

The background image shows a futuristic interior space, possibly a spaceship or a high-tech residence. A large, curved window dominates the view, looking out onto a vast, arid, reddish-brown landscape under a hazy sky. In the distance, a small, round, light-colored object, resembling a hot air balloon or a small moon, floats in the air. The interior features a brown leather armchair on the left and a red leather sofa on the right. The floor is covered in debris, including what looks like a broken piece of a helmet and some electronic equipment, suggesting a scene of aftermath or abandonment. The overall tone is cinematic and atmospheric.

# How to Roleplay the *HARD* Way

SHONNER PRESS

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## Preface

# HARD

/härd/

*acronym*

Honest and Reactive Dialogue.

A few years ago, I had this great idea that I would write a book. I had yet to learn what the book would even be about. I never thought of myself as a writer. The only things I had ever written were technical manuals for the web using *Sphinx*. The subjects were either computer programming or 3D modeling.

I tried and failed to use various editions of *Microsoft Word* to write some ideas I had over the years. The same happened with *LibreOffice*. I couldn't get myself motivated. Of course, I blamed the graphical and user interfaces of these programs. And I didn't know the term "distraction-free," which would have helped me get started on any writing at that time.

*So then what happened?*

A week before I started typing this sentence, I was sitting in as a guest on a *Legion of Myth* live stream that MaxLiao was hosting in *Streamyard*. I was explaining how I roleplay in my tabletop roleplay game sessions for the umpteenth time for somebody either on the panel or in the live chat when it dawned on me that I really should

write a book or something on my style of roleplay, so I don't have to explain it over and over any more to anyone.

That was when I found *Scrivener*. It was easy to learn. Easy to use. I could stay focused without distractions while writing.

## Who this Book is For

People who are roleplay-curious. Maybe they are tired of the more gamey feel that rolling dice presents? To some, roleplaying a character genuinely sounds more interesting to try and learn more about. Existing players who want to advance their roleplaying level or vet the right players for their next game session will find the HARD way much more rewarding.

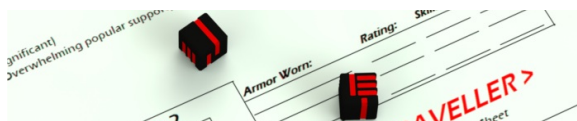
This book gives the reader a running head start on roleplaying. It can be used as a teaching tool to inspire or encourage other players who wish to tackle roleplaying in their game sessions.

*Enjoy the quest!*

## Who this Book is Not For

People who have played D&D for years or decades that have developed habits incompatible with roleplaying a character. This book will only be an enigma to them.

## Materials Needed



A roleplaying game that has a unified skill-based system and uses a quick dice roll mechanic. *Mongoose Traveller Second Edition* is recommended as a game system for roleplaying the **HARD** way.

If a different roleplaying game system is used, ensure it is skill-based and uses a task's difficulty level as the target number to roll for. Changes to some in-character **HARD** roleplay in this book will be needed to match the game system's minor differences.

There is a \$1 version of the rules called *Mongoose Traveller Explorer's Edition*. It's a great introduction to those new to roleplaying.

## Practice

Thirty minutes of roleplaying the **HARD** way is a good time for players to practice their characters in scenes. Players new to roleplaying will pick things up much quicker than players in the tabletop roleplay gaming hobby for years.

After thirty minutes, the players should all take a break from the practice roleplay session. They should talk about whether or not a scene was understood. And how it

was meant to be understood. All the players should give each other feedback on where improvements and refinements could be made. They should do more practice sessions and try out different scenes and settings.

The best practice is to roleplay one-on-one with someone who has a thirty-minute scene ready and knows the **HARD** way.

## Terms Used in this Book

**Mindscape** - An imagined surrounding.

**Character** - A person (or even a creature) in a mindscape.

**Player** - Roleplays one character.

**Runner** - Roleplays the other characters and creates mindscapes.

**Encounter** - Anything a character can interact with.

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Thanks to Shawn Cherry and Richard Kurbis for

participating in *StreamYard* discussions on various roleplay topics.

Thanks to the old *YouTube RPG Brigade* from over a decade ago. I bounced my ideas for roleplay off of a group of individual RPG YouTubers, each getting their start in vlogging. It was refreshing to find other roleplayers making videos of this hobby. Especially, BashBizznet, Michael Barnecott, Tim "Samwise7RPG" Harper, DM Lloyd, Hammered, and Sameøldji.

Thanks to Midjourney (John Harris and John Berkey) for their AI art in this book.

# Chapter 1: Social Contract

## What Goes in It?

*Sign here, please.*

What exactly is a social contract? Well, here's an old one from the before time.

- HDSL/Cable or better Internet connection with camera and mic
- No camera phones, phone apps, touchpads, padTVs, or PDAs (a.k.a. no handheld devices)
- Headphones are a must to prevent echo
- No chirping smoke detectors (replace batteries!)
- No food (drinks are ok)
- No phone use, texting, or web browsing during game
- No chat room use or private messaging in Hangout
- No out of character speaking during the game session
- Players don't ask the GM questions
- Each player (including the GM) narrates what their character is doing
- The GM states when die rolls are required
- The players narrate their successes while the GM narrates PC failures
- All talking, as well as asking questions, is done in character (PCs speak to other PCs and NPCs, and NPCs speak to PCs) to relay or answer questions
- No initiative
- No combat rounds
- Combat is close to real-time as possible
- Action is cinematic style
- Characters are allowed to move at the speed of their player's narration
- No narration means no action taken by that player's character (they are sitting or standing)
- When a character dies, the player leaves the Hangout (and game) until they have created a new character to return to the game with.
- Players must have their character sheets with them. Always.

Players must not fear it. It's just a social contract. This is one of many. Players will devise their contracts for various game groups and roleplay sessions. It's essential to have one of these.

## **So What's the Catch?**

*Decisions, decisions.*

Here, the players decide on some ground rules before beginning a roleplay session. Social contracts are either written down from scratch or copied and edited from existing ones. Players add to the contract the crucial things they desire while roleplaying.

Typically, the contract will contain items that will stay the same for a game session. Players that don't agree to a contract don't participate in a game. Social contracts help keep the players all on the same page, as it were, regarding ground rules for roleplaying a game session.

Players can update the group's social contract between game sessions and hope everyone agrees with its changes. Players will often add rules for being late to games or no-shows. Some contracts will state who gets to narrate successes and who gets to narrate failures. Maybe a house rule for a die mechanic gets thrown into the list? The other players might tell the person running the game that there can be no horrific twist endings for their game sessions, which also gets noted in the contract.

Then there is the usual stuff, such as no ultra-violence. None whatsoever. And for any sex scenes, fade to black. If all the players know each other, such items can be left off the list as they are already agreed upon.

Social contracts are vital for spectacular roleplay at the game table.

# Chapter 2: Setting

## Established Model

*Written in stone.*

This can be an easy thing, at least for the players. They only have to roleplay their characters in the setting the Runner has created for them. World-building can be time-consuming for the Runner, though, because maps must be made, characters need to be generated, backstories need to be written, and quests need to be written. Lots of quests. And lots of hooks. And then more characters need to be generated. Examples are monsters, bandits, pirates, space dragons, planet killers, and time travelers. Time-travel serial killers are the worst things to keep notes of. Actually, there are worse things to keep track of than the characters might bump into during roleplay.

The point is that, with the established model, various locations in the setting can be used for roleplay without creating additional things on the spot. A disadvantage of using the established model is that characters might not visit any of the Runner's well-designed locations. Instead, they may choose to travel elsewhere.

## Sandboxed Model

*Starting with nothing.*

The sandbox is the other style of gaming. It requires almost no prep work before a game session. The Runner

makes no maps, characters, quests, or backstories for anyone.

There is one catch, though. During a game session, the Runner has to world-build around the players. Everyone narrates where their character is and what their character is attempting. As places, people, and things are described, they are added to the sandbox, which becomes the mindscape over time.

If a game session is to be continued in the next game session, maps are likely drawn and referred to as locations for future world-building by the Runner. Mind map software can organize connections between characters, locations, items, and quests. Writing little notes about characters and places made up on the spot during a game session and using images from [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com) as references is a good practice.

The images might be shown later to the players. Or they might not. Sometimes, players will have images of things in their mindscapes already. So, offering an image to them could jar how they've imagined everything.

A disadvantage to using the sandboxed model is mental fatigue if a game session lasts too long.



## Established vs Sandbox

*I am not a number!*

Technically, established settings can be sandboxed. However, even though a world is mapped out, and its characters are fleshed out, it doesn't mean that characters are pigeonholed or used as cogs on gears. Players still have free will with their characters. Every town is a sandbox. Every building. Every dungeon. Every railroad car.

## Choosing the Setting

*So what will it be? Science fiction? Horror? Fantasy?*

A lot of decisions need to be made, it seems, before even starting a game. That's true. Social contracts were mentioned. Using either an established or sandboxed model for world-building was talked about. So now is a good time to talk about setting.

Choosing a setting is a huge deal because all the players will be knee-deep in it while roleplaying. Players need to know the setting. They'll be creating their characters based on it.

Technically, all roleplaying games are fantasy. But for game purposes, the players will need to narrow down what kind of fantasy each is interested in roleplaying. Often, a setting will use two genres:

- Sci-fi Western

- WWII Cthulhu
- Time-Travel Hitmen
- Cyberpunk Camelot
- Space Vampires
- Viking Cyborgs
- Egyptian Mars
- Dieselpunk Romance
- Techno-Noir
- Legends of the Fallout

That list could be overdoing things. Imagine if settings used three genres! Such settings would have something called “gonzo” that begins to creep into them. Most roleplayers prefer settings that are more likely to have existed or will exist eventually.

During Halloween, players often feel like using a horror setting. During Blockbuster season, players nearly always crave a cinematically epic setting. During Christmas, players will want a low-key, maybe a sleeper hit, setting that’s not stressful but is heartwarming and stays with the players after roleplaying.

For veteran roleplayers, a new and exciting setting is always a plus. While for new roleplayers, a setting they already understand is best practice. There’s nothing worse than throwing complex, unheard-of settings at players who are brand new to roleplaying.

The type of music players listen to can also trigger a setting of interest for the group.



## Setting the Tone

*Comfort zones.*

Players need to decide on a tone for the game session. It could come from the setting naturally or be something bolted on. The Runner mustn't make it look like it's bolted on, though. Otherwise, feelings that generally happen during a game will be the wrong ones the players feel. They'll get mad if feelings are contrived for a scene.

There are too many tones to choose from when deciding on one. Yes, one. An Internet search will list them all for use in stories. A town will use one. A character will use one. Even a simple object will use one.

The players often agree on the tone written down in their social contract. It lets players know if the game session is something they would be comfortable playing.

## Setting the Theme

*Morality plays.*

Players will sometimes want there to be meaning in a roleplay game session. For example, one theme could be the feeling of what it might be like knowing who the serial killer on the spaceport is, but your only proof is that you read into the character's mind. And the use of psionics is "banned in these parts." Meanwhile, the killer is also psionic and knows about you. Sci-fi settings handle such themes by default.

Another theme for a sci-fi setting could be the characters encountering a thousand-year-old fleet of living starships with AIs controlling them. The fleet wants to surrender for its war crimes to a homeworld whose civilization has long since died off or abandoned the planet, leaving an AI of its own behind to assign the fleet's next mission.

In a supernatural setting, a ghost girl in the attic who isn't a girl but wants to be one could be another theme. Maybe all the characters for this game session will be ghosts in the house or the neighborhood. It could also be that the house is not a house.

## **Setting the Scope**

### *How big is too big?*

Just as this book has a scope it tries to fit into, so should roleplay game sessions. A Runner can create an entire universe with places and things for the characters to encounter and roleplay with. That's all fine. The trick is for the Runner not to info-dump all their fine-crafted universe onto the players.

The scope for a game session cuts out anything the characters will likely not encounter from the said universe. Roleplaying focuses just on a scene with characters in it.

If the entire game session will take place in a house containing some supernatural artifacts, that house is the scope. If the small town down the street from the house is visited, that small town becomes the scope until another building is entered, which would then become the scope.

And so on.

The scope can be thought of as just the area the characters see. Say a session starts with the characters inside an abandoned home. So far, the characters don't know where they are exactly yet. The scope expands as soon as one of the characters opens the curtains and looks out the window. If they see Earth on the horizon, eclipsing part of the Sun behind it, the characters might assume they are on a terraformed Moon. And that it's the future.



# Chapter 3: System

## Best One to Use

*Conan, what is best in life?*

The trick to choosing a game system is to pick one that won't interfere with a game session. Nothing is worse than when a game grinds to a halt while a die roll is made. Die rolls need to be as non-intrusive as possible. And the rules for various actions need to be unified and not spread throughout the book, with every attempt a character can roll having its own separate rules.

Players, including the Runner, should be able to understand and learn the game system quickly. The rules should make sense for any roleplay situation. Players won't have to look up how something is ruled during a game session in the book.

## Three-Dimensional Roleplaying Games

*Ease of roleplay.*

Three-dimensional roleplaying games allow for roleplaying. In other words, they do not interfere with the players' roleplay. Having unified rules for actions called skills and bell-curve results from their die mechanics creates a perfect environment for roleplaying. Bell curves are a necessity, as their distributions are not totally random. Players need some predictability when roleplaying their characters. One that provides a range of successful outcomes for characters attempting things. A

purely random luck roll invites chaos and is useless for roleplay.

*Mongoose Traveller Second Edition* is a unified skill-based game system that allows characters to attempt things depending on their skills. And the game rules don't need to be looked through during a session to determine how a skill works.

The technical die-rolling part of this book, the **HARD** part, as it were, is specifically written to be used with either *Mongoose Traveller Second Edition's* or *Mongoose Traveller Explorer's Edition's* quick dice roll resolution.

## Other Systems

*There are others.*

As a side note, three other excellent roleplaying games that can work with this book are *Total Party Skills*, *CORE Micro*, and, with some tinkering, *The Void*. They are available at [www.drivethrurpg.com](http://www.drivethrurpg.com). Even *Mongoose Traveller First Edition* can work as an option. The **HARD** part will need minimal tweaking to work with these game systems.

# Chapter 4: Roleplay

## Character-Driven Characters

*Characters drive themselves.*

Players should always think about what their characters will attempt next—asking themselves what they would attempt in a situation. What would make sense for their character to attempt? Is this something their character would attempt?

Also, the way characters interact with each other is all based on character-driven behaviors. All kinds of situations can come from characters simply being around each other. Even some “player versus player” can occur if the players agree to such things in a social contract beforehand.

## Character's Motives and Goals

*It's what my character would do.*

Characters should always have goals. Always. Motives are the reasons for the goals. One cool thing is that characters may not know the motives of others. So, if roleplaying an evil character, think of some ulterior motives to have.

Goals can be anything from getting to Mars to faking one's death. Most of the time, though, there will be immediate goals to attempt, such as:

- Getting out of bed.
- Checking the horse's shoes.
- Making some toast.
- Fixing a blown fuse.
- Updating the firmware of the kid's Bobbie-Rob.
- Chopping meat for the atrium plants.

Not all goals are challenging. Many are trivial. But they're still goals. Characters that have hobbies will always find things to attempt while at home. Just note that if a character is interested in time travel and art collecting, it doesn't mean that all the other characters are as well.

Often, characters will go their own way because of their own goals. It's a natural result of roleplaying characters. Forcing the players to keep their characters together would be out of character for all involved.



## Narration

*This is the most important part of roleplaying.*

Players in the game session are there for the roleplay. They want to roleplay. They're invested in their characters. They can't wait to roleplay them with each other's characters.

The players (including the Runner) narrate what their characters are attempting. What a character attempts is simply what "their character would do." Nothing is attempted out of character.

Keep in mind that characters are character-driven. Some characters will be smooth around each other, while others may be coarse. Characters will attempt things or say dialogue through roleplay by the players. The players simply narrate what their characters attempt or say in a scene. A couple of sentences are all that's needed for each player to describe their character's attempts.

Players must remember that their characters should be able to attempt things in the amount of time it takes them to narrate. Narration violations are discussed later in this book.

Each player narrates for only their own character. The Runner narrates for only their own characters. There is no bleed-through narration between the players and the Runner.

Note that only the Runner narrates mindscapes.

## Cinematics

### *Action!*

Roleplay sessions should be narrated in cinematic mode. This helps all the players visualize a scene as though they are watching a movie and that their characters are in it.

The Runner describes the area surrounding the characters, keeping the scope tight and telling only what is in line of sight of the characters. If it's a room, the walls and windows are mentioned, of course. Furniture gets a mention if there is any. Rooms can be escape rooms, futuristic time-slip cabins, chip-integrated digitized dreamscapes, or just a simple bedroom from the Baroque era with a vaulted ceiling with engraved carvings of golden cupids on it.

Cinematic mode also means that scenes are handled quickly. In movies, how long do bar fight scenes last? That is how long such a scene should last in a game—both in game-time and real-time. How long does a mission briefing go on in a film? That is how long a roleplayed scene should be.

## Minimalistic Roleplay

### *Attempting just the bare minimum.*

Minimalistic roleplay is very bare-bones roleplay. During each player's turn, including the Runner's, a player simply says where their character is and what their

character attempts.

Determining a character's motive or goal is the first step in deciding what a character attempts (or does not attempt). Technically, a character can choose not to attempt anything. Maybe they are just sitting or resting. Jelling. They could be sleeping until woken by something. Scenes can often start with a character that is asleep.

A lack of roleplay never means that out-of-character talking is allowed. Players can even say what their characters think if this is agreed on via social contract.

## Talking in Character

*Just talk.*

Roleplay exists when a player says where their character is and what their character is attempting.

Players speak in 1st-person while the Runner speaks in 3rd-person.

### 1st-Person

*I am.*

A player speaks in the 1st-person. They say what their character attempts using "I." Such as:

- I head outside and walk over to the taxi waiting for me.

- I grab the journal and start reading through its pages.
- I yell, "Reloading!"
- I'm climbing the next flight of the escape ladder on my way to the roof.
- I start filling the hole with concrete.
- I place the palm of the Captain's hand on the scanner to open the airlock.
- I say under my breath, "This better work."

## 3rd-Person

*He said. She said. They said.*

The Runner speaks in the 3rd-person. They say what one of their characters attempts using "he, she, they, or their character's name." Such as:

- She heads outside and walks over to the taxi waiting for her.
- Dang-the-Scavenger grabs the journal and starts reading through its pages.
- He yells, "Reloading!"
- They're climbing the next flight of the escape ladder on their way to the roof.
- Max starts filling the hole with concrete.

- She places the palm of the Captain's hand on the scanner to open the airlock.
- She says under her breath, "This better work."

## Attempts are Turns

*So everyone is talking at the same time?*

Kind of. But during "attempts." Each player gets an "attempt" at doing something with their character. Specific things that a character might attempt are:

- "Cap'n, I made it to the engine room. I think I can get the power restored if I bypass the regulator with a jumper."
- "This communications relay has been stripped of anything useful. However, I may have enough material to send a single micro-burst SOS."
- "I attempt to use the equipment to call one of my contacts."
- "I attempt to grapple the warthog."
- "I pour a beer from a tapped keg and jest, 'I object and move to strike yesterday from the record.'"

A player can say their attempt in a couple of sentences. Granted, the character should be able to attempt the thing said in the time it took for the player to say it.



## Where Everything Is

*The Runner typically narrates the scene.*

It's something short and sweet and pertains to the scene a character finds themselves. There's no mention of any galactic empire or Empress or rebel faction. There is no text crawl to read, as seen in a Flash Gordon opening shot. The Runner does not info-dump walls of text, as it were, onto a player describing the current setting their character is in. Instead, the Runner only describes the immediate area in view of a character.

"You're near the laundry room of the house. There are clothes hanging from a hamper next to a dryer and a box of detergent on top of the closed lid of a washer."

Nothing is said about the graveyard at the other end of the road from this house. Nothing is said about what is upstairs, assuming the house has an upstairs. There's no mention of the police station with cops on duty at this hour. Only the immediate area is described.

## Where a Character Is

*The player narrates where their character is in a scene.*

"I step into the laundry area and look around."

"There is a door at the other side," says the Runner.

## What a Character is Attempting

*The player narrates what their character attempts in a scene.*

"I walk over to the washer. I move the detergent and open the washer lid."

"A scrap of paper falls to the floor next to your feet," says the Runner.

"I pick it up," says the player.

"It's a note that's lost some of its stickiness on the back. There's writing that says, 'I miss her so much still. You know.'"

"I go to the other door and turn the knob to enter the room."

"You're in a darkened garage. The door slams shut behind you. It's pitch black now. There is the sound of a car's idling engine. The exhaust-filled room is unbreathable."

## Roleplaying with Other Characters

*Things are getting mental.*

Though roleplaying by oneself is possible, using methods from solo game rules, most roleplaying is done with a group of players. Characters will encounter other characters, and situations can occur between them.

Each player says where their character is during their attempt. That way, each player can see in their mindscape where all the other characters are in relation to their character. Each player will know how far away the other characters are. If their character can see them. And if they can hear them.

The reason for creating such mindscapes is to establish the 3D space where each character is located in a scene. Will a character be close enough to toss something over to them? Will it take a few attempts before a character has moved close enough to them? Is everyone bumping into or blocking each other while traversing a zero-g crawlspace with their weapons drawn?



# Chapter 5: The HARD Part

## Asking Questions

*So many questions.*

Since players cannot ask the Runner if their character can attempt something because that would be talking out of character, players ask how difficult something might be in character.

*Asks in character? Asks who?*

By asking another character. It's no different than when characters ask each other where they're from or about any skills they may have. The Runner will have a character who knows or can hint at how difficult attempting something will be. There can also be clues that reveal an attempt's hidden difficulty. Or inform the character that an attempt is impossible.

Just through simple roleplay can difficulties be learned. Situations can occur in just a few attempts during a sandbox game session.

The player says, "I walk into the junkyard. I can feel the heat of this planet's suns cooking the rusting metal air-cars as I attempt to squeeze between them without singeing myself."

The Runner says, "Behind you, the sound of dirt-filled boots scrapes towards you. Then nothing. Then, the sound of a cig lighter. Then boots."

"I turn slowly around and look."

"The man stops in his tracks about 8ft from you. The typical barbarian for this world. At least this one is not bald for a change."

"I put my hand to my hip slug pistol and tell him, 'I will shoot you dead if I don't like your answer. I'm looking for my car. Or at least parts that are left of it.'"

The Runner interrupts, "Are you Baronetess Parly Egiwerly Igenshi of Orim?"

"That's not an answer."

"You didn't ask a question yet."

The player says, "How do you know my name? And that horribly long title of mine... for that matter?"

"If I answer, you'll most likely shoot me. If I don't answer... Miss Par..."

The player says, "I grab my gun and extend my arm all the way forward, elbow locked, aiming right for his head."

The Runner says, "Don't make this difficult for yourself."

"I shoot."

*See how the Runner revealed the difficulty level for the player's shot?*



## Difficulties

*From 2001: A Space Odyssey:*

Dave says, "Alright, Hal, I'll go in through the emergency airlock."

Hal responds, "Without your space helmet, Dave, you're going to find that very difficult."

*Through conversation, the player's Dave character talking to the Runner's Hal character revealed a difficulty level. So now the player knows the target number to roll to succeed.*

## Attempts

*I will attempt it.*

Characters often consider their characteristics and skills when attempting things. Therefore, a characteristic or skill check is rolled whenever a character "attempts" something that can lead to exciting outcomes.

Let's say a character attempts to access the memories from a synthetic brain found on a lab workbench. The character has learned from a journal that the procedure is formidable. So, the difficulty level is formidable for the attempt.



Now, at this point, the player shouldn't panic if they know nothing about science or synthetic brains in real life. They do not have to narrate what they are doing using scientific terms.

The player says, "Monie. I know that my knowledge of computers and cybernetics may limit this attempt at accessing the Captain's memories from his synthetic brain. I'll be taking my time using some of the scientific equipment I'm familiar with on this lab ship to assist me."

The Runner says, "Monie looks at all the gear on the workbench and asks, 'How much more time will you need, Doctor Braza?'"

"No more than a day, I hope."

The Runner then says in character, "Having all this equipment around is a real boon for you, Doc."

The player then rolls.

*Some technical info here. The task normally takes **1D x 10 minutes** to try. The player hopes to get **1D x 4 hours** from the Runner to try the task. This will add a modifier of **+4** to the roll. The player uses Doctor Braza's computers skill, which will add a modifier of **+2** to the roll. And because Doctor Braza is using scientific equipment to help with his task, the Runner asks for a **boon roll** (where three dice are rolled, keeping the higher two) instead of a **2D roll**. The player rolls **1D x 4** to get the time that elapses—a value of **20**. So the time spent on the task is **20** hours. The player then rolls a **2**, a **5**, and a **3**. Everything gets added (**5 + 3 + 4 + 2 = 14**). **14** equals the difficulty level of the task. The roll result is a **marginal success**.*

The player narrates, "I'm tired after working on the Captain's brain for twenty hours. I've had marginal success with accessing its memories, though. I get up from the workbench and hold the memory chip up to the ceiling lights, looking at the brightness coming through the translucent colored parts of its casing."

*What if the Doctor failed?*

Let's say the player rolled an **8** instead of a **14**. That would be an **exceptional failure** for the character.

The Runner narrates, "After twenty wasted hours, the Captain's brain is making a bubbling noise inside. And it has become a sticky paperweight leaking ooze on everything it contacts. Some of it is on your pants and shoes."

*Rolling an 8 would be very rare under the circumstances. A 0.5% chance, in fact. But still a chance.*

In most cases, successes are narrated by the player, while the Runner narrates failures. This is agreed upon in a social contract before starting a game session.

## Hidden Difficulties

*Hidden knows.*

In the earlier example with Doctor Braza, where he discovered the difficulty level of a task from reading a journal, the difficulty would be hidden from him and Monie if that journal was never read. The difficulty level isn't mentioned during roleplay of the characters.

In such situations, characters won't know how difficult a task may be before attempting it. Even after a success or a failure, they still might not know how difficult a task was. When unlocking a safe, for example, and the Runner states that it opens after the player's roll, all a character will know is that they opened it. But will they know that its silent alarm was triggered?

## Roleplay Will Often Decide

*Roleplay's the answer.*

Dice are not used in place of roleplay. However, dice do have their uses. Only when difficulty levels are mentioned during roleplay between characters or with encounters are dice ever rolled. Difficulties will still be there if not revealed through roleplay, as in the case of hidden difficulties.



## Encounters

*All things are encountered.*

Now is a good time to mention encounters. What are they? How are they used? Encounters are anything a character comes across and can interact with. Everything is an encounter. A bed. A kitchen. A kitchen cabinet. A utensil. A rusting fence. A car with no wheels. A phone booth. A phone book. A dog. A junkyard. A safe. A trap. An airlock. A cannibal. A radioactive can of beets.

Players simply narrate how their characters interact with things:

- "I reach down to the coffee table and press the TV power remote lying there."
- "I hit the kitchen light switch."
- "I grab the kitchen knife and examine how sharp it is."
- "I start climbing the fence."
- "I open the phone book and look for the Nolan's home address."
- "I take a peek out the window, checking if that man's body is still on our driveway."
- "I quickly throw on my rain poncho."

Most things can be done through roleplay without dice. Encounters are roleplayed out with character-driven

characters. Dice only come into play when something interesting develops from an encounter, triggering the Runner to mention a difficulty level.

## Narration Violations

### *Illegal attempts.*

Violations are when a player fast-travels their character. Such as:

- "I buy my ticket, take the rocket trip to Mars, and unpack my luggage after arriving in my hotel room at the Protonilus Marsport."
- "I look in my toolbox for the wrench to tighten the spark caps on my rotor. I then proceed to make repairs on the rest of my vehicle that needed fixing, and then suit up and head off to the Northern Wastelands, where I spend three days searching for Hari."
- "I climb down into the pit. I have my sword ready to attack anything. I put my magic helmet on to see in the dark. While I walk down various tunnels, I'm also checking for traps and looking for any treasures. I'll bite a bit off my crunchy cake whenever I'm hungry. And be sure to rest if necessary along my journey."
- "I light a smoke. Look out for the bad guys. I load and ready my weapon. Charge into combat. Defeat the enemies. Flick smoke into liquid fuel. Then walk off into the sunset like a badass."

These narrations violate real-time. Character attempts that take way longer to perform than for a player to narrate are violations.

## Narration Shortcuts

### *Shortcuts in Life.*

Shortcuts are when a player glosses over what their character is attempting. Shortcuts are not allowed, such as:

- “I kill all the enemies that are near me.”
- “I make all the robots work again.”
- “I activate the controls of the laser cannon and shoot down all the pirate ships.”
- “I set up a merchant business in the town.”
- “I run down the hallway and have my gun ready to shoot just in case anything comes at me from any direction.”
- “I fly our ship to the next planet.”

Runners are likelier to use the last example to allow for fast travel in a session. Such as, “You guys fly your ship to the next planet.” However, Runners should attempt to minimize their “controlling” of game players. Rarely do Runners tell the players what their characters attempt because they want the players to have agency with their characters as it fits in with the **HARD** play style.

## No Initiative

*None.*

No initiative roll or check is made with the *HARD* roleplaying style to see who gets to attempt something first. Nothing random, really, either. Just common sense is used to determine which player attempts something next.

A character in the middle of attempting something during their last “turn” will probably still be in the middle of attempting that same thing on their next “turn.” The “turn” would then go to the character who either hasn’t attempted something recently or just finished with the last thing they attempted.

If a player’s character is unconscious, another player gets to roleplay their character attempting something. If a player’s character attempts a task that will take some time, another player gets to roleplay their character attempting something.

*See a pattern here?*

If a player doesn’t say where their character is, it simply means they haven’t left their last location. If a player doesn’t say what their character is attempting, it merely means they aren’t attempting anything.

Usually, when a player doesn’t say anything, another player gets an attempt. An available character whose player speaks first receives the so-called “initiative.” That character gets an attempt.



## No Combat Rounds

*No more games.*

As initiative goes, so goes the combat round. Such are the casualties when roleplaying the **HARD** way. Modern tabletop roleplaying games have enough rules in them as-is. However, game designers still insist on bolting on contrived and artificial-feeling wargame frameworks that have been around since the 1970s. They'll turn a roleplay session into a board game in a heartbeat, ruin the game's pacing, and gum up roleplaying, if not remove it entirely.

Combat skills are just like any other skill a character has. And should be attempted as all skills are attempted. Just because a character shoots a gun at someone doesn't mean everyone needs to switch into "combat round" mode. Combat rounds will only prolong the inevitable anyway. So, the best practice is to continue roleplaying things out in real-time using "turns" as always.

*The Runner says, "A Psion is accessing the control panel at the airlock." A player says, "I pull out my pistol and aim at the Psion." The Runner says, "The Psion is entering the access code." If the Runner says nothing else, it's assumed the difficulty level is **average**. The player says, "I fire," and makes a **2D** roll. The player knows what characteristic modifier, skill level, and aim modifier to add to their roll. The result is **10**, and the player says, "**Average Success**," rolls for damage, and says the amount. The Runner removes the amount from the Psion's health and narrates the Psion's injury. The player describes their character aiming for another shot. The Runner says what the Psion attempts next if anything.*

## Sample Session

*Meanwhile... In space.*

Runner: "As your ship approaches the salvage station, your headsets crackle, 'Spiritus 5, this is Deep Salvage C-409E. I have you on approach vector. Transferring telemetry and docking assignment to y'all now.'"

Eneri: "I think to myself... A.I. with personality. Yet another terrible affliction created by our age of wonders. Finally, I say, 'Good morning, Wynona. Receiving telemetry. Always a pleasure.' I key in nav data to the control console."

Rega: "'Hey, it could be worse. Much worse. Wynona is a sweetheart.' I use the ship sensors to scan other ships at the salvage station. Looking for ships that I recognize."

Runner: "The salvage tug and friendly rival 'Rictus' is docked at the station. They send a burst message to you after your sensor ping. 'Drinks at the bar on us after you dock?'"

Rega: "I burst a message back, 'You still owe me for covering for your tab last time. See you there.'"



Runner: "Wynona's synthetic drawl speaks again, 'Spiritus 5, I seem to have a spot of trouble. I have a far trader inbound that is unresponsive. You are closest. Sending you sensor data now. I'd be mighty grateful if I could trouble you to see why they just ain't answering their phone.' A telemetry package arrives on your console. The heavy freighter Solossius is not responding to station control, and vector data shows it on a collision course with the station. [Nothing out of the Average. EOL.]"

Eneri: "'Roger that Wynona. We'll check it out.' I adjust our heading to intercept the freighter."

Rega: "I adjust my sensor sweep to focus on the freighter, looking for signs of damage to the ship."

(Rolls a 2D plus Sensor skill and Intelligence modifier)

Rega: "Average Success. I see that the ship is venting gasses, and the drive is flickering on and off. 'I'm seeing some damage on the Solossius.' I relay that info back to Wynona."

Runner: "The console screams at you, 'Incoming objects from the Solossius at hypervelocity.' Ship ident systems scream, 'Railgun rounds at 73% confidence. [Evasion Difficult]'"

Eneri: "I slam the console controls for evasive maneuvers and activate seat restraints. 'It just fired on us!'"

(Rolls a 2D plus Spacecraft skill and Dexterity modifier)



Eneri: "Average Failure."

Runner: "New colors appear on the console—multiple hull breaches. The lights of the cabin switch to emergency red. 'Warning! Hull breach detected.'"

Rega: "I struggle to put on my helmet as the ship moves violently, and the seat restraints get in my way. 'Mayday, mayday! Wynona, we are under attack by the Solossius!'"

Runner: "The communication system returns only static. The entire EM spectrum is noise. From the view screens, shipping modules are shown detaching from the freighter, and small drive plums are directing the metal boxes toward you. It's difficult to tell how many."

Eneri: "'Pirates? Well, we shall see about that!' I flip the ship on its axis, pointing our heavy tug drive at the approaching modules. 'Brace!' All emergency power into the main drive."

(Rolls a 2D plus Spacecraft skill and Intelligence modifier)

Eneri: "Marginal Success. The Spiritus accelerates hard away from the Solossius. Moving erratically to try to avoid that railgun. I then grab for my helmet before the last of the cabin atmosphere leaks out."

Rega: "I keep trying to hail Wynona at station control."

(Rolls a 2D plus Comms skill plus Education modifier)

Rega: "Average Failure."

Runner: "A robotic voice breaks through the EM noise. 'Stand down and prepare for boarding. Our holy crusade has come to cleanse this system. Accept our upgrades and be saved.'"

# Chapter 6: Ending

## The Jolt Back to Reality

*Emotional damage!*

Players whose characters may have died off during an intense game session will be relieved when they see that they themselves are still very much alive. The feeling of sorrow will be there for a time as players unwind and breathe a sigh of relief.

A four-hour roleplay session can be mentally draining. It could be physically draining since the session is like one long roller coaster ride with players on the edge of their seats for most of that time. Heartbeats slow as players begin their re-tellings.

## Questions

*What just happened?*

At the end of a roleplay session is when players can ask their questions. If it was a who-dun-nit session, the players may not have found a clue or two and are dying to know who the pearl lady was that they saw often standing near the topiaries outside. If it was a sci-fi action session, the players might ask if the psionic dilettante woman's mind was really hers or actually the copy of her Archduchess grandmother's.

Runners ask the players what they thought of the

session. Questions about rules and rulings, if there are any, are also asked at this time.

## Story

*What story?*

Throughout this book, there's been no mention of story. The downtime after a game session is when players begin to replay the things that just happened in their heads. All of it. Saying to each other about that one part of that one scene where such and such happened and so and so decided to remain behind so that this and that timeline could continue onward, etc.

Players love talking about the parts that were the best. And the parts they totally weren't expecting.

## The Takeaway

*You're talking about memories!*

The created story is one of the rewards of roleplaying the **HARD** way. If recorded, it will sound like an audio book that can be played back and enjoyed by others.

## About the Author



Shawn Driscoll is a self-professed RPG snob and owner of a hundred cats. Well, that may be only half true. He is also an American artist. Computers are his primary creative tool. His many hobbies are in sync with his being a student of all sciences. Some of these are discussed in length on his YouTube channel at [www.youtube.com/c/ShawnDriscoll](http://www.youtube.com/c/ShawnDriscoll).

## Contact

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# Character Notes

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## Journal

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