

FINK

A Small Game of Social Warfare

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Ray puts down the receiver. Everything is going as it should. Soon that closet-Satanist neighbor of his will be evicted, and peace and harmony would one again be restored. The doorbell rings. Ray goes downstairs and opens the front door. Outside are two serious-looking men in suits. "Mr. Barnes", the tall one says, "we have reason to believe your daughter has been selling cocaine at school. May we come in?"

Introduction

This is a role-playing game. It is played by a group of participants, one of whom takes the role of a game master, who describes the setting and the general events that happen within it. All other participants take on the role of one character, a person living in that fictional world. Each character is like a normal person living in a small, safe suburb, yet harbors several vices. The players will eventually become aware of each others' characters' hidden sins, as will their characters. These, along with fictional sins, are what the game is about.

Fink is a game of social unpleasantness. It is about manipulative back-stabbing performed by "friends" upon supposed "friends". The core idea of the game is to be as nasty as possible to the people around you – both game-master controlled characters and those of fellow players – while preserving the illusion of amicability and common values. The characters ruin their fellows' lives, but the players stay friendly with one another.

This game is optimally played in small groups and for short periods at a time. It has been designed so that it can work both as a beer-and-pretzels game played for naughty fun and as a very serious, introspective game about social roles. It is thus important to decide in advance how the game will be played.

Playing the game is about balancing two things. The first of them is preserving the facade of "normal suburban life" and the second one is ratting out on your fellow citizens. A citizen gains status and respect by ousting the deviants hiding in the supposedly peaceful community, the fiends that threaten its idyllic stability. If his own indiscretions are revealed, however, he himself faces social reproach and even the possibility of being evicted.

The players are at all times aware of what is currently happening in the game: if one player says that his character is going to pay a visit to his mistress, every player hears that. Their characters, however, do not. This way the players are not competing against one another on who figures out whose secret plans, but are rather collectively creating a tangled web of alliances, lies and betrayal. Some surprises will naturally be included as certain plans play out, but that too happens in a way all players may appreciate even if they have themselves been fooled by the plan's misdirections and intricacies.

This is not a role-playing game for beginners, but rather a possibility for experienced, mature players to utilize their arsenal of dirty tricks against one another in a benevolent manner. To avoid problems, it is highly recommended that participants discuss game limits in advance, so that no problems appear during play. If a player states "I do not want to have these themes in the game", those should be left out without any questions being asked. Fink deals with very serious themes despite its humorous overtones, and thus the game events should be treated with a certain level of seriousness and contemplation even when they are laughed at.

The Setting

Fink takes place in a nice, clean and peaceful suburb connected to a large city filled with jobs, money and temptations. The suburb supposedly contains none of these, and is thus - in theory – isolated from and unaffected by the outside world. It may have a fence and security guards, but it probably does not.

This small island paradise also has a lovely, pleasant name befitting such a perfect place. Perhaps it is called “Pleasant Acres” or “Pine Hill”, perhaps something completely different but at least as corny.

What is known for certain is that all the inhabitants are middle-class people who think they share the same basic values. Maybe all-white, all-black or all-Korean is the norm, maybe the norm is that everyone must accept that every neighbor comes from a different ethnic background. One ideology or religion is probably favored by the great majority of the inhabitants, who in turn maybe tolerate those close to it, but certainly despise those who do not share their values at all.

The suburb is the location of choice for Fink because the theoretically ideal suburb is a place where the non-mundane never reaches. Similar social networks full of one-upmanship and back-stabbing exist in other circumstances, but are too often connected to immediate concerns instead of small-scale dominance hierarchies, irritation and petty grudges. For example, small towns tend to develop a tighter and more all-encompassing social structure due to the inhabitants’ workplaces’ existence within the community itself. Some suitable places of course exist, and two of the most obvious ones are dealt with in the Appendix.

Character Creation

Each starting character has five Traits, characteristics that set him or her apart from the expected normalcy of the community. Each of these Traits contains one benefit and one drawback for the character who has that Trait. Not being a part of the crowd provides advantages, but also paints one as a target separate from the flock. In addition to these two sides, each Trait has some listed examples of common Vices connected to them.

Basic Traits:

Artistic

Your character has a talent for one or more types of artistic activity. She may play the flute, paint, dance or practice some obscure form no one else calls an art. She has an outlet for her ideas, producing an inner calm, but also makes her extremely sensitive to criticism. Artistic Vices are usually connected to either obsessions or a lack of respect for others’ privacy.

Bad Temper

Your character has a short fuse. When threatened in a verbal or a physical manner, she has a tendency to retaliate at once. She is frightening to offend, but also a threat to anyone she comes into contact with. Characters with Bad Temper have Vices enabling them to vent out their anger in a controlled manner, such as fringe politics or local activity groups.

Communal Authority

Your character has a position of local authority. He may be a Catholic priest, a PTA leader or a community politician. This position gives him better chances to gain and abuse power, but also makes his own actions very visible to outside observation. Status Vices are usually connected with misuse of power.

Competitive

Your character knows he is better than everyone else. This means he has the resolve to resist criticism from everyone around him while he is on the path to victory. On the other hand, he is often irritating enough that he gets in trouble, especially when confronted by people whom he cannot defeat. Competitive characters’ Vices tend to favor risk-taking, obsession and attempts at gaining power and control over other people.

Conservative

Your character is conservative even beyond the norms of the community. He holds fast to some set of values, even when confronted with evidence that doing otherwise would be beneficial. He is easily able to preserve an image of respectability, while being unable to grasp the needs of other people. Their most common Vice is outing other people’s Vices, which means they gain a lot by doing so, but also risk much.

Desirable

There is something absolutely desirable about your character, due to charisma, appearance or both. She is easy to be attracted to and can take advantage of that, but must beware the envy of others. Desirable people often have Vices connected to either constantly testing their attractiveness or to denying it completely.

Deviant

Your character deviates significantly from the norm. This maybe a question of appearance, living habits, sexual preferences, etc. or a combination of several such quirks. The deviant is unaffected by common concerns and values, but is also an easy target for everyone looking for someone to blame. Deviant Vices can be anything.

Educated

Your character is much better educated than her peers. She knows more than them about many subject, especially her specialty. She also has trouble understanding the minds of the common folk, and can come of as haughty and hard to comprehend. Educated Vices tend towards obsessions, snobbery and affirmations of intellectual superiority.

Family

Your character has one or more children. She is thus considered very normal, but has limited time available due to family concerns and can be targeted because of the actions of her children. Family Vices can range from obsessive parenting and discipline to living through the accomplishments of one's children.

Famous

Your character is publicly well-known. He has an easy time finding people who want to be his friends. The downside is that he is a primary target for rumors, as everyone loves to see icons being revealed as common people. Fame Vices are often connected with social misconduct, substance abuse and eccentric behavior.

Honest

Your character is honest to a fault. He tells the truth even when it is not necessarily a good idea. On one side, he is truly reliable, on the other he is often incredibly blunt. Honesty Vices come either as a complete trust or mistrust of other people's motives.

Ideological/Religious

These are two very similar Traits: Your character is very committed to the teachings of one world-view, either ideological or religious. This gives her a trust in how things will eventually turn out, but her fanaticism may meanwhile drive people away. Characters with this Trait display Vices connected to fanatic behavior, anything from illegal activity to public preaching.

Ignorant

Your character is completely uninterested in the big picture. This is not necessarily due to a lack of education, but rather just a sense of knowing all that matters. He is thus hard to shock or provoke, but also obvious to the real results of his actions. Ignorant Vices can be nearly anything, as long as they center on not caring.

Intimidating

There is something about your character that people instinctively fear. He easily avoids confrontations, but he also too often avoids making new friends. Intimidation Vices are very often related to being a bully.

Lustful

Your character loves sexual pleasures. He knows how to manipulate the emotions of people, but may also come across as either creepy or uncaring. Lust-connected Vices are almost always connected to sexual misconduct.

Mechanically Apt

Your character has a knack for repairing and building things. He is able to fix things that no one else understand, and thus has many friends in the community. He also holds contempt for those lacking his skills. Mechanically adept people often have Vices centered on pet projects such as car restoration.

Minority

Your character is a member of some minority within the community, typically either ethnic, religious or sexual. She is able to observe the nuances of the community from an outsider perspective, but also in some sense is outside the community. Minority Vices tend towards self-expression that emphasizes the minority status.

Physical

Your character has a talent for physical activity. She is physically superior to others and able to perform things others are not. She also despises those less strong. Physical Vices connect to either attention-craving or obsessive training.

Respected

Your character is highly respected within the community. Everyone thinks she represents the community values impeccably. She thus has relatively free rein to pursue her indiscretions, but is also a delicious target for those looking for attention by ruining her. Respect Vices usually either enforce the status or are direct violations of the trust it embodies.

Smart

Your character is significantly more intelligent than the other inhabitants. He understands things much more quickly and adapts things very fast to fit his world-view. His mental superiority also leads to people not sharing that ability to dislike him, and him being haughty in turn. Intelligence Vices are commonly connected with a lack of empathy.

Ugly

Your character is simply unpleasant to look at. He is not controlled by the intricacies of the social dance, but is probably also very lonely. Ugly Vices usually either emphasize the state to grotesque levels or become grudges against the beautiful people.

Unattached

Your character has no spouse. She does not have to take another person into consideration when planning her actions, but may be lonely and easily becomes the target of rumors. Unattached Vices can be nearly anything.

Unemployed

Your character has no job. Maybe he has been laid off, maybe he is at home by choice. He has more free time than the other inhabitants, but is looked upon with suspicion and contempt. Unemployed is the Trait most commonly associated with Vices like substance abuse and sloth.

Violent

Your character thrives on violence, either inflicting or receiving it, or both. He is accustomed to pain and knows how to cause it. He also lacks consideration for peacefully solving problems. Violent Vices self-evidently tend towards violent behavior of all kinds.

Wealthy

Your character has extra money to spend. He is able to usually acquire what he wants. He also has trouble understanding what things are worth and that others do not have it as easy. Excessive spending and showing off are common Wealth Vices

A second set of Traits, if needed, can be made by simply reversing the ones presented here. Making up new Traits is also recommended, but it adds more complexity to the game. Bear in mind that if you can create a Trait through the interplay of already-existing Traits and/or Vices, doing so is preferable to making new

The character is created through the interplay of these Traits, as well as the absence of the others.

Example: Sarah is Competitive and has a Bad Temper, so she verbally lashes out whenever she is provoked. If she also had Violent, she would use physical violence instead of verbal assaults as her primary means of defense, even against verbal insults. If she also had the Trait Physical, she would be very dangerous while doing so, as well. A professional wrestler could have the combination of Desirable, Famous, Physical, Ugly and Wealthy, making him clearly stand out in the area. A person

who has an affair may or may not have the Trait Lustful, but someone who constantly screws around probably does.

Vices

Every character starts with three Vices. All of the Vices have to be connected to at one of your character's Traits. Some traits are obviously more suited to this, but all have their possibilities.

Example: John is Mechanically Apt, and has a Vice about obsessing on the tuning of his car.

Certain Vices are easily observed by others, others are as hidden as possible. Some Vices, such as alcoholism, may be connected to multiple Traits. In those cases, choose one. The basic game presumes all Vices to be somewhat mild, so an alcoholic character would more likely be someone who is slightly buzzed and somewhat incoherent at all times rather than a complete down-and-out.

In a serious game, it is also possible to link one Vice to more than one Trait, making it worth that many Vice points. This option creates very unpleasant characters, and is thus not recommended for the funny variant at all. **Example:** Michael has the Traits Deviant and Violent, and chooses physical sadism as their combination Vice. A sexual predator would have a Vice focused on Violent and Lustful.

Along with choosing the Traits and Vices, the player has to think about the situation and the personality of her character. In essence, she fills out all the details about the character's life that the Traits do not cover. Such elements include age, relatives and friends. It is each player's own responsibility to create her character's closest associates. Family members and friends have three to six Traits (player's choice) and at least one Vice. Each character has to have at least one family member – the spouse - or two friends. Each extra loved one gives the player two extra Complication Points (see below) and each friend one extra Complication Point, up to a maximum of five extra points.

Game System

Playing the Game

The game master has as many duties beyond conflict arbitration as she likes. A simple game can consist of just normal suburban daily life, but it is also permissible for the game master to choose a more stressful situation. Examples of these are a wave of burglaries, approaching political elections and natural catastrophes. The game master can also invent important small-scale events that still affect the entire community, such as the funeral of a well-known community figure. If the playing group can agree upon solutions among themselves, this game can also easily be played without a game master.

All events are run as discussions and verbal descriptions. There is no need for randomization whatsoever. The only important rule is that all players present at the game session should be informed of what is happening at all times. So leaving the room for private plotting etc. is completely forbidden. This way the players are able to appreciate good plots, and interfere on them, without the game turning into a player versus player situation. To emphasize the story, secrecy needs to be avoided.

Conflicts

Conflicts in the game are resolved by comparing Traits. If one of the character has more suitable Traits than the opponent, she wins the conflict. If there is any question on who has more suitable Traits, the character whose player provides the best explanation wins. **Example:** Marcus and Jacob have gotten into a physical fight. Jacob has Physical, Marcus has not, so Jacob wins. If both of them had Physical, Marcus' player could say that since his character is Violent, he is able to resort to dirtier tricks and thus wins. Jacob's player could, however, say that since Marcus is also Arrogant, he gets bested by Jacob who is more focused on accomplishing things than gloating. The game master works as an arbitrator, and chooses the more entertaining of the two as the winner.

Being a Rat

Basic interaction techniques consist of direct methods such as outright lies and blatant insult. Both accomplish much, but easily lead to the accuser. They are thus a beginner's tool, or a last-minute resort. Far more insidious basic techniques exist in the form of insinuation and rumor mongering. Citizens of

the community eventually learn to become more and more circumspect in their accusations, causing ruin through an ever-widening gyre of false and true leads.

One basic technique requiring special mention is informing the authorities. It is extremely effective, but any character having some pull in the community may be able to trace the accusations back to the person who called in the cops. And no one in the community likes the person who repeatedly brings outsiders to close proximity of their own vices.

Advanced techniques are too many to list here, and part of the fun in the game is coming up with them. Classics of the genre include extorting a less important person to rat out on a more important target as well as direct blackmail. Staging events that look like something they are not (such as a meeting that looks like a lovers' quarrel) and the forging and/or planting of evidence are also extremely effective, if risky tactics. And forming alliances is crucial – but it also opens you up to later betrayal.

Remember that you do not want to get caught, and act accordingly. There will nevertheless be complications, however.

Complication Points

Each player character starts with four Complication Points. They can be used to create the proverbial “interesting times” for other characters, or exchanged for information and Trait changes.

Causing a small problem to someone else costs one Complication Point. Small problems include things like a bad day at work, a fight with a mistress or bad luck with some project.

Causing a serious problem costs three Complication Points. Serious problems include events like falling ill on the day of an important work conference, a mistress getting pregnant or leaving, or a home project suffering a severe setback.

Catastrophic problems cost five Complication Points. They are events like being laid off, the suicide of a mistress or completely ruining a pet project.

Using Complication Points to cause a severe problem without one or more similar small problems preceding it, or a catastrophic problem without at least one similar severe problem foreshadowing it, costs double the normal points. **Examples:** Having Jean's lover leaving her after a fight costs only 3 points, but having him leaving out of the blue costs 6. Jack totaling the vintage corvette he has spent years restoring costs 10 points, but only 5 if he has earlier been arrested for drunk driving.

Causing a family member or friend of some player character to act upon his or her Vice costs one Complication Point. If the serious game rules are used, forcing a non-player character to act upon a combination Vice costs three points.

Note that the points can also be used to impede the actions player characters do to reveal the vices of other characters, and can easily lead to a careless rumor-monger getting caught.

Under no circumstances can Complication Points cause drastic changes to the community itself. Thus houses in the suburb never burn down, criminals do not roam the streets, etc.

Players can also exchange Complication Points for other benefits. By using one point, a character can find out about the Vice of a friend of another character. For two points, she can find out about a Vice of a family member.

It is possible to remove a Trait, buy a new Trait or exchange a current Vice for a new one by using five Complication Points and role-playing the change that takes place. At least a full session must pass after the points are spent for the change to take effect. If the process is ruined, the points are lost without the change happening. Note that during this time, the character is still a legitimate target for harassment by both other players and Complication Point use, so it is therefore wise to stock up on points of your own, or form protective alliances, before attempting such a change. **Example:** Joanna wants to get rid of her drug addiction. If anyone in the community finds out she's in rehabilitation, her reputation is

severely damaged. So she promises to protect Paul, who is Respected, from being revealed as a wife-beater in exchange for him to make sure her former habit stays safe.

Continuity

After each game session, characters are awarded extra Complication Points based on their activities:

- +1 point if the character acted upon one or more of her Vices at least once during the session.
- +1 extra point if the character acted upon all of his Vices during the session.
- +1 points for successfully revealing the Vice of another character's friend or loved one to the community.
- +3 points for successfully framing another character's friend or loved one for a Vice she does not have.
- +1 extra points if the target of the framing or revelation was a player character instead of a friend or loved one.
- 1 point if the character's family member had his Vice, or a framed one, revealed to the community.
- 2 points if the character got caught while revealing another's Vice to the community.
- 3 points if the character's Vice, or a Vice he was framed as having, is revealed to the community.
- 5 points if the character got caught while trying to frame another character.

Accumulating a net total of over 5 negative points during a single session means the character is driven out of the community. This means that someone badly caught needs to shift the blame very quickly, or must point out the flaws of others.

Dramatic Constants

There are three game elements that should always stay the same and can never be affected by Complication Points. They are The Mayor, The Police and The Angry Mob. The Mayor represents a semi-benevolent overseer trusted with the running of things. The Mayor's minions see to it that the facade of normalcy gets preserved after something happens.

The Police respond to any criminal misconduct, if they are informed of such events happening. All police officers have the Traits Physical and Armed, meaning they will triumph over any physical confrontation. They will eventually find out about any crime, if they are given clues leading to it. They will not find out about characters' indiscretions on their own.

The Angry Mob is formed out of all characters, both player and non-player alike, whenever a character has been deemed as unsuitable to live in the community. They will drive that character out, whether by using passive-aggressive tactics or torches and pitchforks. Eventually they always – always – succeed. After the eviction, the mob disperses and life returns to normal. Until the next target is painted, that is...

Appendix: Suggested Game Variants

Dramatic Variant: The Court

The most classical version of the social back-stabbing seen here is the one practiced in courts. There the codes of conduct are even more precise and more tightly observed. Every faux pas results in social retribution. The default work on this is of course *Dangerous Liaisons*, which should be mandatory viewing for those interested in trying this setting. Despite coming close to this, the sub-variant of school environment should usually be avoided, as any realistic application of it requires considerable power being given to the non-player parent characters. If you want to follow *Cruel Intentions*, however, feel free to do so.

Horror Variant: The Gulag

For a much nastier and more serious game, move the events to a prison camp such as a Soviet Gulag where there is a sense of oppression and semi-arbitrary rules but not the direct inhumanity of a concentration camp. You can use the same basic traits, possibly adding a few more indigenous to such an environment (Black Market Genius, Scrounger, etc.). Applebaum's book *Gulag* will, despite its numerical inaccuracy, prove extremely useful reading for players of such games. This is also the variant that will probably have the biggest chance to stay interesting for a longer period.

Character Sheet

[illegible]