# Waxing Lyrical

# Waxing Lyrical

## Introduction

Another game in 24 hours. Actually in 6 hours, in between a large number of other things. So much less material than my last one and much less completeness. Also had a bad computer crash part the way through those 6 hours, and lost about an hour. So call it 5 hours. But I got the core ideas in, so yay me. If this generates any interest, will do another version down the track. Doubt it, but you never know your luck and there is no accounting for taste. It is missing character sheet, game world examples and examples of play, and needs all of them to make it shine. Ah well.

My main game concern is that I am not sure if I have adequately balanced the Game Play section properly. I think it works but it might need some tweaking. Meh. If anyone playtests this I would love the comments, but I won't hold my breath.

Also, once again I began with the intent of putting a better GM support section together, and failed to get that done in time too. **Sigh.** Ce la vie.

This is a storytelling game with strong role playing elements. It is designed with fast play in mind, and the role play elements are core, but by that token it is not a pure role playing game. The abilities focus more on the player's ability to get things done in the story than the character's ability to act in the game world. I also went a bit nuts and decided to incorporate elements of my understanding of GNS theory as stats. Why? Well, um… not sure. If you want to know anything about GNS theory take a look at the Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com) and look at all the articles there.

The origins of this monster are in an idea that had been bouncing around in my head since 1992 or thereabouts. I ran a game at a con in the 90s to do with similar ideas. But I never formalized those ideas into a system. At the time it was run systemless but pretended to be Cthulhu.

The base concept is that characters, setting and plot are defined by song lyrics. Depending on what songs people pick and how they choose to manifest those lyrics the game universe gets generated on the fly.

In the original version for the con I created a pregen world, & the characters were from songs by Nick Cave, Soundgarden, NIN, Ministry & Nirvana. As you might guess, it was primarily in the horror genre. This incarnation is thus a similar but different beast altogether, with much broader applicability.

## Overview

I don't have the time to muck about this time. So here are the core elements of the system. In this game a character's theme song is their character sheet.

When you want to direct the story in some way, or you want your character to perform some action or want certain things to come to pass or to exist in the system, you use lyrical fragments and their appropriateness to the desired outcome to determine your primary chance of success.

Characters are not given statistics apart from their theme music. Players, however, do accumulate attributes as they play the game. These attributes manifest and limit player power, indicate things about the player and also manifest how the player influences how the game unfolds.

Section Alpha (Character Creation) demonstrates how to deconstruct song lyrics into their key components for game play. Section Beta (Player Attributes) looks at the basic statistics that allow a player to impact on the story. Section Gamma (Game Play) shows how to use these components to generate the story. And Section Delta (Lyrical World) shows game variants, including Game Master and Agenda play.

## Alpha: Character Creation

Find a song you like. Find the song lyrics (online is good). Deconstruct them down into story ideas (Narrative Threads), action words (Game Verbs) and phrases (Simulation Fragments). That's it. You are ready to play Waxing Lyrical.

OK, I took a few shortcuts there. Characters are defined in a much more fluid and powerful fashion in Waxing Lyrical than most RPGs. Their theme song does not only describe what they are physically or mentally capable of, it also describes the world they live in, and how they interact with that world.

Let's learn how to deconstruct song lyrics to the three types of components. I will use a really simple song example to demonstrate the process. See the centrebox for the One Man Army lyrics by the Prodigy and Tom Morello. You can always count on the Prodigy to give you short and sweet in the lyrical department…

### Narrative Threads

Any complete statement with subject verb and object can form a Narrative Thread (NT). This is the shortest that a NT can be, and generally they are longer, more involved and complex. NTs allow complex story elements to be introduced or attempted. They are intuitive, and they can be extrapolated from the verses of a song rather than directly quoted from them if the player desired. NTs can be drawn out of the song tapestry on the fly if desired, but it can assist to draw them out in advance so that you as player have in mind some aspect of how you can relate the song to the core action of the moment rapidly and without having to pause to read the song lyrics in detail. Generally try to write between three to five elements here so as to not clutter the information too much but to give some good threads to start from.

So for the character whose theme song is One Man Army I will take lines "Dogs of the reservoir causing friction" and "Taste the Back of my Crystal Fist", and write them in the NT section of the character sheet. I am not too sure how I will draw these into a story, but they might be literal or figurative at this point. Then I will extrapolate a bit and write "Reservoir Dogs: Criminals have a police informant among them" because the film is directly referenced by the song, and that is a cool story element I think of lots of possibilities for in a story. OK next "Crystal Fist: use of violence is a sign of weakness to violence by the perpetrator." If violence is used in the story I now have a neat hook to even the score. Lastly I will take "Reservoir Dogs / Causing Friction: Criminals are arguing with each other and / or causing problems for groups normally in accord with each other." That should be enough to go with.

### Game Verbs

Action and ability is the core focus of Game Verbs (GV). They are extrapolated from key verbs in the song lyrics and any relevant adverbs or necessary adjuncts to the verbs can be added to make an action more attuned in its use and thus more limited in scope but more efficacious. If you do not have enough verbs in the lyrics, extrapolation is allowed with a limited scope. Game verbs are used for a quick win, or to overcome challenges presented in a story. You can list as many as you want, but generally five to seven is a good number.

Using the example of One Man Army, we have immediately "Taste" and "Causing Friction". But as these are very limited lyrics, that is all we have to play with here. So I will extrapolate a little: Crystal implies

brittle, transparent and ornate, so I will go with "Shatter", "See" and "Impress". I anticipate being more interested in playing the game that the others construct, so I want to have a bit more than this so I will add in a "bite" for the Dog reference and "burn" for the friction. Not a bad list, most only one word long, so more likely to be generically applicable but not each individually generating much of a bonus. The exception is Causing Friction, which is a bit more limited than say Burn, but will generate a two word bonus when it is applicable (see section Gamma: Game Play)

### Simulation Fragments

In between GVs and NTs in size and scope are Simulation Fragments (SVs). Any line or short connected phrase including a noun with any adjectives or connectors might form the basis for a SF. Their utility in game is somewhere between Game Verbs and Narrative Threads, in that they are used to introduce real elements to the game world that have consequence for all characters that might interact with them. They might be setting elements, real objects or aspects of reality that apply to everyone. Once again, you can list as many as you want but around four to six is a good number to start from.

Back to the One Man Army example: "Crystal Fist" and "Dogs of the Reservoir" are the obvious two. I will extract these a bit further, to "Reservoir" and "Fist". To this I will add the elements "Friction" and Crystal" for completeness.

I see the Reservoir as a setting in game, the Dogs as being real animals or a gang or a guardian of some description. Crystal Fist might

---

**One Man Army – The Prodigy & Tom Morello**

Taste the back of my crystal fist
Taste the back of my crystal fist
Taste the back of my crystal fist
Dog of reservoir
Causing friction
Taste the back of my crystal fist
Taste the back of my crystal fist
Taste the back of my crystal fist
Dog of reservoir
Causing friction

be the name of a specific martial art or maybe a location in the game that someone else suggests if I want to support it. The other elements I have extracted I will probably use to manipulate the universal principles of action. "Fist" will be for promoting martial arts or brawling combat, friction for guiding the principle that technology is friction based rather than electric or sci-fi focussed, so adding to elements of cars and running and physical action. And so we are done.

## Character Name

You may want to write out a name for your character. Other character attributes can be written in if you want, like what they are wearing and eye or hair colour, but all this information is only relevant if you need these descriptions in visualising your character. It can be drawn from the song lyrics directly if the song contains such, or simply created on the fly now or later as needed.

# Beta: Player Attributes

There are four key attributes that a player accumulates over time: *Vocals*, *Rhythm*, *Melody* and *Base*. The Vocals are the primary statistic and are accumulated as the player directs action. The Rhythm, Melody and Base are each accumulated as Vocals are spent, each in turn to modify or actualise some element of the story that the player desires.

To begin each player must rate themself as in the core secondary statistics by applying 6 points as is seen fit among Rhythm, Melody and Base. These form the player's ability to manipulate situations and game elements to their own liking, and will improve over time.

The **Vocals** statistic is the core player attribute. Vocals indicate how often you have the limelight or centre stage in the game. Vocals start at zero. Each time you attempt to use a lyrical element to affect the story in any way, you accumulate one point of Vocals. Vocals are manifest in the game by tokens of some kind, like pips, glass beads or poker chips. Each player starts with no Vocals, and accumulates them into their Vocals Pool as time goes on from a bank of tokens kept in the centre of the play area. The total number of Vocal Points that a Player has limits their ability to get their own way in any challenges to their

desired action. Points of vocals can be used to support other people's action, and thus to encourage other players to narrate or shape the story.

Directing how the game unfolds in plot and story is the core focus of the **Rhythm** statistic. In the same way that drums provide the key structure of a song, this attribute allows the player to develop and introduce key plot and story elements. It is accumulated the more often that a player uses their character's theme song in Narrative Mode to support someone else's story ideas (in other words, how often the player uses the character's Narrative Threads, see the Game Play section).

Allowing a player to direct how action unfolds and challenges are overcome is the realm of the **Melody** attribute. Like how the lead guitar or synthesiser provides the tune to a song, this statistic allows the player to manage the challenges of a story by making them harder, or overcoming them as they desire. It is accumulated the more often that a player uses their character's theme song in Gamist Mode to or challenge another player's character action (in other words, how often the player uses the character's Game Verbs, see the Game Play section).

Lastly, the **Base** statistic manages a player's ability to shape the universe that the game takes place in. Similar to how the base guitar forms the framework for the rest of the music, this attribute allows a player to frame the story in the kind of reality that they want to play in, adding in materials, objects or game elements, or favouring one kind of game action or another based on the player's desire. It accumulates the more that the player uses their character's theme song in Simulationist Mode to support another player's contributions to the game world (i.e. how often the player uses the character's Simulation Fragments, see the Game Play section).

# Gamma: Game Play

Stories are manifest by players bringing story elements into game play. This can be done by describing a setting, establishing a character or framing a scene or scene transition.

There is no formal way of determining whose turn it is at any time. The order of goes in Waxing Lyrical is determined entirely by the social contract between the players. If players want to take turns evenly, you can establish a clockwise or counter clockwise order around the table if you so desire. If there is one player that all wish to lead the session they might have the floor after every other person's go. See section Delta for more information about this.

Every time you take a turn, you must collect a Vocals chit from the central pool and add it to your personal pool. Add the number of chits together in your pool. This is your Vocals total. This number determines what your current dice is till your next turn. Any time you are asked to roll a dice this is die type you must roll.

If there is a dispute as to who wants to have the floor at any time, the person with the lowest current Vocals chits wins. If two or more players have the same current Vocals score, they roll their dice for low number to determine whose turn it is.

| Vocals Score | Dice Level |
|---|---|
| <=4 | D4 |
| <=6 | D6 |
| <=8 | D8 |
| <=10 | D10 |
| <=12 | D12 |
| 13+ | D20 |

On your turn you can choose to use one of three modes. All players then have opportunity to support or oppose the action or description in question. After the action has been resolved it is then the next player (in whatever order you have determined) to play an action.

### (1) Narrative mode

In Narrative mode you choose one of your character's Narrative Threads (NTs) and attempt to bring it into existence as a game event or plot. Describe how the NT is manifest in the situation. Then roll your dice and subtract your Rhythm score. If any other player supports your description they have the opportunity to also subtract their Rhythm score as well by playing a Vocal Chit to the centre pool.

Anyone is able to oppose your action by collecting a Vocal chit from the centre pool, then describing an alternate outcome using one of their own character's NTs. They then get to add their Rhythm to the original dice roll.

Combine all the modifiers together. If the number is zero or negative then the player's original narrative is held to be true, and the player gets to narrate the situation. That NT is checked on the character's sheet. Players may also want to record any universal situation or events that are ongoing on a central sheet so that all can see them and use them as a reference point. Any further actions by any player that use that NT as a relevant reference automatically reduce the player's active dice by one shift (from d6 to d4 for example).

If the number is positive and unopposed, all players (including the active player of the moment) have opportunity to narrate the outcome of the situation by gaining a chit from the centre to their pool. As with all attempts to gain the floor, if there are multiple players all wanting the same job, lowest Vocals wins, and dice off ties.

If the resultant number was positive and the story element was opposed, the opposing player with the lowest Vocal rating gets to dictate the outcome based upon the NT they used in their opposition. This oppositional NT can then become checked in the same way.

(2) Gamist Mode

In Gamist mode you choose one of your character's Game Verbs (GVs) and describe an action that your character takes in the scene that has been framed so far using that verb or action statement as a basis. Then roll your dice and subtract your Melody score. If the GV is more than one word and is judged as applicable, you can subtract one point from the roll for each adverb or relevant descriptor.

If any other player supports your description they have the opportunity to also subtract their Melody score as well by playing a Vocal Chit to the centre pool. Anyone is able to oppose your action by collecting a Vocal chit from the centre pool, then describing an alternate outcome using one of their own character's GVs. They then get to add their Melody to the original dice roll, plus one for each word after the first that their GV contains.

Combine all the modifiers together. If the number is zero or negative then the player's character action is held to be true, and the player gets to narrate the situation. GVs are not checked for further usage modifiers, but if character experience is relevant each use can be checked for later test of experience.

If the number is positive then anyone who opposed the action gets to narrate the outcome, as usual the lowest Vocals having first option. If there is no one opposing the action but it fails anyway anyone can buy in to narrate the failure by gaining a Vocal chit, or else it falls to the player whose action has failed to narrate the outcome.

(3) Simulationist Mode

In Simutlationist mode you choose one of your character's Simulation Fragments (SFs) and attempt to bring it into existence as a game scene or setting element. Describe how the SF is manifest in the situation. Then roll your dice and subtract your Base score. If any other player supports your description they have the opportunity to also subtract their Base score as well by playing a Vocal Chit to the centre pool. Anyone is able to oppose your action by collecting a Vocal chit from the centre pool, then describing an alternate setting element using one of their own character's SFs. They then get to add their Base to the original dice roll.

Combine all the modifiers together. If the number is zero or negative then the player's original simulation concept is held to be true,

and the player gets to narrate or describe the object. That SF is checked on the character's sheet. Players may also want to record any universal simulation notes or plot devices (objects) that are likely to be ongoing on the central sheet so that all can see them and use them as a reference point. Any further actions by any player that use that SF as a relevant reference automatically reduce the player's active dice by one shift (from d6 to d4 for example).

If the number is positive and unopposed, all players (including the active player of the moment) have opportunity to describe the simulation element in the situation by gaining a chit from the centre to their pool. As with all attempts to gain the floor, if there are multiple players all wanting the same job, lowest Vocals wins, and dice off ties.

If the resultant number was positive and the setting element was opposed, the opposing player with the lowest Vocal rating gets to dictate the outcome based upon the SF they used in their opposition. This oppositional SF can then become checked in the same way.

### Opposing and Supporting

The key way to participate in game play when it is not your action is to Oppose or Support the action of the player whose turn it is.

Opposing an action requires the player to buy a Vocal chit from the centre pool. Opposing an action does not gain the player any improvement to their secondary scores, but does give them the chance to cause an action to fail and grant them the right to narrate the failure. See the sections above on the different modes of action.

Supporting an action allows a player to get rid of a Vocal token as well as increase the relevant statistic for the action that they are supporting. An example of this is that if the active player is attempting to hurt something with their character using the "shoot it" GV in Gamist mode, and another player wants to support this action, the supporting player gets to pay a chit from their Vocals to the centre pool and accumulate one point to their Melody Score.

### Damage, wounds and death

Unlike most other RPGs, Waxing Lyrical is not overly concerned with combat. In any situation where there is conflict, one player can narrate or control the elements to cause another character to "die" etc if so desired. Obviously the afflicted player has the right to oppose this action. If the action is successful, however, the player still has opportunity to change the scope of the death or affliction in some way when it is next their turn.

# Delta: The lyrical world

Extracting the song out into the half-truth, it is possible to assume that the song lyrics actually make the world. The characters may fall through the looking glass and end up in the otherworld, where larger than life images of realized or their home world might be infused with the truth of songs. Are the songs real? Is reality nothing more than the reflection of the art? Does the core story have a theme song? Are each player's songs intermingled into the core to make a story?

The reality of the game world is up for grabs in this game. Players can direct the game to any genre, style or character types. Meshing of

normally incompatible ideas into new genres of gameplay might be the order of business. It is certainly possible to go in the other direction, and to limit the game style to a specific agenda or central theme song.

There are thus many ways to play "Waxing Lyrical". Here are some of them.

**No GM freeform**: This is the default way of playing the game. Everyone pick songs, write out notes and go for it.

**Agenda play**: You can pick a style of music or an artist, or even an album, and only allow players to choose songs in that specific genre and style. This limitation will create a much tighter game experience, with all themes and ideas being similar, or at the very least come from the same place. This version can have a GM or not. It is also possible to choose one central song that all players must draw at least one character element from in each category (NT, GV and SF).

**GM play**: Either of the two previously mentioned game times might have a GM if so desired. The GM in turn will support the desired shared imaginary space. They only have to pick up a Vocals token if they choose to take the floor. GMs never pick up tokens for opposing actions. They also have first option to take a turn under all circumstances irrespective of their Vocal score. As a last power, GMs can support an action even though they have no chits left, and will gain statistics for this if they do. GMs also start play with 3 points shared between Rhythm, Melody and Base per other player in the game (minimum 6). In all other ways they are a standard player.

A GM will generally have to do a few more extractions from a song to prepare adequately for running a game. Usually picking a central theme or important song is key to this. A GM's song is the key or central theme song for the game. An example follows of a GMs song and statistics… or not. I must sleep now, so this peters off into an abrupt ending here.

See the next page for a good song choice. I built an entire game or two on this one I can tell you.

# Nick Cave the Bad Seeds---Red Right Hand

Take a little walk to the edge of town
Go across the tracks
Where the viaduct looms,
like a bird of doom
As it shifts and cracks
Where secrets lie in the border fires,
in the humming wires
Hey man, you know
you're never coming back
Past the square, past the bridge,
past the mills, past the stacks
On a gathering storm comes
a tall handsome man
In a dusty black coat with
a red right hand

He'll wrap you in his arms,
tell you that you've been a good boy
He'll rekindle all the dreams
it took you a lifetime to destroy
He'll reach deep into the hole,
heal your shrinking soul
Hey buddy, you know you're
never ever coming back
He's a god, he's a man,

he's a ghost, he's a guru
They're whispering his name
through this disappearing land
But hidden in his coat
is a red right hand

You ain't got no money?
He'll get you some
You ain't got no car? He'll get you one
You ain't got no self-respect,
you feel like an insect
Well don't you worry buddy,
cause here he comes
Through the ghettos and the barrio
and the bowery and the slum
A shadow is cast wherever he stands
Stacks of green paper in his
red right hand

(Organ solo)

You'll see him in your nightmares,
you'll see him in your dreams
He'll appear out of nowhere but
he ain't what he seems
You'll see him in your head,

on the TV screen
And hey buddy, I'm warning
you to turn it off
He's a ghost, he's a god,
he's a man, he's a guru
You're one microscopic cog
in his catastrophic plan
Designed and directed by
his red right hand

(Organ solo)

Extra verse from DJ Spooky Remix (From Scream
2 Soundtrack):
He'll extend his hand, real slowly for a shake
You'll see it coming toward you, real slowly for a
shake
(Grabbing at your peril buddy?) cause you know
you ain't
getting near much as he will take.

He's a...

He's mumbling words you can't understand
He's mumbling word behind his red right hand.