

Dialectic

by Chris Hall

Theme

Time -- The 10 of 1 format works quite well for a series of debates. The game represents this as a series of TV shows, like *Meet the Press*, or a sequence of more standard debates like the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

Ingredients

Emotion -- The debate format should naturally make the players emotional: angry, excited, and engaged.

Committee -- The round table debate format is just a committee by another name.

Glass -- Glass is represented by the penalty egg timers. In a game about speaking, being silent is the most keenly felt punishment.

The Game

Dialectic is a game of world creation played in ten sessions of one hour each. Each session represents a single chance for a debate about some topic and the topics vary each session, though they are all set in the same world. For game set in the modern day each session might be an episode of a *Meet The Press* style television show, where each character is a political commentator.

Characters could be participants in a traveling series of debates, sponsored by gentlemen's clubs all over England in a Steampunk game. They might even be priests of pagan religions arguing about how to deal with the rise of the Dark Lord in a high fantasy setting. What is important is that the setting is one where the conflicts will be settled with words rather than deeds. The hour of time is the length of the debate itself, while the ten sessions are the length of the debate circuit or television season that is the venue for the debates.

Game Play

But the players in the course of their debate create the setting itself, after the game's leader, known as the Moderator, has established a base concept. At the beginning of every session, and during the session as time passes, a player is selected by the moderator to establish a fact. This is a single

sentence that defines something about the world. Facts must make a reference to an established fact, but they also must establish new knowledge. While debate is central to the game, facts are absolutes that cannot be argued with or challenged except by a majority vote of all participants. Indeed, each character is assumed to have always known the fact, even before it was established. During the course of debates, characters may not directly contradict established facts, but they can, and are encouraged to, establish their own interpretation of the facts.

Facts can be about anything in the world. The most obvious things to make facts about are the organizations that the character's represent and how they effect the world. A player could create a fact about the previously established pro-domestication bunnies, that they prefer carrots to celery. Facts about the other characters are also perfectly reasonable, and even encouraged. Creating the fact that two of the other characters are sleeping together should shake things up!

Importantly though, each new fact must be tied to a fact that has already been established about the world. This can either be a fact that another player has established in play, or one of the facts that the moderator established about the game at its beginning.

Key Phrases

- ◆ [Character Name] must be mistaken about [fact]. -- Initiate a challenge.
- ◆ I apologize, I was mistaken. -- The challenged player admits his error and backs down. He may continue to speak.
- ◆ Moderator, what is the truth? -- The challenged player asks the moderator for a ruling.
- ◆ The truth is [fact]. -- The moderator reads the established fact from his notes. The challenged player continues to speak.
- ◆ I stand by my words, who stands with me? -- The challenged player asks the other players their opinion about the statement he has made. If a majority does not support him, the challenged player must be silent for two minutes.
- ◆ I stand by [character name]'s words. -- A player agrees with the challenged player.
- ◆ I do not stand by [character name]'s words. -- A player agrees with the challenging player.

Challenges

One of the moderator's main jobs is to keep track of the established facts. But it is not the moderator's job to stop players from contradicting fact. That job falls to the players themselves, and conflict arises in the game when players disagree about what facts are true or not. Rather than interrupt the flow of discussion, players use certain key phrases to create and settle challenges about facts.

Essentially, a player may be challenged by any other player when he is stating a fact or stating an opinion. He may respond in three ways, by admitting error and correcting himself, by asking the moderator for a ruling, or by polling the group for an opinion. When polling the group the player takes some risk

on himself, he will be forced to be silent for two minutes if he loses the vote, but he also has a chance to overturn an existing fact.

Actually, this is the only way to overturn an existing fact. An egg timer should be used to measure the time that the player must spend out of the debate.

The Moderator

The moderator's job is to keep debate moving at a good clip, and to encourage in character conversation while discouraging out of character conversation. Players can be punished by the moderator, as needed, though it shouldn't be! Punishment consists of handing a player a two minute egg timer. They must be silent until it has run out.

The moderator must also break debate periodically to establish a new fact. Each player should be given a chance to establish a fact at least once a session, and these chances should be given fairly over the course of the game. The moderator should encourage each player to establish a fact that fits the theme of the debate being held in a given session.

Finally, and most importantly, the moderator must establish the core idea of the world, and create interesting roles for the players to inhabit in the first session and interesting topic to theme the sessions around. A good world concept will be a paragraph or less and

will establish an archetypal feel for the world so that all the players have an idea of what kind of world they are going to be building. World concepts might include cyberpunk, Steampunk, high fantasy, the modern day, or gilded age Europe. World concepts should never be taken directly from the real world or some established fantasy world. The point is to create a world after all! Good roles will suggest prejudices that the characters might

have. Roles should come naturally into conflict, providing fodder for debates.

With luck the world that the players create will be more interesting and alive than anything they could have come up with on their own. The players might even want to continue with the world as part of a more conventional roleplaying game!

Sample Scenarios

These two pre-planned settings can be used as a starting point for a moderator looking to run a game. Five roles are given for each, but the games can be played with as few as three. Two starting issues are given, which can serve as themes for the first two sessions. After that, session themes should suggest themselves based on what has been established before.

Friends, Romans, Countrymen

In *Friends, Romans, Countrymen* the players take on the roles of roman senators vying for the favor of the fickle plebes in a Rome inspired by, but distant from the historical one. Perhaps magic exists and witches can be found on every corner and oracles on every mountain top. Perhaps the gods descend to earth to ordain kings and have sex with virgins. The difference is up to the players to create as the game happens.

The game is set in the forum, where governmental policy and legal cases are debated before an audience of Senators and Citizens. Senators should remember that they are playing to the crowd, not just to themselves – table pounding and arm waving is encouraged. The Moderator may wish to give an idea of how the crowd reacts to especially rousing speeches.

Roles:

- Senator Catullus: He is rumored to be the richest man in Rome because of his large plantations outside of the city.
- Senator Marcus: The voice of the people, he was elevated to the aristocracy by the Senate, having been born a plebe.
- Pontifex Julius: Priest of Mars, god of war, he is known for his faith and his bellicousness.
- Senator Calixtus: A highly educated Senator, if not the most moral one.
- Lady Agrippinna: The lady's husband has been ill for several months, but Agrippinna speaks in his place, always arguing for the good of Rome against greedy Senators.

Issues:

- Where should valuable public funds go? To the temples, public works like aqueducts, or into gladiatorial competitions for the plebes? A canny Senator might even divert some of the public treasury into his own pocket.
- To the south the Carthaginians have proved resolute enemies of Rome, blocking the natural course of Roman expansion time and time again. But to the north the primitive Gauls have continually made a nuisance of themselves, plundering Roman fields and taking Roman citizens as slaves. Should the republic make war on one or both of these two, or is this a time to gather strength?

Television, Tuned to a Dead Channel

Cyberpunk is the genre of *Television, Tuned to a Dead Channel*. Inhuman corporations vie for profit, leaving the common man little enough room to survive. But to maintain their stranglehold on the world, the corporations must keep the public confused. Perhaps the corporations are barely hanging on to their power, keeping a careful clamp on brewing revolutions. Perhaps the net is about to birth an artificial intelligence that will make modern computer security obsolete. The players can shape the world to be as oppressive as they like, or maybe even offer a ray of hope.

The game is set on a popular talk show, *The World Now*, which 200 million people tune into everyday. All but one of the participants are representatives of the corporations. They want to see the corporate line advanced, but their own profits and good image are of paramount importance. Adrian Brody, on the other hand, wants to tarnish the corporate image on national TV. The facts he establishes are damning, they cannot be overturned.

Roles:

- Christina White: A member of a public relations firm handling the public image of Fire, Electric, and Gas (FEG).
- Ebun Maalik: Vice President of Technology Development for the world's largest software design firm, Macrosoft.
- Erica Hu: Misima Corporation's Director of Marketing. She is Misima's youngest executive.
- Ioseph Prach: A press secretary for the Russian Consortium, a global corporation that also runs the territory of the former USSR.
- Adrian Brody: The president of the People's Alliance, he wants to expose corporate duplicity before the world.

Issues:

- The United States is holding a referendum to decide if FEG should take control of the governmental functions of the country. If they do it could mean unparalleled efficiency with much money saved and many jobs created, but also a dramatic loss of profits for their competitors. If they don't, on the other hand, it would be a big blow to the prestige of the corporations.
- Several recent incidents have linked the corporations with major environmental disasters. Is this just the natural product of industry, or a danger to our children?

Inspirations

Lexicon by Neel Kirshnawami. (http://www.20by20room.com/2003/11/lexicon_an_rpg.html) A game of dictionary creation that serves as a major inspiration for *Dialectic*.

Polaris by Ben Lehman. (http://www.tao-games.com/games_polaris.shtml) Chivalric tragedy in the utmost north. The idea of key phrases is drawn from this game.