

The Dinner Party

A roleplaying game of social dysfunction for 4 to 8 people

by Doug Ruff

Overview

In this game, each player takes on the role of guest (or host) at a 1970's dinner party. Each person at the party has their own hangups and issues, and their own "games" which they play to enhance their self-image at the expense of the other guests. Players may seek one of two goals for their character: gain happiness, or gain enough courage to confront their Issue.

The Game Chef Competition

This game is my submission for the 2005 Game Chef competition at <http://www.game-chef.com> and meets the following design requirements:

Historical Period – 1970's Suburbia (also a submission for the 1st "Chairman's Challenge")

Ingredients – Wine (this is a currency in the game); Companion (most of the characters are married and have special games that they play on their spouses); Accuser (accusation is a tactic in game and also a theme in some of the games); Invincible (a person who faces their Issue becomes invincible.)

Rules Limitation – All playable characters are fixed.

Credits

Firstly, I'd like to thank all my friends at the Forge for rekindling my interest in game design. You know who you are, take a bow.

I'd especially like to thank Matt Snyder for his recent comments about writing games about ordinary people (on his own blog and 20' x 20' room). If I hadn't read those articles I wouldn't have been inspired to write this game. Thanks also too Ron Edwards for inspiring Matt!

Closer to home, thank to Stuart and Lyd for keeping me roleplaying, and to Claire for being a far better Companion than the ones in this game. Take a bow too.

Also, thanks to my mother. She died this month and I don't think I ever told her enough how much I owe her for bringing me up in the first place. There you go, that's my Issue.

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Why should you play this game?

Seriously, there are hundreds of roleplaying games around, what's so special about this one? Ultimately, it's your choice – you know your taste in games better than I do. However, here's some information to help you decide whether or not this is the game for you:

- First and foremost, this is a game about ordinary people. Each of the guests has one or more “special powers” that only they can do, but the only magic in this game comes from the alchemy of the human spirit.
- That doesn't mean that nothing exciting happens, far from it! During the course of the evening, the guests can get drunk, bitch and argue with each other, and can even get thrown out of the house. This isn't a game about being nice and dull and inoffensive. In gaming terms, there is a *lot* of conflict.
- The basic conflict rules are simple (roll some dice, use the highest number) but there are a lot of tactical options for each character. This game should take at least a couple of hours to play through and could take a whole evening of gaming to play out.

Still interested? Here's what you need to play *The Dinner Party*:

- There are 8 character sheets at the back of this document, you should print these out to give out to the players. Also a pen or pencil each to write on the sheets.
- There is also a Play Aid and a list of Small Talk topics. You should print one of these out for each player, especially if it's the first time you've played.
- You also need several tokens of two different types. These will represent Food And Wine. You need at least 3 Wine tokens and 6 Food tokens for each player, but you can use anything you want as a token (poker chips, candy, vol-au-vents...)
- You need one special token, this is the Conversation token. It will get passed round quite a lot, so use something bigger. Ideally, it should be something you can toss to the other players, like a small beanbag... or a cuddly toy.
- Dice. *The Dinner Party* uses everyday normal dice. Just like the dice you'll find in a Monopoly or Risk game. Each player will need around 6 of these (or you can get by with a shared pool of 12-16 dice, depending on how many players you have.)
- As this is a game set at a dinner party, you may get hungry or thirsty. Decide in advance who's bringing the food and drink.

Getting Started

First, decide who will take on the roles of Host and Hostess for the party. The players do not have to be the same gender as the characters.

The Hostess' player then gets to decide who to invite to the party. The rules for invitation are as follows:

If there are 4 players, the Hostess must invite either the Neighbours, or the Boss and his Wife.

If there are 6 players, the Hostess must invite the Neighbours and the Boss and his Wife.

If there are 5 or 7 players, the Hostess must invite either the Mysterious Woman or the Drunken Friend in addition to the rules for 4 or 6 player parties.

If there are 8 players, everyone's invited.

Special Rule: if one of the players is late and you are waiting to start, keep the Drunken Friend to one side; you can give him to the player if and when he turns up.

Once the invites have been issued, the other players can fight amongst themselves to decide who gets to play who.

Next, the Hostess' player must decide on the menu for the meal. See the Menu Choices section for the options available. They must choose one Starter, one Main Course, and one Dessert. And note down the Portion Size for each meal. The larger the portions, the longer the game will take to play; the Hostess' player should bear this in mind when choosing the dishes.

The Hostess also gets to decide who sits where around the game table during the meal.

Give each player some time to read their own character sheet. They should also read each other sheets, as all of the characters know each other well.

Special Rule: If someone is playing the Mysterious Woman, they should not let anyone else read their sheet. They should still read everyone else's sheet.

Also allow time to read through the Play Aid and Rules Summary sheets. If anyone has any specific rules questions, check them against this document. If you're still not sure, you'll have to make something up for now: you can send me an email later to tell me what's wrong and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. My email address is doug.ruff@gmail.com.

Once everybody is comfortable and ready to begin, start with the first course, Aperitifs.

The Courses

Play is split into 5 scenes, called Courses. These are

Aperitifs
Starter
Main Courses
Dessert
After-Dinner Drinks

Aperitifs

This part of the game gives players time to “get into character” and sound each other out. Although there are no dice rolls during this part of the game, players can engage in verbal sparring and make alliances.

Special Rule: If anyone is playing the Drunken Friend, they may not take part in this scene.

The Host gives each player 2 Wine tokens which represent a glass of sherry. At any time a player may drink these: for each token consumed (give the token back to the Host), the player adds 1 to their character's Courage and reduces their Capacity by 1. The Host may replace these Wine tokens at any time (but the glass does not hold more than 2 tokens).

Rules Note: Drinking is a fundamental action within the game. Whenever a character drinks, they add 1 to their Courage for each Wine token spent, and reduce their Capacity by the same amount. A character reduced to Capacity of zero becomes Drunk.

The character sheets do not include a great deal of information about the characters. For example, the age, appearance and profession of the characters is not specified. Players should use this period to agree on these details and describe any other distinguishing characteristics.

Special Rule: The Mysterious Woman has a special power, their player should use it now.

After a few minutes, the Hostess' player should announce that the meal is ready. Each character must finish their drink – for each Wine Token a player has, they must add 1 to their character's Courage and deduct 1 from their character's Capacity.

Starters, Main course, Desserts

Each of these three scenes follow the same rules.

Serving Food

The Hostess gives each player a set number of Food Tokens (this is equal to the Portion Size for the food chosen.) The Hostess may also give up to two other players one additional token, and may give herself one/less token than the portion size if she chooses.

Note: The less Food Tokens a player has, the more a character can take part in the conversation. The Hostess' player should choose the players she wants to penalise, and give them the extra food.

Serving Wine

The Host fills each person's wine glass, by giving them enough Wine Tokens to bring their total to 3.

Eating and Speaking

The scene is now broken up into a number of *rounds*. Rounds are played until everyone has eaten all of their food.

At the start each round, players must decide whether their character is going to Eat or Speak. To determine this, each player should hold out their closed fist, which will be empty or contain a Food token. All players open their hands to reveal their decision together. Anyone with a Food token in their hand will eat, anyone with an empty hand will Speak. The Hostess must Speak during the first round of a course, and starts with the Conversation token.

Note: Someone who Eats gets to discard the Food Token they just showed, but cannot take part in this round unless someone brings them into play.

If all players choose to Eat during a round, that round is over. If only one player chooses to Speak, the round is over, but that player gains 2 points of Courage.

If more than one player chooses to Speak, then the round continues. Whoever is holding the Conversation token gets to speak first, if that person is eating, then the player on their left gets the token (and must pass it to their left if they are Eating.)

Let Combat Begin!

If you are holding the Conversation Token it's your turn. On your turn you must choose an action to take. Actions that any player can take are on the Play Aid. Actions that only you can take are on your character sheet. You must announce the action you are taking, and your target(s).

Special Rule: you should avoid targeting a player who is eating. If you do target them, then all players who are Eating may now take part in this round from now on.

At this point, anyone else may declare that they are trying to Interrupt you. Or they may have a special action that they may declare now. If so, resolve this now, and your action is cancelled. (Remember: it's usually rude to interrupt. This means that you can Accuse someone if they keep interfering with your fun.)

If you weren't interrupted, your action goes ahead. Follow the rules for that action. The rules may call for a *conflict* between you and your target. If so, follow the conflict rules below.

Important Rule: make an effort to narrate your action. For example, don't just say "Fran Snipes at Julie." Go into detail, describe the actual insult. If you feel like it, get into character and actually insult the other player's character. You know you want to.

After your action is complete, check to see who gets the Conversation token now; it's now their turn. Some actions will end the round instead. If this happens, start a new round by going back to *Eating and Speaking* above.

Finishing the Course

The course ends when all players (except the Hostess' player) have get rid of all of their Food Tokens (the Hostess does not have to finish her meal). The Hostess will then leave the table for two more rounds (she can "ask" the Host to join her, in which case he must also leave the table.) The other players may keep Speaking for those two rounds (or they may Pass and sit in stony silence...)

Special Rule: If the Hostess goes to the kitchen on her own, she may recover 2 Happiness and has the option to use her Valium power. If she brings the Host with her, she may not gain either of these benefits.

The next course then begins.

After-Dinner Drinks

Assuming there are still enough guests to play (see *Leaving The Game*) then the party continues. There is no eating during this scene, and if a round ends for any reason, then a new one begins immediately. Players may continue to drink, or they may request coffee (this has no effect other than preventing the Host from getting you even more drunk.)

The game continues until all guests are evicted or leave, or both Host and Hostess leave the game (at which point the guests must leave in confusion.)

Conflicts

When a conflict is called for, each player involved gets to roll a number of dice. These will usually be a the number of dice listed by one of their *attributes* (Parent, Adult or Child.)

Before the dice are rolled, any player who is able to take part in the conversation may Take Sides. This costs them 1 point of Courage, and allows them to give one of the other players an extra die to roll. If you are one of the players in a conflict, you may also spend 1 Courage to give yourself an extra die to roll.

All players involved then roll their dice. The player with the highest die showing wins the conflict. If these are tied, then look at each player's next highest die.

Examples

<i>I roll</i>	<i>You Roll</i>	<i>Who wins?</i>
5,2	4,4	I do – I have the highest die (5)
6,1	6,4	You do – the highest dice are tied, but your 4 beats my 1
5,5,2	5,5	I do – the first two dice are tied, but my 2 wins because you do not have a die to match it
5,1	5,1	Tie – we must both roll again

Special Outcomes from Conflicts

If someone declares a conflict which targets you, but you win the conflict, gain 1 Courage.

If you Took Sides in someone else's conflict, and the person you helped won, gain 1 Happiness.

In addition, if you are on the other side of a conflict to your Companion (either as participants or by Taking Sides) and you win, you gain 1 Happiness and they lose 1 Happiness

All of these effects stack with each other and with the original stakes for the conflict.

Being Excused

The house has an upstairs and a downstairs lavatory (this is a status symbol, the Host will probably brag about this at some point). You may not take the Excuse Me action if these are both occupied. The Hostess may always excuse herself to the kitchen (but not to be Sick.)

Getting Drunk

If any character drinks enough to reduce their capacity to zero, then they are now Drunk and must use the "Drunk" values for their Attributes in any conflict. In addition, every time they Eat or Drink from now on, they must roll 2 dice. If they roll double 1 or double 6, then they are become Sick and must immediately excuse themselves to the lavatory. If both lavatories are occupied, then find somewhere else (the rubber plant, a bucket, the garden.)

Getting Drunk before the end of a meal is a Faux Pas. Being Sick gains the character a Black Mark (*two* Black Marks if you didn't use the lavatory), and a player who is Sick also loses all of their Happiness and half of their Courage (round losses up.)

Faux Pas

Several actions in the game are considered a Faux Pas. If you commit a Faux Pas, any other player may immediately Accuse your character by pointing at you (if more than one player Accuses you, the player who is fastest gets to make the accusation.)

Accusing is a high risk tactic: whoever loses the conflict must either apologise (they lose 3 Happiness, and the winner gains 3 Happiness) or they get a Black Mark.

Leaving the Game

There are several circumstances in which a player may have to leave the game:

If a character is reduced to 0 Happiness (including through being Sick), they must excuse themselves from the room immediately, or storm out, or burst into tears (their choice). They may not return to play unless another player successfully Consoles them. To Console someone, you must spend 2 rounds away from play and roll your Parent against their Child.

If you score higher, they are consoled and may return to play with 3 Happiness. If they score higher, you lose 1 Happiness and may not try again (someone else will have to try.) *You may not gain or lose additional Courage or Happiness as a result of this conflict.*

Note that no-one is obliged to do this, but failing to come to the aid of your Companion is a Faux Pas (and you may be called on this at any time until the other player returns to play, not just the first time you fail to aid them.)

If a guest gains 3 Black Marks, the Host may Evict them from the house This may be done as politely ("I think it's time you left,") or as rudely ("get out of my house now!") as the Host desires. If the Host does not evict them, he may do so later if that character commits another Faux Pas at any time. An evicted character takes no further part in the game but gets to keep their current Happiness total.

If either the Host or Hostess gains 3 Black Marks, then any of the guests may decide to leave with their heads held high. They get to add their Courage to their Happiness as their final action.

If a guest has 3 Black Marks and the Host does not evict them, another guest may still choose to leave: however, they do not get to add their Courage to their Happiness.

If your character's Companion leaves, and your character does not go with them, your character automatically gains 1 Black Mark. This may get them evicted too!

A player must also leave the game after successfully confronting their Issue (see below.)

Issues

Each character has an Issue, which is the chief source of their pain and anger. A character who gains enough Courage to confront their issue must immediately do so. (The amount of Courage required is listed on your character sheet, it's a very high value.)

If a character confronts their issue, they immediately interrupt whatever is going on (no roll required) in order to do so. For a brief period of time, they are invincible: no-one can Interrupt them or challenge them in any way whatsoever. They can say whatever they want, regardless of offence, as long as they also reveal and address their Issue while doing so.

However, once they have finished speaking, they immediately drop to 0 Happiness and cannot be consoled. Wise players will narrate a suitably dramatic exit for their characters. Sneaky players will occupy one of the two available lavatories.

Winning

There is no fixed winner in this game. Just surviving to the end of the game is a challenge. However, anyone whose character successfully confronts their Issue may consider themselves to have won a moral victory. Ending the game with more Happiness than any other player is a social victory. If you end the game happier than your Companion, that's another type of victory.