

The Opposite of People

A game of illegal theatre

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Ingredients – Actor, Team, Law

Timescale – 10 sessions of 1 hour each

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Introduction

"We're actors! We're the opposite of people!"

- *The Player*, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead.

In ***The Opposite of People***, the players take up the roles of a travelling troupe of actors. Though they start almost penniless and down on their luck, they hope their travels through the villages and towns of the world will bring them fame and fortune. Particularly fortune.

The game can be set anytime and anywhere, though three settings are provided. These settings are sketched broadly in order to allow plenty of space for the players to detail their own towns, countries, cultures and people.

The game is designed for four people, and is played in ten one-hour sessions. Each session represents one town on a tour. The first shows are performed in small communities, but the final performance takes place in the capital city itself.

The group will need about 30 tokens and a deck of ordinary playing cards.

For tokens, I use plastic gold nuggets. You could use coins, beads or jellybeans, but make sure they're shiny and tempting.

The Group

People pretending to be people who are pretending to be other people can get a little complicated. So let's decide on some terminology.

One participant is the **Games Master**. The GM has two main jobs – to portray the **Crew**, and to play the townspeople, audience, nobles, guards and love interests. They also provide suggestions for conflicts and difficulties.

The **Crew** comprises the **Director** and/or **Writer**, and any other stagehands, carpenters, or riggers the play may require.

The other three participants are the **players**.

Each player has an **Actor** they portray.

Actors play one or more **Roles** within a Play.

Altogether, the three Actors are the **Cast**.

The **Cast** and the **Crew** together are the **Company**.

Sessions and Phases

Each session is divided into three phases of twenty minutes each. The phases are **Production**, **Play** and **Pleasure**.

During the **Production** phase, the group decides on some details of the town, a problem the townspeople are having, and then tweak the Actors abilities into shape. They also might play through one or two encounters in the marketplace, an argument with the owner of the venue, or persuade a local girl to attend the show. If the set needs building, this is when that happens.

Play is the second phase. Here, the Actors perform their roles, make speeches or clown, entertain the audience with poetry or pratfalls, request last minute changes to the script and make sure to bat their eyelashes at that lad in the first row.

And in the third phase, **Pleasure**, the Cast fritter away their wages, get laid, buy enough brandy for the next trip and hustle out of town before the local protestors mount a unified front.

Setting Up The Game

The Opposite of People uses a deck of playing cards to describe elements of the setting, suggest conflicts within the setting, and resolve those conflicts.

The cards are separated into royal cards (Kings, Queens, Jacks) and face cards (Ace, 2 through 10).

The face cards are the **Conflict Deck**. These are used to suggest to the players the beginning of a scene but also determine how a conflict ends.

The royal cards are known as the **Protest Deck** and represents the various factions in each village or town which really, really hate actors.

Tokens are also used to represent an Actor's wealth, known as their **Purse**. The players can use their Purse to improve their chances in conflicts.

Each player starts with *three* tokens. The rest of the tokens are placed to one side and form the **pool**.

That's the basics. Now how do the different phases of play work?

Production – 20 minutes

In the first phase of the game, the players do not yet know who their Actors are. This phase will establish much of the flavor of the setting, and the Actors are designed to fit the setting, its conflicts, problems and mood. In novels or movies, we don't know every detail of a character when they first appear.

So first, the group designs a Town.

If the group has already decided to use one of the sample settings of ***The Opposite of People***, then keep their suggestions for conflict, people and mood in mind. If the group is instead going to design their own setting, then it's down to them to describe interesting locations and situations.

Throughout the rules, we use an Elizabethan setting called **Exits and Entrances** for examples. This setting is described in the appendix.

The Town

Play one card from the Conflict Deck. This describes the generalities of the town – the **Population**. In our Elizabethan setting, the value of the card determines the size of the place:

- 1-4 – Just a hamlet, with no more than a hundred people.
- 5-7 – A small village or town with a few hundred people.
- 8-10 – A town of perhaps a thousand people.

The suit played describes in very general terms the business of the town. In the **Exits and Entrances** setting, the suits are:

- ♥ – Livestock farming such as cows, sheep, goats and chickens. Or fishing.
- ♣ – Fabrics, perhaps wool or silk, fashionable or dreadful.
- ♦ – Mining, gemstones, precious metals or smithies.
- ♠ – Farming, particularly of grain and vegetables.

Obviously, any town or village will have more than one business. But some towns are well known for silver, pottery or knifemaking, and this is what the suit suggests.

Take a couple of minutes to discuss the town and its **Population** with the group. No-one has special authority and the group should agree on the town's details. Is the population of 7 young and vibrant or old and conservative? Is a village of only 4 actually quite a large place, where the youth went off to war? Just what sort of Farming is suggested by that 6 ♠?

The GM draws another card from the deck, does not look at it and places it face down beside the **Population** card. This card rates the **Satisfaction** level of the town. More detail on Satisfaction can be found on page 11.

Example:

The participants decide to play in our Elizabethan setting. As this is the first session, the GM plays one card from the Conflict Deck. It's a 6 ♠ and so the GM suggests the town is a rough, grubby farming community situated on one side of a wide valley.

One player asks if the weather could be especially rainy and grim at the moment, and the group agrees. Another adds that the venue for the play will likely be a cowshed and wonders if he might be able to make eyes at fetching milkmaids. And one player wants a river running through the town, with many tethered barges for the Cast and Crew to vanish in the middle of the night.

The town described, we design the Cast and Crew.

The Cast

Actors are described very simply, with two or three words scribbled on a scrap of paper. You don't need to pinpoint every element of your character at this stage. Characters are not set in stone, and may change hugely in future sessions.

You don't even have to have a detailed picture of the character's history. These traits will emerge in play and what happens *during* play is much more important than 'backstory'.

Furthermore, this allows the players to really bond as a team of storytellers; each can bounce ideas for their Actors off each other. Perhaps one player decides that his character was a thief before joining the Company, and another player suggests his character was robbed by him!

In our Elizabethan setting, all Actors are male. Their roles within the play may be male or female, of course.

Qualities

Actors are defined by two Qualities. Qualities may be talents or skills, elements of the character's history, personality, or broad goals.

Every Quality is associated with a suit. The player can choose two Qualities from the same or different suits.

- ♥ - Activities relating to appeal, social interaction, confidence, emotion or passion.
- ♣ - Physical capabilities, whether brawn or agility, athleticism or stamina.
- ♦ - History, background, murky pasts, experience or naïveté.
- ♠ - Mental, perceptive, cerebral, intelligence, verbal, wit.

By picking a Quality, the player is telling the group that he wants scenes based around the Quality. A Quality like Find True Love ♥ suggests scenes involving affairs of the heart.

If it's not obvious which Quality relates to which suit, just pick one that the group can agree on. The categories of Qualities are meant to be fuzzy, and the choice of suit can define a Quality in an interesting way.

For example, a Quality of Drunkard ♦ could be chosen if the character wants to run into old drinking partners, whereas a Drunkard ♣ might mean the character can hold his drink, or fight best when tipsy. And a Drunkard ♥ Quality suggests a lovable sot.

Here are some examples of Qualities and their associated suits:

Swordsman ♣, Verbose ♠, Gambler ♦, Avenge Father ♦,
Brutal ♥, Sincere ♥, Cowardly ♠, Lovestruck ♥,
Nimble Fingers ♣, Fop ♦, Wanted Man ♦, Lane ♣.

As you can see, many Qualities refer to 'negative' or 'unwanted' traits or history.

At least one Quality should be useful during the performance itself. Examples are:

Love Scenes ♥, Clowning ♣, Juggling ♣, Rhetoric ♠,
Double Entendres ♠, Slapstick ♣, Monologues ♠,
Poetry ♠, Old Hand ♦, Charm ♥, Duels ♣,
Pratfalls ♣, Ribaldry ♠, Beauty ♥,
Looks Scary ♥, Insults ♠, Well Travelled ♦.

Example:

Having described the basics of the town and venue, the group describes their Actors and Crew.

One player wants a foreign Actor, because he quite likes putting on accents. So Grigor is a Slavic character who has come to England to escape criminal charges. The character is large and bulky and excels at duelling scenes and commanding the attention of the audience. His Qualities are Criminal Past ♦ and Tragedy ♠.

The player has not yet decided what crimes Grigor has committed. This may come to light because of a suggestion from a participant, or may never be an issue.

The second character is Aden, a slim and handsome lech. His Qualities are Rake ♥ and Clowning ♣.

The third character is a scruffy youngster, only recently joined the troupe. Sam's Qualities are Appeal ♥ and New to the Life ♦.

Once the town and Cast have been determined, the group play through a couple of quick scenes. The purpose of these scenes is to quickly get the players into their characters and to present them with a problem or obstacle.

So how are scenes created?

Scenes and Conflict

Henslowe: Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.

Fennyman: So what do we do?

Henslowe: Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

Fennyman: How?

Henslowe: I don't know. It's a mystery.

- *Shakespeare in Love*.

Obstacles

To start a scene, play one card from the Conflict Deck. The suit of the card suggests the category of problem:

- ♥ - Social problems, relationship issues or unwanted attention.
- ♣ - Physical obstacles such as a fight, an injury or exhaustion.
- ♦ - Problems with resources, or with something from the character's past.
- ♠ - Mental obstacles such as foreign languages, or those that need the application of reason.

The value of the card describes the difficulty in overcoming the obstacle.

So a 5 ♣ might be an impending scuffle with an angry shopkeeper. A 7 ♥ might suggest a lovestruck suitor who simply won't take a hint. A 3 ♠ could be a difficult local dialect or puzzling rhyming slang. A 3 ♦ might be a character's past come to haunt him.

Fortunately, the characters can overcome the obstacle.

Stakes

The player describes their goal and discusses the stakes of the situation with the GM.

So in our bellicose shopkeeper example, the player wants his Actor to defuse the situation. The GM and player discuss what the player wants to risk. So perhaps if the player fails, the shopkeeper becomes more angry and bars the Actor from his shop. If the player succeeds, the shopkeeper remains wary, but relaxes enough to allow the Actor to buy something from him.

Stakes can get pretty interesting. The GM and player could just as easily decide that the Actor is going to get drawn into the fight, no matter what, and that the stakes relate to how much of a pummeling the shopkeeper and actor each receive. Perhaps if the player fails, his actor ends up with an ugly black eye. If he succeeds, the shopkeeper gets the black eye, and ruefully offers a discount at his shop.

Anything can be gambled, including tokens. In the Production phase and a 7 ♦ scene, the player suggests the obstacle might be a stall owner who won't sell canvas at a fair price. The stakes decided are that if the player fails, he gets a rotten deal, which costs one token. If he succeeds, he gets the material for almost nothing. During the Pleasure phase, tokens might represent grandiose lodgings, imported wine or the bed of the mayor's daughter.

Neither the GM nor player have a special role when setting stakes. Both the player and GM might suggest the possible failure, or the possible win. But the stakes must be decided on before the next stage.

Example:

Grigor is demonstrating his Slavic superiority to a doubting Yorkshireman. Grigor's player deals a 7♣, a physical problem. The two are to arm-wrestle in front of a hooting crowd.

The player and GM discuss stakes. They agree that if Grigor succeeds, the Yorkshireman must pick up the tab for beer. If Grigor loses, he won't have to pick up the tab... but will be dunked in the duckpond outside.

Results

The player flips a card. If that card's value matches or exceeds the value of the obstacle, the player succeeds and reaches their goal. They get to buy the hat, or don't have to pay for beer.

If the obstacle has not been beaten the character has failed. The player lose whatever it was they risked. That's a black eye from the shopkeeper or a trip to the pond.

The player then narrates their success or failure.

Notice that the stakes and results do not have to relate to the suit of the obstacle. In the arm wrestling example, the obstacle could be overcome by the player narrating how he insults the Yorkshireman, belittling his weedy, girlish arms.

There are a few small wrinkles to this system.

Each played Ten gives the player one token from the general pool to put in the actor's Purse, and one from the pool to place on the town's Satisfaction card.

An awful failure (an Ace) or a glorious victory (a 10) also causes a reaction from the townsfolk. See page 12 for how the Protest Deck gets involved.

Using Qualities and Tokens

A character can do two more things to improve their chances.

If a flipped card is of the same suit as one of the Actor's Qualities, they can immediately flip another card and add the total together. They can only do this if they then narrate their Quality becoming an element of the scene.

So perhaps the scene involves an angry herd of sheep blocking the way to town. The player and GM set stakes and then the player flips a card. It's a ♦, and the actor has a Quality of Was A Farmer ♦. The player can flip another card and add that to the first, as long as he narrates his farming experience helping to solve the sheep problem.

And the player can also spend a token to flip another card and choose between the first and second cards. If they're desperate enough, they can go on spending tokens, buying additional cards for one token each and then choosing one.

Qualities and tokens can be used together. A character can play a card, flip another because the first card was of the same suit as a Quality, then spend two tokens to get two more cards. They can then choose two from the selection and add their values together.

Retries

In some scenes, the player may have another chance to beat the target.

Example:

Perhaps a creaky barn is being repaired for an upcoming show. The player and GM agree that a failure means the barn begins to fall down. A success means the barn is repaired. The player plays a low card and loses his stakes, and part of the roof begins to creak and fall in. The player really wants to keep the barn as the venue, and so asks for new stakes: a win means the barn is repairable, and could be ready in time. A failure means the barn collapses and an angry farmer throws the actor off his land.

In this situation, the player can flip a new card, and add the card's value to their first card and compare this to the obstacle. Taking time over a task can improve the character's chances hugely, but remember: each phase of the game is only 20 minutes long. You won't have time to spend on each and every conflict.

The Crew and the Venue

During the Production phase, the group needs to establish a few things. Having described the Town and their Actors, they also need to decide whether their player has a Writer and Director, or one unlucky soul with both jobs. He won't have any Qualities (only Actors have those), but as someone the Cast might look to for advice, he needs a simply sketched character.

One way to create the Director or Writer is to establish him in a scene. Perhaps a ♥ scene is played, and the GM describes how the poor, miserable writer has writer's block. Or is dead drunk and won't wake up and needs Medicine ♠ right now.

And where is the performance going to be? Will it be a barn, hastily converted but dusty? Just a green space on the outskirts? The marketplace, where actors will have to avoid ducks and cattle? Or in larger towns, could it be an actual *theatre*?

Create scenes where the Cast have to persuade a farmer to give them a shady spot in his field, or ask the local nobleman for patronage and permission to use his great hall. And if the set isn't quite ready, or the flats fall or the curtains need darning, this is where those Stagehand ♣ qualities come in.

Each player should get one obstacle to overcome. Once each player has tackled a problem, further obstacle cards can be played.

Once the 20 minutes are up move quickly onto the next phase.

And shuffle the conflict deck.

Play – 20 minutes

So we've described the town, detailed the Cast, and played through a couple of opening scenes. We know where the venue is, and might even have an idea who will attend. We also know how conflicts work. Next comes the show itself.

Firstly, what is the play about? Discuss this among the group. Is it a tragedy, full of grief and revenge? A comedy with pratfalls or a comedy with lascivious puns? Does a title suggest itself?

Keep the setting in mind. In **Exits and Entrances**, the play will likely resemble the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe. In the setting **Shadow Puppets**, the play is a mixture of puppetry and magical circus acts. So is the tone of your show moody and mysterious? Exciting and upbeat? In **Young Mars**, the performance is a reenactment of famous 20th century movies. So is it a comedy with references no-one understands, or science fiction trilogy reduced to an hour?

Each Actor should have at least one scene in the play. Play cards from the Conflict Deck as usual, setting stakes such as 'the audience fails to react to my role's bloody suicide' or 'tomatoes are hurled'. A player might even suggest a flashback scene where his character argues with the writer over some niggling plot detail (9 ♠ means the writer is difficult to persuade). Perhaps Romeo and Juliet *needs* a happy ending after all.

Remember, the Actors will have Qualities that will aid them during the play, such as Rhetoric ♠ or Love Scenes ♥ .

Tokens played to gain extra cards are considered to be payments to the Writer or Director, requesting memorable scenes for the actor. This is also an opportunity for flashback scenes.

The Audience

Who is the audience? Have many people turned up, or is the venue almost empty? Should one actor consider walking into the crowd for his final, epic speech? Does the play really need an improvised duel? Would a dull line be more memorable with a punctuating pratfall?

This is a good opportunity for the troupe to earn some tokens to place on the Satisfaction card.

Once each player has had one obstacle, they may play another. Once the 20 minutes for this phase is up, move on to the next phase.

And shuffle the conflict deck again.

Pleasure – 20 minutes

This phase describes how the Actors enjoy themselves after the curtains come down. They spend gold, drink and make merry, dally with local lads and lasses, and then hightail it to the next town before they're caught.

As usual, each player draws an obstacle card, sets stakes and resolves the conflict. These scenes should relate to drinking, seduction, lovemaking, gambling, debauchery and keeping a firm hold of the floor.

Will the barmaid finally accede to your seductions? Might the barman sell you that vintage sherry for a (literal?) song? Can you make a stirring, patriotic speech to the adoring drunkards at the inn or are you much more likely to fall off the table?

During this phase, the players will need to make a few last plays in order to get those valuable Tens and place tokens on the Satisfaction card. So during this phase, the stakes should be raised.

If there are few Protest cards in play, then the stakes could involve the appearance or scrutiny of the authorities – set stakes involving flips from the Protest deck.

This is also a good phase in which to gamble the last coins in your pocket.

Satisfaction

When the players finally decide that their Actors are leaving town, or when the 20 minutes of this phase run out, flip over the Satisfaction card.

If the number of tokens equals or beats the value of the card, the players get double the tokens from the Population card. Split the tokens up so that each player gets an equal number. The remainder is allocated by the GM. This goes to their Actor's Purse.

If there are fewer tokens on the satisfaction card than its value, they just earn the Population in tokens.

And that's the end of the session. The rules for subsequent performances are described on page 13.

Protest Deck

As mentioned above, Tens and Aces played from the Conflict Deck trigger a reaction from the Protest Deck. Ordinary folk, from farmers to merchants are represented by **Jacks**. Priests and religious elders are **Queens**. And the police, army, constables or Royal Guard are **Kings**.

Flip over the top card when an Ace or Ten is played. This represents the inevitable scrutiny that the Company draws with either success or failure. The GM is responsible for deciding how these elements appear, but suggestions from the players are welcome.

If a **Jack** appears, then a large number of ordinary folk begin to protest. During the Production phase, the Actor attracts a crowd of jeering townspeople. Expect rotten eggs. During the Play phase, perhaps members of the audience start to heckle the cast. During the Pleasure phase, not even the whores will take your gold.

If a **Queen** appears, then severe and miserable members of the clergy are involved. During Production, they might make speeches in church or on street corners. During the Play itself, members of the clergy protest outside the venue and the faithful are forbidden to attend. During the Pleasure phase, priests confront the Cast with stories of their eventual damnation.

If a **King** appears, then armed and dangerous law enforcers are involved. During Production, peacekeepers assemble near the venue. During the Play, perhaps soldiers gather around the theatre and menace the Cast. And during the Pleasure phase, tax collectors might try seize the profits of immoral activities for their employers.

Protest cards can be used as obstacles. A player can try to evade a gaggle of angry nuns by playing cards to beat their difficulty (Q ♠). Disguising (Costuming ♥) himself as a priest, he sends the nuns in another direction. The Queen representing the nuns is send to the bottom of the Protest Deck.

As more Protest cards are played, place them side by side.

Protest cards can also be bought off by the Cast. This requires no drawing or setting of stakes. Each card can be moved to the bottom of the Protest Deck with three tokens. It is generally best to bribe a card that is likely to make a suit or four-of-a-kind, as described below.

The Jack, Queen or King used to describe the Population of county towns, regional centres or capital cities can *not* be bribed away, or defeated in conflicts. They're a permanent and troublesome feature of the town.

The Protest Deck is never shuffled at the end of phases, only at the end of sessions.

Routs

A **Rout** happens in one of three ways.

Four Protest cards of a kind are played.

Three Protest cards of one suit are played.

More Protest cards are played than the Population of the town.

The actors are immediately attacked by townsfolk, nuns, guards or soldiers, and are evicted from the town. They manage to snatch up only half the tokens from the Population card, and no bonus tokens from the Satisfaction card.

The Tour

So the troupe have performed the first play of the tour. They may have earned a little gold, or at least not lost too much. What's next for the artists?

Firstly, the group should decide whether the energy around the table can stretch to an immediate new session, or if it would be best to play some other time.

At the beginning of subsequent sessions, shuffle both the Conflict and Protest Decks.

The players have a choice for where to travel to next. They can either draw from the Conflict deck or draw from the Protest Deck for their Population card. A Protest Deck card describes a county town, large regional centre, or capital city. Kings drawn from the Protest Deck are ignored.

J - A county town

Q - A regional town

Once the players have performed in at least one county town and at least one regional town, they may choose to perform in the capital. Pick one of the Kings to be the capital:

Obviously, the Populace will be 11, 12 or 13 in these bustling communities and the Cast have a chance to earn a great deal. However, the Populace card acts as a Protest card itself, one that cannot be persuaded to leave or be bribed away. In such large towns, a troupe of actors can never entirely avoid official disapproval.

During **Production**, the Actors can retain their Qualities from the first session, or write up entirely new Qualities. This is especially suitable for background or experience-related qualities, but it's just as possible to swap out Drama ♠ for Duelling ♣. As before, this is one way the player tells the group what scenes they want to be involved in.

Each time the group plays through a county town or regional centre, they gain an extra Quality. So a character who has played through four small towns and two county towns has a total of four Qualities.

The play performed in subsequent venues may be the same, or an entirely new production. If the group want to continue with the same play, then they can return to scenes again and again, refining a speech or punchline for fresh audiences. There's also humour to be had in twisting the original story around completely, adding slapstick and puns to a historical tragedy. Though it's likely the writer will cry into his beer at how his script has been abused.

But such is theatre.

Pace and Rewards

In a typical session with a Populace of 1-10, each player should play about three cards per phase. Thus, 27 cards will be played total. The more cards that are flipped, the more likely the players are to play Tens and beat the Satisfaction of a town. So in a large town (8-10, J, Q), you might want to provide sufficient conflict for more card plays - perhaps 40 or more card flips per session in order to allow the troupe to fill their Purses.

This is largely a tool the GM can use to pace sessions. If the characters earn few tokens in the first phase, allow them to make more plays than usual in the Play or Pleasure phase.

The Opposite of People has three sample settings.

Exits and Entrances is a smudged Elizabethan setting, set somewhere between 1590 and 1610. It takes the best bits from movies like *Shakespeare in Love* and the lines we can just remember from the plays of the period.

It's the beginning of a new century. Bawdy and simplistic Tudor morality plays have given way to more poetic, thoughtful and secular works. Playwrights such as Shakespeare and Marlowe dominate the scene.

In this setting, the Company wander through England's villages and towns on their way to a final performance in London. Venues are sunny riverbanks and lush greensward, village halls and the nobility's mansions, overgrown cemeteries and filthy corners of the marketplace.

Population

1-4 – A hamlet, with no more than a hundred people.

5-7 – A small village with a few hundred people.

8-10 – A busy town of a thousand people.

J – A town like Stratford-Upon-Avon or Leicester with two or three thousand people

Q – A town of ten thousand people such as York

K – London itself, a great metropolis of 150,000 souls.

♥ – Livestock farming such as cows, sheep, goats and chickens. Or fishing.

♣ – Fabrics, perhaps wool or silk, fashionable or dreadful.

♦ – Mining, gemstones, precious metals or smithies.

♠ – Farming, particularly of grain and vegetables.

In large towns, the suit describes the quarter of town where the play is staged.

Need some names for villages and towns?

Lentford, Waltham, Shakesbury, Hamton, Kingsbury, Cal Hill, Himbleton, Boreton
Reeside, Frisk Abbey, High Twyk.

And some vaguely English names?

Aldric, Edbert, Nedrick, Oscar, Rolf, Barnabas, Edmond.

Rowan, Audrey, Elfie, Ethelle, Kerrylyn, Livia, Cordia, Imogene, Nerys.

Young Mars

The second sample setting is of a near-terraformed Mars hundred of years in the future, with dusty towns and atmosphere stations strung together by railways and canals.

Five huge corporations have begun to tame the Red Planet:

IPower, capital of New Mumbai™. Geothermal power, heavy industry.
Twotech, capital city of Olympos West™. Biological solutions to industrial problems.
Galaxy, capital of Maharashta™. Large scale engineering projects. Bridges, dams, skyhook.
Dabaya, capital of Cameroon City™. Cutting edge tech, such as atmosphere production.
NAM, capital of Bradbury. Solar power, satellite technology, and communications.

The people are descended from the first colonists, two centuries ago. Xenophobic and proud, their bond of family is stronger than any other, except perhaps loyalty to the Corporations. A mixture of cultures and races, their DNA has been tweaked to provide some defense against the incessant dust and to make them more fertile. Twins and triplets are common.

Clothing is practical and utilitarian, with goggles protecting the eyes and multiple layers of synthetic fabric keeping the dust out. Leather is rare and denotes status. Rifles and wicked knives are defense against the nomadic bandits or strange, insectile mistakes that creep or swarm from the dustclouds.

Food comes from assorted modified grains, processed into hard breads, firm curd and clear alcohols. Meat is rare and comes from slaughtered reptilian beasts of burden. Imagine something between beef and crocodile.

There is little live entertainment as the official Corporation policy is that music and art are irrelevant or damaging. Instead, families huddle around battered, antique radio sets, listening to news, educational and rare entertainment programmes.

Into this red world comes the troupe. In **Young Mars**, the Cast arrive by train or cargo helicopter, or perhaps balloon or barge. It's likely they came from one of the big cities, but could even be strange and untrustworthy offworlders.

Populace and Places

Most towns are small and temporary, tents and prefab buildings thrown up for just a few months. Once the bridge is built, or foundation laid, the families travel onto the next project.

1-4 – A small project town with a handful of families

5-7 – A project town of a dozen families, with maybe a couple of hundred people

8-10 – A large, permanent town with a thousand people

J – A waystation with a couple of thousand people and airport

Q – A large waystation with major factories, airport and tens of thousands of people

K – A capital city of a hundred thousand people, with spaceport or skyhook.

♥ – Genetically engineered animals, fish farms, canalport.

♣ – Construction, perhaps of a railtrack or bridge.

♦ – Mining, ceramic parts, metalwork, a small spaceport or airport.

♠ – Maintenance of a colossal atmosphere station. The town is often beset by storms.

Protest and Conflict

J – Ordinary people

Q – Elders from the settlement

K – Monitoring from an orbital satellite!

In this setting, Kings are not something one can bribe away, as they represent the attention of the corporations themselves. Clever players may be able to use Kings as obstacles, perhaps to hide or shield their performances from monitoring. Four Kings means the imminent arrival of tough, well-armed corporate police forces. This is a good time to leave town.

Inspiration for conflicts comes from Westerns, with their isolated ranches and distrust of strangers – strangers bring trouble on the wind. Bandits prey on the smallest communities.

Food is scarce, money means nothing outside the capital cities, and barter is difficult with such distrustful folk. Rather than gold or cash, tokens represent rarities and valuables such as genetic templates for improved grain, books and paper or unusual foodstuffs. The weather is also exceedingly harsh, with duststorms that last for days, endless parched summers and frigid winters.

The Play itself should be a variation on a classic Earth movie of the 20th Century. So perhaps the Cast retell popular science fiction or gangster movies, interspersed with songs of the period (from Cole Porter to Coldplay), all played on junk instruments made from farming tools and spaceport detritus.

Need some names for Martian towns?

Amazonis, Zumba, Nectar, Tharsis, Utopia, Tanais, Phrixus, Neith, Icaria, Arcadia, Aeolis, Cerberus, Elysium, Umbra, Pandora, Xanthe, Lemuria, Mare Sirenum, Meridian, Sabis Vallis.

Smaller project towns either have a simple numerical designation – City 17, Project 112 – or are named after the family in question – Manju 12, Kamal Town. Many settlements have just a grid reference.

Need some family names? Here are a mixture of Indian and European names:

Khaleel, Devdas, Menzies, Chandra, Yapp, Avery, Nila, Ffloyd, Lakshmi, Nishant, Chiranj, Ceder, Hoss, Sirakov, Johl, Tjinder, Piyush, Bedell, Rebbeck, Olibarri, Durga.

Shadow Puppets

This setting is a fantastical ancient China where outlawed performers struggle against the forces of their legalistic empire. In this land, only the poetry of the Emperor is legal, and he sends messengers throughout the countryside, reciting it to villagers.

There is always a war on one border or another, so most farming communities send their produce along great highways to the central towns. Most towns lose young people to military schools, and many states have mandatory military service.

Each member of the Cast once trained at great Academy which trained the talented in magical abilities, but they were expelled for some reason and never fully developed their powers. Why were they thrown out? Did they sleep with a tutor? Fail to sleep with a tutor? Offer insufficient bribes to their principal? Did a family secret come to light? Or did they fail each and every exam?

Expelled, they fell in with a crowd of similar vagabonds, and now travel the byways of this vast country, using their minor magical powers to put on shows for gawking villagers.

But did they learn the secret of Fireworks and Explosions ♠? Ventriloquism ♥ or Mesmerism ♥? Magic of Illusion ♥, or Alchemical Processes ♠, or powerful Kung Fu Shouts ♣ that can split stone? Uncanny Acrobatics ♣ or Telekinetically Juggled Knives ♠? Can they Master Any Horse ♥ or did they steal away their tutor's wise (but tiny) Dragon ♦?

The performances in this setting are more like a circus or variety show. Shadow Puppetry ♠ is also popular, as the dozen different cultures within this empire do not share a common language.

Populace and Places

1-4 – A tiny village of perhaps a hundred people with no defenses bar its location.

5-7 – A village of a few hundred people with a spiked fence, wall or maybe a tower.

8-10 – A town of a thousand people, walled against intruders with numerous watchtowers.

In this setting, the performers are so illegal that two Protest cards are flipped whenever a Ace or Ten is played. Bribes are cheaper, at only two tokens per card removed.

J – A large town with thousands of people

Q – A huge town with many thousands of people

K – The Emperor's City of a million people

♥ – Farming, rice fields.

♣ – Silk, paper, lumber, fine skills such as calligraphers or alchemists.

♦ – Mining, a quarry, clever metalwork.

♠ – A garrison, academy or town favored by the Emperor and his court.

Protest and Conflict

J – Townsfolk.

Q – Sorcerous enforcers from the Academies.

K – The Emperor's own constables and investigators.

Obstacles in this setting include townspeople terrified by sorcery, greedy mayors and their snivelling advisors, wise men who preach about the end times, and dangerous weather, from sudden snowstorms to typhoons.

Need some names? In this setting, most are of the *Adjective Name* or *Noun Name* form.

Shining Xu, Willow-haired Rei, Excellent Zan, Waves-Crash Ling.

Summary of Play

Set-up

One deck of playing cards separated into **Conflict Deck** (Ace-10) and **Protest Deck** (face cards).

30 tokens.

Each player gets three tokens in their **Purse**. The rest go in a separate **pool**.

Play – 20 minutes

One card determines the town's **Population**. Place a number of tokens equal to card's value on the card. Another card determines the town's **Satisfaction**.

Pick two **Qualities** for each Actor.

Each player draws one card for an **Obstacle** this phase. Resolve the conflict. Once all players have had one conflict resolved, a player may then play another obstacle.

Production – 20 minutes

Each player draws one card for an obstacle this phase. Resolve the conflict. Once all players have had one conflict resolved, a player may then play another obstacle.

Pleasure - 20 minutes

Each player draws one card for an obstacle this phase. Resolve the conflict. Once all players have had one conflict resolved, a player may then play another obstacle.

When the players decide that their Actors are leaving town, flip over the Satisfaction card.

If there are an equal number or more tokens on it than the value of the card, the players get double the tokens from the Population card.

If there are fewer tokens, they just earn the Population.

Conflicts

Each player draws one obstacle card from the Conflict Deck.

Discuss stakes and goal.

Draw one card:

If this the same suit as one of your Qualities, you *may* draw another card and add them together. Or spend a token, draw another card, and choose two cards to add together.

If the card is not of the same suit as a Quality, spend a token to draw another card. If the new card is of the same suit as your Quality, you may add its value to the previous card.

(Spend tokens to buy more cards, use Qualities to add cards together)

For each played Ten, earn one token from the pool (this goes in your Purse), and place one token from the pool on the Satisfaction card. Then flip a card from the Protest Deck.

If a played card is an Ace, flip a card from the Protest Deck.

If the value of the card or cards equals or exceeds the obstacle, narrate your success.

If the value of the card or cards equals or exceeds the obstacle, and your Quality was involved, narrate your success and include an element from your Quality.

If it is less than the obstacle, either:

Narrate your failure.

Discuss whether a subsequent draw can be made, and then discuss new stakes.

Protest Deck

Play one card from the deck. Jacks represent townspeople, Queens the clergy or elders, Kings the police or army. Cards can act as obstacles if a player so decides. Or they can be bribed for three tokens.

The actors suffer a Rout and are immediately ejected from the town if:

Four of a kind are played

Three of one suit are played

More protest cards are played than there is Population.