The Strongest Link

A Game of Conviction, Cooperation, and Betrayal

By Paul Vogt

They say a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, but few consider the power of the strongest link. When we form teams or committees to make big important decisions, whether in the government to make broad sweeping decisions that affect millions of people or during a gaming session to decide what board game to pull out next, groups all have their own procedures and processes for making the best decision possible. People long for countless different things both concrete and abstract, and it's these motivations that move people to argue one way or another.

The Strongest Link (SL) is a game of fierce competition amongst players as they strive to prove to each other that their character is the most important member of the group by convincing the others that the object of their lust is the most important one to pursue. Players will participate in group discussions over the course of four game rounds of play in which they will act out the roles of their respective characters to try to convince the other players to lend their support to their cause.

The Strongest Link is political in nature and exists outside the realm of any one genre or setting.

The Players

The game is does not include a Game Master (GM) to the extent that the players dictate the direction of play under the assistance of a Director. The Director's role is very different from that of the standard GM. The Director should be very familiar with the rules and the phases as listed below. The Director earns his name because he is the one who has the responsibility of moving the phases forward, but mechanically speaking, he has no extra power to determine the outcome of the game from any other player.

Given the interaction between players through out a game of SL, I recommend five players (including the Director), but it is possible to play with as few as three. You'll be making a lot of decisions throughout the course of the game that affects other players, and there's a lot of opportunity for backstabbing and betrayal.Iit helps to have more players involved with whom to conspire.

Phases of the Game
Phase 1: Character Creation
Phase 2: Declaration of Motivation
Phase 3: Round Play
Phase 4: The Final Tally

Before the Game Begins

Supplies

Before your game of SL can begin, you need to make sure you and your group have done a couple of things. First, you'll want to make sure you have an ample supply of tokens, coins, or scraps of paper to play the game. From here out, I'll be referring to these simply as tokens. You should have tokens of two different colors which are easily distinguishable from each other at a glance (black and white tokens work well). You should prepare enough tokens so that each player can have two of each color. *For example*: if you have five players, you should make sure to have ten red tokens and ten blue tokens and give two red and two blue tokens to each player.

In addition to tokens, you should have at least two note cards and pencils for each player. You'll be using these through out each of the phases, so keep them handy for all players at all times.

You will also want a watch or timer to keep track of how long you spend on each aspect of the game rounds during Phase 3.

Genre and Goal

Before you begin Phase 1, you should all as a group decide what genre and overall goal you're going to be playing towards for your game of SL. Discuss with your fellow players what kind of trappings you'd like your SL game to have. Maybe you want to be competing spaceship designers working towards picking the best design with which to pursue that big fat government contract. Maybe you're trying to decide which treasure to pursue first in a dungeon exploration where riches of both gold and arcane knowledge are hidden. Perhaps you're all playing movie producers for one of the big studios and hope to pick out the best pet project to pitch to the studio head.

The Strongest Link is about how we make decisions as a group without exploring how successful the overall decision is in reaching the group's goal. You all work to come up with a goal to work towards, but when it gets interesting is in where your individual character stakes his flag and is willing to put everything he's got into backing it.

Phase 1: Character Generation

Characters in SL are defined by the object of their desire. They lust over a certain concept that compels them to act and fight to see it shine above all other concepts. All characters share a common ground and have the same amount of prestige as all the other players. The characters stand as equals to each other. This doesn't mean that they're friendly to each other, or that they have met before. Maybe they're all meeting each other for the first time, or perhaps they're all bitter rivals that have been ordered to brainstorm and come up with the best option to tackle an unsolvable problem.

Regardless of the occupation or role of the characters, they all share two common factors. Every character has a name and every character has a motivation. Further, each character must have a unique name and a unique motivation in the group. It is crucial that each player is arguing for a motivation only their character possesses. If there is overlap, say two characters both desire the route that leads to the biggest pile of cash, then the motivation of wealth will easily outweigh any other motivation at the table. To make sure each player has a unique name and motivation, starting with the Director, each player chooses their character's factors in turn clockwise around the table. Ultimately this game is about competing over which single person has the best idea, not which players have the best idea. There can be only one winner! Remember though, you are a team and ultimately are able to make a stronger decision as a group than a single person following a gut feeling.

There is a plethora of motivations a player can choose from for their character. Listed below are just some of the options, but you are encouraged to think up motivations for yourself. Motivations should be something that drives your character on a primal level they simply can't ignore. If you're playing a fantasy game, for example, your character could lust for gold and riches, rare magical artifacts, personal glory and fame, or the love of a good orc woman. Looking at that list again we can reduce those fantasy-trapped desires to greater motivators experienced by people around the world: Status, Power, Honor, or Romance.

Below you can find a list of the applicable 16 basic human motivations as identified by Professor Steven Reiss in his book, *Who am I: The 16 basic desires that motivate our actions and define our personalities*

Acceptance	Curiosity
Honor	Idealism
Independence	Order
Power	Romance
Collecting	Companionship
Status	Tranquility
Vengeance	

When you pick your motivation, the thing your character lusts for in life, give it some context and extend it naturally towards a more concrete item.. In the example of the dungeon crawl discussion, Romance could be expanded to choose the route that saves the princess or will win back the heart of an ex-lover. In the example of the group of movie producers trying to pick their next project, Vengeance could mean picking the film project that you actively know and argue to be the worst option because you want to get revenge on the studio due to poor handling of your last project.

IMPORTANT: Players are instructed to throw their support behind the motivation they think is the best and not necessarily the idea that goes along with it. The studio executives probably want to make the most money off of their next project as is possible, but maybe the player who argues for his character's vengeance is so thoroughly convincing that the players end up

going that route. They take a loss overall, but at least they went with their guts and came to the conclusion that the vengeance was more important than any other driving force in regards to their decision-making process.

Phase 2: Declaration of Motivation

Once everyone has chosen a name and motivation for their character, each player takes a turn at sharing these with the group and giving whatever background details are necessary to give context to where their motivation lies. Players should **not** involve other players' characters in their character's background unless the other player says it's okay to do so. If any other player takes objection to how the motivation and context of a character interacts, a public vote is immediately taken amongst players on whether to allow the questionable content. Tie votes mean the content stays in.

Name and motivation, with a few context keywords if necessary are then written on a note card and placed out front for all to see. I recommend taking a 3 x 5 note card, folding it in half lengthwise so it can stand up like a name plate, and writing the character name and motivation on both sides of the fold. You can now move on to Phase 3 and the real meat of the game.

Phase 3: Round Play

At this point, the Director should make sure that each player has two of each color of token (for a total of four tokens each). Everyone knows the setting of the discussion, each character's name, and their motivation. Every player should also have another note card or piece of paper they can use throughout the four rounds of this phase. At the beginning of this round the Director declares one color of token to be positive and the other color to be negative. So in essence, every player has two positive votes and two negative votes. Players should sit in a circle either on the floor or at a table.

Preconceptions
Before the four game rounds begin, each player must choose one of their four tokens to give to another player. The token can either be positive or negative and must be given to a player to the left or a player to the right. Passing Tokens at this point is to show support toward another player's character's motivation and context and represents the preconceptions characters bring to a decision-making process without having heard any arguments. This also serves to make the game interesting right from the start as each player will have had to put support or shown their distaste for another player's character's motivation and makes the game political immediately.

When I refer to **Passing Tokens** for this part of the phase as well as below follow this process:

1. Each player, in secret, chooses a character and writes his or her name on the note card (if you can't remember the name of the character, rather than asking or try to be sneaky and look,

write down the name of the player instead).

2. Each player, in secret, writes either a "+" or a "-" (plus or minus) next to the name. This indicates which color you'll be passing to the character chosen in number 1.

3. When a player has chosen, he places the note card face-down in front of him and does not discuss who they chose - it's a secret!

4. Once all players have their note card face down in front of them, the Director tells everyone to reveal their choice.

5. Starting with the Director and then going clockwise around the table. Each player says the name of the character/player he chose, shows the + or -, and gives that player the appropriate token. Tokens given to players from other players should be placed in front of the name card for all to see and so as not to mix them with the tokens the player still has to pass to other players.

Game Rounds

Once preconceptions are placed, the group will play through four game rounds. Each game round is played in the following manner as moderated by the Director:

1. Discussion: Players discuss the results of Passing Tokens from the previous turn (or from the preconceptions if this is the first game round) for up to five minutes. They may also role-play from their point of view to try to persuade other players to take actions in a specific way for the coming Passing Tokens step.

2 Wheeling and Dealing: Players break away from the group and may talk to any other player in private for up to five minutes. Players must role-play during these conversations to cut deals or try to influence other players. If a player says they don't want to talk to you during this step, walk away and either find someone else to talk to or sit down back at the table, allowing others to discuss their dealings in secret and privacy with each other.

3. Passing Tokens: See the instructions under Preconceptions for details on how to run this step. Depending on which game round it is, players may have constrictions on who they may pass a token to:

> *Round 1*: Players may pass a token to anyone other player.
> *Round 2*: Players may pass a token only to a player to their left or their right.
> *Round 3*: Players may pass a token to anyone other player.
> *Round 4*: Players may pass a token only to a player to their left or their right.

The steps above outline one complete game round, so once steps 1 through 3 have been completed in four cycles, this phase is complete. You will notice that there are five opportunities during Phase 3 for players to pass a token to another player but that each player only has four total tokens to pass. This is intentional. **Players must pass a token to another player during**

Preconceptions, but during the four game rounds, players must choose one game round in which they do not pass a token to any other player. When a player decides not to pass a token, they simply write a dash for the name and type of token to be passed. Players must pass all four of their tokens within the opportunities allowed them during this phase and may not pass a token to their own character.

Once all four game rounds have been completed, move on to Phase 4 and the end of the game.

Phase 4: The Final Tally

Winning the Game
At this point in the game, each player will likely have at least one token if not many more placed in front of them. Starting with the Director and going clockwise around the table, each player subtracts the number of - colored tokens from the number of + colored tokens to get their final tally for their character and announces it to the group. The player who has amassed the highest final tally is the winner of the game, and his character's motivation and context win out over those of every other character.

Tie Breakers
If there is a tie, the Director will allow for each tying player to make a one minute closing argument for their character (going clockwise starting with the Director), and holds a final secret vote. Each player writes the name of the player or character they want to win in secret, and all players simultaneously reveal their vote (in the same fashion as Passing Tokens is done in secret), with the player with the most votes winning. If there is still a tie, the tied players play a best two out of three game of Rock-Paper-Scissors to determine the winner. Essentially, dumb luck and a small amount of strategy is what is needed to help the group make their final decision at this point.

Discussion
After the final tally is taken, allow the group some time to go over the decisions that were made in the game. Discuss why you went one way or another and what contributed to your decision-making process. Speculate on the effects of the path chosen by the group.

Would it turn out well for the group? What kind of difficulties could you face going in the winning direction versus the direction that no one supported? What do you wish you could have done differently to win the support of your fellow players? What could have made you change your mind during one of the rounds? What determined the round you didn't pass the token to anyone?

Sample Note Card/Character Sheet

Character Name: Joey Dice
Motivation: Honor
Context: To design the game, *Amazons Slinging Chain Guns* which will impress all the other game designers at the Forge.

Preconception
Character: Token:

Round 1
Character: Token:

Round 2
Character: Token:

Round 3
Character: Token:

Round 4
Character: Token:

Final Tally:

About the Game

The Strongest Link is my first attempt at designing a 24-hour RPG for the Forge. Authors must choose two themes from the following list: Amazons Lust Chains Queen. I chose to go with Chains and Lust. I was inspired by the aspect of many individuals making up the whole that chains had to offer. The struggle of each link, or team members in the case of The Strongest Link, is competing to have their individual goal supported by the group. The game is heavily inspired by the board game Diplomacy with its alliance-making and backstabbing, both themes I find to be quite compelling in tabletop games. This is the first full game I've designed, although I've been working on a complex sci-fi setting with a fairly straight-forward engine for over a year now.

This game was developed in about five hours from start to finish. If you took the time to read this, or God forbid actually *played* the thing, I would love to hear some feedback. You can send any comments to TheHopelessGamer@gmail.com and check out my gaming blog at The Hopeless Gamer. Thanks!