Some time ago, Emily Boss and I (Matthijs Holter) started working on a set of principles and techniques for open play. The central idea is that players would use different roleplaying techniques as they saw fit, selecting and incorporating them along the way, following the flow of the game and their own personal desires. Now we're ready to release the ideas into the wild.

PLAY WITH INTENT

making stories together

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What we're about to show you

This book is a description of a certain way of roleplaying. We call it "Playing With Intent". If you like to improvise, to explore characters and story, the thrill of never knowing what happens next, this is for you.

The ideas are simple. They do, however, require experience with roleplaying, preferably with different schools/styles of roleplaying. It is possible for an inexperienced player to participate in Playing With Intent, but at least two participants should have roleplaying experience.

The central idea

You will use different roleplaying techniques as you see fit, selecting and incorporating them along the way, following the flow of the game and your own personal desires. In this way, you will explore something that nobody has experienced before you, and nobody will again.

What does this mean?

It means there is no fixed set of rules. You'll be trying out different rules, techniques, ways of play as you go along. Maybe, at some point in play, a player says: "I'd like to turn out the lights and play out this scene in total darkness." Maybe, in a different game, a player says: "Let's put some miniatures on the table to see where all the characters are." or someone says: "Lie down on the floor! We'll be the voices in your head, whispering your madness."

No rules at all? No structure?

Yes, there is some structure. There are some principles.

Principles

The rules of this game will change, as all participants do things that fit. Follow each other's lead. Explore the new territory. Feel your way. Be changed by others. Find out who you are together.

We've given some examples of how these principles can be applied. In all the examples, assume you're playing in a Shakespearean tragedy setting; your character is based on Lady MacBeth. Events are improvised, sometimes loosely based on the play, sometimes not at all.

Here is a list of the Principles. Print it out and hang it on the wall of your playing space. What follows is a discussion of each Principle.

- Be attentive!
- Stay with it!
- Be in it!
- Take action!
- Challenge!
- See the real people!
- Sense the spotlight!
- No planning!

Be attentive!

Listen to what the others are doing. Feel what the group is doing, see what the situation is, while playing.

The effect of this is to make sure you're all on the same page, playing the same game. Just like music can't function if every instrument plays its own tune in its own tempo, you can't roleplay if you're not aware of what others are doing.

Example: You've just had a big fight with MacBeth over his cowardice. As the scene is about to end, you see the player hunched over. You sense that this is a turning point of sorts for his story. You walk over, say softly: "Husband?" and touch his back. This gives the player an opening for all sorts of play, and signals to everyone that the scene isn't over yet.

Example: You sneak into a room where two servants are fighting over a bloodied dagger. One of them is screaming and crying. The other notices you and stops dead. You sense this is a cue for you to assert your authority; in a hard, quiet voice you say "What is this?" and step forward. The servants drop the dagger, and you bend to pick it up.

Example: You realize your daughter Isabella is having some sort of inner struggle. You say to her: "Isabella, go to the castle walls and speak your mind to the wind!" This is a cue for her to have a soliloquy; the characters don't know her thoughts, but the players will.

" Follow each other's lead

Explore the new territory

Feel your way

Be changed by others

Find out who you are together "

Stay with it!

Don't chicken out on boredom, tension, pain or discomfort. Like massaging a hurt muscle until it warms up, go through it.

The effect of this is to give people space and time to experience the story and the characters. As soon as you hurry, pushing things, you remove the breathing room needed to feel, reflect, understand. Fast play is a specific technique to be used at specific points - not a general principle.

Example: Your firstborn child has died, and you are sitting by her deathbed. Everyone's silent. You sob quietly. You feel the impulse to speak, to rise, to do something to break the horrible atmosphere; but you suppress it, and stay with the silent tension for a bit longer.

Example: Another player has introduced a technique based on a slow, repetitive ritual. After a few minutes, it becomes almost unbearable, and it's clear everyone wants to stop. You whisper "Stay with it", pushing it a bit further, hoping it will work.

Example: You're at a table with MacBeth. You're talking about meaningless things; none of you touch on important subjects. You consider introducing something dramatic, but instead you decide to keep on the chatter, let it become even more inane, let the conversation slowly die as a highlight of your dying relationship.

Be in it!

Be your character, be your description, be in the situation. Accept that the narrative might not be perfect; go for the experience. The effect of this is to bring you into the game - heart and mind. Thinking outside the game will happen, and it is allowed, but if your focus is only on building a perfect story, your head will not be free to live in that story.

Example: The murders have begun and after picking up the dagger, your hands have become stained with blood. You call for a solo scene at night, woken from a dream and try and try to wash off the spots. Someone offers you a red magic marker and you draw them in. You let yourself open up to the panic that she feels, and trust others will let you know when to move on, or that you will know when the time is right.

Example: When you take the role of another character you assumes a different voice with a different accent and way of speaking. It helps you feel the character as more than a role, and since it is natural for you it helps others when in scenes with you. MacBeth instead puts on a hat or chooses a simple prop when playing a different role.

Example: You and Macbeth are fighting. He is feeling regret and looking to escape from you and his terrible ambition. To enforce the isolation and trapped nature of the situation another player creates a barrier with their body to keep him from running away.

Take action!

Step in and do something. Your character can act. You can use techniques, give instructions, set scenes. The effect of this is that everyone feels ownership of their character, the story, the game. The experience belongs to everyone, and is being created by everyone.

Example: MacBeth thinks he has triumphed. Someone else, seeing the moment for the prophecy to be fulfilled, jumps up and brings all the other players into a group. Handing them pages to flutter and leading them toward MacBeth, the trees walk to Dunsinane.

Example: Early on, you want to show how the idea for betrayal is growing in you and MacBeth. You call for an internal or metaphorical scene and arrange the other players as a human sculpture. You make an image putting MacBeth above all else, and you above him.

Example: When Duncan freezes in his role, you look for a moment's lull and then Cut and take him back to beginning of the scene. You asks him to now play through what his character dreamed of doing.

Challenge!

Make others feel alive by providing them with challenges and hurdles. The effect of this is to bring their feelings - both player and character - into the light, to make them understand what they're experiencing. Personality traits come to the forefront when tested.

Example: As the story starts to come alive with bloodshed, someone calls for a rapid fire montage of scenes. Everyone works together to set the scenes quickly, and yet take enough time to feel the humanity of MacBeth's victims as the numbers mount.

Example: Your daughter is in love with a Tuscan nobleman. The two are having a blissful, happy time. After seeing their joy blossom for a while, you decide to push them a bit: You attempt to seduce the young man, using a magic potion, to convince him to give you his land.

Example: MacBeth is fighting the ghost of his brother on the battlements of the castle. In order to make the battle more dramatic, you describe how the enemy's soldiers, besieging the castle, are starting to fire arrows at the battlements. You describe a cut scene where the old witch, locked in the dungeons, foresees the fall of a mighty warrior this very night - someone will die soon!

See the real people!

Help and challenge the actual players. Give them themes they might find interesting, provocative, hard. Scaffold them.

The effect of this is to make the experience feel real and meaningful to the player, not only the character. It is more important that the player has a strong experience than that the character or story is believable.

Example: The witches are asked to start off the play. In order to help them create the proper spectral mood, the other players are asked to describe the eerie atmosphere of the woods surrounding them, helping the Witches creep out MacBeth as play begins.

Example: John is playing for the first time. He suggests taking a small role to ease into it but trust his ability and think that he might feel marginalized since he is unsure. You explain and suggest he take MacBeth.

Example: Your friend Eva is playing Lady MacBeth. You know Eva has been going through a rough time lately, so you work out some signals with her. When the madness ramps up and she gets close to the "out, out" sequence you let her know you're there for her, but let her "stay with it". At a certain point she signals "enough", so you step in and challenge another player to ease things a bit.

Sense the spotlight!

When someone's doing something cool, help them do it until it's done. When there's not a spotlight, feel free to grab it, or point it at someone.

The effect of this is that everyone gets a chance to shine, and that you will be part of each others' experience. When you make someone else awesome, you are part of that.

Example: You've got a great idea for a scene where you can narrate some off-stage battle. As you step forward and start talking, another player takes the word at the same time. You quickly think back - when was the last time you had the spotlight, and when did they last get to do something cool? If they were the center of attention recently, keep talking. If you were, step back for now.

Example: Lady MacDuff is lying on the ground, a dagger in her chest. Her father stands over her; this is the second time he's killed someone in the last ten minutes. It's been a while since anyone heard anything from Lady M, and now she's dying. You sit by her side, taking the role of a spirit, and ask her in a loud, clear voice about her childhood. For the next few minutes, you get her to narrate beautiful moments from her life.

Example: Everyone's being a bit passive, nobody knows how to get started. You could try to get them going, but you've tried a few times, and it's not happening. You decide to grab the attention, and initiate a seduction scene where you try to seduce your rival's son. After dominating the scene for a while, you step back and see if someone else can grab the spotlight.

No planning!

Do not try too hard to connect all the dots. Do not set up a railroad to follow. Possible future events are tasty treats that we might want to pick up, not checkpoints on a to-do list.

The effect of this is to give everyone space to contribute. It also frees you to explore the potential narrative and experience; instead of painting by numbers, you're seeing things for the first time, experiencing every moment because it's new and nobody knows what happens next.

Example: At the start of the game, one player has a voiceover-type narration where she describes a regular day at the court, then ends with the statement: "Little did they know that before winter's end, only a pile of ashes would be left." Sounds like there's going to be a great fire at some point! However, towards the end of the game, there's been no fire, and you realize it would feel forced and unnatural to suddenly bring it

into play - especially since the action has moved to an underwater kingdom. No problem; let it go, and focus on the story that flows before you.

Example: There's a break between scenes, and someone points out that a character described as someone's newborn child in one scene is suddenly a grown man in the next. Oops. You talk about it, quickly decide he wasn't a newborn child after all, and move on with the game.

Example: Three different kinds of magic have appeared in the game - a witch's necromancy, your magical gift of seeing the future, and a sort of Judeo-Christian divine intervention. The group start talking about how they interconnect, and how they could come into conflict in the next two scenes. People are thinking out loud about how the final climax should work out as a battle between these supernatural forces. You point out that it's way too early in the game to think about the climax - and the others smile sheepishly, laugh a bit, and get on with the next scene.

Be attentive!

Stay with it!

Be in it!

Take action!

Challenge!

See the real people!

Sense the spotlight!

No planning!

Structure

We gather in a good playing space.

We're in a safe space. We trust each other. We have time - no time-boxing, no other waiting engagements. This is crucial. Things are open.

We talk about Playing With Intent. We lay out the basics: We're here to explore. Our aim is to listen, to incorporate, to build, to listen more. To do what feels right, spontaneously.

We go through the principles. We discuss those we need to discuss, answer questions that need to be answered.

We have loads of roleplaying techniques we know. Let's mention some of them, write them down on a big poster. We put the poster on the wall. Or maybe we just pick a set from the book to get us going.

We generate the seeds: A setting. A basic situation. Some characters. Here, we use techniques we know, or make some up on the spot.

We should expect the start to grate. Things can be slow and painful, but warming up we'll get into it. Stay with it! If it flows, see that as a gift. When things do stick, keep with it.

We start out with a simple, but functional structure - round-robin scene framing, for example.

Further play is guided by the principles.

As we sense things are ending, we bring each others' attention to the fact. Maybe someone takes charge, maybe we have a climax; or maybe we just acknowledge the ending with a silent nod and a sigh.

Environment

The Space

Ideally, play in someone's home. A welcoming, gracious host is the best. You want a room that can be closed, but has a visible exit that people can use. You might want to be able to dim the lights. You want some paper, some writing utensils, some open space, some pillows & chairs & tables on the side.

A Safe Space

You want to know that people will treat you with respect and listen to you. You want to feel safe, so that you can play out stupid, silly, personal, intense, imperfect things and be accepted and have people follow up and contribute.

Before play, you might want to think a little about what makes a safe space for you. Be sure to let someone know if they're making you feel unsafe. Here's one player's list as an example:

- No one's gonna come out with any OOC/OOG homophobic/transphobic/sexist/racist/etc. bullshit.
- No one's gonna shit on anything someone else comes up with.
- No one's gonna be super self-flagellating.
- No one's gonna shit on someone else's needs, like music volume, temperature, touchy topics, etc.

Cut and Brake

A recommended technique for keeping people safe (so they can go crazy) is "Cut and Brake". It's very simple: If someone does something you're not too sure about, that pushes your boundaries a little too much, say "Brake". They should immediately tone down, back out a bit, but play still goes on. If you feel like things have gotten out of hand, or you feel scared or very confused, say "Cut". All play stops immediately, and the group should be quiet and listen to whoever cut the game. Be supportive, find out what the problem is. Don't continue unless everyone feels safe and wants to go on.

Maybe you end up never using Cut and Brake. But knowing they're there will help you feel a lot more safe if things get weird.

The Group

Play with people you know, or people you want to get to know. Play with people you trust to take initiative, to contribute, to listen. These three traits are the most important. If you like and trust someone, but they're a horrible listener or never do anything on their own initiative, you might not want that person in the group - at least not the first time you play.

There will be different dynamics in each playing group, based on how players' personalities interact and what mode they are in. (Is someone attracted to someone else? Is someone a natural joker that everyone listens to?) Being aware of these dynamics and personalities is good. Try to see the other players for who they are. Sense when you're pushing too hard, sense when they need input, sense when you can challenge them or tease them or get close to them.

Be aware of the spotlight - that is: who's getting the attention, when, how. For this style of play to work, everyone must know how to grab and focus attention. Is there someone in the group who usually takes charge? Or someone who always gets attention when they act out a scene? That's okay, but it means they - and everyone else in the group - need to actively give the spotlight to others, to make someone else the center of attention.

Structure of Play

Beginning things

At the start of play, you need some seed of the story and characters to begin with. You may start very simply, or use a bit more structure to give yourself ideas. With more players, more structure may be helpful.

Your story may be divided up in to smaller sections, like scenes in a film or play. If so it will be helpful to know how your group will move from scene to scene. Beginning a new scene is often called "framing" the scene.

We've listed some options for beginning the game, and also for framing scenes. Choose from these options, or or work with you group to find different answers that suit your tastes.

Starting the game

De minimis: look over the techniques. Pick a genre and a word to start off play. For example, fantastic and ships. Brainstorm some opening situations with characters to play (e.g. the captain at the helm, two sailors scrubbing the deck). Play out the first scene and see where it leads. Pick techniques that work with your play.

Cast and plot: once you have picked a play set, choose a situation that fits. Each player may suggest an element. For example, in an Action & Drama game, the players chose "a family member in danger", "a cabin in the woods", "family treasure hidden at the cabin", "a gun and gunplay to be involved". Once enough information has been suggested to have good material for a story, suggest characters that would fit the situation.

Framing scenes

Round-robin scene framing: each player takes a turn setting the scene for where play takes place. They say where it takes place, who is there. Perhaps what is happening, and when it is. If play involves getting up and moving about, pick some way to keep track of the order of players: write their names on a piece of paper, for example. Go "around" in order as the names appear. If someone passes, come back to them before going around again.

Separate play and reflection spaces: have a designated space for group reflection, breaks, planning. A table with chairs is good; it makes things a little formal, and should signal to the group that when we're at the table, we think and talk in a rational, collaborative way.

Have another area that's for play, especially if you're going to use physical play. An open space, pillows, a couch maybe. When you play, go back and forth between the two areas. When someone's acting out a scene, let them do that in the play area; the others will sit and watch, instruct, or comment in the reflection area. Go back and forth as you see fit - you'll soon find your own rhythm.

At regular intervals, for instance after each scene, we go to reflection and planning. Perhaps we sit down at a table with some paper. We sum up what we've seen so far, and talk briefly about how to start the next bit. We do not plan a plot or specific narrative - just enough to kickstart the next part. Maybe we use randomizers or other forms of narrative seeds.

" Play with people you know, or people you want to get to know

Play with people you trust to take initiative, to contribute, to listen "

Reincorporation: one element is suggested and written down by each player. These become elements of play. May be used as the seed for framing scenes, or simply be elements that the players are aware of that they can call up on organically throughout play. The warm-up exercise Escalate or Explore, can be used to make up ideas relating to play, which can then be incorporated as themes or events.

Could be used as a timing structure: make a list, circle an item when introduced to play and cross it off when reused. When all have been crossed off, begin to wrap up game.

Inspirational objects: everyone has the option of bringing stuff, things that might be used as props or tools: A hammer and nails, a Ouija board, a veil, a bottle of vodka, a painting of a woman with child.

Ending things

Maybe you will end up dividing play into scenes, or maybe not. Maybe you will want the game to have a defined ending, maybe not. But in case you want to be able to end scenes, games, stories, here are some techniques you can use.

The Ender: someone is given authority to end things. When they say so, start wrapping up the scene, or even cut it right away. It's a good idea to establish how to signal the end of a scene - maybe the Ender says "scene!" or makes a cutting motion with their hand. To give the players the ability to keep playing, if they have more to say, the Ender may invite the end. For example, they may say "Is that a scene?" and make the hand gesture. Players may ask for more time with a gesture (wave hands--ie need more time). If a players asks for scene to go on, they should then end the scene after they are done. Or again ask, "Is that a scene?".

Look and nod: when the game reaches a quiet point, or has gone through a climax, look at each other to gauge the atmosphere. When a few players nod, that's a sign that the scene is over.

Vote with absence: when you feel like things are over, or it's time for a break, move away from the playing space - possibly into the designated planning space. Do so quietly, let others finish what they're doing. When two or more players have left, it's time for everyone to wrap up the scene.

When the scene is done, thank the players.

Authority and Taking Charge

Authority can lie in many places. If nobody does anything about it, one of the players will usually end up in charge and make most of the decisions. This is okay sometimes, but not as a default mode. You want everyone to be able to influence things - the choosing of principles, the adding of things to the fiction, management of the spotlight et c. So make sure everyone has a say, and make sure to ask people for their opinion or give them room to give it freely.

There are different forms of authority, and nobody needs to have them all - in fact, it's good if they're divided, so everyone contributes and everyone has to listen to someone else.

Here are some roles with authority:

The host: owns or controls the playing space, and serves food.

The facilitator: who's read this book.

The alpha player: who usually takes the spotlight, and entertains people.

The idea creator: who comes up with weird, crazy and/or fitting things in the fiction.

The setting boss: who knows the period of history you play in, or the books you're borrowing from.

The historian: who keeps track of character sheets, maps or other records of what-has-gone-before, more or less being needed depending on the game.

The bringer of the alcohol: whoever has a bottle of wine or whiskey and starts pouring it.

The organizer: who says when and where you meet, who brings what, et c.

The scene ender: who determines when scenes come to a close.

The lead team: a team or one person who is in charge of making the game flow-

The mood minder: who suggests when to take breaks.

Full consensus: agreement among all the players is asked for to determine what happens in play. Use structures for play that spread decision making throughout the group such as turn taking, divvying up responsibilities, universal authority to invoke techniques, objects anyone can use that signal change (a bell, a prop gun, writing on a white board, et c.). Commonly, players take actions, describe character feelings/dialogue/choices and agreement by all is assumed. If differences in opinion arise, choices are made through discussion among the players. Make sure to have a comfortable place for all to sit if deep discussion is needed. Some times, everyone cannot agree. You may drop that idea and move on to something else.

When anyone disagrees or challenges, they must offer a suggestion of something else to do that builds on what has already been played.Decide ahead of time on a way to move forward in cases where group is split and play is blocked. Majority rules, perhaps, or a set of suggestions created by the group at the start which are chosen from randomly ("do what takes the most toll", "kill someone", "end the scene and do a flash back.")

Recommended for groups of friends that have worked or played together on other campaigns and projects. Mostly agreement just flows, but the group must have commitment to communication, flexibility and desire to work things out in order for this to work in times when it doesn't.

Rotating moderation: each session--or changing within one session--one person takes the job of a director or GM: making sure the game moves forward, agreed upon procedures are used, and spotlight is shared. Good for whoever occupies this role to have a set of procedural tools to use. For example:

scene-framing, calling end to scenes and bird-in-ear; or overseeing round-robin framing of scenes, asking for world/emotional descriptions from players and keeping track of which characters have had focus scenes.

Turn Taking: going by some order (around the circle if players are seated, alpha order, by die roll order, et c.) each player has the responsibility for doing an important part of the game. For example, if play takes place in scenes, each player might take turns saying 1) who is present, 2) where they are and 3a) what is going at at the start of play or 3b) what will happen in this scene. Can be applied to: framing scenes, ending scenes, or using another specific technique.

One team in charge: resembling the traditional single GM, or a team that takes that role. Several people take responsibility for "running the game" for however long it takes place. What that means will vary from group to group: these may be the moderators that make sure everyone knows the rules and keep things flowing, these may be people with a large, differentiated creative responsibility that create threats that the others must deal with.

Having a stable set of facilitators heightens surprise and allows secrets to be kept from the other players. It also may be used to allow players to have a more focused or intense type of experience. If your group is not yet a cooperating team, or if you're new to this style of play, it can be good to start out with a strong focus on sharing the authority and the spotlight.

Democratic voting: if group cannot come to full consensus, players may vote with decision going with simple majority (51+%) ruling.

Tokens: each person has a token they can use to insert idea or use technique. Place out of play after invoked until all have used their tokens. May be cards with name of technique on them.

Two hand voting: (from Microscope, 2010, by Ben Robbins) Each player who has an idea about change to make states it. All players vote simultaneously by pointing to the player whose idea they back. Point 1-5 fingers at player to indicate degree of support held. May use both hands, but must point to different players if so. May instead make "Rock" of support: make hand into fist to indicate that you support any idea that is chosen by group. In case of tie, Vote again on just the two ideas that tied. If another tie, throw out both and move use original idea.

"Yes, and" or "Yes, but": if someone doesn't like what's been established by another player, they accept most of it, but change it's implications in order to have something else to work with.

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Optional Roles and Authority

The host
Owns or controls the playing space, and serves food.

The facilitator
The person that has read this book.

The alpha player
Usually takes the spotlight, and entertains people.

The idea creator
Comes up with weird, crazy and/or fitting things in the fiction.

The setting boss
Knows the period of history you play in, or the books you're borrowing from.

The historian
Keeps track of character sheets, maps or other records of what-has-gone-before, more or less being needed depending on the game.

The bringer of the alcohol
Has a bottle of wine or whiskey and starts pouring it.

The organizer
Says when and where you meet, who brings what, et c.

The scene ender
Determines when scenes come to a close.

The lead team
A team or one person who is in charge of making the game flow.

The mood minder
Suggests when to take breaks.

" We're here to explore.

Our aim is to listen, to incorporate, to build, to listen more. To do what feels right, spontaneously. "

Techniques and Tool kits

These tool kits are collections of techniques you can use to aim for different creative goals in your game. Bear in mind that these are just suggestions - if you're using these as definite lists, as canon, you're doing it wrong. When you play, use techniques as you see fit, invent new ones, change old ones, as long as it works for you. Explore the creative space you have available.

Surreal

The laws of causality do not apply anymore. Time and space can become twisted. Metaphors and jokes can be taken at face value. Dreams and ideas are manifest and real.

Warm-ups

- Take turns looking at objects in the room and shouting out the wrong name for them.
- Recount a dream: close your eyes and say what you see.
- Perform a ritual that makes no sense, in perfect solemnity. The burial of a shoe, for instance, or the bar mitzvah of a bureaucratic committee.
- Interview each other about something that doesn't exist.

Countdown: everyone closes their eyes. One player starts counting down from 10 to 0. For each number, someone describes a sensation or experience, possibly related to the setting or characters. At 0, everyone opens their eyes.

Identity blurring: the character loses some important aspect of their identity. It might be replaced with something else.

Example: The hard-boiled investigator goes to work one day to discover that she's now working as a nurse at a hospital. A father talks to his son and discovers that the child is a grown man who speaks a foreign tongue.

Discontinuity: things that should happen in order, don't.

Example: After a long phase of courtship, the couple is on their way to the wedding ceremony. In the next scene, they meet on the street as strangers and initiate friendly, curious conversation.

Metaphors are real: words that are spoken can transform into or refer to actual things, people and events.

Example: It's an important meeting with the board of directors. You need the opinion of the chair on difficult issues. You place a physical chair on the table, and address it at regular intervals.

Trancework: attempting to reach an altered mental state through, for instance, chanting, breathing techniques or other means.

Example: You and another player have a sense of connection. You sit down in a darkened corner of the play area and lock eyes, attempting to see beyond what's physically there and perceive the essence of each others' characters.

Mask: wearing a mask can create interesting effects when players "channel" or try to become the mask.

Example: When you are on your way to meet your mother, you hand another player a mask of a bird-like creature. She puts it on, looks briefly in a mirror, and acts the role of your mother - who, apparently, is this creature.

Closed Eyes/Blindfolds: sense awareness can be heightened by closing your eyes, or wearing a blindfold. Example: Outside, they are fighting. The war is claiming too many lives. In this dark cottage, you are still alive. The players all don blindfolds and sit in silence, sometimes touching hands or whispering a quiet word.

Internal monologue: the characters don't know what the others are thinking - but the players can. Speak your character's thoughts out loud, or ask someone else to speak theirs.

Example: You are trying to seduce the landlord's daughter. Another player tells you both to speak your thoughts out loud, in a whisper. The scene is filled with contrasts between your spoken words and hidden thoughts.

Unpredictable scene framing: each scene is in a new, strange, contrasting place.

Example: The first scene involves a child being rescued from drowning in a lake. The next is the inside of a TV studio, where the anchormen are fighting to the death. Then comes a scene with a flashback to one of the anchormen's childhood.

Unreliable narrator: what was said and done, proves to be untrue or skewed. Everything that happens in the game is potentially subjective or erroneous.

Example: You've just described how your character comes from a troubled background; she grew up on the streets, fought police, stole drugs... Another player, portraying policeman, addresses you in a scene. It becomes clear that

you're colleagues - in fact, you studied together, and came from the same rich neighborhood. Later, another player casually remarks that she knew you as a child, when you were a poor immigrant, before you struck rich.

Shared character creation: each character is made up by the group as a whole. Take turns adding information and details.

Example: Giulina: I'm playing a character who is broken and lost in the world. Brad: You're a man, a father. Trini: Your partner loves you but can't be with you any more. Georges: When you were a child you thought you could understand what birds say. Danika: In your dreams you fly every night.

Bird-in-ear: you can whisper each other instructions - actions to perform, memories, emotions your characters have.

Example: You're looking at your brother, who has just finished his training to become a Technomancer. I sit next to you at the party, and whisper: "How you hate him. How you envy him." Later, I get more direct: "You want to poison him. You want to kill your parents. Pick up the knife. Throw the glass."

Wrong detail: sometimes small things can be disturbing. Change a detail, or add one, to make things weird, silly, absurd.

Example: You meet an old friend at a class reunion. You shake his hand and drop your pants. So does he. You continue the scene in your underwear, as if nothing has happened.

Alternate reality flashback: all of a sudden, someone remembers something that didn't happen or you narrate something that might have happened, but didn't.

Example: Your fighter Thora runs across the bridge, sword in hand. She strikes her enemies down one by one! Another player takes over, describing the scene in slow motion - and then cuts suddenly to Thora giving birth at the age of thirteen, to a child destined to be a traitor. Thora runs on, but the sudden false memory jars her, and she stumbles.

Re-play scenes: do it again! Differently this time. Or maybe just the same.

Example: You enter the bus and sit down. Another player sits next to you. You are about to start talking, when a third player tells you both to do it again. You enter the bus and sit down. The other player stumbles onto the bus, drunkenly, and falls into your lap. "Do it again", says the third player. You enter the bus and sit down...

Low-key and personal

It's about real people, subtle emotions, relationships. It's about taking time to let things grow slowly. It's about real humans, fictional or not.

Warm-ups
- Tell of a time you felt safe.
- Tell us something from when you were a child.
- Tell us of your best friend when you were younger.
- Clean up the place physically, make it roomy and airy.

Ars Amandi: a technique used to simulate sex in play. Players touch each other in permitted, non-intimate areas (hands, arms, shoulders, back, neck) with their hands, arms or neck, to represent intimate contact of love making. Expression of tenderness, passion, violence can be made through contact on neutral areas. Allows strangers to portray intimate contact without actually kissing or acting out arousal.

(Further discussion found here: http://ropecon.fi/brap/ch17.pdf)

Bring your personal history: allow parallels between your life and events of play to inform your experience and choices. Not an invitation to monopolize spotlight by telling story of your life per se. An opportunity for everyone to use real events to deepen fictional story.

Example: Delila knows that her girlfriend is planning to break up with her. She picks a character who is thinking about ending his marriage.

Endowment: players gift each other's characters with problems/aspects. Accept what other say about you in play and bring it into the game.

Examples: Joseph and Emma play a married couple. In their first scene together, he makes a comment about how she cheated on him before they were married. Emma accepts this and plays out the guilt and rebelliousness this expresses about her character throughout the game. In a scene with Lars, Anders pretends to punch him in the eye. Lars takes the blow and nurses it through the next several scenes. He milks it for attention, and puts emotional distance into his interactions with Anders until the characters come to an understanding. When Anika's character appears, Joseph says she is the most beautiful woman he knows. Everyone else in the scene plays out being distracted by her appearance, or resentful of the attention she receives.

Hotseat: players choose with no suggestions from others. All wait patiently for the individual to find inspiration.

Example: Each player takes a turn choosing where the next scene will take place and who is in it. Instead of jumping in with suggestions if the person whose turn it is hesitates, everyone relaxes until an idea comes to them.

Inside/outside voice: alternate between character's inner voice and external narration/dialogue. Speak interior thoughts other characters would not perceive in between speaking normally so that other characters would hear. May also speak broad connecting information, like a narrator's voice-over in a film, that fill in pieces of the puzzle or push the characters in new directions.

Examples: At another player's request, the action in a scene pauses while Anika speaks from her character's point of view. She talks about how alienating it is to be seen as exceptionally beautiful, and how far that is from her own perception of herself. The scene continues and she introduces herself stiffly to Joseph's character. Lars introduces a scene. He says "After fighting all the way to the family gathering, the newly married couple realizes that they must put on an undivided front to get through." Johanna and Emma then begin to play out their married couple arriving at the family home.

Locked eyes: players maintain direct eye contact with one another as long as possible while playing out scene. Heightens awareness of the other person's reactions. May put pressure on players to focus intently. Can be used as trigger for other technique or new action if someone drops their eyes.

Example: Characters in argument are placed face to face to have it out over long running conflict. Other players murmur support or disagreement. First to drop their eyes loses the advantage, and the other players are encouraged to turn on them and support the other.

No out of character (OOC) talk: everything that is said is taken to be said by the character. No asides, jokes or irony. This may be the case throughout the game, or once a scene has started. Exceptions may be during internal monologues.

Normal life setting: game is set in contemporary, real world. No magic, supernatural, or superheroic powers. Dramas are about troubles that face us all: love, illness, career ambitions, financial despair, et c. About normal people, not the rich, powerful or famous.

Example: Nora and Ross play a husband and wife who are trying to save their home from foreclosure. Shelly plays their daughter who doesn't know and who is planning to go to college that year.

Physical play: stand up, move around and act out what the characters do. Embody the characters. Use simple props. Also, use the space and movement to represent the emotional elements of play.

Examples: A set of table and chairs stand in for a grand dining room, a pen is a bunch of roses. As a character starts going mad, the other players start whispering and moving faster, making a cachophony and showing the overwhelm and panic felt.

Shared situation creation: everyone contributes to picking what the story will be about, or the setting in which play will take place. The group brainstorms successive ideas about what the game will be about until they find one everyone likes. Each person gives a pitch and then the group votes on the one they like best.

Examples: Everyone says one element they want to see in play: "Gambling", "New York City", "Homelessness", "Actors".

Example: First was "lesbian spin-the-bottle game at a girls leadership conference sleepover", second: "annual board meeting at a failing family company", third: "First holiday together after two weddings and a divorce in the family". Everyone votes, and chooses unanimously "lesbian spin-the-bottle".

Secrets/burdens: the characters enter play with things they wish to hide from others, or that pull them down emotionally. If they are not revealed in play, they should form strong motivations for the characters that direct the players actions. If they are known by all the players from the start or revealed in play, they provide dramatic irony for the other players to put pressure on and play off of.

Examples: Each person writes down a betrayal they've seen, done or known on a sheet of paper. Everyone picks one and incorporates that into their character. Everyone chooses one other character and thinks of something they want from them (that they probably shouldn't have), they deeply envy about them, or that they hate about them.

"Stay with it!": in moments of boredom, discomfort or loss of the way, everyone is asked to keep going, to allow play to either express something through the uneasiness, or to move into something more when moment is past.

Whispered: give suggestions of what to do, how they might feel, act, react. Through a quiet whisper in the ear, or low suggestion audible by all.

Action! Drama!

Just like in the movies, you want things to happen! Larger-than-life! Suspension of disbelief. Setup and payoff. Battles, explosions, and one-on-one conflict!

Warm-ups

- Personal space exercise: stand in lines across from one another. Approach step by step until it feels uncomfortable. Back off, approach again. Find equilibrium.
- A round of Status play each person putting down the next.
- Play Russian roulette, telling story of loved one you leave behind before "pulling the trigger" (roll die, first to roll 1 dies).

Setting up conflicts of interest: create characters at odds with one another. Rivalries, victims, ruthless opponents and allies with diverging interests.

Examples: Johnny and Dan were brought up together. But Dan's father is a police, while Johnny's runs the mob.

Examples: Shari has set her sights on being the first woman to head IntCorp. Patrick sees his path to greatness by bringing her down.

Examples: Antti is Pekka's loyal lieutenant. But when she starts taking on younger and younger kids to peddle smack, he has to make a change.

Conflict resolution: when there is a decision point or disagreement about what happens next, use some rules to decide who gets to say. Determine what's really important about the decision.

Example of voting:. Pekka and Georges are facing eachother down in the dramatic climax. Pekka is Georges lieutenant who is betraying him now to save her sister. They square off with guns, and each want to kill the other. All other players point to side they want to win. Lois, Danika and Peter, pointing to losing side choose negative consequences winner suffers: shot and bleeding, caught by police, see the next Don continue in dead character's footsteps.

Example of drawing cards: Pekka and Georges are facing each other down in the dramatic climax. Both want to control or kill the others. Each side draws 2 cards. For each other player supporting their side, draw additional card. Highest wins. Pekka wins. She narrates killing her boss, and having a grateful reunion with her kidnapped sister.

Absurdity curve: do a bigger and bigger version of one thing. This can involve two people competing or one alone (for example, by stacking on Impossible Environment). Effective when it's played with truth underneath the absurdity.

Breathing scene to get ready for more action: a quick character scene as an interlude. Shows the human side of the characters.

Don't say it, do it!: whenever you have an urge to joke about an in-game event relating to your character, simply see if that translates into a character-led action.

Goals/Victory: there is a way to win this game. Maybe it is getting the goods on your enemy, maybe it is making your way to the top, maybe it is getting that dream you've always had that drives you onward day by day. You know what it is, and you know when you've attained it--or not.

Humor: leaven the tension or horror with levity. Allow for jokes, have a character or two who gives comic relief, pick a light scene before or after moments of unbearable strain. Here are tips on bringing in humor.

Impossible environment: a basic clown technique. Find something everyday in the environment to have trouble with, interfering with some other activity that you are meant to be focusing on.

More!: raise the comedy in a scene by calling out a feature that is ripe for re-use, and asking for more. Minimally, it can just be a clearly timed call for 'more of that!' or it may be specified.

Montage!: shotgun play of brief thematically related actions. Quick succession of brief, preparatory or development scenes.

Examples: As the new couple falls in love, everyone takes a turn describing a sweet moment from their days together. "They walk in the park together, and feed the swans." "They skinny dip in Farmer Hodge's pond and get surprised by his horses coming out to drink." The gang recovers from the vicious slaughter from the gangland war by recruiting and training new soldiers. Quick scenes of young boys being collared by older kids. Put through brutal training. Armed and sent out onto the streets.

People as objects: when a object is needed for attention in the scene, such as a statue, alien obelisk, or business slide presentation, players act this out. Wherever possible, this should be used to make a blind offer to the players with speaking roles in the scene, to make sense of. Although this would normally be for a large object, it needn't be.

Protagonists and Hordes: a few players take a single continuing, main character, around whom the the action revolves. Others play many roles: taking minor characters and possibly the opposition, as needed. Those with many roles take Game Master-like responsibilities. Provide adversity to main characters, and may be called upon to lose gracefully.

Remapping: a player calls a scene, framing its location and characters, that attempts to recreate the dynamics found in an earlier scene - probably the one just completed. Lifting elements wholesale is encouraged - slices of dialogue, activities, pace of the scene.

Send in the doubles: enhance a curious character by introducing other players essentially twinning them, especially in body and voice. Depending on style and fiction history, these may or may not be related to the first character. Three copies of the same character is good to aim for.

Sides/teams/good-bad dichotomy: the plot provides sharply delineated conflicts between groups involved in play. May take the form of moral disparities (those willing to kill/maim/destroy for their goals vs. those respecting or protecting the rights of others), or strongly disparate goals (competition for single goal, biases against one another) that put the players at odds with one another.

Spew questions like bullets from a machine gun: rapid fire interrogation of players by other players to narrate action. Increases tension. Telescopes time.

Examples: Thieves are in the midst of bank heist. Fred begins rattling off questions to other players, they shout out answers: How does the teller respond to the note? Looks panicked but starts filling bags with money. Who notices? A security guard who get shot. How do the customers respond? A little boy starts crying. Several break and run for the door where Mei-li stops them. What does the bank manager do? Tells everyone to calm down while moving behind the counter to set off the silent alarm.

Status differences: simply to be mindful of high status being ripe for humour. Pomposity, arrogance, et c. are all gold.

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Thanks for feedback and initial impressions by:

About us

Matthijs

What type of play I like: I like play that emerges from interactions between characters in a group. I also like interactions with the gaming world. I like experiences that are new, things that put me in a different state of mind.

What I usually do in a playing group: I tend to be the game master or facilitator by default. However, I enjoy being a player in a group, if I have enough freedom and enough resistance.n

What I don't like in play: Railroading. Someone taking over everything and imposing their personal vision on a group without consent.

My achilles heel: I shy away from sad and horrible emotions in games. I don't want to feel what it's like to lose a child, for instance, or to live through childhood abuse.

Some games I've designed: Archipelago II. Society of Dreamers.

Emily

What type of play I like: A wide range of styles. What I'm looking for here is play that allows for greater in-character experience, variety of the ways you play (from in -depth mapping of a world to deeply emotional play acting of a role), and more fully shared co-authorship by the players.

What I usually do in a playing group: Watch for opportunities and support other folks in putting forward their ideas. As a player, I'm most comfortable when I can see how my character can make real change in their world. As a GM or facilitator, I'm happiest when the game brings everyone's ideas into play and people start sparking ideas off of one another. As a collaborator, asking questions is my preferred mode. How does this work? What would that mean? How would this play out for these people in this world?

What I don't like in play: Being led by the nose. The worlds we explore can have a life of their own. If they don't react to what we do, why not just read a book? Even knowing what will happen is fine, so long as we get to be part of making it happen.

My achilles heel: Freezing up. As a player, failing to be able to bond with a character and so have no clue what to do with it. As a GM, being too hands off. Some games I've designed: Breaking the Ice. Under my Skin.

Warm-Ups

Take turns looking at objects in the room and shouting out the wrong name for them.
Recount a dream.
Close your eyes and say what you see.
Perform a ritual that makes no sense, inperfect solemnity. The burial of a shoe, for instance, or the bar mitzvah of a bureaucratic committee
Interview each other about something that doesn't exist.

SURREAL

Warm-Ups

Tell of a time you felt safe.
Tell us something from when you were a child.
Tell us of your best friend when you were younger.
Clean up the place physically, make it roomy and airy.

LOW-KEY AND PERSONAL

Warm-Ups

Personal space exercise: stand in lines across from one another. Approach step by step until it feels uncomfortable. Back off, approach again. Find equilibrium.
A round of Status play each person putting down the next.
Play Russian roulette, telling story of loved one you leave behind before "pulling the trigger" (roll die, first to roll 1 dies).

ACTION! DRAMA!

Countdown

Everyone closes their eyes. Count down from 10 to 0. For each number, someone describes a sensation or experience, possibly related to the setting or characters. At 0, everyone opens their eyes.

SURREAL

Identity Blurring

The character loses some important aspect of their identity. It might be replaced with something else.

SURREAL

Discontinuity

Things that should happen in order, don't.

SURREAL

Metaphors are real

Words that are spoken can transform into or refer to actual things, people and events.

SURREAL

Trancework

Attempting to reach an altered mental state through, for instance, chanting, breathing techniques or other means.

SURREAL

Mask

Wearing a mask can create interesting effects when players "channel" or try to become the mask.

SURREAL

Closed eyes/ blindfold

Sense awareness can be heightened by closing your eyes, or wearing a blindfold.

SURREAL

Internal Monologue

The characters don't know what the others are thinking - but the players can. Speak your character's thoughts out loud, or ask someone else to speak theirs.

SURREAL/UNIVERSAL

Unpredictable scene framing

Each scene is in a new, strange, contrasting place.

SURREAL

Unreliable narrator

What was said and done, proves to be untrue or skewed. Everything that happens in the game is potentially subjective or erroneous.

SURREAL

Shared character creation

Each character is made up by the group as a whole. Take turns adding information and details.

SURREAL/UNIVERSAL

Bird-in-ear

You can whisper each other instructions - actions to perform, memories, emotions your characters have.

SURREAL/UNIVERSAL

Wrong detail

Sometimes small things can be disturbing. Change a detail, or add one, to make things weird, silly, absurd.

SURREAL

Alternate reality flashback

All of a sudden, someone remembers something that didn't happen; or you narrate something that might have happened, but didn't.

SURREAL

Re-play scenes

Do it again! Differently this time. Or maybe just the same.

SURREAL/UNIVERSAL

Physical Play

Stand up, move around and act out what the characters do. Embody the characters. Use simple props. Also, use the space and movement to represent the emotional elements of play.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL/ UNIVERSAL

Whispers

Give suggestions of what to do, how they might feel, act, react. Through a quiet whisper in the ear, or low suggestion audible by all.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL/ UNIVERSAL

Hot seat

Players choose with no suggestions from others. All wait patiently for the individual to find inspiration.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

"Stay with it!"

In moments of boredom, discomfort or loss of the way, everyone is asked to keep going, to allow play to either express something through the uneasiness, or to move into something more when moment is past.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Locked eyes

Players maintain direct eye contact with one another as long as possible while playing out scene. Heightens awareness of the other person's reactions. May put pressure on players to focus intently. Can be used as trigger for other technique or new action if someone drops their eyes.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Ars amandi

A technique used to simulate sex in play. Players touch eachother in permitted, non-intimate areas (hands, arms, shoulders, back, neck) with their hands, arms or neck, to represent intimate contact of love making.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Personal history

Allow parallels between your life and events of play to inform your experience and choices. Not an invitation to monopolize spotlight by telling story of your life per se. An opportunity for everyone to use real events to deepen fictional story.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Normal life

Game is set in contemporary, real world. No magic, supernatural, or superheroic powers. Dramas are about troubles that face us all: love, illness, career ambitions, financial despair, etc. About normal people, not the rich, powerful or famous.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Shared situation creation

Everyone contributes to picking what the story will be about, or the setting in which play will take place.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL/ UNIVERSAL

Endowment

Players gift each other's characters with problems/aspects. Accept what other say about you in play and bring it into the game.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL/ UNIVERSAL

Secrets/ burdens

The characters enter play with things they wish to hide from others, or that pull them down emotionally. Reveal in play for dramatic irony and Transparency. If secret, make strong motivators.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Inside/ Outside Voice

Alternate between character's inner voice and external narration or dialogue.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

No out of character talk

Everything that is said is taken to be said by the character. No asides, jokes or irony. This may be the case throughout the game, or once a scene has started. Exceptions may be during internal monologues.

LOW KEY AND PERSONAL

Conflicts of interest

Create characters at odds with one another. Rivalries, victims, ruthless opponents and allies with diverging interests.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Conflict Resolution

When there is a decision point or disagreement about what happens next, use some rules (like VOTING, or DRAWING CARDS) to decide who gets to say. Determine what's really important about the decision.

ACTION! DRAMA!/UNIVERSAL

Spew questions

Rapid fire interrogation of players by other players to narrate action. Increases tension. Telescopes time.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Montage

Shotgun play of brief thematically related actions. Quick succession of brief, preparatory or development scenes.

ACTION! DRAMA!/ UNIVERSAL

Protagonists and hordes

A few players take single continuing, main character, around whom the action revolves. Others play many roles: taking minor characters and possibly the opposition, as needed. Those with many roles provide adversity to main characters, and may be called upon to lose gracefully.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Sides/teams/ good-bad

The plot provides sharply delineated conflicts between groups involved in play. May take the form of moral disparities or goals that put the characters at odds with one another.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Goals/victory

There is a way to win this game. Maybe it is getting the goods on your enemy, maybe it is making your way to the top, maybe it is getting that dream you've always had that drives you onward day by day. You know what it is, and you know when you've attained it--or not.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Breather

A quick character scene as an interlude. Shows the human side of the characters.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Humor

Leaven the tension or horror with levity. Allow for jokes, have a character or two who gives comic relief, pick a light scene before or after moments of unbearable strain. See Humor Technique cards.

ACTION! DRAMA!

Status

Simply to be mindful of high status being ripe for humour. Pomposity, arrogance, etc are all gold.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

More!

Raise the comedy in a scene by calling out a feature that is ripe for re-use, and asking for more. Minimally, it can just be a clearly timed call for 'more of that!' or it may be specified.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

Doubles

Enhance a curious character by introducing other players essentially twinning them, especially in body and voice. Depending on style and fiction history, these may or may not be related to the first character. Three copies of the same character is good to aim for.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

Remapping

Use a scene's location and characters to recreate the dynamics found in an earlier scene - perhaps the one before. Lifting elements wholesale is encouraged - slices of dialogue, activities, pace of the scene.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

People as objects

When a object is needed for attention in the scene, such as a statue, alien obelisk, or business slide presentation, players act this out.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

Impossible environment

A basic clown technique. Find something everyday in the environment to have trouble with, interfering with some other activity that you are meant to be focusing on.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

Absurdity Curve

Do a bigger and bigger version of one thing.

HUMOR/ACTION! DRAMA!

Don't say it, do it

Whenever you have an urge to joke about an in-game event relating to your character, simply see if that translates into a character-led action.

ACTION! DRAMA!