

OUT OF FRAME

AN RPG OF CINEMA ESCAPE



Out of Frame: An RPG of Cinema Escape

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For questions, contact talysman@gmail.com

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Introduction: Not Awake


It's the '50s. Oddly, you can't quite remember the year. You're a pretty ordinary person, maybe just a tad better than the average joe, with a pretty exciting life. You're a jungle explorer, a gangbuster, a private detective, a heroic scientist.

There's just one problem: you swear you've seen this all in a movie.

You can't quite put your finger on it, but reality just doesn't seem to add up anymore. Maybe it's the gaps in your memory; you don't feel like you have a real past. Maybe it's the way you suddenly "remember" someone you feel you've just met. Maybe it's the occasional moments of lost time. Or maybe it's the way you can sometimes predict what's about to happen, because it seems to be part of the "plot formula".

There's also more eerie evidence. The feeling you're being watched. The way everything seems to be connected. The way the universe seems to conspire against you any time you try to "break the plot". And those strangers in the shadows...

Whatever it is, you're going to get to the bottom of it. And you know Keeton has the answers...




Chapter 1: Overview

Out of Frame is a surreal RPG set in an apparently ordinary world of the 1950s. The players take the roles you might find in any typical B-movie of the era. What sets these characters apart from the ordinary is their self awareness; they all have the sneaking suspicion that their lives resemble a B-movie and want to find out why. They discover that their awareness lets them predict the near future, coincidentally find tools, materials and allies just when they need them, and even gain sudden access to information about other characters as if by reading directly from the movie script. What they also discover is that trying to break out of the script doesn't always work; obstacles and accidents coincidentally prevent them from "exiting the scene", enemies just happen to show up to stop them.

The player characters also discover that they aren't the only ones aware of the script. Most of the other "actors" are completely oblivious, but the mysterious Directors occasionally show up to force events back into the script. And there is also a Producer, Keeton, never seen at first, only hinted at. The more times the player characters break out of the script, the more directly the Directors and eventually Keeton himself step in.

Out of Frame is meant to be played by a game master and one to four other players. The game master (GM) takes the roles of the extras, B-movie heavies, and supporting cast, as well as the Directors and the Producer, when they finally appear. The GM also describes the world and events around the main characters. The players, of course, take the roles of the main characters; they are able to change the world through reasonable "in-world" actions, but are also able to make limited direct changes "outside the script" using the genre memory ability, described in its own chapter.

To play the game, you will need two standard six-sided dice per player, including the GM, as well as a few extra dice for the script freedom feature. You will of course need pencils and paper; players will need to create characters, either on scratch paper or on printed character sheets copied from the back of this book. The GM will need to make a few notes on heavies and supporting characters, plus potential events and situations to drop on the player characters. Also, the GM needs to follow the guidelines from the "Between the Lines" chapter to work out potential answers for the central mystery of the game.



Chapter 2: Resolution

Before creating your first characters, you need to know how characters work in the game.

If you are playing a character, you will probably want to change the fictional environment or things in it, or respond to attempts to change your character. The GM will describe situations your character encounters, and you will tell the GM what you want to do. Most actions are possible, given the right knowledge, tools, and materials. There's no uncertainty if there's enough time. For example, take cooking a meal. If you know the basic steps, have the food and cooking utensils, you can do it. If you aren't very experienced, you could theoretically burn it or otherwise ruin it, but eventually you will cook that meal. The only time there is an uncertainty is when there is a risk or challenge involved, or when time or quality is critical.

When you tell the GM what your character is doing, the GM may ask for clarification on how you are doing it (what tools you are using, any special steps, how quickly you are working.) If the GM is satisfied that a character with your background can do what you are trying to do and there's plenty of time, then the GM says, "you do it", then describes any results. If the action is impossible, the GM tells you why it's impossible; if it's impossible without minimum requirements, the GM tells you what you'd need to do it, assuming your character has the background needed to know what is required. If the character doesn't even have an appropriate background, the GM will tell you "find out how to do that first."

If your character can do the action normally, but there is a risk involved (a potential side effect or unintended consequence,) or if there's a challenge involved (something stopping you from doing the action,) or if you need to finish an action before some other event, or need to know how well you did the action, you need to roll two dice. Pick one result for the speed of the action, the other result for the action's effectiveness.

Speed is when the action happens, in numeric order. Speed 1 actions happen first, then Speed 2 actions, up to Speed 6.

Effectiveness is how powerful or well done the action is. Higher numbers are better. If there is a target or opponent resisting or defending against your action, there will be a defensive value -- basically, the target or opponent's effectiveness. If your effectiveness is higher than a target's defensive value, the action has a noticeable effect, called "damage" (even when talking about non-combat actions.) If there is no target or opponent, there is no need to compare numbers: the effectiveness is just how well the action was performed, which may be relevant when building defenses or creating situations.

The reason why you need to know how to roll dice and resolve actions before actually creating a character is because characters are mainly defined by stats, which affect dice results, and backgrounds, which provide bonuses and determine what actions you can take. Stats will be described in detail in the next chapter, but for now, you need to know that if a stat applies to a particular situation, it can be used in place of Speed (if it's a speed rating) or in place of effectiveness (if it's a power rating.) If you roll a 3 Speed when trying to notice and react to danger, but you have a Mental Speed of 2, you can use the 2 instead of the 3. If you roll a 4 effectiveness when trying to stop a rolling vehicle, but you have a Physical Power of 5, you can use the 5 instead of the 4.

On the other hand, there's experience. If you perform an action that requires experience, the number of years of experience you have in a relevant background equals the maximum die roll possible. For basic instinctive actions like stopping the rolling vehicle with sheer muscle power, experience doesn't matter, but for actually maneuvering a car during a chase, 3 years of driving experience is going to be limiting.

If you have more than 6 years experience and you are competing with someone with less experience, you get a +1 to your effectiveness. If your competitor has more experience, add +1 to the competitor's defensive value. Thus, if you are a long-time cabbie (10 years experience) and you are being chased by a getaway driver for the mob (8 years experience,) neither of you will have limitations on your die rolls, but you will have a slight edge.

Other things can give you or your opponent an edge. Tools, for example. If you have a special tool for a job that could be done barehanded, it adds +1 to effectiveness. If the job requires a tool, but you have a better quality tool, it adds the same +1. This could apply to a high-quality socket wrench, for a mechanic, or an excellent library, for a researcher. It could even apply to temporary conditions, like dashing into a crowd when fleeing on foot. It could even apply to an opponent's temporary disadvantages, such as fleeing on foot from someone after bashing his kneecap.

If a target or opponent has a tool or advantage that protects it, such as firing a revolver at someone hiding behind cover, your effectiveness must be higher than the defensive value of the tool or advantage; if it is, your effectiveness must also be higher than the target's defensive value +1. Defenses form layers rather than adding together directly. This allows some detailed results (the bullet punches through the door but is stopped by a large steamer trunk.)


If a tool is overwhelmingly better than the material it is being used against, such as firing a bullet through an ordinary glass window, ignore the defensive value, or add +7 to your effectiveness. If the material is overwhelmingly better than the tool used on it, ignore effectiveness, or add +7 to defensive value. This means that guns injure people automatically unless they have appropriate cover or use some other defense, like evasive maneuvers or spoiling the gunman's aim.

Risks were mentioned briefly. A risk is any action that may have an unintended negative side effect. The GM may decide that any action that is almost, but not quite, impossible carries a risk. Some unusual actions, like script breaking and using genre memory (described in a future chapter) are always risky, which means they always require rolling the dice. If the genre of your B-movie world is sci-fi or horror, using mad science technology or supernatural powers are inherently risky as well.

You and the GM agree on the risk, if it isn't already set in the rules. If you think the risk is too great, or the GM doesn't think you're risking enough, you don't take the action at all; think of something else to do, or suggest another risk. The risk must be something undesirable for you, the risk taker, but it must also be something that could conceivably happen whether or not your action is effective. Once you agree with the GM on a risk, roll the dice and figure out speed and effectiveness, as normal. In addition, if you rolled doubles (the dice match,) the risk takes effect.

In addition to special circumstances that promote risks, you can risk a tool or situational advantage, or even a background you haven't used yet on this action to get a reroll. Rerolls don't undo your initial roll, they add to it. Thus, if your action was ineffective, you have to describe how you are using your tool, situational advantage, or other background to try to change the situation. Likewise, you can boost an already effective action by describing what you are doing to make your initial action more effective. You can only risk something once, and in this case the risk must have something to do with the tool or advantage. You might risk losing your grip on a knife, for example. Roll an additional die and add it to the original effectiveness. If the two effectiveness dice match, the risk is triggered. You can take other risks to keep rerolling that additional die and boosting your effectiveness, but once a risk is triggered, you have to stop. Each reroll adds +1 to Speed, so all the Speed 1 actions are resolved, then rerolls of Speed 1 actions occur simultaneously with Speed 2 actions, then further rerolls of Speed 1 and Speed 2 happen simultaneously with Speed 3 actions, and so on.

What about damage? Every time your effectiveness exceeds a defensive value, mark down one point of damage. If your effectiveness exceeds twice the defensive value, mark down two points, and mark three points if it exceeds three times the defensive value. If you take damage yourself, don't erase or change your stat; mark the damage on a tally sheet. Keep different tallies for different kinds of damage, like wounds, exhaustion, embarrassment, confusion. When the total damage for a given type exceeds the relevant stat, something bad and permanent happens. Wounds, for example, lead to death; exhaustion leads to collapse and defenselessness, embarrassment leads to ostracism, confusion leads to stunned ineffectiveness. Damage can only be healed by "doing damage to the damage"; the techniques and time required to do this for any given type of damage is up to the GM.



Chapter 3: Characters

By now, you are ready to create characters and get on with playing the game. Character creation is pretty simple: you set most of your stats to the default, but you do get to pick one stat and set it to any number other than 1 or 6, but if you do, you must roll a die for another stat. Then, you pick backgrounds and assign years of experience to them, adding those years to your base age. Finally, set the initial values for your special stats, genre memory and script freedom.

There are six basic stats and two special stats. One of the basic stats, Age, is pretty self-explanatory; it's your character's age in years. It is the only basic stat not rated on a 1 to 6 scale. You begin with Age 15 and add years when you select backgrounds. Backgrounds are defined as occupations and can be made up as necessary, with GM approval. There are some suggested occupations divided by genre in a future chapter, but these can be pretty flexible; just pick something that fits for a typical B-movie character. Decide how many years of experience you have in each background, then add those years to your base age. Maximum age is 50 and minimum age is 18, unless the GM wants to assign risks for actions taken by other age groups. Otherwise, age only affects the reactions of other characters, based on how they feel about particular age groups performing particular actions.

The other five basic stats are:

Resources - a combination of wealth and social status, used for purchasing equipment, getting credit, or influencing people. It's also the defensive stat for social attacks. Default is 3. Approximate status levels range from dead broke/hobo through poor, solidly middle class, high middle class, and elite, up to the millionaires (rating 6.)

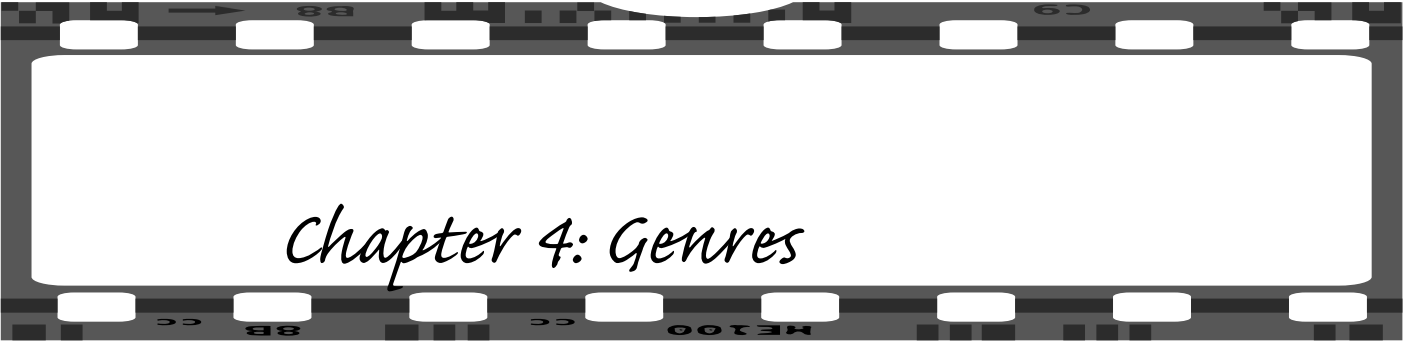
Physical - a pair of stats, one for Physical Speed (default 4) and the other for Physical Power (default 3). This covers all obviously physical actions. Power also doubles as the Physical defensive value.

Mental - another stat pair, one for Mental Speed (default 4) and the other for Mental Power (default 3). This does NOT cover conventional memory or intelligence. Players have to provide that! This is actual reaction time, sharpness of senses, and abstract ratings of comparative communication skills, awareness, and raw talent. Power is the Mental defensive value for attacks meant to confuse, distract, or deceive.

If you do not like the default scores, you can pick one stat and set it to any number other than 1 or 6. Presumably, a 2 for a Speed stat or a 5 for any other stat. However, if you take this option, you must roll one die and assign that value to another of the five basic stats. If you set a Power stat to 5, you must roll the die for a Speed stat, and vice versa. If you set Resources to 5, you must roll the die for any of the other four basic stats. You must pick which stat you are rolling for before rolling the die. You may be lucky and actually roll well, but there's always a chance you won't.

The final two stats are special. Genre Memory always starts at 1 (0 for NPCs) and Script Freedom starts at zero. These are described later, since they are related to the unique setting of the game and the way play actually progresses.

Round out your character with a name and three short descriptive phrases that distinguish your character from any other. In another setting, you'd also want to define some relationships here, but for Out of Frame, the only relationships that matter at this point are how your character knows each of the other player characters. If you want more relationships, "buy" them as backgrounds, using the number of years you've known them as the cost.



Chapter 4: Genres

You should have a basic grasp of characters and the resolution system by now, and if you've played an RPG before, you could probably wing a simple scene or two. However, playing Out of Frame needs more than a simple car chase or gun fight. This is a game about feeling trapped in a B-movie. The next step is to choose a genre.

B-movies, especially in the '50s, are heavy on genre and rarely deep. They are movies about simple but competent people struggling for simple, broadly understandable goals. There's rarely much philosophy: adventure movies are about adventure, romantic comedies are about the guy getting the gal, mysteries are about solving the crime and getting justice. Just about the only philosophy is a naive moral in a sci-fi, horror, or noir film, and even that isn't very deep. These movies are about what happens, not really about why.

This game takes place in a "movie world". It feels like a movie, to the player characters, although they can't quite name what movie. If they ask any of the extras or supporting characters, they would laugh off any suggestion that they're in a movie. And they may have a point, since the genre can in fact change, if you change location or seek out a different class of people to socialize with. But at any given moment, your character will have a general feeling that they are in a movie of a specific genre.

Selecting the initial genre, as well as a couple backup genres you might want to focus on later, is an important step. For the players, it helps narrow down what kinds of character backgrounds they should choose. For the GM, it defines possible locations, situations, and characters that might need to be prepped. The list of B-movie genres includes the following information:

Locations: typical places where scenes may occur

Situations: what normally happens in those locations

Heavies: enemies the main characters are likely to encounter

Supporting Cast: roles that might need to be filled

Professions: suggested backgrounds for main and supporting characters

All of these genres are assumed to occur on a 1950s movie world:

Action Adventure

Locations: Wilderness, Abandoned Building, Docks, Bar, Jungle, Desert, Ruins

Situations: Rescue, Disaster, Fistfight, Gunplay, Chase/Escape, Trapped

Heavies: Criminal Mastermind, Nazi, Witchdoctor, Tribal Chief

Supporting Cast: Sidekick, Love Interest, Thug, Savage

Professions: Explorer, Sailor, Hunter, Missionary, Spy

Atomic Horror

Locations: Lab, Military Base, Island, Jungle, Desert

Situations: Rampage, Struggle for Control, Infection,

Heavies: Robot, Alien, Mad Scientist, Giant Monster

Supporting Cast: Sidekick, Love Interest, Victim, Lab Assistant

Professions: Scientist, Soldier, Journalist

Comedy

Locations: Restaurant, Theater, Dinner Party, Mansion, Store

Situations: Accident, Mix Up, Inheritance, Contest

Heavies: Snob, Boss, Maitre D

Supporting Cast: Love Interest, Buddy, Store Clerk, Waiter

Professions: Socialite, any lower class

Mystery

Locations: Mansion, Hotel, Quiet Town, Ocean Liner, Train

Situations: Locked Room, Missing Clue, Suspicious Behavior

Heavies: Killer, Thief

Supporting Cast: Victim, Police, Suspect

Professions: Police/Private Detective, Socialite, Journalist

Noir

Locations: Alley, Speakeasy, Club, Docks

Situations: Heist, Blackmail, Accident

Heavies: Femme Fatale, Blackmailer, Mobster, Millionaire

Supporting Cast: Kid Brother/Sister, Thug, Cop, Journalist

Professions: Ex-Con, Prostitute, Socialite, Private Detective

Romance

Locations: Exotic Resort, Ocean Liner, Train, Club

Situations: Meet Cute, Love Triangle, Secret Illness, Banished, Mix Up

Heavies: Disapproving Parent, Rival

Supporting Cast: Confidante, Approving Parent

Professions: Socialite, Doctor, Lawyer, any trade

War

Locations: Trench, Bomb Shelter, Mine Field, Bunker, Hospital, Airfield, Outpost

Situations: Air Raid, Strike Force, Escort, Advance, Retreat, Rescue

Heavies: Nazi, Enemy Officer

Supporting Cast: Spy, Sarge, Prisoner, Buddy

Professions: Soldier, Sailor, Pilot

A couple genres are special. Westerns are obviously a different time period than the '50s, but it's possible to recast Action Adventure, War, and several of the other genres above in the Old West. It's also possible to run a western-themed adventure in the '50s as well; these add the obvious profession option of "Cowboy". Likewise, Gothic Horror can either be played in the '50s or in an earlier time period, with the heavies Vampire, Werewolf, and Witch. Sci-Fi can be used as a modifier, recasting the whole era in a faux retro-future.

For any sci-fi or supernatural genre, unusual abilities and inventions can be modeled using scaling: weird science or the supernatural is always assumed to be overwhelmingly more effective than equivalent ordinary material, tool or defense. It is also always risky, requiring a die roll.



Chapter 5: Script Control

Before getting into how the game master should set up and run the game, it's time to delve deeper into the way the movie world works. What makes it different from the real world, the world the characters can't quite remember?

The Script.

There isn't literally a script. The GM does not write out scripted events, nor are the results of the characters' actions pre-determined. However, the way events unfold around the characters seems to resemble a formulaic plot from a movie. If the characters go on an expedition to Africa, there will be a plane crash, or an attack by Nazi rivals, or a native uprising. If you find out your boss has a gun in his desk, he will use it soon. If a scientist tells you there's an off-chance something might go wrong with the latest experiment, it will go wrong. Nothing happens without introducing drama or challenge.

But more importantly, it's difficult to deviate from this unknown script. Something seems to force events to stick to the current perceived genre. Any time a character attempts an action that the GM decides doesn't fit the genre, such as moving to a location that doesn't match the genre, skipping a scene without resolving it, or befriending a heavy, the action is treated as a risk; you must roll for the action, even if it's normally easy to accomplish. If the risk is triggered, you gain a temporary penalty called script inertia, a group-level stat that the GM tracks.

The effectiveness of your genre-breaking action is added to the current script inertia, which always begins at zero. This then becomes a temporary defensive value for normally trivial actions that break genre. When you try to leave the room instead of finishing an argument in a dramatic moment, the door sticks; if you make it out the door, the elevator is out of order. Coincidence after coincidence crops up to force your character back into the genre. Script inertia also acts as a protective layer to any target or opponent for out-of-genre attacks. If you're stuck in a romance and decide to just shoot your love interest, the gun jams unless your effectiveness exceeds the script inertia. Furthermore, each additional genre-breaking action is treated as a risk that could escalate script inertia.

The only way to erase script inertia is to damage it. Any time the GM rolls doubles for an NPC action, the script takes one point of damage. Any time the player character performs an in-genre action, compare the action's effectiveness to the current script inertia; if it exceeds the script inertia, the script takes a point of damage. Once you've done damage equal to the current value of script inertia, it drops back to zero -- and you gain a point of Script Freedom.

Script Freedom is a spendable stat. As mentioned during character creation, it begins at zero. Once you begin to acquire it, you can spend one point to gain a risk-free reroll, which can be used to boost an ordinary action or to damage script inertia using out-of-genre actions. Once spent, a point of Script Freedom is permanently lost and must be regained by overcoming script inertia. Using Script Freedom to enable you to break script and physically leave a scene or go to an out-of-genre location is called "going out of frame"; it's as if someone were making a movie and you choose to simply not stand within the view of the camera. Whenever this happens, the genre changes; you're no longer in an action adventure movie, you're in a comedy, or a romance, or a horror movie -- whatever genre fits the location you move to or the action you next attempt.

There's another way to interact directly with the script, besides breaking it: use it to your advantage. This is called "genre memory", and it, too, is inherently risky. Your character has a Genre Memory stat, which acts like a limit rather than a minimum score; in other words, it's a measure of your experience with the script itself. You begin with a Genre Memory of 1. You can attempt the following Genre Memory-based actions:

Prediction is knowing what is going to happen next, as if you've read ahead in the script. It gives you a bonus to your next action equal to your roll, maximum bonus equal to your Genre Memory.

Backstory is knowing useful information about a location, object, event, or another character without being told or otherwise learning the facts. It creates a temporary advantage that can be used for a +1 bonus on relevant actions. The quality or defensive value of the advantage is equal to your roll, maximum value equal to your Genre Memory.

Coincidence is finding the exact tool or material you need, when you need it, even though there was no way you could have known in advance where that tool could have been. The quality or defensive value of the tool is equal to your roll, maximum value equal to your Genre Memory.

For any Genre Memory roll, there is a risk. What that risk is depends on the value of another group stat tracked by the GM: Genre Awareness. This begins at zero and defines how close you are to solving the central mystery of the movie world. If the current Genre Awareness score is less than the number you rolled for Genre Memory, something eerie happens which might interfere with your future actions. You might be distracted by the sound of film running through an invisible projector or a creepy feeling of being watched. A phone may suddenly ring, attracting attention; if you answer the phone, there's dead air.

If Genre Awareness is more than or equal to the number you rolled, you get an eerie visitor: a creepy-looking stranger dressed in black known as a Director. Exactly what a Director does in the current scene depends on what the GM decides Directors are and what they want; early visits from Directors should be ambiguous about whether they are friend or foe. Directors are otherwise normal human beings, but they are defined as genreless and outside the script, so Genre Memory and Script Freedom can't be used against them, nor can any action against them affect script inertia. Also, they can't be stopped; they can enter locked rooms, find you in remote locations, and even come back from the dead, until they are done visiting you. Otherwise, they have no special powers.

If Genre Awareness is more than 7 and your roll is less than your Genre Memory, you get a contact from the Producer instead. Your first contacts will be indirect: a telegram providing cryptic information, signed "Keeton". A phone call from the same mysterious Keeton, expressing uncanny knowledge about your current situation. Again, whether Keeton the Producer helps you or hinders you depends on what the GM decides Keeton really is and what he wants. He may be the boss of the Directors, or may be working against them. He may be your best friend. He may be a former main character like yourself who finally escaped.

When your Genre Awareness goes up to 9, contacts from Keeton become more direct. Someone hiding in the shadows may speak to you with a familiar voice. You will never see his face, however, until you have Genre Awareness 10. At that point, you can also attempt to use Genre Memory to locate or contact Directors or the Producer yourself, and you enter the end game.

How does Genre Memory or Genre Awareness go up? Any time you are affected by an eerie side effect or when a Director or the Producer take action, the GM rolls two dice as if this were a risky action. If the GM's effective roll is less than or equal to your current Genre Memory, your stat increases by 1. If the GM rolls doubles, Genre Awareness increases by 1.



Chapter 6: The Central Mystery

If you are the game master, then before the game can begin, you must decide the basics of the mystery. Are the characters in a movie, or some other fictional setting? Why? Are the characters even real? Who are the Directors, and the Producer, really? What do they want?

You don't have to work out a detailed backstory on how everything came to be; in fact, it's better to work out the details during play. But you must have a general idea of where investigation of the central mystery will lead. At the very least, you need to know how the Directors and the Produce really feel about the player characters and the mystery. Do they want the characters to fail, or to succeed? Do they agree with each other? Is it possible to change their mind?

The four main details that need to be worked out beforehand are: the relationship of the real world to the B-movie world; the relationship of the characters to both worlds; the nature and desires of the Directors; and the nature and desires of the Producer. Here are the options for all four.

Real World vs. Movie World

Which world is real, and how do they relate to each other?

There is no real world: It's all a conspiracy. The "movie world" is the real world, but something is interfering with either natural events or the perceptions of the characters. Any memories of the "real" world are false, but may be based on deep insight into reality, or may be a clue to what the Directors or the Producer are up to. Script inertia is a manifestation of the secret plot. The player characters' goals will focus on the actions of the Directors and the Producer, and how to respond to them: join the conspiracy, fight it, or change it?

There is no movie world: It's all in the character's head. The movie world is a dream or hallucination. If it's a dream, the player characters may be asleep or in a coma. If it's a hallucination, the player characters' actions have an analog in the real world, either as muttered commentary, or physical acting out. This works well with the Directors and Producer as figments of the PCs' imagination, fragments of their personality, or analogs of doctors or other real-world people. Script

inertia isn't caused by an outside force, it's a symptom of the characters' condition. The player characters' goals will focus on waking up or returning to sanity.

The movie world depends on the real world: It's not all in the character's head. The movie world is still a fiction of some kind, but it is being caused by an outside force, possibly represented by either the Directors, the Producer, or both. The movie world could be a virtual reality created by science or the supernatural, may be the result of hypnotic suggestion, might be a facade for a prison. Script inertia in this case is a deliberate action by the outside force to prevent return to the real world. The player characters' goals will focus on escape.

The movie world parallels the real world: Both worlds are real. The characters have travelled from one to the other and forgotten where they came from. This may be a parallel universe, another planet, or the afterlife. Script inertia might be nearly anything: the plot of an outside force, the natural law of the new universe, or subconscious sabotage by the player characters themselves. The player characters' goals will focus on recovering their memories and deciding which world they want to live in.

The real world depends on the movie world: Everything the characters know is wrong. The real world was the virtual reality, or the facade, or Plato's Cave, and the characters somehow escaped or awakened, but they haven't fully adjusted to the change. If they weren't supposed to wake up or escape, script inertia is part of a plot to keep them from recovering fully. If they weren't expected to wake up, script inertia is a really bad hangover. If they were awakened deliberately, script inertia is a clever therapy technique, interference by an opposing force, or perhaps subconscious resistance. The player characters' goals will focus on becoming more aware, escaping any opposing forces, and possibly waking others back in the real world.

Characters vs. The World

Who are the characters, really? And how did they get where they are?

The characters aren't real: The character is a lie. They've forgotten their real selves, and who they think they are is the result of brainwashing or delusion. This obviously works well with "There is no movie world" or "The movie world depends on the real world", but it can work with "There is no real world" as well: the characters were brainwashed as part of a plot, and the side effect is a perception that the world is unreal, their roles a sham.

The characters are real: The script is a lie. The hints that they might not really be who they are is a side effect of something else. The feeling that it's all scripted is just the only way the characters can make sense of prescient feelings or heightened awareness of what's happening around them. Obviously works best with

“There is no real world”, but can work with a delusional movie world or one of the other two world options if the two worlds closely resemble each other.

The characters aren't the characters: The character is a body snatcher, or the victim of one. Alternately, the character is a clone of the real-world counterpart and acquired hints of other memories by mistake. Outside forces are trying to cover up the switch. This works well with “The movie world parallels the real world” or either of the dependent world relationships. If paired with “There is no real world”, the character's personality is a fictional construct, perhaps created because of an accident that destroyed the real personality.

The characters aren't whole: The character has two lives, possibly simultaneously. This could be because of reincarnation or multiple copies in multiple worlds. The unreal feeling is caused by bleed-through from the other personality. This works best with any of the three concepts where both worlds are real.

The Directors

Who are the Directors, and what do they want? What is their relationship to script inertia?

The Directors aren't real: They are figments of the characters' imagination, perhaps signs of a slide back into delusion, or signs of shaking off the script. It doesn't matter if they are helping or hindering the characters' efforts; what really matters is seeing them at all.

The Directors are oppressive: They are the script's minions. The characters' memory loss is their doing, and they will maintain it.

The Directors are liberators: They are the script's opponents. As the characters break free of the script more and more, they are able to catch glimpses of the people helping them behind the scenes and perhaps receive direct assistance.

The Directors are observers: They are studying the script. It doesn't really bother them if the characters break free, but they may actively prevent the characters from truly destroying the script.

The Directors are a side effect: They are created or summoned by the unraveling of the script. If it turns out the script is a good thing, it's probably a protection against the Directors.

Keeton, The Producer

Who is Keeton, really? What does he want, and what is his connection to the two worlds? Several of the answers below can actually be mixed.

The Producer isn't real: There is no governor. Keeton is a delusion, perhaps encouraged by the Directors or by someone else. Or, Keeton is part of the characters' psyche, an archetype, symbol, or split personality. Recognizing that the messages from Keeton are fake is part of the solution to the mystery.

The Producer is a mask: Keeton is the Wizard of Oz, and there are multiple men behind the curtain. The people behind Keeton are deceiving the characters, either because they don't trust the characters or cannot be trusted themselves. Revealing who is behind Keeton and whether they are up to good or ill is instrumental in stopping them, or assisting them.

The Producer is real: Keeton knows where the characters came from, and may be the key to getting the characters back. Following the script prevents contact with Keeton.

The Producer is the scriptwriter: Keeton brought the characters into the world, and can take them out of it, but probably doesn't want to. Script inertia prevents the characters from escaping Keeton.

The Producer is asleep: Keeton isn't aware there's a script. The more the characters fight against the script and come closer to being awake themselves, the more awake Keeton is. Keeton may in fact be someone the characters are bringing up to their own level of awareness, rather than someone more aware than they.



Chapter 7: Design Notes

Out of Frame was my project as part of the Rob Lang/1KM1KT.net 2009 24-Hour Game competition. Out of a list of required topics, I chose “B-Movie Oblivion”, and I decided to take the idea literally: the players would play characters in what appeared to be a B-movie from the ‘50s, and actual oblivion (forgetfulness) would play a major role.

Part of my inspiration for the idea was an early Frederick Pohl short story, “The Tunnel Under the World”, which has also been adapted to radio and to an EC Comics story. In it, a man wakes up to realize that everything in his life has been replaced, but no one seems to notice that everything has changed. The movie “Dark City” owes a great deal to Pohl’s story, although it adds a strong noir style, creepy aliens, and a messianic theme.

Another influence was Woody Allen’s “The Purple Rose of Cairo”, where a character in a B-movie becomes self-aware, talks to a woman in the audience, and then steps off the screen and out of the film. The other characters in the B-movie become self-aware after the main character’s escape; they worry about what this means for them -- what are they supposed to do if they can’t continue the plot? What will happen if someone turns off the projector?

There’s also a little bit of the Twilight Zone episode “Five Characters in Search of an Exit”, at least in terms of amnesiac characters recognizing the unreality of their situation and trying to escape from it. Another lesser influence was Craig Shaw Gardner’s Cineverse Cycle (Slaves of the Volcano God, Bride of the Slime Monster, Revenge of the Fluffy Bunnies.) Specifically, the concept of genre awareness.

I decided my approach to the idea wouldn’t include the “script changes” of the Pohl story or “Dark City”. Aside from the initial event that tampers with the player characters’ memories and sets up the “B-movie universe”, the world around the PCs does not suddenly and mysteriously change; the mysterious forces interfering with the PCs’ lives attempt to enforce the script, but only through actions that fit the script. The way the script is enforced is through coincidental events and script inertia.

I included the Strangers from “Dark City”, renaming them to the Directors and stripping them of their powers; their only unusual abilities are their awareness of the script and their ability to track the player characters. Likewise, the player characters don’t have any powers that don’t fit the script other than those related to genre memory and general script awareness. Genre memory is a very toned-down version of the genre manipulation seen in the Cineverse books; again, it’s a way to create coincidences, not a way to acquire super powers.

Unlike “Dark City”, Out of Frame is not necessarily noir, although it can turn noirish. And unlike the Cineverse Cycle, there aren’t separate universes for each genre. There’s one universe, which sort of feels like the real universe, and it contains many events that could fit within one genre or another.

In addition to the above guidelines, I didn’t want to predefine the mystery behind the setting; that would have required a GM-only section of the rules, which guarantees possibility of spoilers. So, instead, I defined types of events (script inertia, intervention by the Directors, and communication from Keeton) and specified rules on when these events occur. Everything else about the mystery is GM-determined and could actually be fluid.

The mechanics for Out of Frame are similar to those I’ve used in another game I created for a recent RPG design challenge (Resist the Atom!) They are the latest iteration of some basic rules I’ve tinkered with in several designs. To tailor the rules for Out of Frame, I stripped down the number of basic stats from ten to six, added the genre memory and script freedom stats, and defined rules for script inertia and Director/Producer intervention.

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Out of Frame character sheet

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Player Name

Physical

Speed

Power

Character Name

Mental

**Distinguishing
Behaviors or
Appearance**

Speed

Power

Resources

Age

**Genre
Memory**

**Script
Freedom**

**Equipment, Allies,
and Notes**

Backgrounds