

NEVER KNOWS BEST



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Never Knows Best

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The purchase of this as a physical product entitles you to the digital version as well. The digital version comes with reference sheets that make this game easier to play. If you did not receive a digital copy at purchase for any reason, contact us with proof of purchase at:
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NEVER KNOWS BEST

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION P.1

Setup	3
The Town	4
Counterculture	5
Finishing Setup	6

PLAYBOOKS P.7

Playbook Elements	9
Labels & Traits	12

GETTING STARTED P.13

First Session Procedure	14
Rolling The Dice	15
N.O	17
Teamwork	17

BASIC MOVES P.18

Basic Moves	19
Peripheral Moves	26
Distress & Voluntary Overflowing	30
Harm	31

END OF SESSION P.32

End of Session	33
End of Episode	34
XP & Advancement	35

RUNNING THE GAME P.37

The GM	38
Flow of Play	39
GM Agenda	41
GM Principles	42
GM Moves	43
Obstacles	45
Threats	46
Creating NPCs	47
Critical Success and Additional Effects	48

INTRODUCTION



Never Knows Best (NKB) is a roleplaying game about middle school kids facing impending adulthood, growing up, and society's—sometimes nonsensical—expectations and obligations. It's designed for three-five players plus a game master (GM) who facilitates the game.

This game uses absurdism, metaphors, motifs, and literalization to represent the struggles and growth these kids go through. Society's obligations and expectations manifest as outrageous forms—creatures and monsters not of this world. The kids combat these creatures by transforming into robots. Whenever a kid transforms, their robot takes on their unique strengths and traits representing how they reject society's attempts to make kids conform and obey.

In this way, the internal conflict kids face when growing up becomes something real and seen. Battles are metaphors for their inner turmoil about who they are, where they fit in, and who they want to be.

NKB is inspired by an anime called FLCL (Fooly Cooly) and wears this influence on its sleeve. This game and its rules focus on my own interpretation of the source material, rather than attempting to emulate the anime as closely as possible.

Mechanically, NKB is also influenced by other Powered by the Apocalypse games, most predominately:

Masks (<https://www.magpiegames.com/masks/>)
and Monsterhearts

(<https://buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts>).

ASHCAN EDITION

This game is not yet finished. This ashcan edition is a really dressed up playtest of Never Knows Best. This edition contains the core mechanics and the game's integral parts in a compact framework that allows for you, the audience, to play the game and send me feedback that will go into the final version of the game. (neverknowsbest RPG@gmail.com)

This edition works best for either a single four-hour session or a short campaign of three to four session.

tone & safety tools

Begin by asking everyone what tone they want to experience in the game—something focused on the heavier aspects of growing up, or something a little more lighthearted, for instance. What kind of fiction and rating will you assign to the content in your game—anime, a live-action TV show, a movie, PG-, M-, or G-rating and so on?

Teens deal with a lot of stuff growing up, which could get dark, messy, or uncomfortable for some players.

Use your preferred safety tools to navigate the content in your game so that everyone has a good time. I use two in particular:

Lines & Veils and the X-Card. Additionally, the following compiles many such safety tools that you may choose to use during your own game.

The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a resource created by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk. The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a compilation of safety tools that have been designed by members of the tabletop roleplaying games community for use by players and GMs at the table. You can find it at bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit.

SETUP

In a typical first session, your table will decide on the game's tone, create the town, make characters, answer the player characters' starting questions, and play out one or two scenes in the actual fiction. Setup pacing varies depending on the number of players, how fast people make characters, and how much players expound during the setup.

THE TOWN

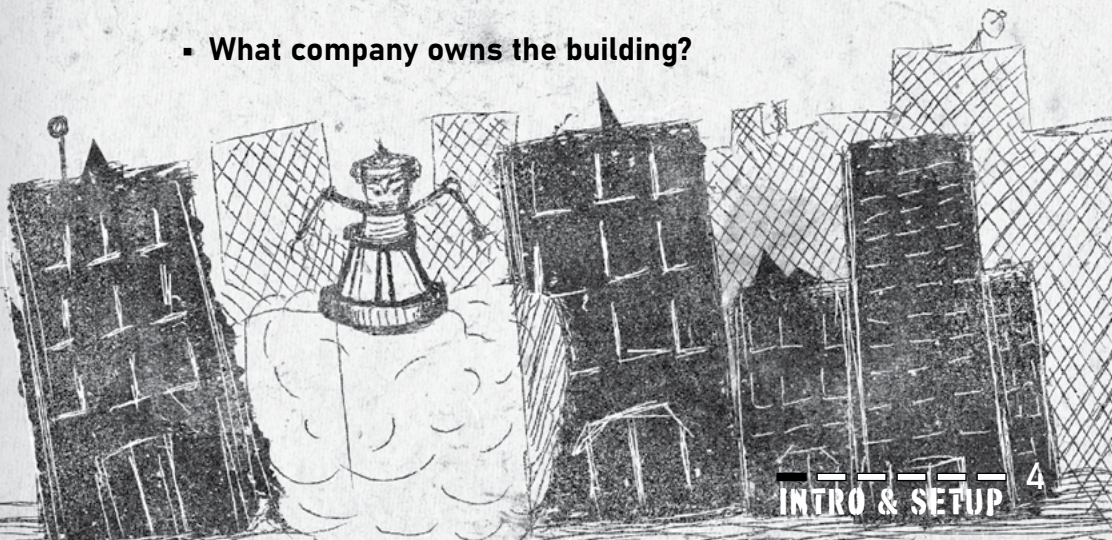
Your group will build the town where the character players live using the procedure below; there is no pre-defined setting. This town represents the grown-up or “mature” world and the societal expectations therein. Together, you will establish the town’s social expectations and visual motifs to bring out the subject matter you want to explore.

The GM should ask the following questions, ideally with input from everyone. Just answer the questions you find interesting. Your answers will provide scaffolding for the game’s themes and visual motifs during play.

WHAT BUILDING in town embodies societal expectations? Choose one, roll a six-sided die, or create your own:

- 1) A factory (perhaps automated)
- 2) A research and development facility
- 3) A hospital
- 4) An energy plant/farm
- 5) A mall
- 6) A mine or mill

- How does the building’s shape telegraph that it is a symbol of societal expectations?
- What company owns the building?



HOW DOES THE COMPANY control the town, making the town feel detached from the rest of the world? Roll 2d6 a few times, circle all the apply, or create your own:

- 1) Its building emits a smoke that blankets the town
- 2) It is located at and/or protects the entry/exit to town
- 3) They own most of the other buildings in town
- 4) Their logo is everywhere you look
- 5) They have an agenda that only adults seem to understand
- 6) There are no clear entry/exit points to the building's structure
- 1) They control the media
- 2) Their building(s) emit light pollution that blocks out the night sky
- 3) Most people in town work for them
- 4) The owner or owner's family are situated in politics
- 5) They fund the school and influence what is taught there
- 6) People depend on the company for their utilities

COUNTER CULTURE

Keeping in mind the town's chosen visual motifs, it is now time to create the counterculture. The counterculture stands in stark contrast to the societal expectations embodied by the town and the company.

The counterculture's visual motifs establish what is "cool" and subversive to the player characters. Mainstream culture is considered a facet of the grown-up world. Counterculture, on the other hand, is not concerned with what everyone else is doing. Think about what was subversive or cool when you were that age (or if you are that age now even!). What was art? What was expressive in a way that was not mainstream?

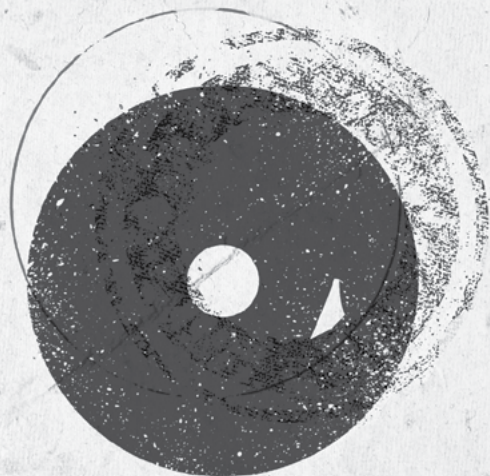
ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS TOGETHER:

- Is the counterculture rooted in a particular medium, such as music, magazines, games, etc.?
- How does the medium link the player characters together?
- Are the counter culture's visual motifs literalized?
For example: if music is subversive and everyone owns a guitar, are guitars used as actual weapons to combat the adult world?
Are punk jackets with patches actual armor?

Each player should jot down the parts of counterculture that interest them while everyone brainstorms. The player characters all have bedrooms that represent who they are. You can use these counter cultural elements in scenes involving the player characters' bedrooms, so the more ideas everyone comes up with, the better!

ASK THE FOLLOWING OF THE TABLE TO FINISH SETUP:

- What color palette is typically associated with the counterculture? What colors are associated with the adult one?
- If this fiction had a soundtrack, what would it sound like? What genre, artists, songs, and/or tone would it feature?





PLAY BOOKS

EACH PLAYER WILL CHOOSE A PLAYBOOK

to create their player character. A playbook contains all of a player character's pertinent character information. Playbooks in NKB share two things in common: middle school dynamics involving self-expression and personal issues, and the fictional dramatization of said dynamics in pop-culture.

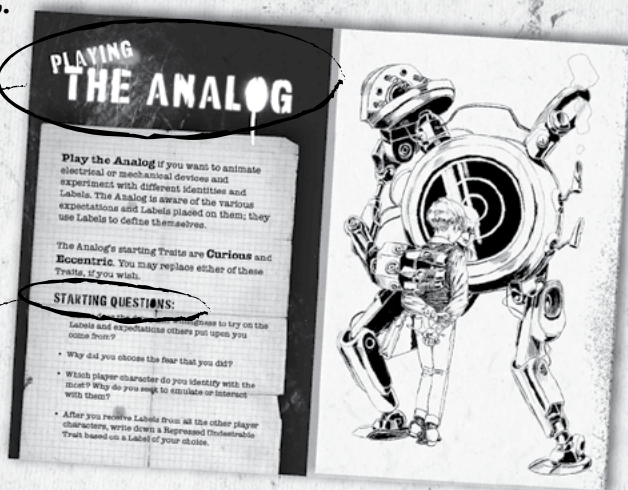
Playbooks focus on how each player portrays their character through their Traits and emotional hang-ups. NKB literalizes a character's emotional distress or baggage, emotional processing, and inner conflict through combat. The player characters use their Traits and emotional hang-ups to transcend their bodies and transform into robots to overcome their problems. In this way the game's fiction becomes a metaphor for the confusion and difficulties of growing up through absurdism, literalization, and abstraction.

A player character's inner conflicts may end up being pointed at another player character—potentially resulting in fights between the player characters as robots. That's okay, it's a part of the player characters figuring out who they are to each other.

PLAYBOOK ELEMENTS

Working from the top left on the first page to bottom right on the second page, each playbook has the following sections (which should be worked through in the described order below):

PLAYING THE _____ breaks down the playbook's most relevant mechanical parts to help a player decide if it is for them or not.



After the players choose their playbook, they answer the **STARTING QUESTIONS**, fill out the identity section, choose their moves, and decide any other pertinent information about their character. When everyone finishes these sections, each player will introduce their character to the group. Players will then read aloud the answers to their starting questions (as well as completing any instructions included in those questions).

The **IDENTITY** section (adjacent page) offers a pick list of names, eyes, look, and a fear. Players can choose from the list, or they can make up their own—especially when choosing their character's fear, which should align the player's comfort levels. Players may also opt to select a fear during play in the first session.

IDENTITY NAME: Ayden, Jules, Li, Jackson, Heitor, Zvie, Malak, Rissa, Aiko.

AGE (12-16):

EYES: gunmetal eyes, assessing eyes, wandering eyes, astute eyes, _____

LOOK: awkward, dismissive, expressive, _____

FEAR: self, alienation, _____

LABELS +

TRAITS +

- Curious
- Eccentric

DISTRESS **REPPRESSED TRAITS**

TRAITS, located below the Identity section, are the most important part of the game. Each playbook lists several Traits. However, a player can replace those Traits with something else if they prefer. Traits are the player characters' stats,

and they drive the characters' actions. When a player character triggers a move, they look to their Traits and their Labels. The more Traits and Labels embodied in a scene, the higher their chance of success.

LABELS are the second most important thing in the game. Labels are how other people see that character. They are typically placed on a character by other characters—both non-player characters and player characters alike. There's a move specifically about utilizing Labels. But, as with Traits, they help players roleplay their character while influencing the chances of getting a higher die roll result.

The **DISTRESS** row (next page) has 4 boxes for marking Distress. Distress tracks when and how a character "Overflows" (meaning they turn into a robot). When a player marks the fourth Distress box, their character Overflows immediately (unless there are other moves in play that modify the outcome). A player character may also choose to Overflow whenever they mark a Distress box. There's a benefit to Overflowing before hitting 4 Distress. The more Distress a character has when they Overflow, the harder it is to succeed when triggering moves as a robot. Consult the Overflow move for more on that.





REPPRESSED TRAITS have two classifications: Desirable and Undesirable. Repressed Traits only become pertinent to the fiction when a player character Overflows.

When that happens, the player character's

Desirable Repressed Traits and their normal Traits inform their robot's appearance. The number of Traits and Desirable Repressed Traits also form the robot's Harm track. When a robot meets that threshold of Harm, they: revert to human form, create a new Undesirable Repressed Trait, and trigger the Struck Down move.

Undesirable Repressed Traits are also released when a character Overflows. The GM creates a Threat from the player character's Undesirable Repressed Traits. The Threat may take any shape, but will most often be a creature or monster.

A character's **ROOM** tells everyone else what they're like—what they care about, what they don't, etc. When a player introduces their character, they will also describe their room. At the start of each session, the player might describe how the room has changed to reflect their character's development.

N.O is a player character's general power level when they're a robot. Characters accrue N.O by defeating a Threat that stems from their Undesirable Repressed Traits. N.O makes it easier to succeed on the Go All Out move; the move most often triggered when a character attempts something difficult as a robot.

ANALOG MOVES

Choose **any** two moves:

☐ BLANK SLATE

Once per session, when you interact another player character via a move, you may choose one move from their playbook and add it to your own, temporarily. When you trigger the move, either erase it or replace this move with it, forever.

☐ CONDUIT

When you interact with something electronic or mechanical, roll. On a 9, choose S. On a 4/6, choose E:

- It is autonomous and self-powered until the end of a session (instead of just the initial interaction).
- It would fight to protect you, if necessary.
- You transfer a Label to it for as long as it is autonomous, then gives it 1 armor (max 2).

☐ REFLECTED IN MIRRORS

When you use a Label acquired in the current session to inform how you appear when Overflowing, take +1 forward.

☐ BUILT FOR THIS

When you Overflow, you add your N.O level to your harm track.

☐ PUNK

When you shape the world, you have the option of asking the MC what the adult world expects of you. Add a temporary Label to represent it. When you subvert that expectation, mark XP and erase the Label. If you embrace it, mark the Label as permanent.

☐ TELL ME

When you get a Label, clear 1 distress or take +1 forward.

When you fail, or when you internalize how you choose to grow up, mark XP.

(Cross out/mark Advancements as you take them)

- Change or add a Trait [max 3] ☐ ☐ ☐
- Change or Add a Desirable Repressed Trait [max 3] ☐ ☐ ☐
- Take another Analog move ☐ ☐
- Take a move from another playbook
- Make a new move for your playbook with the MC ☐ ☐

All player characters start with **MOVES**. Some playbooks ask players to choose an additional move.

The final section tracks a player character's **ADVANCEMENTS**. When a player rolls a miss (1-3 on the dice) while triggering a move, they mark one experience (XP) on their character's playbook.

Additionally, there is an end of session procedure where player characters can earn XP. There are 8 boxes in which to mark XP. Whenever a player marks the 8th box, they take an Advancement and clear all the boxes (see Advancement, page 35-36).

LABELS & TRAITS

A player character's Labels and Traits are powerful mechanically and narratively, increasing the chances of the player character's success. Players should therefore pick Traits they want to portray, as this will help increase their chance of success. Abstractly, NKB uses Traits and Labels to:

- Help players goalpost their character's drive and identity as they develop
- Show how much a scene "matters" to a character and their understanding of the world
- Allow players to institute system mastery that encourages satisfying character growth



Each player character has Traits that represent who they believe they are. Traits are fluid and can be changed or gained throughout the game. Player characters can gain new Traits through Advancements. Existing Traits can change into something else.

Labels are how other people see that character. Labels can likewise be removed, changed, or added during play. The player can see how their character changes from their perspective through their Traits. Likewise, players can see what others think of their character through Labels.



GETTING
STARTED

FIRST SESSION PROCEDURE

Roughly corresponding to the order in this text, everyone should begin with **Tone & Safety Tools**, **The Town**, and **Counterculture**. This will get everyone on the same page for creating characters and playing the game.

1 Players should then review all of the playbooks, particularly the first page as it contains a short breakdown of the playbook. Players can choose the same playbook. However, the more varied the playbook selection, the easier it will be to mesh the characters together.

2 Players should each choose a playbook and then fill out the playbook's Identity section, choose an additional move (if applicable), and choose alternate Traits if they don't like the ones suggested. They should also think about what the character's room looks like. Players should then think about their answers to the Starting Questions. Of course, these things should be fluid. As events unfold in the fiction—especially in the first session—the players can modify their character so they have fun portraying them.

Once everyone is ready, each player should introduce their character to the level they feel comfortable—the character's name, how they look, and their general demeanor and outlook.

Once all player characters are introduced, each player answers their Starting Questions aloud, using the same order as before. Some questions involve other characters, so answering these questions is easier if everyone knows the other characters.

3 After each player answers their Starting Questions, each other player assigns a Label to that player's character. This Label comes from the perspective of the character assigning it to the player character.

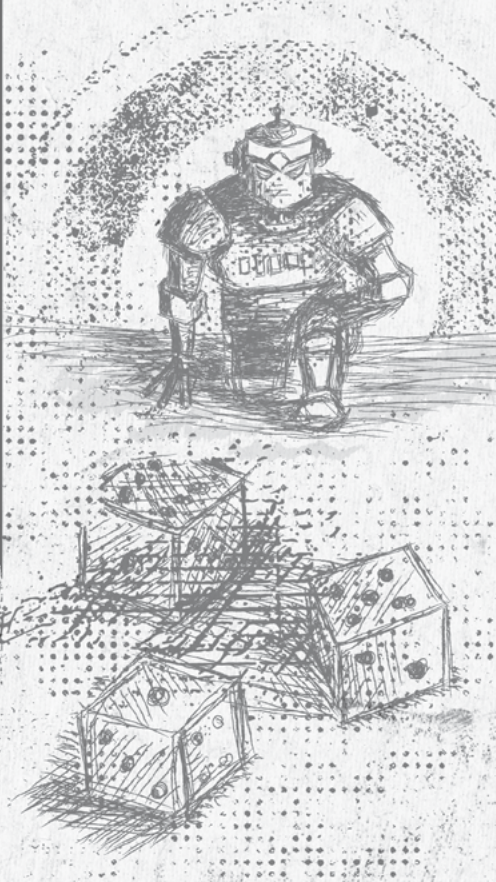


3 (Skill)

Labels are entirely subjective. They do not have to be objectively true. They reflect how one character views another at the present time. They can be modified and removed later, mechanically.

YOU'RE NOW READY TO BEGIN PLAY

As characters interact, events will naturally snowball and become dramatic. If you're the GM, look to the GM section on page 37 for more details on running the game.



ROLLING THE DICE

Play is a conversation between everyone at the table. The GM describes what is happening in the current scene along with any setting details—smells, sounds, and other senses. The players reply with what their character thinks, feels, and does in response.

When a player describes their character doing something, they and the GM should check to see if it triggers a move (i.e., when the player character's actions follow the "When X" opening sentence of a move).

Moves always use a triggering sentence followed by text that helps everyone determine the move's outcome. If a move applies, follow its procedure to help adjudicate what happens next.

Each move follows these parameters of success:

- If the highest die is a 1, 2, or 3 (1-3), the player fails forward.
- If the highest die is a 4 or a 5 (4/5), it is a mixed success—the player succeeds but at a cost.
- If the highest die is a 6, it is a complete success.
- If the player rolls more than one 6, it is a critical success.

If no Label or Trait applies to the roll, the player rolls two six-sided dice and takes the lowest die for the result.

ROLLING MOVES AS A HUMAN

The player who triggered the move rolls a pool of six-sided dice to determine the outcome. To build a dice pool, the player and GM look to the player character's Traits and Labels. They determine which, if any, apply to the fiction leading up to triggering the move. The player adds one die for each Label or Trait the character portrays or embraces in that moment.

For example, if the player character embraces two

- Labels and embodies one Trait, their pool contains three dice.



ROLLING MOVES AS A ROBOT

The normal procedure for rolling differs when a character Overflows into a robot. While Overflowing, the player character removes 1 die from their pool for each point of Distress they have marked.

- For example, a player character Overflows with 1 Distress. They trigger a move and add 1 die for each Trait and Label that applies in the scene. However, they remove 1 die as they have 1 Distress.

N.O

A player can offset their Distress penalty with N.O if they are in robot form. They add an additional die for each N.O level to their pool when triggering the Go All Out move (page 28).

- Characters gain N.O by defeating a Threat that stems from their Undesirable Repressed Traits.
- Enemies also have N.O levels, roughly corresponding to how "tough" they are to defeat. The more powerful an enemy, the more N.O they have.

TEAMWORK

Teamwork is another way to overcome obstacles and Threats. A fellow player character can use the move Tag A Label (on page 25) to add an additional die to another player character's die pool.

"Tagging" a Label simply means invoking it in the scene. If the helping player character can reasonably make the Label relevant, they will become entangled in any consequences alongside the player they're helping.

Labels are how other people view a character, so tagging a Label when interacting with another character is fairly simple (see pages 12-13 for more on Labels).

BASIC MOVIES

THE BASIC MOVES

Any player can trigger the following basic moves as a human or robot. When a move directs a player to “roll,” the player adds the Traits and Labels their character is embodying in that moment. Refer to Rolling the Dice (pages 15-16) for more on resolving moves.

Note: If a player character is Overflowing, their final die pool is modified by each point of Distress and each level of N.O (see Rolling Moves as a Robot on page 17).

GET YOUR WAY

When you try to get your way with another character, roll. On a 6, you either give the target character a new Label or change an existing Label; they choose a reaction from below. On a Critical, you also clear 1 Distress. On a 4/5, they choose one of the following reactions:

- I earnestly express how I feel about you
- I promise something I think you want
- I get embarrassed and act awkward

Regardless of the result, the GM may decide that the outcome also creates a new social trend or some other means of conformity that others must follow or reject.

Get Your Way is the “persuade someone” move. It usually triggers when a player character wants to accomplish something without violence, and they are not specifically rebelling against conformity. Get Your Way allows the player character to learn more about the other characters, alter Labels, and clear Distress.

Social dynamics are a key part of these middle school kids discovering who they are within society. Player characters may create trends when they get their way (if the GM decides it makes sense in the fiction). The GM can add this trend to the list of mainstream culture elements, which the players will likely need to reject in the future.

REJECT CONFORMITY

When you reject conformity in any way, shape, or form, roll. On a 4-6, you do what you want instead of going with the flow. On a 6, choose three. On a Critical, you also gain a temporary advantage or effect. On a 4/5, choose one.

- Change or remove one of your Labels
- You discover something new about the world
- You inspire someone else to also Reject Conformity (they choose one option from this list)
- You Overflow without releasing your Undesirable Repressed Trait(s)

Conformity presents itself in many ways. Primarily, it will manifest as something from the adult world. Otherwise, conformity may come from peer pressure or parental expectations.

Conformity is subjective, and can directly correspond to a player character's Label. Of course, player characters can always attempt to shed or change their Labels using this move. Alternatively, this move could also inspire another player character in the scene to Reject Conformity.

Reject Conformity also lets a player character Overflow without the penalty of releasing their Undesirable Repressed Trait(s). Typically, the GM would use the player character's Undesirable Repressed Trait(s) to create Threats. The only way to avoid this is by Overflowing through this move.



RISE TO THE MOMENT

When you choose to act in dangerous circumstances, say what you're afraid might happen, and then roll. On a 6, describe how you overcome the challenge. On a Critical, you also gain Insight: ask the GM any one question about the situation and take +1 Forward when acting on that information. On a 4/5, acting will leave you or someone else vulnerable (the GM will tell you how); choose to either back down, or go through with it.

Taking +1 Forward means the next time this player character acts on the information during a roll, the highest die rolled is increased by 1. If they roll a 4, it becomes a 5. If they roll a 6, it becomes a Critical.

The game's drama comes from the player characters overcoming their fears—both internal and external. The GM may call for this move, but the player character's fear in that moment is always the player's choice. When in doubt, if the player character is confronting a fear on their playbook, call for this move.

The GM should also consider the scale of the challenge. If the player character is a robot taking on a dangerous physical Threat, this move might trigger. However, the move probably won't trigger if the player character is a normal teenager facing something only a robot could defeat (or, if the teenager can take the challenge on, adjusting the parameters of success to reflect what is possible). That being said, there are many ways for player characters to use this move when not Overflowing. For instance, if a player character is a normal teenager facing down a creature that represents their fear of loneliness, they could Rise To The Moment by being empathetic and offering comfort without Overflowing.

SHAPE THE WORLD

When you inject a new important detail into the world, roll. On a 4-6, you and the GM work together to add the detail to the fiction. On a 6, you may also ask the GM a question regarding the detail revealed. On a 4/5, the GM chooses one from the following list. On a miss, the GM chooses any number of options from the list and makes a move as hard as they like at any time in the future.

- The detail creates a complication—now, or later
- It places someone in danger immediately
- It reveals an unwanted truth

This move adjudicates additional details that impact the fiction on a “substantial” level. For instance: when a player wants to declare an enemy’s weakness so they can exploit it. Of course, there needs to be some plausible reason the player character would know these details based on the fiction. Perhaps the character connects the dots of an investigation, or probes the enemy’s weak spot during a fight.

For example, the players encounter a giant black hole, and their friend is at the center. After rolling Shape the World, a player gets 4-6 and adds the detail that this hole represents their friend’s loneliness; the corresponding “weakness” is comfort and support.

The GM ultimately decides if the moves triggers, as well as the scope of the detail (based on player input). As a GM, if the detail is in the spirit of the game, makes narrative sense, and matches the game’s tone: go for it! The move lets players influence the fiction with important details whilst also adding fun complications.



LASH OUT

When you try to hurt someone physically or emotionally, roll. On a 6, you inflict the desired amount of Distress/Harm up to the number of dice rolled, then choose one of the following. On a Critical, the same, but you also obtain an added effect, creating something momentous. On a 4/5, you choose one, and then the other person chooses one:

- You take Distress/Harm in return
- Your actions physically or emotionally damage someone else that you care about
- Something important breaks
- Your action reveals an Undesirable Repressed Trait
- You Overflow, right now

A player can Lash Out both physically and verbally as a human or robot. Essentially, human teenagers inflict Distress, and robots inflict Harm. Each of these options complicates the player character's actions. If a player wishes to inflict Harm or Distress when Overflowing, this move is good for adjudicating the consequences.

Players might want to consider taking a new Undesirable Repressed Trait. Revealing an Undesirable Repressed Trait could lead to a positive outcome mechanically. The next time a player character Overflows normally, they could defeat the manifestation of that Undesirable Repressed Trait and increase their N.O (which helps their robot-selves overcome obstacles)—so if player characters want to accrue more N.O., they could Lash Out, create an Undesirable Trait, and then release it in the hopes of defeating it to increase their N.O.

ESCAPE

When you physically attempt to escape your current circumstances, roll. On a 6, you get to a safe place. On a 4/5, you get away, however...

- ...you encounter something worse
- ...you cause a scene and the GM gives you a Label
- ...you leave something of value behind, or something of value breaks

The player escapes on a 4/5, but they choose one of the complications. And while the player character chooses the option, the GM informs the player what that choice means for the fiction. For example, the GM could decide that "something of value" is the player character's ability to turn into a robot for a time.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

When you convey your Distress to someone else, describe how you hope to come across, and roll. On a 4-6, you come across as intended. On a 6, choose two of the following. On a Critical, all four. On a 4/5, choose one.

- You clear Distress equal to the number of dice rolled
- They also clear Distress as above (if they agree)
- You may both change an appropriate Label
- You mark XP

The trigger for this move is open to interpretation, as long as the pick list reflects the scene's desired possible outcome. There are many ways for a player character to convey their Distress. Discussing it with a friend is the most likely trigger. However, it could also resemble the genre trope where two characters fist fight to work through their problems (without meaning to exchange Harm or Distress).



TAG A LABEL

When you treat a person like a Label assigned to them, you may:

- Tempt a player character to do something in line with their Label. If the player character follows through, you both mark XP.

- If the person is a non-player character (NPC), add an additional die to your roll.

- Inflict one additional Distress or Harm to a character in the outcome of a move involving them.

- Help or Hinder another player character before they roll. You will become entangled in their consequences, but they add (if you're Helping) or subtract (if you're Hindering) 1 die from their dice pool total.

A player character can target other player characters and NPCs with Tag a Label. Tagging Labels gives player characters the chance to experiment with the judgment and assumptions embedded in the Label. Sometimes, a player may agree with the Label and embrace it, other times they may not.

If the targeted player character rejects the Label, it could be construed as Rejecting Conformity (which would then allow them to change the Label). Tagging a Label is passive, so it works in conjunction with other moves.

PERIPHERAL MOVES

This section contains less frequently triggered moves, and procedures for taking Distress and Overflowing.

TAKE DISTRESS

When you take Distress, you may choose to repress each point of Distress as a separate Undesirable Repressed Trait (up to a maximum of 3). After which point, you have no choice but to Overflow when you take your next point of Distress (unless a move contradicts this).

- **Note:** Each player character may only have a maximum of 3 Undesirable Repressed Traits at any one time. If a player character has 2 Undesirable Repressed Traits, they cannot convert 2 Distress into 2 Undesirably Repressed Traits using this move. They could, however, convert 1 Distress—giving them a total of 3 Undesirable Repressed Traits.

When multiple player characters Overflow, they release each of their Undesirable Repressed Traits. The GM combines the total Undesirable Repressed Traits into one or more Threats (making it that much harder to overcome—see Threats on page 46).



OVERFLOW

When a player character Overflows, they immediately transform into a robot. Their Traits and Desirable Repressed Traits are added together to form their Harm track. The player should note their current Distress immediately after Overflowing, as it will impact their dice rolls. While a player character is Overflowing, each point of Distress removes a die from their dice pool during rolls.

There are two ways to turn from a robot back into a human:

- 1) When an Overflowing player character is no longer in danger, they revert to their human form and erase their Harm.
- 2) If an Overflowing player character fills their Harm track, they revert into a human form, write a new Undesirable Repressed Trait, and trigger the Struck Down move.

This Peripheral move simply operates as a quick reference for entering Overflow and the resulting events that may occur.



OVERFLOWING should always increase the stakes. When a player character Overflows, their actions may result in the Struck Down move (page 29), which carries steep consequences.

GO ALL OUT

When you're Overflowing and attempt the impossible, add 1 die to your dice pool before rolling each time you:

- Risk losing something you truly care about
- Attempt to prove a Desirable Repressed Trait correct
- Risk being Struck Down
- Use a symbol of the counterculture to your benefit
- Otherwise display how you are invested in the outcome of the roll.

Then add 1 die for every point of N.O you have.

On a 6, you do what you set out to do—describe how you do it. On a Critical, you also gain an additional effect. On a 4/5, you succeed but something pertinent is broken or lost entirely (you or the GM may suggest what that may be; the GM has final discretion). Choose: meet the stipulation or back down.

Only player characters in Overflow can trigger this move. Even then, if a player character wants to inflict Harm, they may be triggering Lash Out rather than “going all out.” After all, Threats have a Harm track and might not be so easily overcome in a single move. However, circumstances vary. Perhaps a player character wants to expose a vulnerability in an obstacle or Threat that is otherwise impervious to Harm. In that case, one player character might trigger Go All Out to open them up to Harm, creating an opportunity for another player character to Lash Out. The weakness being exposed from a teammate Shaping The World, perhaps.

Note that Traits do not come into play with this move. The dice pool modifiers come from the move procedure, the player character's N.O level. If the result is a 4/5, the outcome should further show how much the player character cares about the result. After all, something important is broken or lost to achieve their goal—as the GM, make the outcome suitably dramatic and interesting. If the player gets a critical success the additional effect could be something any player or GM suggests and specific to the circumstances and risks.



Perhaps another teammate that was in danger isn't any more. Maybe something extra is revealed due to the success, which would ordinarily not be divulged. It could be anything that heightens the success of the player character.

STRUCK DOWN

When you're Overflowing and are struck down mentally, emotionally, or physically, roll+ the amount of Distress and Harm you've currently taken.

On a 6, choose one:

- You must remove yourself from the situation; pass out, run away, lose consciousness, etc.

- You are no longer in control. The robot takes over and proves an Undesirable Repressed Trait to be true: choose one you released when you Overflowed, or create a new one and embody it now as a robot

Choose two from the below 4/5 results

On a 4/5, choose one:

- A part of you is removed: cross out a Trait, temporarily. You may use an Advance to repair yourself in the future

- You Lash Out at another player character, applying your current result to that move

- You give your opponent the opportunity they were hoping for; choose a player character to be Struck Down

- You buckle down and bear it: take Harm as established by your foe

On a 1-3, describe how you weather the blow or circumvent it entirely.

Being Struck Down can have a lasting impact. Each choice carries with it some important consequence, some of which are more dire than the rest—unless it's passed on to another player character.

An opponent can turn a player character back to human form if a player chooses to “buckle down and take it.” GMs can refer to the Obstacles & Threats section for inflicting Harm (page 45).

If a player character is Struck Down and returns to human form, the GM decides if they should trigger Struck Down again, as befits the fiction. Reverting to human form from a robot is a big deal.

DISTRESS & VOLUNTARILY OVERFLOWING

The GM will usually tell players when they take Distress (usually as a result of rolling a move). However, Distress is subjective to the player character. Sometimes, the player character's feelings will be clear from the fiction. If it's unclear, the player should be consulted about why their character is Distressed. In other words, the rule may state the player character takes Distress, but the player provides the context.

Additionally, a player can voluntarily take Distress when it fits the situation. When the player character would reasonably be Distressed, the player can mark Distress themselves—granting them the opportunity to Overflow (within reasonable limits, whenever they wish). For example, if one player character Overflows and engages in combat, and another player character reasonably portrays their Distress in that moment, they may mark 1 Distress, Overflow, and attempt to help their friend in the combat.



HARM

Harm is a track the only applies when a player character Overflows and turns into a Robot. The Harm Track is calculated by summing a player character's number of Traits and Desirable Repressed Traits.

Generally, the fiction will signal how the player character is harmed and how much Harm they should mark. There is less fictional give-and-take between the player and GM over how a player character takes Harm. Harm always stems from mechanical outcomes in line with the game's tone.

When a player character in robot form fills their Harm track completely, they: revert to human form (resetting their Harm), create a new Undesirable Repressed Trait, and trigger the Struck Down Move (if the GM sees fit). For example, if the player character was Struck Down previously and that is what filled their Harm track, it may not be appropriate to trigger the move again (depending on the previous roll's outcome). Due weight should be given to filling the Harm track.

A player character can only remove Distress using the Express Yourself move (page 24), a player character specific move, or else, perhaps, by a time jump forward.

**STAY
FOR THE
END**

END OF SESSION

There is a procedure to follow at the end of each session. When the session ends, take a break for a couple of minutes so players can step back from their character. Each player should then consult the following questions from a more objective place—like a writer's room reflecting on what happened during the game.

- Did your player character prove a Desirable Repressed Trait false? If yes: erase it. Was a Desirable Repressed Trait proved correct? If yes: move the Desirable Repressed Trait into the Trait section.
- Did a player character overcome an obstacle that embodied their Undesirable Repressed Trait(s)? If yes: the player character increases their N.O by 1 (maximum increase of 1 N.O per session).
- Did the player characters learn something new and important about the world? If yes: all player characters mark 1XP.
- Ask each player: did you use visual motifs during play to reinforce the game's themes? If yes: the player marks 1XP for their player character.
- Ask each player: do they feel their character "grew up" during the session? If yes: the player marks 1XP for their player character.

The answers to these questions should be a group consensus (rather than the GM deciding). If the player is unsure, pose it to the group. If you're struggling to answer the question, then it's probably a "no." That's fine! Character growth takes time, so not every question should be answered in the affirmative every single session.

If everyone has time, these questions can springboard into a debrief. These questions can be an effective way to discuss curiosities around the fiction. They might spark a

conversation partway through answering them. That's also fine! Let the conversation happen and then return to the list.

END OF EPISODE

NKB story arcs take place over episodes, as if it were a TV show. Typically, an episode lasts for two sessions. This will vary with each group, as an episode length typically involves overcoming a significant Threat before the fiction resets. Player characters will most often Overflow into robots to overcome obstacles and Threats with physical combat.

NKB episodes are weird and strange before resetting to normal at the end (more or less). Absurdism and literalization are constant throughlines in Never Knows Best. Middle school kids face strange challenges as a metaphor for their inner conflict. It is absurd that life would go back to normal after defeating a monster, but that is also literalized in this procedure. Events go back to normal, with perhaps one or two significant changes to reflect the characters' growth.

A reset represents the adult world encroaching on the events that took place. Adults can continue their daily life unimpeded and unchanging—forever the same. Adults will not acknowledge what happened, make up their own version of events that occurred, or else accept events as told by the adult world through the game's metaphors and visual motifs.

An important note: players decide for themselves how much their player character recalls of the previous event. Players may choose to remember the events in line with the adult world, remember the events for what they are, or simply forget entirely. Remember: always do what feels right for the fiction and tone.



When the GM initiates a reset, the following questions are posed to the table. Any player may answer, including the GM:

- If an audience were watching this, how would they know a reset occurred? Is there a visual or auditory cue?
- At a player character level, how are they aware a reset occurred?
- What, if anything, remains as an artifact of what happened before the reset? (Property damage, injuries to persons, etc.)
- Is there a new visual motif in the adult world as a result of what happened before the reset?
- Is there a new visual motif representing counterculture that appears as a result of the events before the reset?

This can be done after the conclusion of a session or at the start of the next session. However, answering these questions while the events are fresh in everyone's minds is recommended.

The GM decides how the world, including the NPCs, behave as a result of the reset and the questions answered.

XP & ADVANCEMENT

Every playbook has 8 boxes for marking the player character's XP. When the last box is marked, the player clears the boxes and takes one Advancement (found on their playbook). A player marks XP each time they roll a miss (1-3) and when they answer the end of session questions.

If the player takes an Advancement which is only available once, they should strike it out. Some Advancements may be taken multiple times and will say [Max X], where X is the amount of times the Advancement may be taken.

The option to change or add a Trait allows the player to either make a completely new Trait or select any Trait that is not located in the Repressed section of their playbook, and change it to something else. Doing either of these things consumes 1 of 3 of these Advancement options.

Every playbook has the option to add a Desirable Repressed Trait to their playbook or change one that is currently on the playbook to something else. Mechanically, Repressed Traits may become part of a player character's normal Traits by way of the Go All Out move on page 28). These Desirable Repressed Traits also contribute to a player character's Harm track, allowing the PC to take more damage. However, keep in mind that Desirable Repressed Traits can be erased if they're not proven true (see the End of Session section on page 33)—making them difficult to convert into Traits. However, if all Advancement options to accrue more Traits are exhausted already, this may be the only course of action for getting more Traits.

Each playbook has the option to take an additional playbook move as Advancement a maximum of two times.

A player can choose a move from a different playbook for their character, working out the details and implications with the GM. This decision must make sense within the fiction. If it doesn't, the player should consider taking a different move instead.

Finally, players may work with the GM to create a new move (ideally between sessions, as it may take time to figure out the particulars). The move should follow the structure of other moves: When X happens, then Y. Since this is a complex Advancement, the GM should decide if it's available to players in their game.



RUNNING THE GAME

THE GM

The person who runs the game for the players is called the **Game Master (GM)**.

The GM portrays everything the players interact with, and they mediate the rules.

The GM's tools—**Agenda** (page 41), **Principles** (42), and **GM moves** (pages 43-44)—help the GM run a fair, fun, and imaginative game. These tools communicate the game's tone and goalpost the type of fiction *Never Knows Best* is designed to create.

FLOW OF PLAY

The flow of play brings out the core of NKB: discovering who you are. Players are encouraged to put their characters into conflict to discover if their Repressed Traits are true or not (both Desirable and Undesirable). Player characters grow by experiencing and dealing with the emotional and physical fallout of conflict—whatever conflict looks like in your game. Distress, Harm, conflict, and obstacles can be interpreted broadly.

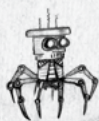
The flow of play is detailed below—you'll note it focuses on **Distress, Overflowing, and Undesirable Repressed Traits**. Each step may vary in length, but all of them will be hit in turn. The GM can use their tools to direct the flow of play through each step.

- 1) Player character experiences Distress.
- 2) Player character(s) Overflows, releasing Undesirable Repressed Traits in the process.
- 3) The GM creates a Threat based on these released Undesirable Repressed Traits.
- 4) Either:
 - A) Player character(s) defeats the Threat. Each player character increases their N.O level if the Threat embodied their Undesirable Repressed Trait.
 - B) The Threat defeats the Player character(s). Defeated player character(s) accrue more Undesirable Repressed Trait(s).
- 5) Player character returns to human form.

You'll notice that Undesirable Repressed Traits fuel this cycle. Player characters accrue more Repressed Undesirable Traits when:

- A player character takes Distress and decides to convert it into an Undesirable Repressed Trait.
- A player character Lashes Out, and the option "It reveals an Undesirable Repressed Trait" is selected.
- An Overflowing player character's Harm track fills. They revert to human, trigger Struck Down, and create a new Undesirable Repressed Trait.
- Struck Down triggers, and the option where the player character is no longer in control is selected (possibly creating a new Undesirable Repressed Trait if the player so chooses).

If a player character wants a shot at increasing their N.O level, they must release at least one Undesirable Repressed Trait when they Overflow. They must also defeat the Threat embodying their Undesirable Repressed Trait(s). Ultimately, a player needs to place their character into conflict if they want to increase their N.O—it's the only way to unearth Undesirable Repressed Traits.



AGENDA

Your GM Agenda contains the main goals for every session. When you make a move (page 43), it should stem from your Agenda and your Principles (opposite page).

- Make the fiction a metaphor for the confusion and absurdity of a middle school kid growing up
- Make the world follow the rules you establish when you decide how something looks, feels, and acts
- Make the player characters' lives interesting, interconnected, and filled with interesting conflict
- Play to find out

As a GM, the most important thing to internalize is: the fiction is supposed to be absurd and confusing. NKB literalizes the teenage experience to expose the complex process of growing up within societal expectations.

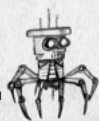
Follow your own rules to keep the fiction honest. Players have a reasonable expectation that information you give them will remain true—unless it's clear that it is not. Likewise, implement the consequences from moves consistently to convey the 'rules' (and mechanics). As soon as you bend the established fictional and mechanical rules you set, the fiction is no longer honest.

Honesty flows into the last Agenda point: Play to find out. If you, the GM, apply inconsistent rules, you're playing to tell a story you've concocted yourself (rather than allowing the game to function as designed). Let yourself be surprised by the results; use your surprise to determine what happens next. There is no predetermined path. Instead, let the players do things they find interesting, and trust it will lead the story to an interesting place.

PRINCIPLES

The GM's Principles are the tropes and best practices for your fiction.

- Make Labels central to the fiction
- Embrace the messy, confusing, and chaotic nature of adolescence
- Tie the fiction to metaphor
- Literalize metaphor and emotion
- Depict adults and the adult world as immature
- Make societal rules and expectations nonsensical
- Empower nonconformity
- Address the player characters, not the players
- Be a fan of the player characters
- Spotlight each player character in the fiction as equally as possible
- Put the player characters at the center of everything
- Name each NPC and give them a motivation they follow into the ground
- Pose questions to the players and incorporate the answers into the fiction
- Adjudicate decision making when it feels right to do so



GM MOVES

The GM has the following moves at their disposal:

- Introduce a physical or emotional conflict
- Put the player characters together or separate them
- Tell them the possible consequences and then ask what they do next
- Give them what they want—with a consequence or twist
- Divulge a distressing secret to the wrong person
- Have adults appropriate something from the counterculture
- Twist something mature into something childish, or vice versa
- Push conformity onto a character
- Supplant something adolescent with a societal expectation
- Telegraph, plant the seed of, or hold a move for future use
- Give a character a Label or take a Label away
- Inflict Distress or Harm as established by the fiction
- Give them recourse, solace, or comfort
- Make something inconsequential important
- Make something obscure explicit
- Give them time to think
- Always ask: 'What do you do?'

When do you make a move?

You can make a move as hard as you like when: the players look to you to see what happens next, someone rolls a miss (1-3), or the players give you a Golden Opportunity (meaning you telegraphed something bad might happen and the players did nothing to address it). Make sure "as hard as you like" makes sense in the fiction and keeps the story interesting.

Keep the strength of your moves proportional to how much agency the player character has in the moment. The softer your move, the more agency the player character has. The hardest moves are the most restrictive to agency, and should stem from the moves before it. The GM should build up to and telegraph hard moves. Let the consequences snowball. The moves above offer a variety of hard and soft moves, allowing you to choose the appropriate one for any situation.

Keep your players informed about the potential consequences of your GM moves. If Distress or Harm are possible consequences, players should know that before following through with any course of action.



OBSTACLES

When crafting an obstacle, look at the visual motifs from the counterculture. Consider your game's tone, what everyone is interested in exploring, and the source of conflict (emotional, physical, or both). Each obstacle should:

Fit your game's tone

Create a source of conflict—be it emotional or physical (or both)

Literalize your major themes—paint the world with an absurdist brush

Have a solvable problem

Create obstacles (and Threats) that fit with your themes. Middle school kids often feel isolated, experience peer pressure, have parental expectations, and various other obligations and passions that drive them. Make those themes tangible and real so the player characters can interact with them.

For example, if you want to explore loneliness, think about how that makes you feel and then literalize it. Perhaps it manifests as a black hole with something you can relate to in the middle that's just out of reach—a perfect problem for the player characters. Perhaps their friend goes missing right before the black hole appears and begins sucking everything up. As a GM, let the players figure out how to solve it. Don't pre-plan a solution to the problem.

The amount of Harm or Distress an obstacle inflicts should scale with the circumstances. Use the player characters' ability to inflict Harm as a guideline, i.e. the number of Traits they can tag in a roll. Depending on what's already fictionally established, you decide if the obstacle should inflict more or less. You may also choose to scale Harm with a player character's N.O level. The more powerful a player character becomes, the more the stakes could increase, and the more difficult obstacles should become.

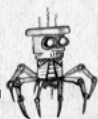
Always scale the amount of Harm an obstacle can take with how much of a challenge you want it to be for the player characters—keeping in mind the amount of Harm a player character can inflict (the number of Traits they are able to tag in a typical roll). Are the obstacle and player characters on the same level? Is the obstacle weaker? More powerful? Is the amount of damage it can take the challenge? Or does the obstacle pose a thematic problem with a weakness that, once circumvented, is easily overcome (in which case a Harm track may not be necessary at all)?

THREATS

Threats are obstacles that are created when a player character Overflows and releases their Undesirable Repressed Traits. A Threat embodies those specific Undesirable Repressed Traits.

When player characters face a Threat, they face something of themselves. If one player character overflows, the Threat becomes one (or more) of their Undesirable Repressed Traits. If all the PCs Overflow, then all of their Undesirable Repressed Traits may create one big Threat. This is up to the GM's discretion. However, don't shy away from creating a big threat. The player characters can accomplish just about everything when they work together—using teamwork moves and their numbers against the threat. Alternatively, you may choose to create multiple threats, each embodying Undesirable Repressed Traits released from a specific player character. As always, make decisions that benefit the fiction in that moment.

Threats differ from obstacles mechanically in that the amount of Harm they inflict and how much Harm they can receive before being defeated.



Threats inflict the number of Harm equal to the amount of Undesirable Repressed Traits they are comprised of plus the Threat's N.O level. Their N.O level is always 1 above the N.O level of the PC that released the Undesirable Repressed Traits the Threat is comprised of (even if their N.O level is 0). If the Threat is comprised of more than just one PC's Undesirable Repressed Traits you make the Threat's N.O level 1 higher than the PC with the highest N.O.

A Threat's Harm track is double the amount of Undesirable Repressed Traits it embodies.

As with obstacles, moves triggered by players might alter fictional circumstances such that you may not use the Harm track. If a PC opens up a weakness and it is exploited such that the Threat should be defeated, but yet technically they haven't inflicted all of the Harm on the Threat's Harm track. It can still be defeated because that is what makes sense in the fiction. The codification of the Harm track and how much Harm the Threat inflicts is there merely as a tool in service to the fiction. You decide how all of these tools best serve you and then deploy them.

CREATING NPCs

An NPC should be simple. They have something they want, and they pursue it. If there is something in their way, they attempt to remove it. How they go about doing that should be codified into a Label that you give them when you are creating them. You might ask another player character to give the NPC a Label with an open-ended question: "Oliver is new in town, and you've gotten close over summer holidays. What one Label sums up how you think of Oliver?"

A Label can be an archetype. Maybe the NPC is a jock, nerd, goth, know-it-all, etc. You use that Label to figure out how they go about obtaining the thing that they want.

No more, no less. NPCs are simple. Unless, of course, the NPC becomes an obstacle or a Threat. Then their assigned want may modify the problem they've become, but their primary function is to facilitate whatever conflict you're most interested in seeing in the fiction.

CRITICAL SUCCESS & ADDITIONAL EFFECTS

Some moves may say a player character gets an additional effect on a critical success result. What these effects specifically vary with the circumstances. However, it is meant to be a back-and-forth between that player and the GM. What are they trying to achieve? How does what they do benefit themselves more so than it already has? How did what they do benefit others? Sometimes the answer is simply that the player character does it more excitingly or compellingly way than they were initially thinking.

