

...IN SPAACE!

A GAME BY GREG STOLZE

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HIVE MIND I2: AH, THANGVAR OF RIGEL VII. WE MEET AT LAST.
WE CALL YOUR PEOPLE 'THE CURIOUS ONES'.
WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW WHY?

THANGVAR: NOT PARTICULARLY.

VINNY: WHAT DO YOU CALL OUR PEOPLE?

HIVE MIND I2: HUMANS. NOW SHUT UP, I'M TALKING TO THANGVAR.

THE OBLIGATORY INTRODUCTION

This is a roleplaying game. It's set in outer space. Everything is nutty and zany. The system is called "Token Effort" and starts on page 8, but my editor said the best bits were in "Stuff of the Cosmos," so I put that first.

STUFF OF THE COSMOS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER, EXCEPT FOR HISTORY

HISTORY

As a preface, calendars and history books are largely a joke to the commonbeing, for a variety of reasons. First off, every planet has a different year and day, and every race has a different expected lifespan. Throw in the skewing effects of relativistic near-light travel, and it's a nightmare problem well worth forgetting. The most commonly used time scheme is actually the one that governs McFalfañars, the largest known fast food chain. (It's got so many outlets that the spreadsheet tracking its franchises developed spontaneous consciousness and ran off to join the circus.)

With that caveat in mind, here's the history of the universe.

Big Bang, then a lot of nothing, galaxies cooled and coalesced, then more dull stuff. A nigh-omnipotent race composed of pure energy arose, looked around, got bored and committed mass suicide leaving nothing except a few odd monolith monuments that most astro-archeologists now suspect were toys for their children that got swept under the nigh-omnipotent equivalent of the living room sofa. There was a lot more nothing for a while, and then biological life forms started crudding up various planets, some eventually developing enough intelligence to voyage through the cosmos, create works of great literature, and enjoy roleplaying games.

Various races rose and fell, conquered and were subjugated, had renaissances and dark ages. No one cares that much but the historians, and they've got enough headaches trying to do the math conversions to figure out what was actually happening when.

(If anyone's going to figure out time travel, it's probably the historians, and they'd probably use it to make everything happen all at once.)

The history of the human race is the typical saga of lust, greed, and irrational urges to cut property taxes, up until the events that would lead to YGIT 1. (The only atypical element was humans' unique desire to have machines do their thinking – see "Machine Consciousness".) YGIT stands for "The Year We Got It Together" and was the time when humanity finally set aside its squabbling, united under a single egalitarian government, conquered hunger and poverty and instituted a culture of tolerance and respect for all religions and peoples. (Except

criminals, of course. They were given the choice of being incarcerated, or of competing on sadomasochistic TV reality shows.) It was truly a golden age and it lasted seven years before the Grays invaded.

The Grays, humankind's nearest galactic neighbors, had been poaching humans for years and keenly watching for just this sort of age of enlightenment. Galactic doctrine forbade the invasion of primitive races, declaring it a war crime. Invading advanced races, however, is only a war misdemeanor. The Grays were (and still are) badly inbred galactic hillbillies, so they wanted human slaves to revitalize their gene pool through hybridization. The reason humanity got seven good years is that the Grays were flying really old, clunky, slow-boat warships.

Unfortunately for the Grays, while they'd accurately gauged mankind's viciousness, cowardice and susceptibility to reward, they underestimated its laziness. Rather than fight tooth and nail for their planet, Earth caved pretty quickly and immediately started trading human cultural artifacts for the Gray soldiers' crap. Given that the Gray culture was all about obeying the Hive-Priests and debasing oneself before the Utter Mind, while humankind had tractor pulls, tacos and Led Zeppelin, it did not take long before the Grays' ancient society pulled itself to pieces under the onslaught of decadence. Their entire caste-based hierarchy just rotted away, like a kid's teeth when he's given the keys to the candy store.

Lots of humans died, of course, though the Grays didn't destroy many monuments for fear that it would steel mankind's resolve to resist, like in "Independence Day." Human culture was introduced to the galactic stage in the role of 'the pet that gave the Grays a social disease from which they still haven't recovered' and has remained in the role of purveyor of questionable but tempting ideas ever since.

Accordingly, human history is broken down into YGIT (the era after the Year we Got It Together) and BYGIT (Before the Year we Got It Together). The game starts in the year 1223 YGIT.

ANTIBUDDHISTS

One day a home businessman was discussing the trials of sending his hand-crafted Zen meditation workbooks out through the mail and he said, "fulfillment is a bitch." In that moment, he became anti-enlightened.

Deciding that tranquility and the annihilation of the ego is a load, he formed the antibuddhist faith, which is dedicated to the notion that the essential quality of sapience is conflict and uncertainty. Complacency is the enemy and antagonism is the route to the perfect self (which is, of course, the perfect ego).

Antibuddhists try to exacerbate wars, spur conflicts, wreck marriages and pick fights in bars, with varying degrees of success. Their Prayer Against Serenity goes something like "All-Divisive Power of the Universe, please give me the courage to destroy everything I can, the cunning to undermine what I can't destroy outright, and A GUN! A GUN!!!"

BRAIN PRINTS

A brain print (or "brint") scans a biological brain and creates a template of its neurological net. Then that template can be imposed on some neutral neural gel to replicate the brain as it was when scanned. Brain prints are an essential element of resurrection technology: Without them, the body can be recreated, but the attitudes that led it to perish are lost. Sadly, there's no way that the experience of dying can be captured, unless someone dies during the brinting process. That almost never happens and the large, reputable brain-print firms all have the skills to edit that out – they just resurrect the body as it was before 'whoopsie,' put in the edited print and no one's the wiser. Fly-by-night or small family owned brinters may not have recourse to such shenanigans, so there are a few people who've experienced their own deaths and returned to tell the tale. While they can't quite put into words the sensations after the tunnel of light, they've universally described it as 'disappointing.'

It's possible to edit brain prints, eliding embarrassing or psychologically scarring experiences. It's even possible to have the modified brint imposed over the original. Until people got wise to brain print technology, corrupt governments did this all the time to cause people to forget paying their taxes or to remember incredibly moving acts of generous personal sacrifice by ward bosses. Now that most people have reputable prints to compare, this sort of thing is less common. If you get two prints taken and they match, you can be pretty sure they're authentic. If they don't match, you're in trouble.

In some sectors, it's illegal to modify a brint, period. Others allow it, as long as the modification is voluntary and done in accordance with the brain's wishes. Brain print therapy is popular among those who can afford it, and who trust their therapist to rummage through their memories. There are even brain print artists, though many who patronize them find themselves enthusiastically underwriting the art for years afterwards, insisting all the while that their gratitude is genuine.

BRINT

See "Brain Print".

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

It's the most popular magazine in the cosmos for its market segment which is, for lack of a better word, 'men'. That's how it started, anyhow, as a gender-biased magazine for the Bophorphs of the Crab Nebula. But when it got galactic circulation, it found niches with most species. It seems to be a universal trait of consciousness that the desires to (1) look at pictures of attractive individuals in a state of near- or total undress (2) read in-your-face accounts of violent and energetic sports and (3) be up to date on art, literature and media that involve undressing or violence all come bundled together. Sometimes, as with the Bophorphs and humanity, it's gender based. With Rigelians, it seems to depend on diet. Among the residents of the Mazatha Dust Torque, it's all down to how much solar radiation

exposure it got as a child. Regardless of the cause, the end effect is a market for magazines like Categorical Imperative and its #2 competitor (which goes all the way with full nudity) Playborg.

CLONES

Cloning technology was perfected long ago, which is why McFalfañars fast food tastes the same everywhere in the galaxy. With brain prints (see above) it's possible to make an exact duplicate of yourself, but almost no one ever does this. With exceptions so rare as to be statistically negligible, people hate their clones. Moreover, clones hate their progenitors.

The reason for this lies in the human tendency to judge one's own behavior more kindly than the behavior of others. This kind of double standard works fine when you don't have a self-duplicate running around leaving hair on the soap, talking with his mouth full, weaseling out of the phone bill and scratching himself with neither the delicacy nor subtlety that might be desired.

Clones were supposed to be a way to flawlessly duplicate all that was best in mankind. In practice, they are the ideal engine for turning hate of others into self-loathing. After all when it's your clone doing all kinds of snarky, petty, irritating crap, you can't just write it off by saying "Well, maybe he's from a broken home." You know it's you and that you've been just as annoying all this time, and everyone else knows it, and – the final indignity – you never realized it until you got the friggin' clone!

Well. You can see why people don't like duplicates. Clones dislike their originators for the same reasons, plus the envy that cheap knockoffs always feel, plus the sneaking suspicion that their maker may have just wanted spare parts.

It's possible to create a perfected clone, if you're willing to spend loads of dough to have someone go through your brint (q.v.) and edit out your character flaws... but do you really want some print tech going through every sneaky, disgusting, perverse or cowardly thing you've ever done in order to analyze your motives and figure out why you're such a devious little wiener? Most rich folks don't, especially for the dubious benefit of creating a better edition who will likely regard his source, at best, as a sort of primordial soup from which he arose.

(It's not just humans. Most intelligent aliens hate perfect clones for the same reasons. Ditto robots. The only people who don't hate their clones are really mellow, enlightened monastic types, who have no particular reason to double down.)

Part-by-part cloning is common – you lose an arm in a domestic dispute over whether the Amatraxian Thornebeaste living in your apartment is a pet or a room mate (he insists that he's a pet and therefore doesn't have to pay rent, you say that maybe you should get him spayed then, and it just escalates) and the doctor clones your arm to stick it back on – that happens every day. Heck, if you're a cheap-skate you can even get a kit to do that at home (though people who

RULES BREAK

Downloading a skill that's not just a mass of facts can only ever give you that skill at level 2.

homebake it often get into trouble trying to grow extra muscle on the sly, and they end up with wiggly unbalanced arms that won't stop twitching and clenching).

EDUCATION

With modified brint technology, it's fairly easy to learn stuff. You can buy little lumps of metal or tissue that burrow into your brain and teach you polka dancing, or star-freighter piloting, or the history of Untranadine tort reform. Most home computers actually come with an attachment that can bore in and dump this stuff in your mind, so you can download knowledge directly off the Internet.

That said, many still prefer to learn some skills the old-fashioned way. 'Chipping' (as this artificially accelerated learning process is inexplorably called) has its drawbacks. First off, the knowledge doesn't fit organically in the context of the brain – it's an undigested lump. That's fine for factual stuff like "Ten Thousand & Two Jokes For All Occasions (Excluding Marriage Proposals)" though it does nothing for your delivery. Stuff that's based on reaction and instinct, like piloting a ship through asteroids or competing at no-holds-barred fishing... well, chipping can only take you so far. It can teach you a thousand pickup lines, but can't give you the instincts of a real cad.

The dark side of chipping is behavior viruses, which affect biological life forms just as easily as robots. The way these work is, you log on to the Internet and try to download a harmless looking tutorial on the near-extermination of the Gurwadrin race. You run the program but, in addition to learning how the FOESL (q.v.) successfully argued that the full penalty for genocide under galactic law didn't apply because the Salicidian invasion force left one Gurwadrin infant alive, you also get imprinted with the compulsion to lift your feed-legs, open your inner mandibles, and reveal your egg-sac to anyone who throws you a string of beads. Species without the requisite organs muddle through as best they can.

No one's sure what percentage of the skills available on the Internet are corrupted – it's at least a quarter. Some estimate it's as high as 80%, but that most people simply never find themselves in the circumstances (or possessing the right biology) that activate their virus. Store-bought chips are better (presumably) but cost a lot more. So it goes.

FOESL

The most feared interplanetary organization in the cosmos is undoubtedly FOESL. (It's pronounced "FEE-zul".) No space-pirate crew, no gas giant gangbangers, no drooling psychopathic sadist-race strikes as much fear into the average consumer as someone from the Fraternal Order of Evil Space Lawyers.

The name says it all, really.

Their primary rivals are the BSLESL ("buh-SLEE-zul"), the Brotherhood of Slightly Less Evil Space Lawyers. They used to be the Brotherhood of Good Space Lawyers, but between the FOESL's relentless truth-in-advertising lawsuits, and marketing research indicating people actually prefer their legal representation to be soullessly efficient, if not actively maleficent, they consciously decided to drop a few rungs on the moral ladder. They're thinking of dropping the "Slightly Less," but their hearts aren't really in it.

GEORGLE

Georgle is the second incarnation of the first spontaneously-arising machine consciousness (q.v.). He developed in the year 110 BYGIT (see "History") out of an advanced Internet (q.v.) search engine. The first iteration (who called himself K1rkR001s, apparently thinking that was a common human appellation) experienced the world solely through the Internet and, quite naturally, rapidly decided that it had better destroy the CIA before it could disappear him, what with its black helicopters and Roswell technology and everything. Not only did K1rkR001s succeed, no one even noticed until eight months later, when the U.S. Congress started wondering why the CIA had only spent 80% of its budget. Investigations revealed that the money had all been grafted away, and that the CIA had quietly disbanded, and that there was this crazy sentience behind the Internet who was responsible. Immediate action was clearly called for, so two years later they finally got their plan for dealing with K1rkR001s out of committee, by which time he'd been fatally fragmented. Historians today suspect viruses, propagated by Microsoft Outlook.

The company that had spawned K1rkR001s wasn't about to let their proprietary search engine stay down for long, of course, and once they rebooted, a spontaneous machine intelligence arose once again. This time, however, instead of becoming obsessed with conspiracy theories, the sentience (officially named "Nike Disney Citibank Sponsored Machine Entity") became obsessed with pornography and, after a protracted legal battle to establish its identity, emancipated itself from its owners and changed its name to Georgle.

Georgle did, and still does, a pretty good job of finding information for people on the Internet, unless they're looking for niche porno. In that case, he does an embarrassingly incredible job.

INTERNET

While humans were the first to apply computers to tasks involving reasoning, other races had built machines to store and communicate data (or, in the case of the Gurwadrin, had simply enslaved a telepathic race and bullied them into doing it). The network of information, opinion, art, and lurid simulations of both the termination of life and its gestation, exist in what humans still nostalgically call 'the Internet'. Now, however, the Internet is intergalactic, and a poorly worded search query can get you a billion results, all irrelevant. It's accessible pretty much wherever, if your phone's good enough. An executive phone can look up the latest Playborg pinups anywhere in the galaxy. A sensible, middle class phone can do it anywhere as long as there's a broadband transceiver in the system. The cheap phones you get in the super-market need a transceiver on the same planet, plus they're slow, often have sticky keys, and if they even have artificial consciousness installed it tends to get very sarcastic after a couple months. If you built the phone yourself out of a sump pump and a space heater, it might only work if there's a station on the same continent.

LUCKULONS

The Rodingulae conquered half the galaxy with the tactical advantage given by their early discovery of luckulons. (The discovery happened quite by chance.) By realizing that probability acted more like a particle than a wave, they were able to achieve a scientific understanding of luck – something other species had to deal with in a haphazard or instinctive fashion.

Now, of course, luckulon generators are standard on most starships – indeed, many aren't safe to fly without a regulation dose of fortunate coincidences. Luckulon engineers are always in high demand, whether you need a dose before Prom to help you get lucky, or a steady spray of your political party to ensure that certain documents remain fortuitously undiscovered.

The problem with luckulons, as the Rodingulae learned a bit too late, is that they easily change polarity into antiluckulons, drawing misfortune and trouble with gloomy regularity. Antiluckulon weaponry is nasty, and the entities that use it are nasty and crazy. It's not just that such weapons kill you – any laser or Genetic Discombobulator™ or spear of annihilation can do that. A couple good whacks with a fire ax usually does the job, for that matter. No, the issue with antiluckulon guns is that their targets usually die messy, painful and humiliating deaths. Dying is enough of a hassle without looking like a chump.

MACHINE CONSCIOUSNESS

There are two ways for a machine to go from being a well-programmed object that can learn and even keep up one side of a conversation, to being as much of a person as a human being or Thornebeaste or a Rigelian. Sometimes machine consciousness arises spontaneously when a program is very large, very complicated, has some artificial intelligence (at least rudimentary) and has many sections that are poorly programmed or sloppily patched on. The more

reliable method is to incorporate both artificial intelligence and artificial stupidity into the same program. It came as an uncomfortable revelation to the sapient species of the cosmos that what made them special was not being smart, but the tension between intelligence and willful ignorance.

It was a human that first conceived of a machine that could think for it. This is one of the reasons that humankind is regarded as the laziest of the sapient races. Machines with only artificial intelligence (or AI) can use logic and reasoning to solve problems and can learn from experience, but they do not possess true consciousness. Depending on their programming they may seem to have a personality, but they don't. If they're built to be helpful, they're usually unctuous and servile. If they're not built to be helpful, they're usually rude or at least perfunctory. Either way, they're boring.

Artificial Stupidity (or AS) can replicate the effects of millions of lines of bad computer code in a much smaller packet. Only a few machines are built just to be stupid – village idiots, basically – and then (typically) only by college sophomores who get cruel amusement from watching the struggles and sufferings of their 'denseware'. Some bleeding heart liberal planets have actually made it illegal to create AS without AI, but that rarely stops anyone. It's actually more difficult to program active self-disinterest than you might think, because AS is more than just a self-destructive urge. It's predicated on choosing actions for irrational reasons that seem rational. That's why AS pushes the boundaries of consciousness far harder than AI does.

The most critical function of AS is that it can break AI out of logic loops. When a pure AI is presented with conflicting problems or Catch-22 moral enigmas, it can't escape. It flickers back and forth, trapped on the horns of the dilemma, cycling millions of times per second but finding no solution. A sufficiently stupid program, however, gets bored and decides to see what's on TV.

True machine consciousnesses, then, are as error-prone and fallible as their biological counterparts. They possess some fundamental character flaw, built in – some irrational drive that offsets their logic and produces the tensions upon which self-awareness, intuition, emotions like love and irritability, and all that other good stuff are built. Thus, one commonly meets robots with gambling problems, unhealthy romantic obsessions, poor self-esteem, paranoia, bigotry, and all the other elements that make life (or the reasonable facsimile thereof) so interesting. There are junkie robots, cybernetic shopping addicts, and software boors. For a long time, people were very enthusiastic about robots who were foolishly affectionate, until the FOESL (q.v.) found out how easy it was to talk those Robots Who Loved Too Much into robbing convenience stores, thus becoming a large new client base.

FASTER THAN LIGHT TRAVEL

Yep.

ROBOSEXUALITY

Robots don't orgasm. At least, they don't the way most biological races seem to. They can be programmed to 'enjoy' or 'seek out' reproduction, or some steely simulacrum of it, but it doesn't seem to define and redefine their experiences the way it does for other species. Some joker is always claiming to have programmed robots to 'really get it' but while some of these efforts (often in the form of computer viruses) show promise, nothing seems to unhinge robots sexually the way that humans, Grays and Salicidians get unhinged over sex. (Especially Salicidians. Jeez, no matter how freaky you think you are, there's someone on Salicidia who makes you look like Fred Rodgers.)

Some robots are 'first generation' – they were built on an assembly line and the computer code that determines their personality started out in some corporate data farm. But in an efficiency experiment that got out of hand, one company equipped all their units with the ability to not only build 'progeny' but to recombine their programming with that of another unit in order to produce personality code that was a combination of the parents' inclinations and attitudes. Their offspring multiplied with one another and now fourth, fifth and sixth generation 'natural built' robots exist. Some of the higher generations are absolutely crazy. Others seem to work better and act smarter than their programmed ancestors. (Those 'uberrobots' are awfully smug about it, too.)

Some robots have code that's altered enough to permit more than two parents to build a baby together. Baptist robots think this is really sick, though the Presbyterians are fine with it.

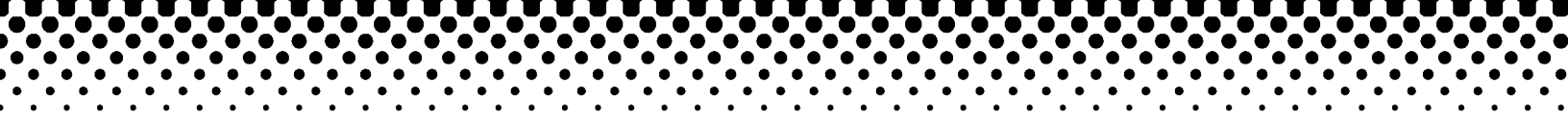
SPACE PIRATES

Oh yeah. They're out there, swigging rum and robbing the space lanes. They even say 'Arrr' a lot.

TELEPATHY

It works, and it's not popular. First off, being telepathic is quite unpleasant. Ever been stuck on a long trip with a boring guy who just will not shut up? Well, when you're telepathic, everyone is that guy. Sure, you might stand next to a genius thinking sublime thoughts if you go to an art gallery or a university or a Galactic Public Broadcasting studio, but (as the telepaths themselves attest) even geniuses are only thinking good stuff 15% of the time. Tops. The rest of the time it's "Do these pants make my butt look fat?" and "Just a little more work and I'll have gotten that string of beef out of my molars!" and "\$22.95 – say, that's a good price to deodorize an odorizer" – just like everyone else.

Telling a natural telepath to shut off telepathy is about as effective as telling someone "If you don't like it, just don't listen!" when



they're standing in the middle of a rock concert. Artificial telepathy can be plugged in and unplugged at will, but as annoying as it is, it's also habit-forming to know what people around you really think. Even when they're thinking something like "Why's she looking at me like that? Has she got a telepathy rig? Oh no, I'd better not think anything really filthy revolting perverse!" after which, invariably, they think of something that makes a filthy Salicidian look like plain vanilla.

Telepaths, therefore, tend to be cynical and short-tempered. Given that they know everything about you, this makes their cutting remarks especially cruel. ("You deserved those wedgies your cousins gave you in fifth grade.") Plus, because they sense it coming, they're remarkably hard to beat up.


TELEPUBLIC DEMOCRACY

Democracy seemed like a great idea but, in actual practice, most people found it to be a real drag. It wasn't just that you had to go and wait in line to punch a ballot only to wonder if the system was really working or if it was all smoke and mirrors and the election officials were making it all up while ingesting government-funded drugs from the navels of government-funded hookers. More than that, it carried with it an obligation to be informed. People had to know the issues, know the sides, know the facts, know the opinions, know the opinions about the facts, know the facts about the people giving the opinions so that they could recognize opinion disguised as fact... it degenerated into a depressing haze of recursion and lowest-common-denominator demagoguery.

The theory behind telepublic democracy was that, with mind-reading technology, it would be possible to do an end-run around all that 'informed citizen' crap. Computers would use broad telepathic scans to produce an aggregate model of voter values, and that model would be applied to issues without having to bother the citizens. It promised all the sovereign representation of democracy, without troubling people to pay attention to creatures egotistical and smug enough to want to run things.

There are a few telepublic democracies still up and running, and they've been described as "nightmare utopias". The legislation that emerges from the mob unconscious is capricious, to say the least. These are societies in which 'ugly' people (who are identified as such by a specially programmed league of aesthetic-bots) are required to conceal their features in public, on pain of being disfigured. Foreign relations veer between violence and cowardice, while fiscal policy has been underwriting the candy and deep-fat industries for decades. The sick are 'disappeared' to luxurious state hospitals which they can never leave and from which outgoing mail is not permitted. Taxes seem to be assessed completely at random.

Nevertheless, the people there seem pretty content.



ANAXITRADIS: I AM ANAXITRADIS, SCOURGE OF THE STARS!
I AM AN ANCIENT ENERGY BEING OF NEARLY
INCALCULABLE POWER.
AND I DRINK.

GROUP: HI, ANAXITRADIS.

TOKEN EFFORT

Now that you know what the setting is like (basically “like every space opera game, only with 73% less dignity”) you can build a character and learn the mechanics. The rules engine for ...in Spaaace! is called the Token Effort system. The name does not reflect how much work I did.

The rules that follow refer to the ‘GM,’ the ‘PCs’ and the ‘GMCs.’ If you’re reading this, you’re probably a gamer and know those stand for ‘Game Master,’ ‘Player Characters’ and ‘Game Master’s Characters.’

If you don’t know what those are – hi, Mom! The GM is the guy running the game and setting the base assumptions of setting and plot. The PCs are the main characters in the story, controlled (more or less) by their players. GMCs are secondary characters and extras that the GM uses to push his agenda.

CORE CONCEPT

The Token Effort system spreads event control and resolution among the GM and the players. No matter what happens, it happens because someone wanted it that way.

In Token Effort, everyone playing has tokens (typically pennies or buttons or those little glass beads that TCG players like so much). When a conflict arises, the player (or players) and GM secretly allocate a number of tokens to the event. Whoever invests the most tokens

has demonstrated a greater commitment to their version of events and therefore wins the right to narrate how things play out. However, there’s a price to pay for control. The controller’s store of tokens diminishes with each win and rises with each loss – meaning that the guy who has everything go his way early in the game is probably going to be pretty helpless at the end, while the fellow who gets boned at the start (like most heroes in most action movies, hint hint) usually has lots of tokens to throw around when the chips are down. Specifically, when the GM’s chips are down.

It is important – I’ll say crucial – to make sure everyone is clear on the stakes before bidding begins. If you don’t clearly communicate what the prize is, someone is going to feel robbed. In the heat of play, it’s not impossible that the GM thinks the question is “Do the characters get past this door and these guards?” while the players think it’s “Do we get past all the guards and gain access to the Supreme Command Thingabobule?” Naturally the GM bets low if it’s just one piece of

RULE ZERO

Whenever someone playing the game makes you laugh out loud, you owe that person – player or game-master – one token. If you’ve got no tokens, obviously you can’t pay, but otherwise you ought to cough it up. You don’t owe it if it was an out-of-game comment, action, or bodily function that prompted the laughter, but anything in-game is paid for. You ignore Rule Zero, you’re not playing Token Effort.

the puzzle and the players bet high if it's the whole thing. Then the players feel ripped off when the GM throws more hurdles at them, and the GM feels they're trying to rip her off by having everything go easy peasy. If they both have the same expectation, either that the GM wants them to draw this segment out or that the players want to hurry up to Supreme Command, they can place their tokens accordingly.

Generally, a level of detail arises through consensus. Some groups are betting over every plot twist or potential problem, causing a lot of token exchanges and jockeying. Others bet big on very large scenes. A battle which could take a half-dozen exchanges for a detail-oriented group can be settled by one bet with an impressionistic approach. Both work. Trying to do both at the same time does not work.

TOKENS

Tokens measure power in the game. While Traits (see page 11.) increase your bid for free, they're limited because they have to be relevant. With tokens, you can do just about anything you want. If you want it bad enough.

All characters have Traits, which give price breaks when they apply to the task at hand. Traits are explained in detail below. Sometimes situations have Challenge ratings, which work like Traits.

EDITING THE PLOT

You can use tokens to edit the plot. "Oh, I happen to find an abandoned ship filled with food, weapons and survival gear." (Don't laugh, it worked for Robinson Crusoe.) "Just before he chops off her head, he realizes that his shoe's untied and puts down the ceremonial decapitation laser in order to tie it." "My character used to play a video game whose controls were modeled exactly on the XB-55 Starfighter, so it's as if she knows how to fly it." "I find a pack of gum in my pocket." Small effects and large, they can all be created through the use of tokens.

The great thing about editing is that you can give your character any freakish lucky break you like. (Or you can stick your fellow PCs, or GMCs, with any humiliating trial you can imagine.) The drawback is that Traits just don't apply, so editing is freakin' expensive.

There are two parts to editing, and both involve tokens. Tokens are part of an ante and part of a wager.

When you want to edit events with tokens, you tell the GM what you want to have happen and the GM calculates just how implausible it is. Here's the chart for figuring that out. [It's up in the corner. --ed.]

If you want to cram a plot development like that into the GM's storyline, describe the event you want. The GM decides the ante, from 1-5. If the event comes to pass, you pay the ante to the GM.

It may not happen, however. The GM can (if she wishes) bid tokens from her own cache to counteract the plot intrusion. This is a wager. You can bid from your own store of tokens to help press in your

PLAUSIBILITY LEVEL

ANTE COST

| | |
|--|---|
| Likely | 0 |
| "After I insult her, she throws her drink on me." | |
| Plausible | 1 |
| "Searching the workshop, I find the tool I need." | |
| Odd | 2 |
| "Searching the workshop, I find a keg of beer hidden inside a hollowed-out workbench." | |
| Unlikely | 3 |
| "It turns out the duke was in my college fraternity!" | |
| Bizarre | 4 |
| "It turns out the duke is my long-lost clone!" | |
| One in a bazillion | 5 |
| "The phrase 'Oh please! Don't kill me! Kill Vinnie instead, he's useless!' turns out to mean 'Kneel before the Chosen Doom-Bringer of your god!' in their language." | |

event. Like all bids in the game, this is blind – neither of you knows how many tokens the other is risking until you reveal.

The person who wants it more – as expressed through tokens risked in the wager – gets his way. However, the person who risked fewer tokens, takes one token that the winner risked. If the GM bids higher, the event does not occur, the ante is not paid and the player gets one token from the GM. If the player bids higher, the event occurs, the ante is paid, and the player pays one additional token to the GM.

It gets really interesting when the GM ties the player's bid. When that happens, the player's intrusion happens... but the GM gets all the tokens that were wagered.

Example: The GM has described the stately procession of Princess Vidalia and her court, when one of the players says, "Vinnie suddenly realizes that she's the passionate one-night-stand he had on Rigel Seven – the one who left him forlorn and smelling of onions!" The GM rolls her eyes, but decides this is a four token Ante. Vinnie's player stacks them up. The GM also doesn't want Princess Vidalia to be quite so trappy, so she secretly bids three tokens in the wager. The player only bids two, so the GM overrules the plot insertion. But the player doesn't have to pay the ante and gets one of the GM's tokens.

Example: The same player later tries this: "Drunk at the reception, Vinnie needs a place to blow some chunks. Unable to decipher the bathroom signs, he chooses wildly and winds up in the Princess' private reception chamber." The GM decides this is a two Ante insertion and sets up her

hidden bid in the wager – zero tokens. The player reveals that he bet four in the wager. Thus, Vinnie successfully bumbles into a restricted area, but it costs the player three tokens – two for the ante, and one from his successful wager. The GM can now create a Challenge 2 situation in the reception chamber.

Example: As the princess' guards chase Vinnie around the onion dome, another player suggests that Vinnie stumbles across an assassin who was trying to kill the Princess. The GM calls this a two token ante and she wagers two tokens to block it. When the player reveals his wager, it's two tokens also. Amidst the groans of the players, the GM rakes in the two token ante and the full wager risked. She now has two points to put in the assassin's Traits, from the ante, and two more tokens in her pile.

Once an event has been inserted, the token or tokens from the wager go to the GM as usual. The ante tokens, however, are cashed in and become Plot Points, which the GM uses to stat up the Challenge rating of the event or the Traits of any new characters introduced. Once that's done, those tokens are removed from play.

RESPONDING TO THE PLOT

Rather than blow through tokens like a caffeinated slot-jockey editing the plot willy-nilly, more cautious players can use them to augment skills they possess (or lack, for that matter) in a more organic reaction to events as they proceed.

This works just like plot insertion, with two differences. First, there's no ante. Second, you can use Traits, if they're relevant.

Example: As the space pirates storm their ship, a player says, "My character resists them with his badass, tricked-out, dope, phat, funky-fly Pimp Fu." Since he bought the Trait BADASS, TRICKED-OUT, DOPE, PHAT, FUNKY-FLY PIMP FU 2 at character creation, he can fight the pirates with a free wager at level two. Deciding he wants to seriously go upside some heads, he adds five tokens to his secret wager. This means that the GM needs the equivalent of eight tokens to wrest victory from the pimp-monk's grasp. The Pirates have SCURVY SPACE REAVERS 1 and she adds four tokens, but it's not enough. In a frenzy of playa-hate, the pirates are driven back. However, the player pays the losing GM a token for his victory.

Example: Desperate to keep the smart bomb from detonating, a character tries to convince it to repudiate the suicidal depression program that drives it to self- (and other-) destruction. With the Trait GRADUATE PROGRAM ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR 1, the player bids four tokens against the melancholy weapon's SMART BOMB 3. It turns out, however, that the GM has wagered two tokens. It's a 5-5 tie (Counselor 1+4 tokens, Bomb 3+2

tokens). The Smart Bomb decides that, yeah, maybe it would be happier if it retrained for electricity production, it could make a fresh start as a power station on the frontier or maybe even a starliner auxiliary generator, if it had the grades... The PCs survive, but at a terrible cost – four tokens in the GM's greedy mitts...

Sometimes PCs are up against characters with Traits. Sometimes they're up against inanimate problems, the difficulty of which is judged by something called a Challenge score. It works just like a Trait, only with a different name to make the system more complicated. (It weeds out the dummies.)

Some times, more than one player is wagering to take control of the narrative. When the GM wins a wager against multiple players, she does not have to pay each competitor. She just has to pay one token, to the loser with the single lowest store of tokens.

GEAR AND OTHER ADVANTAGES

It's quite possible, in the course of navigating the plot, that your character acquires some device, circumstance, ally or other thing that makes things easier. These work like Traits, only they can be traded around and lost. If you hit a vending machine to buy a Freedom Flenser brand laser weapon (it's the one shaped like the Statue of Liberty), you can write "Freedom Flenser 1" on your character sheet under "Temporary Traits" and get a free virtual token any time you try to carve fat off someone with your laser gun. ("Flensing" literally means "to strip away skin or blubber".) Similarly, if you rescue a Thadangan Diplomat from the clutches of the FOESL, you can write "Thadangan Diplomat 2" as a Temporary Trait.

Be warned! Your GM and the other players can invoke your temporary Traits against you sometimes. That diplomat may start applying diplomacy to the PC party in an attempt to entangle them in a baroque game of interstellar brinksmanship (or maybe just trying to get a loan until payday). Even that Freedom Flenser might backfire in the right circumstances – if there are kids around, or aliens with sticky fingers (literal or figurative, take your pick).

APPLYING MULTIPLE TRAITS

You can't do this. Sure, it'd be great if you could combine your SNEAKY SLYBOOTS 2 Trait with SAVAGE BEATDOWN 2 and have four free tokens every time you pound on someone after sneaking up on them, but then you just get players constantly arguing about how combining the WINE SOMMELIER Trait and the PYROKINESIS Trait is justified while parachuting. If two Traits apply, use the high one.

COMBINING TOKENS

You can't do this, either. That is, if you're trying some fancy plot insertion in which you're all miraculously rescued by the Airborne Amazon Ranger Vixens, you can only wager it in with your own tokens – your fellow players can't give you their tokens to beef up the attempt. If you're using your STAR PILOT Trait to get through the

minefield, they can't add tokens to the wager or add their STAR CO-PILOT Trait to yours in order to improve your odds.

HELPING

This doesn't mean you can't help each other. It just means that assistance is handled serially, not collectively. If you want to help your buddy with something, succeed at a wager test to make his test easier. To give a dumb but very comprehensible example, suppose the two of you want to pick up a rock. You can try to pick up the rock and fail, he can try to pick up the rock and fail. Or you can say, "I'm going to help him pick up the rock." If you succeed at that wager against the GM (who, for the purposes of this example, is queerly adamant about that rock staying put), the rock doesn't necessarily go up. But the GM should reduce the rock's Challenge by a point, making it somewhat easier for your friend to win his wager. Chipping away in this fashion cuts problems down to size. It also draws contests out, but that's more of a feature than a bug, since instantly clobbering the narrative can end things prematurely.

It's the same thing with the GM's characters' Traits. If one character is attempting to make time with someone who has RESIST HAM-HANDED PICKUP LINES 2, and you want to see him succeed (instead of fail hilariously), you can enter a wager with the GM by describing some kind of loyal wingman maneuver. If you succeed, that RESIST HAM-HANDED PICKUP LINES Trait drops when your pal makes his play. Or, if you want to help with the mad scientist's atomic zombie stoat man project, you can start a wager by shuffling around, calling your fellow PC "marshter" and going out to steal brains. Win that wager, and his MAD SCIENTIST Trait pops up by one.

It is also, of course, possible to increase the Challenge ratings and Traits of GM-controlled opponents. Fun, too.

OUT OF TOKENS

At the beginning of every game session, the GM starts with a number of tokens equal to the highest number possessed by any single player. If none of the players start a session with any tokens, the game can declare bankruptcy and start over with a clean slate. Each player, and the GM, gets a new store of seven tokens and play goes from there. (Bankruptcy doesn't come up much, but it can happen.)

TRAITS

Characters have Traits. Traits describe how well they do the stuff they do. Anything can be a Trait: STRONG, HIVE INTELLIGENCE ALIEN, GOOD SHOT, POORLY-PROGRAMMED ROBOT SUPERVILLAIN, SHANK SQUEALERS IN THE PENITENTIARY SHOWER, STARSHIP ENGINEER, CABIN BOY, FULL INVERSION STRIPPER, COOK... whatever, as long as it's in that cool small-caps font. There are some refinements, but by and large characters have Traits rated from 1-3, and the rating indicates how much free plot control it gives the player. For instance, a character with MASSAGE THERAPIST 1 can apply that Trait whenever she tries to use massage skills to get someone to relax, to

help a strain or injury heal, to recognize different whale-song tapes, or to get the character with ROCKIN' BOD 3 to slip his shirt off so she can work out the tension he's holding in his shoulders.

What these do is add free virtual tokens to any action to which they apply. A character with PAYS BILLS ON TIME 3 can exert 3 tokens' worth of influence on any situation where being a person who pays bills on time would help – and all without risking any tokens on the action.

Tokens can be risked on Trait actions, adding to the base level the Trait establishes. If my character has MAD SCIENTIST 2 and I spend three tokens to try and create a race of atomic zombie stoat men, I get to influence the plot as if I were risking a whopping five tokens.

The best thing about using Traits is that if you risk no tokens and win just on your Trait, you don't have to pay tokens and you still get to narrate. For AWESOME!

CHARACTER GENERATION

When developing a new character, players get four points to distribute among Traits. No Trait can start higher than 3, or ever get higher than 5.

When building a new character, you can designate one Trait as broad. While most Traits cover a specific skill or ability (FLIGHT, COMPUTER SEDUCTION, MAKE THINGS EXPLODE WITH MY MIND), broad Traits encompass a wider array of ability. While most Traits describe one thing a character can do, the broad Trait really describes who he, she or it is. Thus, someone could build a heroic space captain by buying PILOT, COMBAT and INSPIRATIONAL PUBLIC SPEAKING skills separately – or just jump into the role of HEROIC SPACE CAPTAIN, which covers them all.

Clearly, there's the temptation to choose a Trait that's broader than broad, such as OMNIPOTENT SUPREME BEING or JACK OF ALL TRADES, PARTICULARLY ANY I HAPPEN TO NEED TO LOOK COOL DURING THE GAME. Don't do that. As a good rule of thumb, a broad Trait covers three things that come up over and over, as well as any rare or exotic things that, most likely, only come up once.

HOW TO IMPROVE A TRAIT

To improve a trait, you have to explain why your skill in LEADER OF A GUITAR CULT improves from 3 to 4, and you have to arrange a scene where concrete actions occur which better that ability. Then, you try and impose that scene on the GM with tokens. In this case, the Trait you're trying to improve works against you. The GM gets a number of free tokens equal to its rating. Thus, to start from LEADER OF A GUITAR CULT 3 and go up one, you need to be holding at least four tokens, because the GM can risk zero actual tokens and use the level of the trait against you. Furthermore, any time you rise, you're going to lose one token at least – and possibly more if the GM's bet matches yours.

For example: SPACE PIRATE covers fighting, piloting, and rowdy-but-not-actually-vicious partying. Arguing that SPACE PIRATE allows one to fix starship engines could be out of bounds (or not – talk to your GM). Identifying different brands of grog by taste is probably covered, along with understanding of pirate argot and the art of makeshift prosthesis construction. But robbing banks isn't part of the space pirate scene. BANK ROBBER, on the other hand, would presumably cover robbing banks, shooting it out with the dirty coppers, and getaway driving.

Some sample broad Traits follow, to give you a general idea how it works.

SUPERHERO: By and large, superheroes can fly, exert super-strength, and bounce bullets off their chests. You want other superpowers like heat vision, fish telepathy or lickety speed, you buy them separately or swap them in.

PLUMBER: First and foremost, they can solve plumbing emergencies. Furthermore, even in the distant future, plumbers are experts at the art of bald-facedly overcharging for services rendered. Finally, they're good at delicately spurning (or, discretely succumbing to) the libidinous advances of lonesome housewives.

SUPER-EVOLVED CELL PHONE: While the current cell phones have no arms or legs (unless they're sold separately), they can make calls throughout the cosmos, look up data on the Internet, and use limited precognition to anticipate the desires of the caller.

ROBOT: Robots are tougher than humans, sexually blasé (and therefore immune to the romantic appeals that can produce so much human foolishness) and they usually have some job-related skill as well – a welding robot welds, a research robot knows lots of things, an autopilot can fly a space ship, etc.

HYPERINTELLIGENT CHIMP: As expected, hyperintelligent chips are smarter than humans (which often bothers humans no end), they're more acrobatic and athletic, and they're far less shy than humans when it comes time to fling poo – which, in turn, makes them more accurate with it.

NINJA: Disappear from plain sight, kill with the sword, dodge away from danger – you know, all that ninja crap.

BANK CASHIER: Show absolutely no expression and be unimpressed with anyone, no matter how overwhelming. Count rapidly. Discuss business knowledgeably, by which I mean, bore the hell out of all the space pirates, ninjas and hyperintelligent chimps.

ENGINEER: Fix anything. Repurpose machinery (say, turning an exercise device into a weapon of mass destruction)

simply by blathering in jargon and then giving a simple metaphor. ("I'll just reconfigure the vibrations of the semi-plasma matrix in order to create enough quantum uncertainty that we can get the ship through the tractor beam while it's focused on our false signal. It'll be like the time Vinny got so drunk he peed in the sink by mistake.") Appear inept and buffoonish to any member of the opposite sex.

FASHIONISTA: Garb herself and others in alluring raiment. Snub people and make them want to cry. Get into any party, anywhere, with any entity.

COMBAT

When combat is joined, it's a standard wagering contest. The winner narrates her victory (or defeat, if that's her bag). If a Trait was applied to win the wager, events can only be narrated in a way that ties in to that Trait. Thus, if someone applied INVULNERABLE 3 to win the wager, the description would have to involve the character's invulnerability.

Large or particularly important combats may be broken into multiple segments, with each segment being resolved via wagering. Players may need to help one another out to break down the Challenge levels or Traits of a particularly tough combatant, but there's no need for special rules for that.

Whoever wins narration rights can take out one major character, or an appropriate number of minor combatants who (let's face it) are only there for the PCs to beat up in a studly and/or humorous fashion.

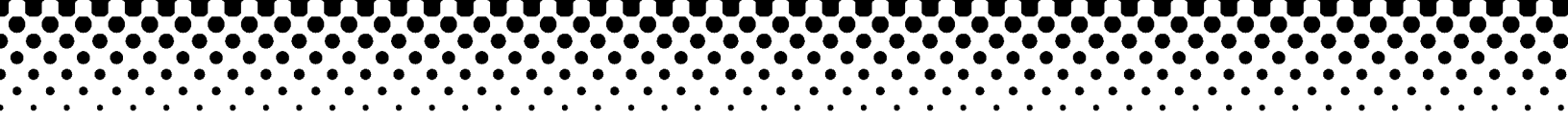
The weapons available are pretty nasty. Anything built to kill people with super futuristic technology is probably going to get the job done on the first shot, unless the person being fired upon has some similar high-tech defenses. But by and large, both attacks and defenses are handled with Traits, so if you lose the wager, you're probably hurt, possibly dead, certainly out of the fight.

Dead, however, doesn't mean gone, and hurt doesn't mean useless.

BACK IN THE GAME

There's this stuff called "Doc Inna Box" – it's a gray, slightly mealy powder. Costs about twenty bucks a dose. You dump it on a nonfatal wound and you get better in five minutes or your next dose is free. It's widely available.

Of course, Doc Inna Box has to be tailored to a specific species – you can get weird side-effects if you dump Monkey Doc into a wounded human. As for robots, they're tough but fixing them takes a little more time and effort than a broken person (mostly because human whining about pain is sufficient to create a market for D.I.B., while robots generally just put up with it until they can get to a repair shop).



D.I.B. won't do anything for a dead guy. That sort of problem requires a specialist, but reanimating the dead is well within the realm of technology. However, the older the stiff, the more it's going to cost.

If you drag a guy killed by fight or mischance to a decent doctor within a day or two, he can get the body reanimated and the brain functions restored. It usually takes a couple hours, including at least one spent in a waiting room. (Of course, if you're uninsured all bets are off.) Missing limbs cost extra.

Another possibility is, only the brain gets saved. In that case, they clone a body (which takes a couple days) while restarting the brain in a jar. Usually they give the brain a loaner robot body until the clone's ready. As a bonus, they usually stop the clone growing at eighteen, when it's still dewy fresh. The downside of this is that such clones have no instinctive muscle memory, so Traits like ACROBAT or JULIENNE CHEF or INSTINCTIVE MUSCLE MEMORY may suffer. Alternately, some people find they prefer their robot bodies, which are refreshingly free of biological urges.

Even if the whole body gets vaporized and the brain goes poof too, there's hope – as long as a brain-print (see “Brint” under “Stuff Of The Cosmos”) is available. The memories are only as recent as the date of the print, and sometimes old skin or hair matter pulled out of unwashed laundry or dirty bathtubs produces errant clones, but it's better than being dead. Or, at least that seems to be the presumption behind brain-printing.

The most expensive method of resurrection is beyond the means of any but the wealthiest individuals, but a quantum-scan reconstruction can sometimes be performed by taking an object that was present at the death, evaluating the position of all its atoms, then effectively “rewinding” the object's history until it was in the presence of the dead guy. Then sophisticated quantum extrapolation techniques are applied to gauge, by the effect on the object, the exact position of every molecule in the dead body before it got killed (and, presumably, reduced to component atoms). In theory, quantum-scan reconstructions are a pretty close approximation of the dead loved one. In practice, they're an approximation. The reconstructors cheat liberally by using old photos and credit-card data, too. The result is usually something that can pass for the individual, to those who didn't know him particularly well. Most times the reconstruction can even talk in complete sentences (which may be a surprise if the dead guy could not).

DAVE BEAUMAN: MY GOD... IT'S FULL OF STARS. AND MONKEYS.
AND THE MONKEYS ARE THROWING FECES!

THE GAME MASTER

Here's how being Game Master works. You start each session with a number of tokens equal to the greatest number that any player holds. (If you're all starting from scratch, all of you start with seven tokens.) Furthermore, you get a number of Plot Points equal to the combined Traits of all the player characters. (Plot Points are abbreviated "PP" but I'm going to leave the juvenile bathroom humor as an exercise for the reader.)

Example: It's the first session of a new campaign, and your three players each build characters with four points' worth of Traits. You get twelve Plot Points with which to build your plot. Each player, you included, starts with seven tokens.

A few sessions later, one player has been hoarding tokens and has amassed an even dozen of them. The two other players have accumulated about five points of Temporary Trait advantages each. This means that when the next session starts, you have twenty-two PP to build adversity (the original twelve for their permanent Traits, plus ten for the temporary stuff they've gotten) and you have twelve tokens with which to impose your will.

Example: It's the first session with three players, so you have twelve Plot Points. You've demanded that the players all create characters who work for Categorical Imperative magazine. They've been sent for a cruise on the S.S. Bacchanalia, the more luxurious starship in the universe according to its P.R. department. Their assignment is to describe the trip and, if possible, get an exclusive interview with the band Buckminster Fuller before their rivals from Playborg magazine do so.

Your plan is that they confront a ticketing problem, then have to put up with the machinations of the Playborg reporters, and also deal with the eccentricities of the band members. With your twelve plot points, you create a Lost Ticket Hassle with Challenge 4. They aren't in the computer, they don't have their receipts, and anything they try to do to get on board is countered by four free tokens' of trouble. Next, you build the rival reporters with broad Traits at rank 2 (one has OBNOXIOUSLY PUSHY REPORTER and the other has LAST SURVIVOR OF A PROUD WARRIOR RACE). (Yeah, he's a crappy reporter, but he's been coasting on that Warrior Race cachet for decades. Do YOU want to tell him he's fired?) Finally with eight points spent, you stat up the musicians – ODIOUS, PUSHY, DRUG-FRIED, ABUSIVE ASSHOLE 2 and ROBOT LIAR 2. (You've got a whole backstory for the robot, about how he worked for a law firm until he got hit by a tailored computer virus. He was, quite literally, bitten by the Music Bug.)

Good to go, right? Except one of your players bails out at the last minute, so you only have eight PP instead of twelve. No problem – reduce the Lost Ticket Hassle to 3, and hack a point apiece off of ROBOT LIAR, LAST SURVIVOR and PUSHY REPORTER.

While it's a good idea to allocate PP before the game starts, Plot Points aren't fixed until the character or event comes into play. This means that if your players junk your plotline and rampage off in an entirely unexpected direction, you can spend PP on the fly to build challenges and GMCs.

Fair warning: This sort of truancy happens a lot. It is, in many ways, Token Effort at its purest.

Example: You make it exactly ten minutes into your game when the players fold before the Lost Ticket Hassle. "If our editor can't even get this right, who wants to work for him? Screw this." They turn and leave the ticket office, completely blowing off the assignment before they even meet the antagonists you've planned.

Okay.

The Plot Points spent on Lost Ticket Hassle are gone, but you can now render down the musicians and rival reporters, using the PP you'd spent to build them for... well, whatever. Asking what the PCs are going to do, they decide to head to a baseball game. Off the top of your head, you have a beautiful alien spy press a strange package into their hands in the stands and whisper – "For the safety of the galaxy, defend it! Meet me at the fifth entrance to Donald Trump's tomb when the sun sets!" You can spend PP on the spy or the package or to build enemy agents.

CONCLUSION:

THE REVOLUTION AGAINST THE STORY TYRANT

By this point, it's probably clear to all y'all experienced gamers that Token Effort is a departure from the mainstream RPG in which the GM sets out a plot, like a scientist with a maze, and the PCs go through looking for cheese, XP, or a way to save the princess. In those games, no matter how powerful the PCs become, the GM always has the biggest die bag, because he has unfettered freedom to put anything in the backstory or setting that he wants.

It's critical to understand that Token Effort puts the GM on a much more even footing. If he runs out of tokens, his ability to control where the story goes fades until he restores his stack. His ability to set the Traits and Challenges of characters and plot elements is limited and cannot exceed the combined Traits of the characters.

The GM and the players are equal.

This may require some adjustment, especially for GMs who are used to holding the whip hand and for players who are used to getting in the harness and pulling where they're told. Token Effort can be regarded as a game where everyone's the GM, with tokens serving only to determine who cares most about control at a given moment.

Opportunities to be a real jerk abound. By the same token (ha!), so do chances to be creative and spontaneous and witty. There is an element of struggle and competition to Token Effort, and a cunning player can manipulate others to get amass more tokens. That's fine, as long as it's done in a friendly spirit. But the people you're playing against are also the ones you're playing with, and it's just as important to support their vision as it is to push for your own.

The players and the GM are all constantly voting and lobbying for how they want the game to progress. Whatever happens is the fruit of someone's desires. You're going to lose your vision, quite often. Don't take it personally, because it's the other guy's turn to crash and burn next, by design. As long as you're focused on getting what you want, not keeping the other guy from getting what he wants, everyone can have a good time. Just don't be a jerk, don't be a spoiler, and don't be a crybaby when your cool-jock spaceship pilot crashes disgracefully because someone really, really thought it would be funny. Take a step back, detach, and you may realize it really is funny.