few minutes before they opened fire. It was a year later, just as you were getting stable for a breath, just as you were learning how to live. They flushed you out of where-ever you had settled, drove you into a nomadic, hunted exile, traveling only when you could be safe, fearing every little twitch and noise. How did you sur-

vive them? Did you eat bugs and worms out of the earth? Cats and rats and roaches?

It was a bad life and, somewhere in your heart, you knew that you were going to die, and that your death was going to be the end of humans. Just like the comics, except then there was always Superman or someone to save them. No good aliens this time, though, just a life of hunger, desperation, and fear.

For most kids, that was probably the end -- they died somewhere hidden away, if not from the robot drones that found them then from hunger, thirst, or insanity. But that wasn't the end for you. Because you found them. You found us.

Someone had managed to figure out how the aliens were controlling their robot remotes, and turned it around into a weapon. Someone, maybe the same someone, or maybe someone else, had managed to build a society -- a brutal, nasty, small, barely living society, but a society nonetheless. And you found them, and they welcomed you in. People are rare enough these days. And, well, maybe you're not a Pilot, but you're still a part of the fight. It's a long-shot, but you just might pull through this after all.

Sometimes you think about your toys, or your school, or your playstation, or even your parents, but not very often. It makes you sad to think about those things. It makes you feel wrong inside, like you never really had a chance. It makes you realize all the missing parts of your life. And if you were sad, well, that might make a Pilot sad, and that might mean their life, and yours.

How to Own an Anchor

Your primary responsibility as the player of an anchor is to lead the pilot through missions. While you're doing this, it's pretty important that you speak directly to the pilot's player in the voice of your anchor character, describing to him what's going on, what he is experiencing, and the tactical situations that he finds himself in. Because of this anchor has a shocking amount of control over the direction of a mission. An anchor who likes a pilot can sooth a bad dream into a semblance of sanity. An anchor that doesn't like her pilot can turn a mission a nightmare, literally.

To this end, the relationship between the anchor and the pilot is of primary importance, not simply because it forms the chasis of the pilot's ANIMa, but because the anchor will ultimately determine not only the success or failure of the mission, but often whether the pilot lives or dies. So it is imperative that, during missions, you really get into the head and the heart of your anchor character, figuring out what she wants, how she sees the pilot, and from that what she's going to lead him into.

During interlude actions, the anchor's role seems much like that of a secondary character. However, because anchor relationships are more prone to stress, not to mention simply more important in general, expect to be the center of attention in a lot of interludes.

Anchors are under enormous stresses. If a mission goes well, the pilot is a hero. But if a mission goes poorly, often the anchor is held at fault. They are prone to cracking, and

their relationships with pilots are always more complicated than they seem at first blush.

Anchors are in many ways the emotional center of *Bliss Stage*. When you play an anchor, it's your chance to explore these sorts of complex emotions. If you play to wrench your own heartstrings, you probably won't go awry.

This is what it's like for Anchors

Here's what it's like to be an anchor: You get chosen because you've got a tight relationship with a pilot. He's the love of your life, maybe not sex but probably, and he's going to save the world just for you, and you're going to talk him through it and sing him into it. Just you and him, you're going to make a difference, you're going to be there for him when he fights, and then you're looking into the black soup of nightmares that he's wading through and seeing yourself reflected back with all the reasons why he hates you and you're seeing that all the time, and if you even flinch once or get angry once or say any damn thing dollars to donuts it's going to kill him, so you've got that all in your head, and you can't tell anyone. And then there are others, other girls that he's in love with, the other people that he cares about more than you, and you can see them through there, you can hear him call their name as they fight at his side, and everyone smiles like it's a good thing and hell if you open your mouth, and if he dies it's your fault because he didn't love you enough.

And then he dies. Because pilots die, because it's a war, because, after all the lies and betrayals, you didn't love him enough to save him that last time. And there's a funeral, maybe, but probably not even, and everyone forgets the dead pilots but you would remember him in your heart, because he was the love of your life, except for that all that love got burnt up by nightmares and now all that remains is a dull thudding.

Then, you know, you've got the anchor training, so they introduce you to someone new, and say, 'hey, why don't you fall in love with this guy, too, because that would be to our strategic advantage and, you know, the whole saving humanity thing. And all you want to do is curl up into a ball and cry yourself to death, but, god help you, you fall for him again, and maybe not as strong as before, but it's the same damn shit.

Repeat until you get used to it.

That's what it's like to be an anchor.

How to be a GM

Whenever you play *Bliss Stage*, someone will be a game master. The game master, ideally, should be the person with the most experience at the game (so if you're all playing for the first time, the person who read this book all the way through should be the GM), although it can really be anyone who has some substantial experience with playing the game. Often, the GM will also be the social organizer and host of the game, but that isn't necessary at all.

As a GM, you'll have a very different set of responsibilities than you had as a non-GM player. These responsibilities aren't more or less difficult, nor do they have a greater or lesser influence on the game. But they do require you to pay even more scrupulous attention to the reactions and feelings of your fellow players.

The GM's responsibilities are outlined below.

Facilitate consensus

The GM's primary job in a game of *Bliss Stage* is to facilitate consensus amongst the players. There are many stages in the game, starting from the initial prep and carrying through to mission scenes, where a group of players will have to come to consensus about any number of things. Most groups of people -- basically those that haven't been trained in consensus -- will have a hard time coming to consensus about anything, certainly at a rate which would make the game fun to play.

Ultimately, you'll come to your own style of consensus. Here are some ideas to get your started.

- If you're going to say you don't like something, say something positive. Basically, don't allow someone to sit there and say "no" to everything without offering some creative input of their own.
- No negative input at all. Some GMs don't let anyone offer negative input at all -- only changes and additions to things already said.

- Take the first good idea. Someone will say something awesome and everyone will be nodding their heads. Cut off discussion right at that second, before anyone tries to modify it ever so slightly and makes it not as cool.
- Call out the shy ones. If someone is hanging back and not participating, try to move the spotlight onto them for a little bit. Most people are creative if pushed, but some people are shy about it.

It's also important, when you're facilitating consensus about something, to back off of your own ideas a little bit. As the facilitator, you inherently have more power, and while this doesn't mean that you shouldn't contribute, it does mean that you should make a conscious decisions to put other people's contributions before your own.

Be prepared

Contrasting the above, in any situation in which the group is expected to come up with an idea, and no one has any good ideas, it will be your responsibility to throw something out there so that the game can move on. As the GM, you are the baseline from which other people are going to improvise, so it's on you to give the basic actions of the aliens, the basic ideas about the group's history, and so on and so forth.

The important thing to remember here is that you don't have to come up with something brilliant, or even something good, just something that's good enough to move the game along. Relying on previous history (what have the aliens done before, what are the common themes in

the game, and so on) will let you make some snap decisions without worrying too much.

Basically, if there's ever a time when everyone is sitting around staring blankly at each other, trying to figure out what to do next, it's your job as the GM to keep things moving.

Likewise, the GM is the only player that needs to prepare between games. Your preparations can be pretty simple, however. Just come up with some basic ideas missions relating to the group's hopes and you're probably good to go. If you're not good at making up mission goals on the fly, come up with a distinct set of goals for each one.

Plan Missions

As the GM, you're the only player of *Bliss Stage* (outside of the host) who has any planning to do between sessions of the game. Fortunately, you don't have to do a lot of planning, mostly just plan the missions.

If you're good at improvisation, all you need is three or four ideas for missions, and you can improvise the exact mission goals during the briefing scenes. If you're not good at improvisation, get some note paper and chart out the missions just like the examples of page 144.

A good mission has to do with the game's hopes and is something that pilots won't want to just give up on. If you can't think of anything else, put their strong relationships at risk.

If you do plan the missions out in advance, don't assume that you're going to get to use all of them. Sometimes the situation in the game is going to change rapidly, and old mission ideas have to be modified or outright discarded. This is okay! It didn't take you more than a couple of minutes to plan it anyway, right?

Gauge the opposition and resources: Missions, interludes, and trauma

As a GM, you're going to be in charge of making life difficult for the pilots. In this, you're going to have to gauge how much difficulty is appropriate to your group's story.

The most important thing to understand is that you cannot make a bad decision here. All pilots are bound to pass 108 bliss or 6 trauma eventually, and in either case they will have a good shot at being able to resolve a hope. If you make things more difficult for the pilots, they will probably head towards a traumatic death, which means that your game will be tragic or bittersweet at best. If you make things less difficult, they will tend towards a blissed death, which has the capacity for a true "happy ending" (although not necessarily.) Both of these are fine. You cannot screw up your game by doing this wrong.

Now that that's out of the way, let's talk about the ways that you can adjust the difficulty, and what you might like to do with it.

The primary way of adjusting the game's difficulty is changing the ratio of interlude actions to mission goals. If there are more interlude actions, the game will be easier. If there are more mission goals, the game will be harder. Generally speaking, as a baseline, a slightly less than one interlude action per mission goal makes it possible for the pilots to generally keep things okay without developing their relationships too much. If there are more interlude actions, things will be easier on the pilots, and you'll see some relationship development. If there are less interlude actions, things will be harder on the pilots, and relationships will fall apart.

If this is your first time GMing the game, give three interlude actions between every mission, including the pilot's privileged action. Once you've got the hang of things a little bit, feel free to adjust that number throughout the game -- giving periods of peace and rest when the pilots can build of their relationships followed by flurries of combat and action where their relationships are ground down and destroyed.

Another way of adjusting the game's difficulty is in your use of trauma. Generally speaking, threatening is the most efficient use of trauma, and threatening the pilot's safety or the mission goal will cause the most difficulty for the pilot. By contrast, only threatening a weakened relationship will have any strong effect unless you threaten it repeatedly, driving it into the ground with stress. Spending extra dice to cause panic, endanger a category, or threaten a non-active relationship isn't as efficient a use of your dice, but can sometimes be appropriate the situation at hand or be

useful if you want to give a traumatized pilot an easier time of it.

The best way to figure out how to use trauma is to watch your players. Each player will develop their own set of priorities for mission dice. Once you've figured out what categories they find most important, threaten those when you want to scare them, threaten others when you want some relief.

The last and most subtle means by which you can make the game more or less difficult is through calling for interludes. If you call for actions featuring characters that already have strong relationships, that makes it much easier on the pilots. If you call for actions featuring characters that have weaker relationships, it will make things much more difficult for the pilots. Also, if you call for actions featuring characters that right now have horrible strains on their relationship, it is more likely to result in trust-breaking behavior, which generally makes everything more tense.

Know the rules

As the GM, you're probably the most experienced player in the group. Even if none of you have played *Bliss Stage* before, you're probably the one most familiar with this book (at least, you'll have read it through once.)

While the game is on the simpler side for most tabletop role-playing games, it is still pretty complicated, with a lot of moving parts. Also, there will be times when my writing isn't clear enough and things get bogged down.

It will probably be your responsibility to understand the rules and their spirit well enough to keep things moving when there's an unclearness about the rules.

When you do get things wrong, it's best to just move on if you can, rather than trying to retroactively do things right. Likewise, if the rules are unclear, the best thing to do is to discuss things with the group, and rapidly try to reach a consensus about how to proceed for this session. After the session is over, look through the book and figure out what the rules actually say to do.

As long as you've got the basic interactions between the values down, you can't go too far wrong, so don't panic if you've gotten a rule wrong. Just note it down and make sure to pay attention in the future.

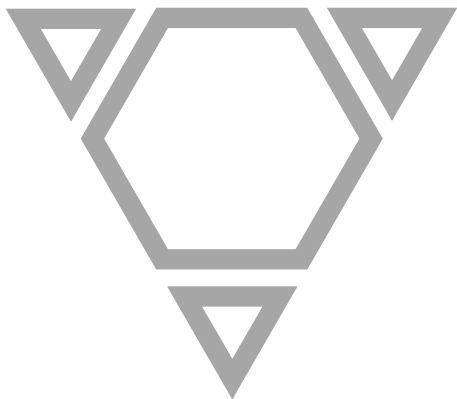
Don't answer the big questions

A lot of the above talked about how, as the GM, it is often your job to have the answers. But there is also very important things that you must not have answers to. The players are given the right to resolve the big questions of the story -- the hopes -- and while you can foreshadow and imply answers to those, you are not allowed to answer them forthright.

There are also some big questions of the setting: What are the aliens? Why are they here? Is there a fundamental reality to the dream world? Even if these things are not a part of the hopes, you shouldn't have in your head "what's really going on." You can have theories, ideas, and speculation, and you should feel free to share these with the other play-

ers, but until such things actually come out of play (if they ever do) it is not your place to say, absolutely, the nature of the *Bliss Stage* world.

Leaving open these ambiguities leaves space for fear and mystery and hope and despair -- all the core things that the game does. If you close them, you close off access to fear and mystery, hope and despair. Don't do that.



Conclusion

This is the part of the book where I'd summarize everything we've been through so far and walk you step by step through what everything means and what the ultimate conclusion of the book is. But I'm not going to. This could be because I'm hard-headed, arrogant, or simply because I don't know how to structure a book very well. Really, though, it's because there can be no conclusion to *Bliss Stage*. The end of this book is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the story.

To reach the conclusion, you have to play the game. Poke around your hometown for good places for hideouts. Throw your hopes on the table. Make up your pilots and your anchors. Go on missions. Take your interludes. Suffer in your decisions. Die for your hopes.

And then, at the end, you'll have your conclusion. Maybe you'll like it, maybe you won't. But it will be yours, in a true and fundamental way that I could never duplicate with vulgar text in a paper book. You will have built it out of your character's struggle, love, pain, and hope. And you will understand it, personally, in a way that some guy writing some book could never understand.

This book is a gateway into your story. Here it is. I've given it to you. It's up to you to step through it, to play the game, to find out the ending. And when you're done, when you're all finished up, maybe you can tell me what the conclusion of this game is.

This is the end of our time together. You must take the next part with your friends, leaving me behind. All that's left for me to do is thank you for coming this far with me, wish you luck with the rest of the journey, and say goodbye.

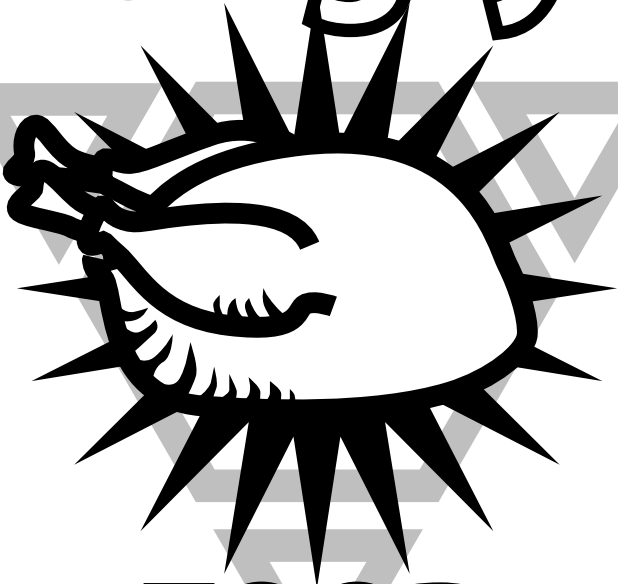
Until next time...

yrs--

--Ben Lehman

(taogames@gmail.com)

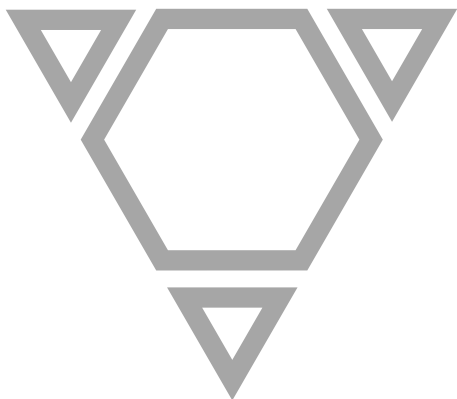
Hungry?



FOOD for GOOD WORKERS

Join the team of ANIMa pilots, and we will pay you with food, water, and shelter. You will be safe with us. Dangerous work is strictly optional. Help us fight the war against the alien menace!

Meet at the intersection of Main and 7th at sundown on Saturdays. Do not try to attack the meeting site. Our representatives will bring no food or supplies, and we will respond with OVERWHELMING FORCE if necessary.



Inspirations

There are so many inspirations for this game it's difficult for me to express them all. Invariably, there will be "thirteenth fairies:" books and movies and people and games that I've forgotten about. In all likelihood, there are more of these than there are actually credited inspirations in this chapter. Nonetheless, I think it's better to be incomplete in my thanks than totally negligent in them, and for those people and stories left behind, I can only beg your forgiveness and promise to correct my errors in future editions of the text.

Humans

- Emily Care Boss
- Andy Kitkowski

- Eero Tuovinen
- Mark Woodhouse
- Junichi Inoue
- Vincent Baker
- Cecelia Holland
- Caroline Isaacs
- Carolyn Lehman
- Ron Edwards
- Rich Forest
- Alexis Siemon
- Joshua Newman
- Jonathan Walton
- Dave Ramsden
- Jake Richmond
- Shizero Nezze
- Christian Griffen
- Clinton R. Nixon
- John DeHope
- Dan Ravipinto
- All the girls and boy who were listed as anchors, who I will not give the last names to prevent embarrassment

Anime and Manga

- Gunbuster
- Patlabor
- Evangelion

- VOTOMS
- Gundam
- Macross Plus
- Robotech
- Ghost in the Shell
- Paprika
- Nausicaä
- Ultraman
- Serial Experiments Lain

Games

- Angel Gear
- My Life With Master
- Otherkind
- Pretender
- Breaking the Ice
- Shooting the Moon
- The Riddle of Steel
- Ars Magica
- Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.
- Robotech
- Apples to Apples
- The Face of Angels
- Under the Bed
- Panels

Books

- My Side of the Mountain
- Slake's Limbo
- Lord of the Flies
- Catcher on the Rye
- The Void Captain's Tale
- The Language of the Night
- Ender's Game
- The Tibetan Book of the Dead
- The Book of Going Forth By Day
- The Song of Inanna
- The Revelation of John
- The Divine Comedy
- I have forgotten so many it's insane

Playtesters

One group, no matter the strength of their bravery, no matter the strength of their love, cannot save the world alone. It was only with the cooperation of resistance cells around the world that this text could be produced. Let us never forget their sacrifices and their courage.

Oakland Resistance Cell

- Chris Chinn
- Liam Burke
- Kate Williamson
- Ion Yannopolous

Dreamation Resistance Cell

- Daniel Ravipinto
- Matthew Gandy
- Daniel Heacox

Indianapolis Resistance Cell

- Dev Pursthyanka
- John Kim
- Gordon Landis
- Chris Chinn

Somerville Resistance Cell

- Alexis Siemon
- Jonathan Walton
- Kendra Tornheim
- Dave Ramsden

Iisalmi Resistance Cell

- Sipi Myllynen
- Henrik Mikkonen
- Sallamaari Janhunen
- Jesse Kaukonen
- Eero Tuovinen

Minneapolis Resistance Cell

- Mark Woodhouse
- Katherine Shane
- Adam Cerling

Plainfield Resistance Cell

- Emily Care Boss
- Phoebe Matthews

Edmonton Resistance Cell

- James Brown
- Eric Finley
- James Tipman
- Fox West

Turku Resistance Cell

- J. Tuomas Harviainen
- Mikko Tolonen
- Joakim Verkerk
- Antti Vestola

Petaling Jaya Resistance Cell

- Poh Tun Kai
- Mok Han Kit
- Lim Vin Tsen
- Douglas Larke

"An oft-overlooked
gem of horror and
suspense drama."

Thomas Weigel,
e23 Manager

"Smart, cool, and
elegant. Panty
Explosion is a
good game with
some genius
mechanics."

Jerry Grayson,
creator of
The Godsend Agenda

"A cool indie RPG.
Count us in!"

OgreCave.com

Panty Explosion



The psychic schoolgirl
adventure game

atarashi games.com