

THE FIASCO COMPANION

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BOILERPLATE

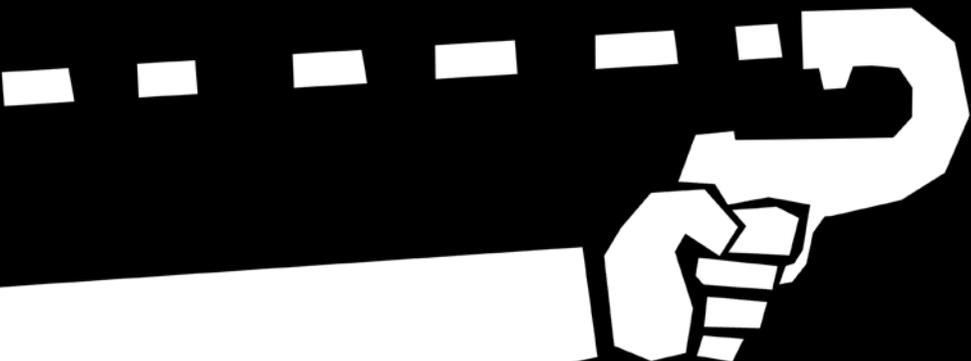
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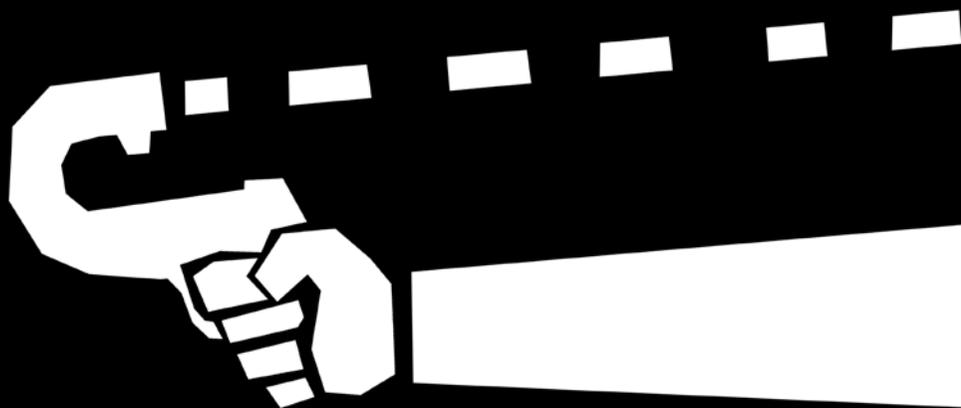


A WORD OF WARNING

This isn't a game—it's a book of commentary about a game. You need to have read, and ideally played, *Fiasco* for some of this to make sense. Some parts can be generalized, but a copy of *Fiasco* is an incredibly wise investment in your future happiness.

THANKS

...to David Artman, Joe Beason, Chris Bennett, Dave Cleaver, Jesse Coombs, Colin Creitz, Jim Crocker, Steve Dempsey, Pete Figtree, Cheyenne Grimes, MJ Harnish, Will Hindmarch, David Humphreys, Andrew Kenrick, Daniel Krashin, Anna Kreider, Leo Lalande, E. Tage Larsen, Sage LaTorra, Jay Loomis, Todd Love, Dan Luxenberg, Ryan Macklin, Marc Majcher, Franck Michaux, Marshall Miller, Brian Minter, Mike Montesa, Clinton R. Nixon, Mario Perez, Nathan Regener, Phil Sbzine, Scott Slomiany, Paul Tevis, Gregor Vuga, Nick Wedig, Charlton Wilbur, Autumn Winters, and Jenn Wong.



SNITCHES

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Nathan Russell, nathanrussell.net

Wil Wheaton, wilwheaton.typepad.com

KNUCKLEHEADS

These old *Fiasco* hands didn't trust us to tell it like it is. You'll see their valuable thoughts and opinions inserted throughout the text.

Chris "Jenkins" Bennett, David "I'm with the Senator" Berg, Kate "Ghost Scorpion" Bullock, Ewen "Lazybones Magic Circus" Cluney, Colin "Bathtub full of sick" Creitz, Pete "This looked good on paper" Douglas, Stephen "Dr. Hook" Granade, Ryan Fucking Macklin, Marc "We're here to help you" Majcher, Marshall "Pengu" Miller, Brian "I need a special doctor" Minter, Paul "Greaseman" Tevis, Remi "Horse murderer" Treuer, Graham "One Eye" Walmsley, Nick "The boat is still on fire" Wedig, and Charlton "Is that a hawk?" Wilbur.

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**PART
ONE**



**BEEHIVE
TETHERBALL**



HOW TO PLAY FIASCO LIKE A FRICKIN' CHAMP

There's a difference between a failure and a fiasco. A failure is merely the absence of success. Any fool can achieve failure. But a fiasco is a disaster of epic proportions. A fiasco is a folk tale told to others to make other people feel more alive because it didn't happen to them.

Drew Baylor, Elizabethtown

Learning to play *Fiasco* isn't very difficult; the rules are minimal and emulate great cinema by design, making the process of play feel almost intuitive. We all know what movies look like, how the camera-work and pacing of the scenes help to tell the story, and most *Fiasco* players unconsciously put that knowledge to use during a game. However, in the following section we'll put the spotlight on suggestions for dealing with common problems and a selection of excellent narrative tools that can really set your next game on fire.

DO NOT
MARRY
HER



LESSONS FROM IMPROV

It should come as no surprise to anyone who has played *Fiasco* that it has deep roots in improvisational performance. For that reason, many of the best tools for playing the game are borrowed from improv. Some of them will also look familiar to any experienced game-master.

Because *Fiasco* has no central GM, the best games happen when everyone at the table uses these tools and actively participates in every scene. The easiest way to make that happen at your table is to demonstrate these techniques yourself.

ROLLING WITH THE PUNCHES

Playing *Fiasco* is about as social an activity as you can engage in with your clothes on. You're speaking and listening carefully, you're making yourself vulnerable by spontaneously creating and opening yourself up for criticism, and you're doing all these things while navigating the ordinary mix of culture and hierarchy that comes with participating in any group. And you might be doing all this with strangers.

It demands a lot of trust.

You need to be confident that your table-mates are bringing the same enthusiasm, energy, and devilish creativity to the game that you are. Everyone wants to succeed, and shared fun is the metric of that success.

You also need to be confident in your own native genius. You know how to tell a story, you know how to work with others, you know how to take turns and follow rules, and you know what you like. That's more than enough!

So you trust your table, you're brimming with self-confidence, and you're primed and ready to have fun. The rest—trust me—is gravy. The following techniques build on that base of trust to help you get the most out of your game.

PACING

I think I've underestimated you, Ned. You've started using your incompetence as a weapon.

Peter, Body Heat

Fiasco mechanically reinforces a very specific story arc, but within that framework there are absolutely no constraints on how the game is paced. You can play sessions that go from one scene to the next like clockwork, or you can play trippy sessions that time-jump all over the place. You can have scenes that run in every possible direction, involving every character, different locations, and multiple conflicts. Alternately, you might choose to set aside conflict and focus the spotlight on one particularly potent moment or image.

The message here is that variety is good, and if you're paying attention you can adapt your scenes to the energy in the room and the energy in the story. If things are frantic, slow it down. If things are lagging, punch it up.

“Sooner rather than later” is great *Fiasco* advice in general. Making a few serious early commitments empowers everyone at the table, especially when it comes to establishing the characters. Waiting around to see if your guy is a bad-ass or not means we may never find out. —Colin Creitz

Just make sure, however you pace your scenes, that they're about things that matter. Look at movies for good examples of scene framing; start your scene in the middle of something, creating questions that need to be answered, and then use flashbacks in other scenes to answer them. Nobody cares about how your guy gets to the veterinary clinic; we want to see him pointing a gun at the veterinarian.

PLAYING WITH TIME

The loose structure of individual scenes, combined with a cinematic feel, makes *Fiasco* a great game for trying out weird narrative tricks. Time is malleable, and messing with it can be very rewarding. You can use flashbacks to reveal new information and shed new light on mysterious events, and you can use flash-forwards to give the game guidance and a sense of purpose.

MAKING THE MOST OF CHARACTERS

This just isn't like him. Bob's like a rabbit, in and out and no nonsense. That goes for a lot more than a hospital pharmacy.

Diane, Drugstore Cowboy

Your characters are a bunch of tools, literally and probably figuratively as well. They're the monkey wrenches that you throw into the gears to create the wild stories you want to tell. If you learn to use both the primary characters and any secondary characters well, it makes for a great game every time.

Recurring NPCs are fun. Especially if you limit it to just a couple and they come into contact with all the characters, so that different players have to pick them up from scene to scene, building on how previous players have handled them.
—Brian Minter

HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE

It's not uncommon to have intense sessions where the only characters who even appear are the ones that were authored in the Setup. This is totally fine; but if you do find other characters entering the fiction, be prepared to play them as hard as you can. Each and every one of them should, in some way, be an antagonist. Use them to push other players and create tense situations. You might even end up playing these characters more strongly than your own, if you find that your guy's outside the orbit of the conflict at hand.

Every time you introduce a secondary character, give him a name and write it down on an index card. Put that card in the middle of the table so that other players will see and re-use the character in later scenes. Otherwise-extraneous characters can be blunt instruments to hammer a Relationship's Need.

The group is playing Transatlantic. Shane and Andy share both "Relationship: First Class and Steerage" and "Revenge: Because your family was destroyed by Capitalists." Of course

Shane's guy, up in First Class, is the Capitalist who runs the hideous stamping mill where the whole family was wiped out. Andy's character, the note-perfect bereft widow down in Steerage, is burning for revenge.

At the table, Will's only ambition regarding these two is to see what happens when they mix it up. His character, a degenerate coxswain, has yet to be pulled into the orbit of their Relationship; when the chance comes to Establish for Andy, Will offers to set up a scene. He introduces Laszlo Haffner, the handsome and sympathetic mill foreman. He is (of course) a widower who lost his own wife in a stamping accident, but he knows that Shane's evil plutocrat isn't at fault. In fact, were anything to happen to him, the mill would shut down and a thousand families would be forced onto the breadline. Perhaps if she were to come up to First Class, she could meet him and air her grievances. And that could be followed by a romantic promenade on the Lido deck...



So Laszlo Haffner is tightly tied to both ends of a Need on the table and is kicking the Relationship in the ribs. Any time either Shane or Andy has a scene, Mr. Haffner is a utility character available to complicate things.

BENDING THE RULES

Now you know why I can never marry a normal woman. That's why I love you. You understand my sickness. You've been conditioned to people like me. You live in my world, and it will be an exciting world!

Grant, The Naked Kiss

So far we've been talking about more or less subtle ways to change your play to improve the game, while still mostly following the rules. The following ideas are about bending the rules for when you want play with a large group or just want to try some advanced maneuvers with the game.

DRIVING IN REVERSE

Fiasco's rules state that you Establish or Resolve scenes "just like you did in Act One" after the Tilt, meaning that you continue the clockwise rotation starting with same person who went first in Act One (the player from the smallest town).

There's no reason you can't change this up. Some people regularly reverse the direction, having the player who went last in Act One go first in Act Two and then continuing counter-clockwise. Not only does this often make good narrative sense, but it ensures that the final die in each Act is the responsibility of a different player and means that the person who had the first scene of the game will also have the last scene, which has a nice parity to it.

Veteran players may take this a step further and abandon the rotation entirely, opting instead to call for scenes when it feels right. Everyone still gets two per Act, but arranging them according to the emerging fiction rather than a rigid turn order does no harm at all. You just need to pay a little more attention to avoid overshooting the Tilt, and work together to make sure that scenes happen when they're supposed to. Chances are you already know whether this variant will work for your local crew.

TWO'S COMPANY, FOUR'S A FIASCO

Oh, he's very popular, Ed. The sportos, the motorheads, geeks, sluts, bloods, wastoids, dweebies, dickheads—they all adore him. They think he's a righteous dude.

Grace, Ferris Bueller's Day Off

Fiasco is optimized for four players. Playing with three or five works fine, but it has a notable effect on the game.

For three players, you're only going to have twelve scenes, making the game short and intense—we've seen experienced players blaze through a session in an hour. You'll begin play with intimate connections to both other characters and you'll be hitting the ground sprinting.

In a three player game, you'll know what the game's about right from the start. You have Relationships, you have a Need; hammer them. There's neither room nor time for subtlety or subplots. If you're thinking that there's not enough meat on those bones for a satisfying session, we'd encourage you to give it a try—you might be pleasantly surprised.

One word of caution, however; in a three player game everyone has to be on-task, listening and contributing to the story from the first scene. *Fiasco* generally requires active participation, but there's room in a larger game for passive players to sit back and watch a bit. With only three people, a tired or hesitant player could make the whole game drag.

My strong preference is for three players. I actually like the fact that subplots are so costly to introduce in a 12-scene game, and that the end is always too close—I love the intensity, and the high narrative velocity, that that entails. I also like sessions under two hours, and I've only been able to do that with three at the table. — Colin Creitz

SETTING UP

Once you've decided on a Playset, briefly explain the game's flow—Setup, Act One, Tilt, Act Two, and Aftermath. The play mat's a great visual aid for walking through this. There's no need to get into specifics. After that, toss the dice onto the play mat and explain the rules for choosing Categories and Elements.

When playing with folks new to *Fiasco*, try choosing each type of Detail in turn, starting with Relationships, then moving on to Needs, Locations, and Objects. This helps guide the Setup and builds interest and enthusiasm. Keeping everyone focused on Relationships at first has two beneficial effects—first, it teaches them about how the dice map to setting Elements, and it prevents information overload. Once everyone understands how they're making selections, let them choose the remaining three categories as they like.

Needs require a bit of special attention. If you're playing with more than three people at the table, always have two Needs. That way everyone's attached to one in some way, and Needs really provide the initial momentum for a session. As a side note, Needs can be confusing for people during the Setup. More than one group has started choosing a Need for every character pair—don't do that.

As Relationships are established and details begin to come together, have everyone write their character's name on an index card. It's helpful to fold the character cards lengthwise to make table tents and have the players put the character's name on the front (and back, if necessary) so that everyone can see it. Like this:



Once the Setup's done, check in with everyone and make sure you're all on the same page. Are you playing *Blazing Saddles* or *Unforgiven*? Any issues with content to avoid or omit? Very rarely, someone will be unhappy with a choice driven by the limited available dice. If you'd rather have a great game than a rules-compliant one, try to be reasonably flexible.

CONVENTION PLAY

Relationships based on extreme circumstances never work out.

Annie, Speed 2: Cruise Control

Facilitating *Fiasco* at a convention or gathering is pretty easy—not only do you get to play along, the whole thing usually wraps with enough time left over for you to grab a sandwich. In general, follow all of the usual advice for facilitation, with these additional suggestions:

Time usually isn't an issue for *Fiasco* in convention slots, so you don't need to manage it as tightly as you might other games. At the start, spend a bit of time making sure the players know each other's names, and ask them about their experience with *Fiasco* and with gaming in general. Give them the elevator pitch for the game and then introduce them to the Playsets they'll choose from. At the Tilt, be sure to take the break. You've got plenty of time.

If you have players in your game who seem a little hesitant or unable to think quickly and improvise the story, feed them hooks in the story instead of overtly over the table. Frame a scene for them that pushes hard in a direction they clearly don't want; this gives them something easy to push against. Play a good villain for the characters to rally against. As facilitator, you may end up in the role of antagonist, and that's more than fine.

Likewise, if those hesitant players get really stuck and the game slows down, try to give them a little space—and encourage the other players to do the same. Offer suggestions, but without pressure. If necessary, skip to the next scene and come back to them afterward. Some people just think more methodically and need a moment.

The rules of *Fiasco* are dead simple, but if a question comes up, it's often better to plow on through rather than stop the game to make sure you're doing it right. As the player who knows the game rules, feel free to bend them as necessary to maximize the fun. If a scene grinds to a halt because folks aren't sure about a procedure, offer an easy way through and get back to the narration. It won't break the game, and there's nothing as dull as everyone watching someone flip through a rulebook.

PART THREE

144 WAYS TO HURT A DUDE



GUIDELINES FOR CREATING PLAYSETS

Well, any human being will cast about in a moment of stress. No, the fact is, they're flooding this valley so they can hydroelectric up the whole durn state. Yes, sir, the South is gonna change.

Ulysses Everett McGill, O Brother Where Art Thou

One of our goals for *Fiasco* was to make it tempting and easy to create your own Playsets. The game was designed with this in mind. It appears to have worked because one of the most common reactions to reading or playing the game is “Oh, man! I’ve got an idea for the perfect Playset!” Online you can find many freely available, fan-made Playsets, covering a wide range of settings and styles. We hope you want to make your own Playsets, because we want to play them!

Making a Playset isn’t difficult, but there are definitely smart approaches that’ll help you best fit your ideas to the game. The following section includes a general breakdown of the essential elements of a Playset and how you can change them. It also includes advice and warnings gathered from Playset authors that’ll help keep you on the path and ensure that yours has the true *Fiasco* stink!

WHAT DO A PLAYSET'S GUTS LOOK LIKE?

Good Playsets can push the form in wildly different directions, but they’re all built on the same bones. Before we get into crafting a Playset, let’s take one apart.

A Playset consists of four meta-topics—traditionally Relationships, Needs, Locations, and Objects. Each of these is broken down into six lists of six items. This means the entire Playset has 144 individual items spread across various categories and sub-categories. 36 items per meta-topic is a wide enough assortment, and it happily corresponds to using six-sided dice.

HOW TO WRITE GOOD NEEDS

Make sure you wanna know what you wanna know.

Kara, Brick

Needs drive the game and it's essential to get them right. While Relationships define the characters, Needs set them in motion. The most important thing to remember about Needs is that you'll have one at the table—maybe two if you're playing with five people, but assume one. That Need has to drive everything until you get to the point where the characters gel and other conflicts emerge. Other motivations will probably arise in play, but in a worst case scenario, a single Need may have to carry the entire session. You see why we're stressing their importance?

Needs are a good place to work in aspects of your setting. "To get even with the Kennedy family" says a lot about which side of the sniper rifle you might be on. —Chris Bennett

Passive Needs are pure death. You have to be able to look at a Need and act on it in the very first scene. That's why the standard format is "Need: To Get X", with X being something active—to get even! To get laid! Even Need: To Get The Truth is active on a slightly esoteric level—someone wants answers and won't stop until they get them.

It's entirely possible to kill Needs dead on the individual Element level. Need: To Get Away: With Murder is fantastic. Need: To Get Away: From This Town is pretty weak. It'll require a lot of pointless work keeping someone in the town and preventing him from escaping, and in most cases none of that burden falls to the person who has the Need. And if he does end up driving away, he takes the session's momentum with him.

Make your Needs gripping, active, and full of potential conflict.

When writing Elements for Needs, be obvious and boring first, and colourful and awesome second. Folk throughout history have pretty much the same Needs as we do, so ground your Playset and make it accessible by having obvious Needs that folk can relate to right from the start. —Pete Douglas



CREATIVE HACKING

Relax, would you? We have seventy dollars and a pair of girls underpants. We're safe as kittens.

The Geek, Sixteen Candles

Once you've mastered creating your own Playsets, you might be interested in changing the game further by hacking the rules or changing the Tilt and Aftermath tables. Maybe you want to drift the game completely from the standard "Coen Brothers" film theme to something else. We call this creating a theme package.

The Tilt and Aftermath tables are an important part of *Fiasco*,—maybe more important than you think. If Playsets are about setting and characters, the Tilt, Aftermath, and Resolution mechanics are about supporting the theme and genre of your story. In standard-issue *Fiasco*, the theme is about ambition and wretched failure, and this is reinforced by a balanced set of dice and deeply troublesome Elements injected in the middle and end points of the game. Change these things and you change the game.

In this chapter we walk through how the Tilt and Aftermath are constructed and provide worked examples of how you can change them to change the theme of the game. We also discuss some examples of ways to change the dice and scene resolution mechanics to add interesting twists to play.

WORKED EXAMPLES

We've included examples of alternative Tilt and Aftermath tables on the following pages. These are designed to completely change *Fiasco's* theme from "Joel and Ethan Coen" to "John Hughes"—they're gentler, more socially focused, and, while the characters may totally miss the prom, nobody's going to get handcuffed to a washing machine and doused in muriatic acid. Hopefully.

Your play group may have other ideas, so make sure you have a short conversation about tone and intent before you start. Actually trying for a violent, gritty game using the softer tables is going to be weird, but from experience we can tell you it's a good kind of weird. The reverse is also true, of course.

One nice thing about these "softer" tables is that they're completely interchangeable. Use them in conjunction with the *Fiasco High* Playset (page 95) and you get *Ten Things I Hate About You*. Play *Fiasco High* with the original, mean-spirited Tilt and Aftermath tables and you get *Brick*. Both will be very fun and similarly off the rails.

You don't even necessarily have to pick which Tilt and Aftermath to use until you get done with Act One. Maybe everyone discovers partway through that the mood is darker than they thought, or lighter than they thought. Or they decide that the first act was lighter than they want, and the harsher Tilts could push the game in a more entertaining direction (or vice versa). —Nick Wedig

PLAYSETS

Four playsets follow, and each earned a place in this book as an example of some of the techniques we've been discussing. All are intended to push the envelope; as a result they all require a little skill and finesse.

FIASCO HIGH

High School is often tragically billed as the best years of your life. Yet is there any other time in life so aptly summarized by “powerful ambition and poor impulse control”?

This playset is tailor-made for the softer package included in this book, but it works just as well when you play black-hearted hardball. Inspirations include films like *Ten Things I Hate About You*, *Brick*, *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Rushmore*.

The Stunt Dice rules work especially well for this playset, giving the teen angst an outlet in overly-dramatic confessional scenes.

Note that there are many potential student-teacher Relationships. If you choose these points, it leads play in a particular direction and requires care in establishing personal connections. Avoid them for a straight-up teen game.

REGINA'S WEDDING

Regina is finally tying the knot. She's found the right guy, and the wedding is going to be a real event. Two big families, scads of bridesmaids, a metric keglod of groomsmen, a catered reception, the whole frilly white nine yards. Of course, everyone has a past, and everyone has an agenda, and even the happiest occasion can become a social—and literal—battlefield...

Note that some choices in this Playset require finesse and cooperation, since in certain combinations you can end up with multiple Reginas, or weird juxtapositions of mothers-of-the-bride. If The Happy Couple category is chosen twice, Regina is engaged to two people. Some of these oddities might actually be really interesting and fun, but proceed with caution. This Playset also swaps out Locations for Moments, making it particularly well suited for playing with time.

Inspirations include films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Wedding Crashers*, *The Wedding Singer*, *Bridesmaids*, and any other movie with “Wedding” in the title.

VEGAS

Las Vegas is a glittering illusion in the desert, a house of cards built on dazzling lights, hope, and desperation. It's Disneyland with strippers and cheap drinks, full of hapless losers, wide-eyed tourists, and gangsters nostalgic for how it used to be.

In Sin City everything can change in the blink of an eye. Maybe you've got a score to settle, or an easy mark lined up, or you just think your luck will change this time. It might even be enough to win her back, or get you out of the life. But don't bet on it—in the end, no matter how special you think you are, the house always wins.

This Playset is a workhorse, designed to serve as a solid backdrop for a wide variety of play styles. It demonstrates many of the suggestions listed in Part Three, notably "Tell Some Stories" (page 75). Inspirations include *The Cooler*, *Ocean's Eleven (1960)*, and *3000 Miles to Graceland*. Use the soft tables if you want something more like *Swingers* or *The Hangover*.

MISSION TO MERCURY

This Playset is kind of hardcore—there's a lot of background! With a tooth-and-nail struggle for domination and exploitation of Mars by the major powers of the near future, the international mission to Mercury is a big public relations effort. Surplus lunar equipment—proven over twenty years of hard service—is heavily modified for the task. The overall mission is named *Shuguang* (Dawn Light). Inspirations include *Sunshine*, *Moon*, *Apollo 13*, and the many International Space Station walkthrough videos available online.

Although not essential for play, this Playset works best with the "technical data" bonus packet, a free supplement which includes pre-defined characters, roles, and an overview that should help get you in the mood and provide some nice jargon, technical information, and inspiration. You can find the packet online at www.bullypulpitgames.com/games/downloads.

The Stunt Dice rules work especially well with this Playset, with confessional scenes as video journal entries or desperate messages sent back to Earth. It's also worth noting that some of the Locations and Objects stray from the predictable—instead representing situations or events along the mission timeline. This is a claustrophobic and weird Playset for experienced *Fiasco* players!

So far we've been talking about ways to improve your skills and modify the game to make playing *Fiasco* more fun. Some folks, however, have been looking at ways to use the game for more than just an amusing diversion, and their experiences are fascinating. In this chapter we present a series of interviews we conducted with educators, performers, and writers on how they see *Fiasco* as a creative tool in accomplishing their goals. First up...

BETTER THAN RITALIN!

PLAYING WITH STUDENTS

What are the two house rules? Number One: No dating till you graduate. Number Two: No dating till you graduate.

Walter Stratford, Ten Things I Hate About You

From the beginning, *Fiasco* has always been a game for adults. It's themes, language, and inspirations are all clearly R-rated. Which is why it shouldn't have been any surprise that high school kids were eager to try it out. The resulting games were super interesting to us, and they're part of the inspiration for the "John Hughes" theme package presented in this book.

To find out more, Jason talked to Pete Figtree and MJ Harnish about playing *Fiasco* with high school students as an educational tool.

Pete Figtree is a teacher currently working in the uncharted wilds of northwestern Pennsylvania. He blogs about gaming in and out of the classroom at ruthlessdiastemagames.wordpress.com.

MJ Harnish is a psychologist and teaches at an international school in Germany. MJ has been running an after-school program teaching kids how to role-play for eight years and maintains a blog at rpg.brouhaha.us.

ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

JASON: Do you think role-playing in general, or *Fiasco* specifically, promotes particular learning styles?

PETE: Students that like to learn through aural means will really enjoy *Fiasco*. It's largely about listening, and my state standards have an entire section on speaking and listening.

JASON: What else?

PETE: Well, they require that teachers assign writing assignments in different genres. I consider story games great tools to craft stories, and it's possible to have students write down the story and then go back to proofread and edit. *Fiasco* would be great for pre-writing and drafting of student fiction. It would also be an interesting way to explore the shape of fiction when it succeeds or fails. *Fiasco* would be great for drama students and a way for public speaking students to think on their feet without stumbling around too much.

JASON: I hadn't thought about public speaking. Let's talk about structure—does *Fiasco* offer an educator different opportunities than more traditional role-playing games? Does the structure help?

PETE: In terms of *Fiasco* versus other role-playing games, it's simply a quicker bridge to creative writing than more tactical games.

MJ: It's been a very useful tool in my kit for getting kids to be more creative with our games rather than simply reacting to what I establish. The fact that they're an active part of creating the story is pretty magical in my experience because it's something they tend to get really excited about and that excitement is contagious—it draws other kids who are curious to find out how the story the students have been talking about came about.

SKILL BUILDING

JASON: You both mentioned social aspects of the activity—collaboration, listening, making creative contributions to a group. Care to elaborate?

PETE: Games like *Fiasco* assume a certain collaboration in story creation that challenges a student's ability to listen to others and to also throw his own creative hat in the ring without too much fear of rejection.

PLAGIARIZING YOURSELF!

FIASCO AS A VIRTUAL WRITERS ROOM

I knowed you was crazy when I saw you settin' there. I knowed exactly what was in store for me.

Carla Jean, No Country for Old Men

Fiasco is sometimes described as more of a creative writing exercise than a game. We like to think it's both, so we asked a bunch of writers about their experiences and opinions of *Fiasco* as a writing aid.

Nathan Russell is a writer who adapted *Fiasco* as a tool for developing his 2010 NaNoWriMo project. You can read more about how this worked at his site nathanrussell.net.

Will Hindmarch is a freelance writer and designer, and the author of the Playsets *London 1593*, and *All the Damn Time*. He is the bearded half of www.gameplaywright.net and you can usually find him hunched over his keyboard over at www.wordstudio.net.

John Rogers is a writer of comics, games, television, and film, and is the creator and executive producer of the *Leverage* TV series. You can read more from him at kfmonkey.blogspot.com.

BENEFICIAL FEATURES

JASON: What are the features of *Fiasco* that translate well to the writing process?

JOHN: It's the "Yes and..." aspect. In particular, in a TV writers' room (or at least, in mine) we wind up tossing back and forth pitches on what the characters might do, what weird situations might occur, how they react—it's not that far off a nine-hander *Fiasco* game with everyone collaboratively playing every character.

NATHAN: Sure, standard play can create interesting plots and character relationships, and the collaborative nature both eases the workload and creates some parameters for the writer to work within.

JASON: Does the highly structured nature of play help or hinder creative discovery?

JOHN: I think the structured play would be very helpful in scripted work. After all, most scripted entertainment works in a very tight structure, such as the TV act breaks. Even mainstream movies have an implicit structure you could easily adapt *Fiasco* to.

EMERGENT PROPERTIES

JASON: OK, do you guys think the emergent properties of *Fiasco* play offer any antidote to creative roadblocks?

NATHAN: The Setup is a great tool to spark plot and relationship ideas. For me, each time I went through the Setup, ideas leapt off the page, so I think that it's a useful way into a short or longer piece of writing.

JOHN: Although this is kind of remedial, it's worth restating: every scene needs conflict. As I repeat ad nauseam—I believe some of the writers put it on an index card to post on the wall—all drama boils down to "One: Who wants what? Two: Why can't they have it? And three: Why do I give a shit?" A lot of times in TV it's tempting to write a purely expository scene. *Fiasco* scenes are always built around opposing needs and conflict, which is a good way to game out scenes where you have to convey crucial information. It's worth noting that several semi-improvisational film-makers, such as Mike Leigh, have shot entire stories just by giving the actors *Fiasco*-like setups before each scene, then rolling the camera.

LYING FOR MONEY!

FIASCO FOR PERFORMERS

You double-cross once—where's it all end? An interesting ethical question.

Johnny Caspar, Miller's Crossing

Fiasco lies at the exciting intersection of improvisation and creative writing. At its heart, *Fiasco* is a structured freeform game and requires its players to think quickly on their feet and collaborate well with the other players. We were interested to know how closely this related to traditional acting skills, and how *Fiasco* might be used as a tool for performers.

Marc Majcher is an improviser and game designer who cannot help getting his on-stage chocolate into his tabletop peanut butter. He has all kinds of recreational fun strewn about at www.gizmet.com.

Kristin Firth is an improviser who performs and teaches in Austin, Texas. She also loves playing games and going to gaming conventions. Find more about her at www.firth.ca.

REHEARSAL OUTSIDE REHEARSAL

JASON: So you guys are both performers. In what ways can you use *Fiasco* as a tool to support what you do on stage?

KRISTIN: If you're in a long-term troupe, bonding outside of rehearsal and shows is really important, and that can be anything from singing karaoke together to playing a board game to watching a movie. And if you could happen to make this entertaining thing together also work on some of your creative chops, that's like double the value!

JASON: Nice.

KRISTIN: I was in a troupe whose focus was on doing narrative shows. We cared about being close as a group, and about becoming better storytellers. We met weekly for a couple hour rehearsal, and we also went through a period where we did some extra-curricular stuff. One member got us to read an article, another wanted us to watch a particular movie, I wanted us to play an RPG.

JASON: You chose *Fiasco*, of course.

KRISTIN: Actually I chose *A Penny For My Thoughts*.

JASON: No!

KRISTIN: This was pre-*Fiasco*!

JASON: In that case, *A Penny For My Thoughts* is a fine game.

KRISTIN: We scheduled an evening to do it and I got everything ready. With last-minute notice one of our members couldn't show up and I wanted to save *Penny* but the other four of us were still gathered, so we played *Happy Birthday, Robot!* It ended up being a super-dramatic two-hour session. We ended up playing *HBR* again a couple months later, and *Penny* a couple months after that.

JASON: One of my friends who is an improviser said he couldn't get his fellow performers to sit still for two hours.

KRISTIN: Lazy! In my troupe I'm the only gamer of any sort, and we got through at least three games lasting multiple hours.

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