FLASHBACK

Your head pounds as your senses grudgingly float back from the depths of unconsciousness. A shrill noise pierces the silence. Your heavy lids lift to reveal strange and unfamiliar surroundings, hard walls of thick concrete, tiny windows barred with heavy iron, and one ominous steel door, with no handle. The noise assaults your eardrums again, resonating painfully inside your aching head. Around you lay the motionless bodies of unfamiliar foes... or are they friends? You can't remember anything, how you got here, where 'here' even is, the identities of those around you, or even your own name! The high pitch ring echoes once more and you realize a phone is somewhere nearby. Maybe you should answer it. Maybe you should find out what the hell is going on, before someone else does...

FLASHBACK is a game about identity and the power of choice. The Players assume the roles of characters (PCs) that awaken in a strange place, with no memory of their former lives. As the game progresses, Players receive **Flashbacks** which represent the slow trickle of memory returning to the character. Although the cards indicate the *content* of the memories, it's up to the individual Player to decide its *specifics*. Does the memory of committing a crime make one a criminal or is it the choices made from here that matter most?

The game is designed to function as a one-shot RPG, however, there is no reason the game could not be continued to extend the story of any characters created during the session. You could even use this game as the prequel of another RPG altogether! Though the game could be played with two people, it really shines with a GM (guiding action, mediating conflicts, and controlling pace through **Triggers**) and four or more players. If you really want to play with only two people, both should be Players and simply share GM duties between them.

The game is heavily inspired by the film Unknown which utilizes all of the desired themes perfectly and will be used as the **Example Game**, but there is no reason why the game can't be played in an alternate setting or using entirely new **Triggers** or **Flashbacks**.

SETTING UP THE GAME...

There are a few decisions that must be made before beginning the game. They can be left entirely up to the GM, if the Players don't want to bother with background or wish it to be a surprise, or they can be discussed openly before the game begins to create a story that includes input from everyone.

WHERE AM I?

The first part of running the game is creating the location where 98% of the game will take place. Although the setting could be anything from fantasy to sci-fi, there are a few qualities that are necessary to any **FLASHBACK** game. The location should be a *secure* place (a prison, a remote island, a bomb shelter...) which the characters will not be able to escape without outside aid. The location should be a *remote* place (in the middle of the woods, under water, on an unpopulated island...) to eliminate communication with the outside world and minimize passersby, but not to dash that hope completely. The location should also be slightly *confining* (a small house, one cell block, a small island...), but not claustrophobic. Character conflicts arise most easily in close quarters, but the Players should still have room to secret away for private conversations.

WHAT WAS I DOING HERE?

After the location is determined, the situation that brought everyone to such a remote place must be created. The situation will preferably separate characters into *perpetrators* and *victims* (hostage situation, dark experiment, sacrifice...) and allow some space for additional *perpetrators* to be introduced for the **Climax**. The situation should also be morally reprehensible enough that any *perpetrators* would normally choose to keep their involvement a secret, though any situation placing people on different "sides" (drug bust, fight between opposing gangs, burglary...) may work as well. It is important to note that neither the Player nor the character will know if they are *perpetrator* or *victim*, that information only comes through **Flashbacks**!

Ideally, the situation will be considered "bad" enough that every character will claim to be a *victim*, whether they are or not, while simultaneously suspecting every other character of being a *perpetrator*. Sure, you could trust the guy that seems too weak to hurt a fly, but what if you're wrong?!

Whatever the situation, something went wrong. Right when the *victims* finally gained equal footing with the *perpetrators* (hostages started fighting back, test subjects turned on their tormentors, captives turned on the cultists...), something happened and everyone blacked out.

WHAT HAPPENED TO ME?

With the *why* already decided, the third decision to make before the game is *how* the characters lost their memories. Whatever the mechanism, it should fit the location and setting as well as possible. There are many mundane ways to cause memory loss in multiple individuals (oxygen starvation, head trauma, drugs, stress, electrical seizure, emotional shock, general anesthetics...), but there is nothing preventing the use of something supernatural (psychic assaults, a hostile spell, advanced technology...), if desired.

The main reason the cause of the memory loss should be decided beforehand is that it will almost certainly affect the characters themselves. If all the characters were drugged they should all share the same side-effects, a gruesome act causing emotional shock could leave evidence for all to see, hypoxia would leave everyone mutually gasping for air, etc. Although the characters don't know what happened, they should easily realize that it did happen to *everyone*.

Declarative Memory Loss fulfills our needs perfectly and it's fairly common, as these things go. Declarative memory involves recalling information like facts, dates, names, etc, as well as memories of specific events like birthday parties or graduations. It does not affect language or learned skills, though the memory acquiring either will be gone. A character can recognize the word "detective", instinctively clear and unload a firearm, and still not recall that he's a police officer!

WHAT CAN I REMEMBER?

The game takes its namesake from the **Flashbacks** and they are the unique mechanic that everything else revolves around. Flashbacks are simply the quick flashes of memory that occasionally come to characters after resolving conflicts (by turning in an appropriate number of **Recall Points**). The best part of **FLASHBACK** is that these identity clues are put on cards, shuffled, and drawn randomly. Player's could see every Flashback in the game, but still have no idea which ones (or which combinations) they'll receive during play!

Flashback cards could be made by simply writing the information on a stack of index cards, but you could just as

easily write a list of Flashbacks and number the list to correspond to a regular deck of playing cards. Flashbacks are divided into three types: Memory, Role, and Final.

Every game will need **one Final Flashback card**. The Flashback for this card should be something along the lines of *"You remember everything. Now tell us what happened!"* The Final Flashback is **not** shuffled into the deck. It is placed underneath the rest of the deck and waits as a reward to any Player lucky enough to pull it.

A Role Flashback informs a Player what role they played during the situation, *perpetrator* or *victim*. As you may have guessed, the Flashback deck should contain **one Role card for each Player**. Even the information in a Role Flashback will be left somewhat vague, encouraging the Player to fill in the details. A Role Flashback might read something like "About to enter [the location], you pause to radio for backup…" or "A rasping voice orders you to pick worthy candidates for the upcoming ritual." Ideally the Role Flashback will imply a particular role, but not lock it in stone. Maybe an innocent *victim* was ordered to fetch sacrifices or face death? Some wriggle room can allow for interesting twists later on. A Player can even end up with a second Role card and will have to figure out a way to weave the two together.

Memory Flashbacks provide the bulk of the deck and an average game will have **at least 2 Memory Flashback cards per Player.** More or less could be used, of course, but the cost in Recall Points will need to be altered to match. Memory Flashbacks include *drama* or a key piece of *information*. Either way, they function as a clue to the character's past. *Drama* cards should provide the Player a gripping line, but allow room to fill-in the details: "You cradle a wounded man in your arms and watch as his eyes go dark." Was he a relative? Who wounded him? The card doesn't specify. *Information* cards provide clues to the actual situation of the game itself: "You broke someone's leg during the fight, but where are they now?" or "You have a fond childhood memory of the character of your choice."

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN NEXT?

Triggers are a list of Bangs or other events used by the GM to maintain tension, escalate the consequences, and push the story toward its **Climax**. Simply create a list interesting, tense, dramatic, strange, or revealing moments to be introduced as play begins. By far, the most important **Triggers** are the first and last ones on the last. The first is the hook that's going to kick off the game with as much fear, paranoia, and urgency as possible. See the **Example Game** for an awesome hook! The last one introduces the **Climax** of the game and when it comes, all bets are off! The **Climax** should involve an event that introduces the possibility of escape, but at a cost. An easy ending, also used in the **Example Game**, is the return of additional *perpetrators*. There's a bunch of them (equal in number to the PCs) and they're playing for keeps!

WHO AM I?

The last thing to take care of before beginning the game is creating the actual characters. This process is exceedingly fast because there is only one choice for a Player to make. Each character has three Traits, **Doing, Talking,** and **Thinking**, and it is up to the Player to assign values to them. Doing is used for physical conflicts, Talking is used for verbal conflicts, and Thinking is used for mental conflicts. Each PC has one Trait valued at 1, one at 2, and one at 3. After Players assign Trait values, they're done. That's it! Due to memory loss, the

character does not need a name, or anything else, though a simple descriptive term can make identification easier.

A value of 2 in any given Trait is average, a value of 3 indicates natural talent or extensive practice, and a value of 1 indicates disuse or natural weakness. The 1-2-3 split seems to work well for "normal" PCs; most fictional protagonists tend to balance one above-average Trait with another that's below-average. For some fantasy settings a 1-1-4 spread may be more appropriate (in the Conan movies, Conan would have Doing 4, his wizard companion would have Thinking 4, and some very manipulative nobility could have Talking 4). A game involving superheroes could simply add 1 or 2 extra points as appropriate, though no Trait should be above 4. Still, most games should do fine with the usual 1-2-3 allotment.

PLAYING THE GAME...

The game incorporates a few simple mechanics to facilitate play. Players take turns creating **Conflicts** for their characters, standard six-sided **Dice** are used to resolve these conflicts, **Suspicion** affects these dice rolls, **Recall Points** are awarded for success, **Flashbacks** allow Players to fill-in their character backgrounds on the fly, and **Triggers** keep tension high and allow the GM to affect pacing.

CONFLICTS

Many RPGs use Task Resolution, which requires one dice roll for each of the character's *actions*. Conflict Resolution speeds the process slightly by allowing the Player to roll once for each of the character's *intentions*. Conflict is derived from opposition. A conflict arises when a character's intentions are opposed by someone, or something, else.

The game is played with each Player taking a turn to describe their character's intentions and introduce a resulting conflict. The conflict can be opposed by another PC, an outside force (the GM), or both, but all opposition must be voluntary. After the conflict is resolved, play continues around the room with the next Player creating a new conflict for his character, and so on…

Play begins with the GM introducing the first **Trigger**, then proceeds clockwise from the GM. The initial conflict for each character *must* be a struggle to regain consciousness, opposed by the cause of their memory loss (the GM). This conflict represents a personal struggle that can not be hindered by another character, though it could be helped.

Although only one Player at a time may introduce conflicts, PCs are free to take *unopposed* actions any time they wish. PCs may also join either side of any conflict created by another Player, regardless of turn order. Until the **Climax** escape is impossible, but conflicts may still be created that involve escape *attempts*. Character death, or even serious injury, is equally impossible before the **Climax** and may never be named as the intention.

Example Conflicts: intimidate another (PC vs. PC), break the window (PC vs. GM), shaking a PC back to consciousness (PC&PC vs. GM), distracting a PC struggling to remember his name (PC vs. GM&PC).

DICE

If there is no opposition, there is no reason to roll dice. When a conflict does comes up, simply decide if the character is **Doing** something, **Talking** to someone, or **Thinking** about something, and roll the appropriate Trait by rolling a number of dice equal to its value. The *result* of the roll is the highest number showing on any one die. If the PC's intentions are opposed by another PC, both Players will roll the Trait they're using and compare the results. If the PC is opposed by the

GM, the GM rolls 2 dice. **The GM always rolls 2 dice!** A tie indicates a stalemate, success means the character fulfills his intentions, and failure means just that.

If one PC is *helping* another PC, then the highest result from *either* player is compared to the opposition. If a PC hinders another PC, then he is simply *helping* the PC's opposition.

> **Example Rolls:** verbal intimidation (Talking vs. Talking), breaking a window (Doing vs. GM), shake PC to consciousness (Doing&Thinking vs. GM), distract a PC trying to remember (Thinking vs. Talking&GM).

SUSPICION

Player characters do not begin the game with Suspicion. It is not until conflicts start appearing that characters will begin to suspect, and rightfully so, that not everyone is on their "side". After the first Trigger, Players will have the option to raise their character's Suspicion of every other character by one. After each subsequent Trigger, Suspicion for other PCs may be raised by one, lowered by one, or kept the same. No PC may ever have Suspicion for another PC greater than 5 or lower than 0. Suspicion can only exist between PCs.

Each point of Suspicion a character holds for another PC functions as a **+1** modifier to rolls when working *against* that character and a **–1** modifier to rolls when working *with* them. High Suspicion can easily bring *results* above 6 or below 1. It's relatively simple to dodge an attack coming from an anticipated direction, but it's a lot harder to lend a hand while watching a potential enemy's every move.

> **Suspicion Example:** PC1 holds 5 Suspicion for PC2 and PC2 holds 3 Suspicion for PC1. PC1 intimidates PC2 (PC1+5 vs. PC2+3), but they have trouble working together against PC3 (PC1-5&PC2-3 vs. PC3).

RECALL POINTS

Players earn Recall Points (Poker chips work great!) every time they are on the successful "side" of a conflict. A Player can earn a Recall Point even if they didn't supply the highest die, their dice still helped. Recall Points help to encourage Players to jump into each other's conflicts. Additionally, exceptional successes of +5 or more grant **2** Recall Points, but only to the Player that actually rolled them.

The main function of Recall Points is to be cashed in for **Flashbacks**, though they could be used as an unofficial score if desired. For the average game, exchanging five Recall Points for a new Flashback should provide 3-4 Flashbacks per Player. This exchange rate can be easily tweaked to account for Player's that don't like to participate in other conflicts or to allow for more or less Flashbacks all around.

FLASHBACKS

When a Flashback is drawn the Player is free to choose whether or not to reveal it to the group. Once the Flashback is revealed, any desired detail must be immediately added by the Player and the resulting story addition instantly becomes *law*. Any addition to the story may be vetoed with a consensus, but this should happen only in the most extreme cases. Players that reveal Flashbacks too early may miss the chance to surprise the table with an interesting twist at the end of the game. Waiting too long may mean that the story has already taken a far different direction than the Player expected, forcing them to find a new way to tie-in the Flashback. A good balance should be obtained by revealing the card whenever it seems most natural, ironic, appropriate, or cool.

TRIGGERS

The game begins with the first Trigger kicking things off as ferociously as possible. After that, play will rotate around the table with the GM introducing the next Trigger after each Player has taken a turn. Triggers are designed to occasionally raise the stakes as well as provide general clues regarding the *situation*. These two functions should alternate for best effect. At the basest level, Triggers simply alter the environment or circumstances enough to allow for new conflicts.

Triggers should not be treated as formula. If the next Trigger on the list seems out of place when it's time comes, use the next one instead. If play is fast and furious when the GM's turn comes up, skip the Trigger all together and let the Players drive the story for a while. Players love feeling in control! Likewise, if play starts to drag halfway through the round with Players struggling to create interesting conflicts, check you list and bring in a whopper of a Trigger. Lastly, feel free to alter your list during the game. Players can sometimes make offhand comments that end up as better Triggers than anything you had on the list!

CLIMAX

The climax is the end game that the whole story has been pushing toward, the last trigger on the list, and the final act. Be careful not to plan a *conclusion* for the game, just plan one awesome Trigger that will force *something* to happen whether the Players participate or not. The climax is the final turning point of the story, Ripley going back for the kid, Neo going back for Morpheus, and Luke leaving to save Han. You'll notice they all have two things in common: a change in the character's mindset and the knowledge that they might not make it back.

The climax finally allows conflicts to involve the chance of escaping the location. Hell at the height of tension between the PCs, why not have the exit appear right in front of them? They can finally go free, but so can the others that they've struggled against the whole time! Besides, what's out there could be worse than anything that's in here. And if the climax is executed properly, it will most certainly be worse!

During any climax, the stakes are significantly raised. Up to this point, no conflict could result in character death or injury. Things have changed. For the climax, anything goes. Any conflicts involving *intent to cause harm* will result in the successful character (whether PC or a GM character) inflicting a *permanent, cumulative* **–1 modifier** on the opposition. Injury is received regardless of how the "damage" was caused. Further injuries stack until the character's roll is bested by an exceptional success +5 of more, which results in that character's demise.

Don't be afraid to let the characters introduce their own climax. This often happens with very proactive players. Simply help to mediate the climax around them and stay out of their way, they'll do all the work for you and surprising them with the now available injury modifier will be priceless!

EXAMPLE GAME – UNKNOWN

The location used in the movie Unknown is a *secure* warehouse, used to store dangerous gasses. Most of its space involves the small storage room, *confining* the characters to the storeroom, the bathroom, or the office. The warehouse is *remotely* located in the middle of the desert, well off of any main road.

In Unknown, the characters are all in the warehouse because of a kidnapping. Two of the characters are wealthy individuals (*victims*) and the rest are kidnapping criminals (*perpetrators*) awaiting the ransom. The victims escaped from bondage long enough for a brawl with the *perpetrators*, but the brawl knocked over a gas tank that knocked everyone out and affected their memory.

That's it for the set up. It's really all you need!

TRIGGERS

The Triggers for Unknown work really well. They're all simple events or discoveries that change the direction of the film in several exciting ways:

1. The Phone Call – The film begins with a phone call, answered by the first character to wake up. The voice on the other end says "Woz...did Snakeskin leave his gun in the desk...we'll be there in a few hours...the cops are all over us." This is the perfect hook! After one quick conversation the character learns that criminals will return in a few hours, a gun was left somewhere nearby, and that one of the characters is on their side!
2. Chairs – One character finds a pair of chairs and some frayed rope, it's obvious that two of them are hostages.
3. Graves – A hole big enough for 3 can be seen outside.
4. Guard – Discover a dead security guard from LPW.
5. Newspaper – A news story says a pair of wealthy businessmen were kidnapped from Liberty Plaza West.
6. Gun – One character finds a loaded gun!
7. Phone Call #2 – "It's done. See you before sundown."
8. Passerby – Kid walks nearby, doesn't speak English.
9. Arrival – Criminals arrive, time to choose sides.
10. Surprised Criminal – One criminal is shocked to see a character struggling with him.
11. Cavalry – A pair of cops arrives and starts shooting.
12. Family – The family of the surviving victim arrives.

FLASHBACKS

Memory Flashbacks:
1. A quick flash of several men wearing ski masks.
2. The character finds a personalized item and remembers carrying a young girl through the hospital.
3. He remembers hiding his police badge in his car.
4. He's dragging the unconscious body of one of the other characters.
5. Watches as the security guard gets shot.
6. Childhood friends with another character and was saved by that character as a child.
7. Ordered to dig a hole big enough for 3 people.
8. Carrying a gun during the fight, shooting at people.

Role Flashbacks:
1. Removing a ski mask in front of the mirror, he realizes he's a *perpetrator*!
2. Attacked by masked men in a parking garage, a *victim*!
3. Breaking free from on of the two chairs, a *victim*!

Final Flashback:
1. The victim's wife helped him organize the whole kidnapping!