

T-Minus

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Submission for Iron Game Chef 2006.

Used components: Committee, Emotion, Glass

Committee: after each scene, the group stops the clock and meets for Committee

Emotion: in the second part, one character has an ability called “Emotion Against Reason”

Glass: in the first part, one character has an ability called “Break the Glass”

Time Requirements: Playable in 8 hours of clocked life in any number of sessions (option #5)

This game requires certain equipment to play. You will need a piece of paper for each player, pen or pencil, a 10-sided die, and a time-keeping device for each player (I suggest a mechanical chess clock, but a stop watch, or even normal wristwatch, will do in a pinch).

This game is playable with a Game Master (GM), and up to four players (the game is best-played with four players and a GM). From my experience, 2 or 4 players work fine, but 3 players requires minor adjustment, which is included at the end of the game text.

Like Sand Through The Hourglass, So Are The Days Of Our Lives

The game begins with the premise that the characters have 8 hours to live. Before character generation and play begins, *the game master (GM) must decide certain factors about the setting and surroundings of gameplay.* These factors are called: timeline, government, and technology level. For each choice, there are three options, allowing the GM to craft the world to the purposes he has in mind for the game. Choose one option for each category and give the players a brief description of the cosmetic and social impact of your decision so that players have some idea what to expect from their gameplay world.

Timeline: Present Day, Tomorrow (near-future), Day After Tomorrow (distant future)

Government: Oppressive and Present, Oppressive and Absent, Republic and Absent

Technology Level: Anachronistic, Present Day, Futuristic

As an example, if one were to choose Tomorrow, Oppressive and Present, and Present Day, (which I will use throughout the text as the “default” setting) the result would likely be an Orwellian future reminiscent of *1984* (making the technology Present Day fits the text more accurately for 2006 than the original Futuristic option that would have been chosen from the point-of-view of Orwell at the time of writing the novel).

Therefore, as the GM, I describe my world as similar to *1984*, but with more urban sprawl and crumbling decay. The government is considered ever-present, but this is achieved more through the use of secret police and informants than functioning technological oversight. At birth, each person is fitted with a time-keeping device that shows the remaining time left to live (set to a default of 50 years, plus some amount of time due to social impact of occupation, party membership, et cetera). At 00:00, time is up, life is over.

Last night, the characters went to sleep with plenty of life remaining. Today, they awoke to see they had 8 hours left to live.

This is the beginning of the game.

It Was The Best Of Times, It Was The Worst Of Times

Now for character creation. First, players must decide, for the first part of the game, what aspect of discovering what has happened to you and why, that they would like to pursue. Four main questions, to begin, need to be answered. Each player chooses 1 question from the list of four. Each question may be chosen only once, and the eldest player has first choice (continuing to the youngest player being last to choose). In games with only three players, the fourth question will not be chosen by a player and will be handled by the GM (see “I Only Have 3 Friends” Section, at the end of the game). In games with only two players, each player will choose two questions, rather than only one.

Why me?

Who will help us?

Who is against us?

How Did This Happen?

Each question has certain advantages and disadvantages. First and foremost, only the player with the chosen question can construct answers to the chosen question. Secondly, this chosen question is what guides the players to craft their individual Moments (described below).

Why Me?: controls shaping the message of the game. How are the characters different? Some examples could be minor genetic mutation (brown eyes in a blue-eyed world), to spectacular effects such as pyrokineticists or psychics. Further, the basic and immediate motives of the “bad guys” are left to the design of this player. Are the characters secretly holding sensitive information that not even they know about? Is it merely that the characters are different in some manner? Are the characters criminals or terrorists? All of these things are possibilities, and left to the design of this player.

Who Will Help Us?: controls the beneficial social network of the game. Who are the allies of the characters? The bartender on the corner? Is he just a bartender, or is he somehow the public face of a secret organization to overthrow the government? How deep does the conspiracy of contacts go? Are there friends or family for the characters? Will they be there in a pinch? This character has control over the network of contacts that the characters may tap into.

Who Is Against Us?: controls the immediate threats and perils of the game. That guy on the street, is he a homeless drifter, or a secret informant that will tell whoever has committed this terrible act your every movement? Is someone close to the characters actually an enemy in disguise? From petty jealousies, to Machiavellian plottings, this player controls the conflicts and vast arrayed enemies of the game.

How Did This Happen?: controls the discovery of the current predicament. From half-remembered faces that burst into your home in the night and drugged you, to the beeping of your life-watch at 2:12 a.m., this player makes the decisions. The framework of clues and potential leads are the purview of the player. This player also has a unique ability known as “Break The Glass” that allows the character and player to influence actions outside the normal frame sequence.

These questions become the central trait of your character. The progress of play begins with the “How Did This Happen?” character. That character now decides on a Moment. Each Moment is 30 minutes of life long. At the beginning of the game, each character has 6 hours of life to expend. *Set the time pieces for 6 hours and start them as soon as the “How Did This Happen” character has finished describing the environment of the Moment.* As soon as the character enters the Moment, the game has started.

The creating player must decide how much is at stake in the first Moment. Stakes are rated from 1 to 3, with 3 being the most at stake. The higher the stake, however, the higher the potential risk. *For each point of stake, the GM has 5 minutes to spend against the players.*

The Moment is played as a normal roleplaying experience, with the character taking actions to further his or her question along in the game. As this is the first Moment, and the player controls the clues of the game, he or she should begin with asking questions and dropping or discovering the first potential clues.

For instance, the first Moment could begin at the character’s home, and the player decides that it will have a Stake of 1 (giving the GM 5 minutes to use against characters that are in the Moment). He has just awakened to find that his life watch has 8 hours remaining. He is scared, but is convinced that it is just a fluke. He uses his phone to call the Bureau of Life Management and is put through to a secretary. The secretary is giving him the run-around, and he is slowly ticking away.

At this point, the player wants to speed things along from the back-and-forth of a bored and underpaid secretary to the next slice of action. Therefore, the player requests a roll from the GM. A roll is performed by the player stating the goal of success in broad terms (“*I want the secretary to give me the requested information*”). The roll is a single 10-sided die (d10), with a 1 being failure, and a 10 being success. Any other number is considered a non-result. The player may spend 1 minute of time (which is deducted from that player’s total remaining time of life, and the remaining time for the Moment) to add another success number to the die. This can be performed 3 times on any one roll (meaning that 1 minute means success on a 9 or 10, 2 minutes is a success on 8-10, and 3 minutes succeeds on 7-10). Similarly, the GM may spend the allotted minutes due to the stakes of the Moment to add numbers to the failure rate (up to a total of 2 minutes, meaning failure on a 1-3).

The player decides that moving along is worth 1 minute to him, so he expends 1 minute to make his success rate a 9 or 10. On a 1, he fails. He rolls the die and gets a 7, a non-result.

In the event of a non-result, the player must keep rolling. Each additional roll costs 2 minutes of time from both the remaining time of the Moment, as well as the total time remaining for that character to live. The rolling continues until either a success or a failure is achieved.

The player expends 2 minutes and rolls again. This time, the result is a 9, which is a success.

After achieving success or failure, the description of the result is performed. In the event of a success, the GM describes the resulting action. In the event of a failure, the player describes the resulting action.

The GM tells the player that the secretary mumbles under her breath about the “fourth call about this today”. Seizing on this slip, the character questions her and the secretary, perhaps seeing a way to hang-up the phone, reveals the names and numbers of the other three callers (who are, of course, the other characters).

During the entire exchange, everybody has their clocks winding down, even if they are not in the Moment. Therefore, while the acting players has expended 3 minutes of life for rolls (1 to make the roll easier, and 2 to roll the die a second time), everybody has lost about 2 minutes of life due to the passage of time. There is, however, still 25 minutes left in this Moment (2 lost for time passage, and the 3 lost during the first roll).

At any time that is not the execution of a roll, another character may enter a Moment by expending 5 minutes of life. Doing so allows the character to enter the Moment and take actions as normal. However, as each Moment is only 30 minutes of life long, the entering player must use 5 of those to enter the Moment, and has only 25 remaining to act.

Each player must track his or her own time allotment for a Moment. When the total amount is expended for that Moment, that character's involvement in the Moment is over. When the player that created the scene has expended his or her final allotment of time, the Moment is over, even if other players still had remaining time to act (this remaining time is not deducted from the remaining life, it is just considered unused potential for that Moment).

After the Moment is wrapped, all players meet as the Committee. During time spent in the Committee, time is frozen (and anyone who has spent time in committee meetings will attest to the fact that time seems to stand still) so all players stop their clocks. Those participating in the Moment have the option to Invest in the Future. *By expending one minute per point of Stake, the players may write down the central clue, contact, ability, enemy, or other resultant aspect of a Moment as a sorted asset for the second part of the game (the exception to this rule will be the "How Did This Happen?" character, who has the option to Break the Glass in emergencies during the first part of the game).* Be sure to record the value of the purchased Stake.

Characters not involved in the Moment may not purchase Stakes from that Moment, *except the "How Did This Happen?" character, who may purchase Stakes in a nonparticipating Moment at double the cost (it is normal cost if the character was actually involved in the Moment).*

Committee is also the time to order food, use the bathroom, and return any missed phone calls.

Play proceeds to the "Why Me?" character, then continues through the "Who Is Against Us?" character and "Who Will Help Us?" character. Each crafts a Moment and is the central character in that Moment (meaning that their expenditure of life and time-keeping sets the overall limit of the Moment). At the conclusion of each Moment, the Committee meets to purchase Stakes and, *after each character has had their first Moment, they decide (by majority rule), who will be crafting the next Moment.* Therefore, if people really want answers to How Did This Happen, or Why Me, they may vote for that scene next. In the event of a tie vote, the GM breaks the tie.

To give an example of Stake, the "How Did This Happen?" character's Moment continued with the character resolutely continuing with the morning ablutions and exercise and calling the other characters to meet at a bar. However, as none of the other characters wanted to enter the Moment, none of them could be reached by phone, and thus, the "How Did This Happen" character merely left messages to meet at Sammy's Bar at their earliest convenience. While making the bed, however, a half-used matchbook from a local strip bar was found. This brought back a flash of memory of four men in masks holding him down while he struggled and injecting him with something to make him pass out. He must have jarred the matchbook loose in his struggles.

The memory of the assault and the injection becomes the declared Stake of the Moment, and the character purchases it during the Invest in the Future phase of the game.

Time Goes by So Slowly, and Time Can mean So Much

When the time runs dry for a character in the first part of the game (the first 6 hours), that character is finished with that section of the game. If the player is involved in a roll, that roll automatically fails. If the character is in a Moment that he or she created, that Moment ends. If the character is involved in a Moment he or she did not create, that character's involvement in the Moment ends. Each player with remaining time has the option to have one final Moment that lasts only 15 minutes of life and can have a Stake no higher than 1 (just a final "wrapping it up" scene for the first part of the game). After this the game proceeds to the second part.

The second part of the game is only 2 hours of life long. Players reset their clocks for 120 minutes and play proceeds as in the first part, with 30-minute Moments. However, during this phase of the game, new questions are chosen (as the players have, hopefully, answered or have some answers, to their first questions). The options for the second part are as follows:

Where is The Source Of The Problem?

Who Pulls The Strings?

How Do We Stop This?

What Are The Consequences For Stopping This?

Again, each question has certain advantages and disadvantages. For the second part, the Stakes purchased in the first part are now available for use (described below). Since time is much shorter now, players should focus on getting to the point, and move forward with the plot, though this is just a suggestion.

Where Is The Source Of The Problem?: controls the "where do I go now?" of the scenario. This player has control over the location, though not necessarily the means to access that location. This player holds the map to the final showdown.

Who Pulls The Strings?: controls the head of the beast. Who is the ultimate person responsible for your predicament? Putting a name and a face to this enemy is paramount if you are to get your life back.

How Do We Stop This?: is arguably one of the most important questions. It is not enough to know where and who, but also how. This player controls the tools and methods necessary to conquer your enemy.

What Are The Consequences For Stopping This?: is slightly a potential foil. With all the trouble of finding why and where and who and how, this person holds the key to "should we?" While the likely answer is "Hell yes!" there should be some moral conflict to defying what may, in the end, be fate. What is the cost of continued living? Is this a price the characters should pay? In addition, this character also has access to an ability called "Emotion Against Reason" which allows the character to diffuse rolls and conflicts that they are not personally involved in.

Before continuing with a description of play, it is necessary to understand the benefits of Stakes and other abilities.

Time Is On My Side (Yes It Is)

In the first part of the game, the “How Did This Happen?” character has a special ability that he can use in emergencies called “Break The Glass”. This functions in the same manner as using Stake in the second part of the game (which is available to anyone at that time). In order to “Break The Glass”, the character states that he will be using his ability and then may draw upon any purchased Stake. When used, the Stake grants its rank in bonus minutes to be used on a particular roll.

The first use of a Stake is free. Each subsequent use costs 1 minute (making it unwise to continue to use a Stake after awhile). *When using the “Break the Glass” option, however, the player may spend 1 minute of cost (in addition to other costs associated with the Stake) to use the Stake to benefit another player.* This option is not available to other players.

Characters other than the “How Did This Happen?” character may not use Stakes until the second part of the game.

Also, in the second part of the game, the “What Are The Consequences For Stopping This?” character has an ability called “Emotion Against Reason”. *When this ability is used, the player may declare a current rolling action that does not involve his or her character to be invalid.* The roll still occurs, but the outcome must be something emotional, stressful, and deal with a morally difficult outcome related to their problem (as in, making the acting character mentally aware of consequences), rather than coldly logical. This ability allows the player to steer the direction of play toward a “should I?” balance. When used, the “What Are The Consequences For Stopping This?” character expends 2 minutes of life and restates the goal of a successful roll. Any minutes used to increase success chances are refunded to the GM and acting player, and may be respent after hearing the newly stated goal of the roll.

To Live Is So Startling It Leaves Little Time For Anything Else

In the second part of the game, the order of Moment creation begins with the “What Are The Consequences For Stopping This?” character, and then proceeds with “Who Pulls The Strings?”, “Where Is The Source Of The Problem”, and finally “How Do I Stop This?”

Each Moment is 30 minutes, as before. However, in this part, there is a different type of Stake called Spare Time. At the conclusion of each Moment, the Committee meets to purchase Spare Time, and, if everyone has already created one Moment and all have some time left on their clocks, to vote on the next Moment created. Those involved in the Moment may purchase only the amount of Spare Time equal to 2 times the amount of minutes the GM used as opposition to your rolls, and purchases are made at a rate of 1 minute of life for 1 minute of Spare Time. If you made no rolls, you may not purchase Spare Time, and no more than 20 minutes of Spare Time may be purchased by any player. The purpose of Spare Time and the collection of Spare Time is to expend in the Final Moment, which occurs after the characters run dry of time in the second part of the game.

Rolls are made as previously stated in the game, except that the GM is considered to have unlimited minutes to use against the characters. Further, *at least one minute must be expended by the GM to oppose any action made by the players*. No more than 3 minutes may be spent in this manner on any one roll.

After the first player runs out of time in the second part of the game, the second part concludes immediately following that current Moment, unless not everyone has had the ability to create one Moment in the second part, in which case everyone is allowed 1 Moment before the conclusion of the second part of the game.

Am I Dying, Or Is This My Birthday?

At the conclusion of the second part, there is one Final Moment. During this Moment, the characters are all present and the GM decides the setting as appropriate for the revelations discovered in the second part of the game. Each character has an amount of time on his or her clock equal to 5 minutes + the amount of Spare Time purchased. The Moment unfolds with the final showdown, in whatever manner that is going to occur.

Should a player run out of time before the conclusion of the scenario (which is determined by the GM deciding that the problem has been resolved), that character has run out of time, they are dead.

I Want More Life, Father

(A quick list of sources for the quotes)

“Like Sand Through the Hourglass, So Are the Days of Our Lives”: opening lines to *Days of Our Lives*

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”: opening lines to *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens

“Times goes by so slowly, and time can mean so much”: “Unchained Melody”, the Righteous Brothers

“Time is on my side (yes it is)”: “Time is on My Side”, The Rolling Stones

“To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else”: Emily Dickinson

“Am I dying, or is it my birthday?”: Lady Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor, last words

“I want more life, Father”: Roy Batty (played by Rutger Hauer), *Blade Runner*

I Only Have 3 Friends

My first inclination is to tell you to find more. However, in the event that your group has but four members, what you should do is have the questions “How Did This Happen?” and “What Are The Consequences For Stopping This?” be run by the GM (along with attached abilities, though “Break the Glass” requires some modification, read on). The GM creates the Moment (and sets the Stake level), and places whatever character, or combination of characters, in the scene at his or her leisure. To buy-in to a Moment in this case costs only 3 minutes, and the Moments last only 20 minutes, rather than the full 30.

Adjusting “Break the Glass” allows the players to divide unspent opposition minutes in the GM-created Moments as “temporary Stakes” that may be used only in the first part of the game, and only once. However, unlike a normal Stake wherein anyone can purchase the Stake, this “temporary Stake” may only be purchased by a single character, and the group may decide to work out how to resolve that issue all by themselves.

Adjusting “Emotion Against Reason” is simpler, and should operate the same as it would normally operate, but the GM may only use this ability once per Moment on any given character.