

**Countdown**  
A Play-By-Email Roleplaying Game  
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Iron Game Chef 2006

Theme: Time. Option 5. Any number of sessions totaling 8 hours of play.

Ingredients: Group 2. Law, Steel, Team.

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**Introduction**

**Countdown** is a roleplaying game designed solely for play-by-email (PbE). The basic concept of PbE is that the group plays, not by speaking to one another while sitting around a table, but by emailing their characters thoughts and actions to each other at the convenience of each individual player. **Countdown** takes this concept one step further. Instead of simply adapting a tabletop roleplaying system to PbE, it is designed to use the advantages of the format and minimize its inherent problems.

The basic unit of **Countdown** play is the session. Each session entails one email from each player to a player designated as the GM, and then a summary email from the GM to all the players at once. Play proceeds through a highly variable number of sessions, depending on the number of players and the nature of each individual game. All players report how much real-time they spend writing their emails, and the GM calculates the length of each session from that.

This is important because all games of **Countdown** involve an 8-hour race against the clock – the characters have to stop a mad scientist from activating his doomsday device, or enact the ritual that will keep reality together, or keep their mom from finding out about their party. Whatever the scenario, the players only have 8 hours of play time between the first session, which begins character creation, to the last, when the win/lose condition takes effect. Of course, each session is only calculated once a round of emails has been sent, so the actual time that passes during a game of **Countdown** could be anywhere from a day to weeks.

Play of **Countdown** entails choosing a theme or genre for the game; creating both characters and the situation that they face; and then the pursuit of a specific goal as indicated by the combination of characters and situation. After 8 hours of sessions, the characters will face and resolve that goal.

## Concepts

Below are terms and concepts used in **Countdown**.

- **GM:** One of the players takes the role of the GM. The GM keeps track of the clock, summarizes each session for the group, and provides adversity for the characters. In the rules, this player is referred to as the GM.
- **Characters:** The other players create characters. These players play the role of their character as they strive to achieve the goal of the game. In the rules, the term player refers to everyone in the group who's not the GM.
- **Sessions:** As mentioned, play proceeds in a series of sessions. During each session, each player can send one email, one GMmail, or one of each. An email is an email sent to the entire group, and a GMmail is sent only to the GM.
- **The Clock:** The clock is the countdown from the first session until the end of the game. The clock starts at 8 hours, and counts down at the end of every session. The GM keeps track of the countdown, and includes a time warning in his summary email at the end of every round in which the clock counts down past the following benchmarks: 7 hours remaining; 6 hours remaining; 5 hours remaining; 4 hours remaining – half of your time is gone; 3 hours remaining; 2 hours remaining – 3/4s of your time is gone; 1 hour remaining; 30 minutes remaining; 20 minutes remaining; 15 minutes remaining; 10 minutes remaining; 9 minutes remaining; 8 minutes remaining; 7 minutes remaining; 6 minutes remaining; 5 minutes remaining; 4 minutes remaining; 3 minutes remaining; 2 minutes remaining; 1 minute remaining – last session.

- Threats: Threats are the challenges that the GM places in the way of the characters as they strive for their goal. A threat could be physical (a SWAT team coming after a team of bank robbers), social (a character's wife threatening to leave him), or anything else that threatens the character. Each threat is generated out of the GM's threat pool, and has a rating, which measures how much of a problem it is.
- Ratings: There are four ratings in the game. Three are character statistics – Fighting, Talking and Thinking. These are compared to the fourth, the Threat rating, which is determined for each threat by the GM. Ratings are a number between 1 and 10, and rise and fall infrequently during play.
- Pools: There are four pools in the game. Three are character statistics – Law, Team and Steel. The fourth is the GM's threat pool. Each pool contains a number of points, which can be spent for various effects. Pools start the game between 0 and 9, and rise and fall frequently during play.
- Response Phrases: Resolution of threats is dealt with both by comparing ratings and spending points, and through the use of response phrases, indicated by *italics* in the rules. Response phrases guide how the character responds to a threat. Response phrases include: *submit*; *challenge*; *admit defeat*; *bid*.
- Laws: Laws are basically the genre conventions that form the auspices under which the game is played. A number of them are set during situation creation, and others can be instituted in play. Laws both contribute to the background color of the game, and provide guidelines for free narration.
- Phases: Phases are an organizational term for the general sections of gameplay, each of which contains as many sessions as required to play out the phase. There are three phases: Generation, Pursuit, and Finale.

## Play Structure

Once a group has decided to play **Countdown**, the GM should make sure that everyone receives a copy of these rules. All questions and clarifications before the first session are “pre-game chatter,” and don't count against the clock.

All of the text in right-justified boxes (like this one) are examples of the rules on that page. There are also a couple of left-justified boxes, which contain side notes to the rules.

## Phase 1: Generation

The Generation phase is when the scenario for play is determined; characters are created; and the Laws that govern the game are established.

Once everyone is ready to begin, the GM sends out the Generation email. He will specify again what needs to get accomplished during Generation, and declares the theme of the game. The theme can be a genre or overall narrative style that will frame the 8-hour countdown. For example, a Noir theme may concern getting the priceless

MacGuffin to prove a woman's innocence before the police can catch her, while a Save The Universe theme may be about diverting a meteor from crashing into the sun, causing a supernova that would fry the Earth. Along with the theme, the GM declares one Law.

Laws are rules about how the game world works, in the manner of genre conventions and over-all attitudes, rather than actual physical laws. The Noir theme may have a “Guns Are Stronger Silent” Law (drawing a gun is more important than actually firing it), while the Save The Universe theme may have a “Nobody Believes The Truth” Law (the characters will face the intransigence of those who think they are crackpots). More Laws can be created over the course of the game, the the GM must include a list of extant Laws at the bottom of each of his session summaries.

The combination of theme and Law should provide a launchpoint for everyone to start from as they create their characters and propose their own Laws and situations.

The first session then begins. The players have three things that they are responsible for: their character, the actual scenario for the game, and a Law. In each session summary, the GM will present the characters as they stand and any Law that has been declared, as well as the situation material that he has received. The guidelines:

Gary sends out an email to the indie-netgaming mailing list, and recruits Alex, Beth and Charles to play a game of **Countdown**. He sends everyone a copy of the rules, and Alex has some questions about the response phrases. These get ironed out over the course of a couple of emails, and finally Gary says that the next email he sends out will begin the game.

Gary's Email: Alright guys. The theme for this game will be “The Matrix” – crazy over-the-top action, agents of the opposition, trenchcoats and sunglasses. For the first Law, I'm going with “Sleepers Never Awake” – other than the characters and the bad guys, everyone else is a sleeper. They can be collateral damage, but they won't matter for the story at all. Now, over the next couple of sessions, you need to create and stat your character, propose an actual scenario for the game, and propose one Law of your own.

You have 8 hours left.

Character Creation: Everyone creates a character that would reasonably join together with the other characters in order to stop the Bad Thing from happening. Your first email can contain anything from a bare concept to a fully realized character with all its stats. The whole process can also take multiple sessions. A **Countdown** character requires a name, general concept, and 6 statistics. Full details of what these stats mean and how you use them are in the Pursuit Phase section.

- You have 30 points to split among 3 ratings and 3 pools. The number of points you put in a rating becomes its value (7 points = a rating of 7). All ratings must be between 1 and 10. The number of points you put in a pool become points in that pool (7 points = a pool with 7 points in it). Pools can begin at 0, and though they can go higher in play, must start the game no higher than 9.
- Fighting Rating – This represents your characters ability to physically fight, be athletic, and commit other physical actions.
- Talking Rating – This represents your characters ability to get information out of people, talk their way into and out of sticky situations, and undertake other social actions.
- Thinking Rating – This represents your characters ability to plan, outthink the opposition, use psychic abilities, and otherwise engage in mental actions.
- Law Pool – This represents your characters strength of morality and character, and also gives the player a say over the game world.

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Alex's Email: (Start time: 1.52.25)

Hey all,  
I'm thinking of playing a reluctant hero. If everyone else is a Sleeper, then he's someone who knows the truth but wishes he didn't – kind of like Cipher, but not evil, just reluctant. I kind of see him as coming out of his shell at some point.

For the situation, I think it would cool to be something that will either lead to complete takeover by the machines, or to their complete defeat, but I'm having trouble of thinking of a specific thing. Thoughts?

(End time: 1.55.12)

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Charles's Email: (Start time: 5.45.07)

I want to be the smart, tech one. I act like this is all a game, and facing actual consequences is going to be a big deal for me.

I like Alex's idea, but I definitely want to avoid a “you must find the One” kind of thing. Maybe there's a virus that is in cold storage somewhere that, if it's released by the machines, will zombie-fy everyone and quash all resistance, and if it's released by the humans into the machines, will fry them and free everyone.

For a Law: All Fights are Gun-Fu. Pretty self-explanatory.

(End time: 5.49.36)

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Beth's Email: (Start time: 7.12.19)

I'm going for over-the-top badass. Stats:  
Fighting 7, Talking 3, Thinking 4  
Law 3, Team 5, Steel 8

And my Law: Swords Are Better Than Guns. Guns are cool and all, but it's melee and hand-to-hand fighting that actually defeats people.

(End time: 7.14.56)

- Team Pool – This represents your characters work ethic and loyalty, and also gives the player a say over the other players characters.
- Steel Pool – This represents your characters courage and resolve, and also gives the player say over the GMs authority.

Scenario Generation: Each player also proposes ideas for the actual situation that their team of characters will be facing, from the detonation of a nuclear device to an invasion of aliens. A good situation will include a reason for the characters to be working together (crime boss will kill them if they don't accomplish a given task; they are the only people in the world who can see the demons) as well as present a consequence that they have a reason for trying to stop or gain (the entire human race is going to die; all of your families will be turned into conservative drones). The GM includes all scenario proposals in his session summaries, and players are encouraged to critique them and make suggestions. The GM is free to propose a gestalt of the ideas presented, but does not add any creative input to this process. This should take multiple sessions.

Laws: Each player also gets to declare one Law, keeping in with the theme of the game. A Law cannot contradict or negate any Law that is already in force, and should be within the scope of the theme. Laws are instituted by the GM in the order in which he receives them. If he receives two contradictory Laws in one session, the one he receives first is established, and he notes that the other player must propose a new Law in his summary email. The GM must include a statement of all the Laws in all session summaries.

Once all Laws have been established, all characters are created, and everyone has agreed on the scenario, the Pursuit phase begins.

Gary's Email:

Session 1 Summary:

Your character's all sound cool, and seem to cover the bases well. For the scenario thus far, we have a virus the exists somewhere in cold storage, that both the humans (you guys) and the machines (the bad guys) are trying to get, because it will assure the destruction of the other side.

I got Charles's email first, so All Fights Are Gun-Fu is in. Beth, you need to propose a new Law, and we still need one from Alex. We also still need: stats for Alex's and Charles's characters and Beth's character's name.

Laws: All Guns Are Gun-Fu; Sleepers Never Awake

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Gary also adds up each persons time: (1:55:12 – 1:52:25) = 2:47 for Alex, (7:14:56 – 7:12:19) = 2:37 for Beth, and (5:49:36 – 5:45:07) = 4:29 for Charles equals 9:53 for players, + Gary's own (which he noted as 9:07:23 – 9:03:12) = 4:11, for a total session time of 14:04. Gary subtracts this from 8 hours, and notes that the group has 7:45:56 remaining.

## Phase 2: Pursuit

At the top of every email, the player indicates what time (to the second) he begins writing. Most computers should have a function that indicates seconds as well as minutes and hours. At the end of the email, the player indicates the time that he finishes writing, then sends the email. Once the GM has received an email from each player, he composes a summary email for the session with all of the characters actions and their consequences. The GM keeps track of his time spend composing the summary email, and deducts that from the clock as well. When the clock has ticked past a benchmark, he includes that both in the body of the email and in its subject line. Note that the GM does not include his time in his email, though he does keep track of it and subtract it from the clock. He also subtracts time players spend on GMmails from the clock. In this manner, the players can keep track on their own and have a general idea of the state of the clock, but only the GM knows for certain. Note also that only time spend actually writing your email, from start to finish, counts for the session – not time spend reading others emails, or thinking about your response.

Everyone is expected to abide by an honor code about being accurate with their email times. If the group wishes to play “hardcore,” use the following system. Each player sends a blank email to the GM before they begin their email, and then the GM compares the timestamps on the two emails. Again, the GM is expected to keep track of his own time.

Any and all communication outside of threats (see below) counts as free narration, which is constrained only by situation and Laws. Players should feel free to incorporate material from the emails they receive into their own emails for a session. Each group will find its own pace and style of free narration.

Over the course of the Pursuit phase, the characters will be seeking their goal, as outlined by the situation they generated, and the GM will be putting obstacles in their way in the form of threats. The GM has a number of threat points that he uses to provide adversity for the characters. He begins the game with a number of threat points equal to 10 x the number of characters. The GM must include his current number of threat points in every session summary.

Gary's Email:

Session 5 Summary:

We're all set. Here's our initial scene.

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The three of you are back-to-back-to-back in the middle of a warehouse, surrounded by security guards. Never mind why you're there or what you're doing – that'll come later. For now, you're facing down at least three times your number of armed Sleepers in a large, dim, crowded space. Threat Level 3.

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Threat Points Remaining: 27

Laws: All Fights Are Gun-Fu, Sleepers Never Awake, Reality Is Reality (there is no “Matrix,” the machines and humans exist in the same shared reality), Ghost Machines (the machines are the source of all supernatural occurrences).

During play, the GM will frame scenes for the characters to play through. A player can request a scene as well, or the GM can call for a player to frame a scene. At any point during a scene, the GM can say that he is opposing an action taken by a character, or that he is initiating some kind of hostile or otherwise unwanted action. This is called a threat. Only the GM can create threats. Disagreements or conflicts between characters are settled either through free narration, or with the expenditure of Team Points (see page 10).

When the GM calls for a threat, he also spends a number of threat points to set its Threat rating, according to the scale below:

Threat Ratings:

- 1 – Minor Inconvenience
- 3 – Noticeable Problem
- 5 – Standard Challenge
- 7 – Unusually Strong Resistance
- 10 – Incredible Opposition

The player of each character involved in the threat chooses which rating (Fighting, Talking or Thinking) they are using to overcome the threat. They only indicate their general course of action (I attack, I try to convince her of the error of her ways, whatever).

Specific narration comes after the negotiation of the threat. Whoever has the higher number will come out of the threat victorious. However, there are a number of permutations and options available to both sides. The negotiation of the Threat is handled through the use of four response phrases: *submit*, *challenge*, *admit defeat*, or *bid*. First, note whether the character has a higher rating than the Threat, or vice versa.

If the characters rating is higher than the Threat Rating:

- The player can *submit* or
- The player can *challenge*

If the characters rating is lower than the Threat Rating:

- The player can *admit defeat* or
- The player can *bid*

Beth's Email:

(Start Time: 5.45.07)

I look left, look right, and nod to my teammates, preparing to explode into action. I'm using Fighting 7 (surprise) to -challenge-.

(End Time: 5:45.59)

Charles's Email:

(Start Time: 6.19.12)

Yup. Challenging with Fighting 4.

(End Time: 6:19.43)

Alex's Email:

(Start Time: 6.59.13)

I'm going to mix it up a little. -Submitting-, with Fighting 5. So I get 2 points, right? I want to put them into Team. However the other two fight them, they get away but I get captured. They'll have to come back and rescue me.

(End Time: 7:02.05)



If the player submits, then:

- The player narrates how they submit to the threat, and
- The player gains a number of points to the most appropriate pool equal to the difference between the two scores, and
- The GM gains a number of threat points equal to the difference between the two scores

If the player challenges then:

- The GM can choose to *give* or *bid*

If the player admits defeat, then:

- The GM narrates how they are defeated by the threat.

If the GM gives then:

- The GM narrates how the character is victorious over the threat, and
- The player gains one point to the most appropriate pool

If the GM or player bids, then:

- He declares how many points, and out of which pool (for players), he is bidding. These points are added to his score. A player can bid out of any pool, but only out of one pool per Threat.
- After a bid, the other party is able to either *give* or *bid* again. A player *give* counts as an *admit defeat*, and they also lose 1 point from the appropriate pool for every *bid* action they have taken for the threat. Both parties may continue bidding until one side *gives*.
- The GM always waits to receive the players choice before he chooses whether he *bids* or *gives*, and includes his choice in his summary email.

Gary's Email: Session 6 Summary: Both Charles and Beth -challenged- my Threat Level 3 with 7 and 4, respectively. Alex -submitted- with a 5. I -give- to both Charles and Beth - indicate which pool you will gain your point in in the next email. Alex gains 2 Team, and I gain 2 Threat Points.

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[Description of crazy gun-fu action, ending with the capture of Alex's character by wave after wave of mooks, and the escape of the other two]

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You have 7 hours remaining. I have 29 Threat Points

[Later in the game, the team has split up to deal with various things. Beth's character finds herself in a staredown with power broker who works with both machines and humans. The following examples indicate only the exchange between her and Gary - in an actual game, she would still be tracking her time, Gary would be sending out session summaries, etc.]

Gary: He feels like he has all the cards. Threat Level 7.

Beth: I want to intimidate him into giving me the information I want. Challenge, Talking 3.

Gary: -Bid- with 0.

Beth: -Bid- from Steel, with 5.

Gary: -Bid- with 2.

Beth: Damn. Oh well. -Bid- with 2.

Gary: Ok, I -give-. 10 to 9, you win. You stare into his eyes, using your considerable force of personality to put weight to your words about the responsibility of all humans to unite against the machine menace. He doesn't seem to be convinced by your words, but your menace breaks down his defenses. "Ok, ok. I heard that the old mainframe library custodians mapped out all of the former superpower information weaponry, that's going to be your best bet to find out more. Now leave me the hell alone!"

Beth: "Thank you so much for your...help. I hope your end won't be too painful, when it comes." I'm taking the point in Steel, and heading out the the mainframe library.

Players can also spend points out of their pools in order to gain authority over certain aspects of the game.

**Law Pool** – This represents your characters strength of morality and character, and also gives the player a say over the game world, by adding new Laws. Laws take effect in the game world at the same rate they are created by players – that is, if a player adds a Law that says “All characters can fly” after several sessions of play, now all the characters can fly. It's not retroactive.

- A player can spend one point of Law in order to add a new Law to the game world. This Law can never contradict or negate a Law that is already in place. (If “All fighting is crazy wushu fighting” is in place, you could add “Nobody is ever truly defeated, they can always come back later for more.”)
- A player can spend two points of Law in order to add a Law that contradicts, but does not negate, a Law that is already in place (“Only the main bad guys can come back for more, but mooks can be permanently defeated.”), or to take an action that contradicts an existing Law.
- A player can spend three points of Law in order to add a Law that negates a Law that is already in place, (“Main bad guys can be permanently defeated.”) or just to negate an existing Law (the GM erases it from the list of extant Laws).

**Team Pool** – This represents your characters work ethic and loyalty, and also gives the player a say over the other players characters. The player declares their point expenditure during one session, and the effect takes place during the next session.

[At the mainframe library]

Gary: It's just banks after banks of servers and hard drives. It's going to take forever to dig through all of this information. Threat Level 6.

Beth: I spend 2 Team to switch my Thinking with Charles's character for the scene – I get him an emergency message that I need him to write me some search routines.

-Challenge-, Thinking 7

Gary: Nice. I -give-. Gain your point, and I gain a Threat Point. Charles's character uploads his search routine to you, and after only a couple of painfully boring hours you're staring at a map of the world with blue dots indicating all of the information weaponry stockpiles from the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the info saves to your personal data banks, your danger sense starts strobing – something is coming for you, something dangerous.

Beth: I make sure to encode my data banks, and whip out my big guns, waiting for it.

Gary: After a couple of tension-filled silent moments, the ceiling bursts open, spraying you with drywall. You're on your back, pointing your guns at one of the hunter-killer machine drones – it must have sniffed you out while you were stationary. Threat Level 10.

Beth: Crap. I -submit- with Fighting 7, but spend 2 points of Steel in order to change the outcome to my victory. I run into the mainframe library, ducking behind servers as decades of information explodes under it's fire, until it's deep inside the building and can't maneuver. I find an exit, and as I dive outside to freedom, I chuck a grenade behind me. The resulting explosion knocks me flat as chunks of hot metal spray everywhere – the drone's severed, melted arm lands right in front of my face.

Gary: Wow. Cool. You gain 3 points in a pool of your choice for submitting, and I gain 3 Threat Points, plus another 1 for your Steel expenditure.

- A player can spend one point of Team to narrate about or take control of any other players character, for one session.
- A player can spend two points of Team to switch one of their characters ratings with the same rating of any other character in response to a Threat.
- A player can spend three points of Team to make a blanket narration about the entire team of characters for one session.

Steel Pool – This represents your characters courage and resolve, and also gives the player say over the GMs authority.

- A player can spend one point of Steel in order to narrate the consequences of a Threat, without changing the outcome. (If the player *admits defeat*, he can then spend a point of Steel in order to narrate his own defeat)
- A player can spend two points of Steel in order to change the outcome of a Threat, without changing the narrator. (If the player *admits defeat*, he can then change it to victory for his character, with the GM narrating)
- A player can spend three points of Steel in order to change both the narrator and the outcome of a Threat. (The player could change an *admit defeat* to a victory, and narrate it himself.)

Any time a player spends points on anything but a *bid*, the GM gains 1, and only 1 Threat Point.

Finally, at any time, a character can spend 10 points from a single pool to raise one of their Levels by 1.

The GM is encouraged to keep a text file containing a cleaned-up copy of all the session summaries, as a “Our Story Thus Far” resource. If he keeps one, it should be attached to summary emails by request of the players.

### Phase 3: Finale

Once the clock has ticked down to the last hour or so, the GM needs to drive play towards resolution of the situation, if it's not there already. As time warnings come faster, this will probably be the most choppy and frenetic phase, as players do their best to conserve time in each session. Also, as the end of the game nears, there is no reason to be conservative with point expenditures – all the stops should be getting pulled out.

The last threat of the game should lead to the resolution of the initial situation. However, it is clear that any player with 3 Steel points can simply spend them to ensure victory. To make the end of the game more exciting, once the clock has ticked past the 15 minute mark, the GM is able to bid against Team, Steel and Law point expenditures, in the same manner as threat bids. He has to bid from 0 (so, if a player spends 2 pool points, he has to spend 3 to win, and prevent the point expenditure from happening). If he wins this bidding, all of the bid points on both points are spend without effect, and the Threat goes back to it's original conditions. He still gets his one Threat point from the pool expenditure.

At the one-minute mark, the GM makes the last call for actions. If a Threat is confronted in this last session, you continue playing out in order to resolve it. If not, this is the last session of the game. Once the Threat in this session is resolved, the game is over. If the GM has been keeping an “Our Story Thus Far” file, it should be updated with the end of the story, and sent out to everyone as a transcript of the game.

Gary: Allright, you're facing off against the agents, the cold locker containing the virus encased in a block of acrylic between you. Threat Level 15!

Beth: I -admit defeat-, and spend 3 Steel.

Gary: It's past the 15-minute mark, so I can bid against that. And I do – I bid 5.

Beth: Crap, I only have 3 Steel left. Oh well, it'll get you down, and the others can do their thing. I bid 3 Steel.

Gary: I bid 2, giving me 7 to your 6. Defeat is yours!

## Last Words

As you can see, **Countdown** is designed to be a light, fun system optimized for the advantages of the play-by-email format, with enough tactical choices to make the adversity presented by the GM interesting without having to take days to sort out every conflict. The 8-hour time limit, while obviously stemming from the Game Chef guidelines, isn't arbitrary. It's a great way to establish that this game will end after a set period of time, avoiding the gradual decay into nothingness that I have experienced in many play-by-email games. My hope is that this game could easily be a “pickup” game that takes a couple minutes out of your day, is engaging and entertaining, and generates a cool transcript for posterity. No more, no less. I look forward to the comments of the Game Chef reviewers, and to playtesting the game! Viva Game Chef!