Standoff

A game about telling ridiculous stories together, by Matthew R.F. Balousek.

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Cover Icon: Knife by Grant Taylor from the Noun Project

The necromancer shrieks with cruel laughter, plunging the glowing dagger into the warrior's heart. Armor and bone tear like paper before the might of The Cursed Dagger of Ag'tekk. As the blood drains from the wound, the necromancer gloats, "Fool! All your struggle was for naught. Your soul will be but a tasty morsel for my dark master!"

She starts to pull the dagger out, but finds her wrist stopped cold by the iron grip of the warrior's hand. The warrior stares back with an icy glare. "Impossible—I caught you right in the heart!" A glint of light catches the necromancer's eye, and she looks down to see the talisman of protection. "But that means..."

Wresting the dagger from the necromancer's cold hands, the warrior grins. "That's right—I hid all my vital organs in a pocket dimension!" Taking a free hand to dip a finger in what appeared to be blood, the warrior tastes it and chortles. "You wasted the ichor of Ag'tekk on nothing more than a large ketchup packet!"

My sincere appreciation to all the wonderful folks who have playtested and given feedback on this game—without your brains and creativity I'd be nowhere. And thanks to Melanie and Joseph for going on a bizarre adventure with me.

You're all the best.

— mrfb

About This Game

Standoff is a game where everyone works together to tell a ridiculous story full of twists, ripostes, counter-feints, and triple-double-crosses.

Before playing, you'll need at least two, but ideally **four to six players**. You'll also need some **writing implements**, and at least a dozen **blank index cards**.

The general structure of the game is:

1. **Setup**: everyone works together to establish **the world** that the story takes place in and some of the **characters** that inhabit it.
2. **Play**: everyone tells the story through a series of **scenes** that are based on improvisation and creative reversals.

1. The World

Overview
Everyone sketches out the world that the story will take place in.
Recommended time: 5-10 minutes total.

1. Restrictions	2. Seeds
Story elements that are forbidden. *Add to as needed.*	Story elements that might be included. *Lock-or-Change.*

1.1 Restrictions

*Write **Restrictions** in the top left of a blank card.*

Add restrictions as needed, unilaterally. If at any time a player isn't happy with an element that has been introduced or they think might be introduced into the story, that player can add that element to the Restrictions card.

Make everyone happy with the story being told. Elements on the Restrictions card should not be introduced into the story by anyone. These can be used to set aside uncomfortable topics, or as a tool to avoid common story elements.

1.2 Seeds

*Write **Seeds** in the top left of a blank card.*

Seeds are story suggestions. A Seed is an element to suggests what might be in the story. This can be anything a player can think of, but is often something like a location, object, character, theme, emotion, or so on.

Lock-or-Change Seeds. The player closest to the Seeds card announces a Seed and passes the card to their left. Then, each player in order chooses to either Lock or Change the most recent Seed. Lock a Seed by writing it down and announcing a new one. Change a Seed by announcing an altered or inverted version of the Seed. Repeat this until everyone has Locked or the card is full.

If anyone can't think of a Seed to contribute, use the Example Seeds table (§4.1).

2. Characters

Overview
Characters involved in the story.

1. Antagonist	2. Protagonist	3. Minions	4. Allies
Has a Sinister Goal. Doomed to ultimately fail.	Embodies a virtue. Destined to stop Antagonist.	Characters who serve the Antagonist.	Characters loyal to the Protagonist.

Overview
Adding characters to the story.
Recommended time: 3-5 minutes per character.

1. Name	2. Summary	3. Powers	4. Limits
It'll be awkward otherwise. *Lock-or-Change.*	A one-sentence description. *Lock-or-Change.*	How they change the world. *Add during scenes.*	Constraints on powers. *Add during conflicts.*

2.1 Character Cards

Important characters are represented with cards. Although any kind of character can be introduced for any reason, only make cards for the Antagonist, the Protagonist, or the characters loyal to them. Before play starts, you'll make an Antagonist and a Protagonist.

Characters don't belong to anyone. During play, anyone can narrate the actions or speak in the voice of any character.

Inhabit a character to take additional control of them. If someone is holding a character's card, that player is inhabiting that character and has ownership of that character's actions and speech for as long as they hold the card.

Inhabitation is negotiable. Players may take, request, relinquish, or exchange character cards at any time. Be nice. Collaborate. Share.

2.2 Creating Characters

Determine a character's basics using Lock-or-Change. Using the same process for writing down Seeds, determine a name and one-sentence summary for the character.

Unilaterally add powers during scenes. Powers can be something fantastical or mundane, but they're something relatively unique that the character can do. Players can add powers to characters during scenes or conflicts.

Unilaterally add limits during conflicts. Limits are caveats on specific powers. Any player may assign a limit to a character's power as part of resolving a conflict.

If anyone can't think of a character detail, use the Example Characters table ([§4.2](#)).

2.2.1 The Antagonist

*Write an **A** at the top-right of a blank card to distinguish this character.*

Motivated by a sinister goal. In addition to their summary, the Antagonist has a second sentence which summarizes the heinous ends they're trying to achieve.

Unbeatable. There's no way the Antagonist's plan could be thwarted.

Doomed to fail. The story ends with the antagonist's plan being thwarted.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine the antagonist's name, summary, and sinister goal.

2.2.2 The Protagonist

*Write a **P** at the top-right of a blank card to distinguish this character.*

Guided by virtue. In addition to their summary, the Protagonist has a second sentence which describes a noble value they hold.

Unstoppable. The Protagonist will always overcome whatever obstacles are put in their way. The Protagonist cannot be killed—or at least not permanently.

Destined to win. The Protagonist will go to any lengths to stop the antagonist from accomplishing their sinister goal, and will eventually succeed.

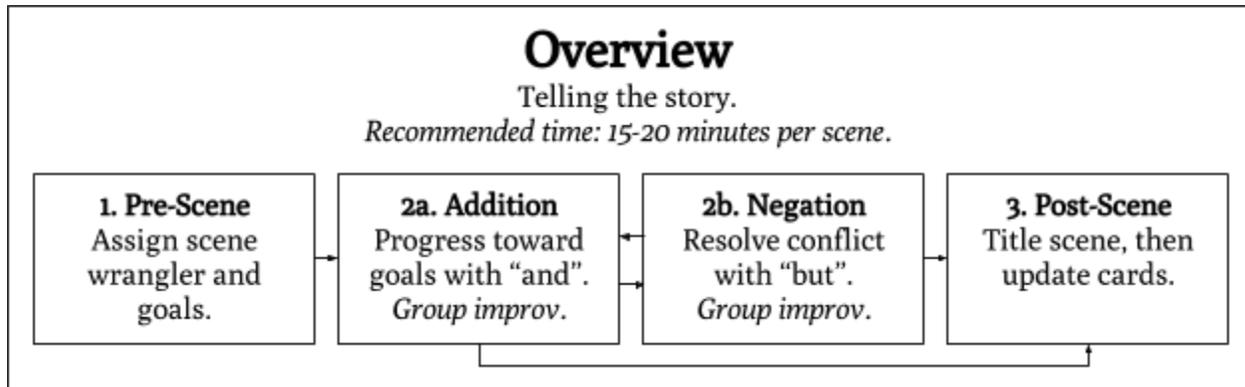*Use Lock-or-Change to determine the protagonist's name, summary, and virtue.*

2.2.3 Supporting Cast: Allies and Minions

Loyal to a cause. Both the Protagonist and the Antagonist get by with a little help from their friends. Allies are characters who are loyal to the protagonist, while Minions are characters who serve the Antagonist.

Loyalty can change. Allies can become Minions and vice versa at any time.

Minimize character paperwork during scenes. When a new character is introduced, have one person write their name down on a blank index card. When the scene is over, use Lock-or-Change to determine their character summary.

3. Scenes

Overview
Telling the story.
Recommended time: 15-20 minutes per scene.

1. Pre-Scene	2a. Addition	2b. Negation	3. Post-Scene
Assign scene wrangler and goals.	Progress toward goals with "and". *Group improv.*	Resolve conflict with "but". *Group improv.*	Title scene, then update cards.

The rest of the game proceeds as a series of freeform improvisational storytelling scenes.

Make a Mode card. Write "and" & "but" on opposite sides of an index card.

Scenes have prophetic goals. Before beginning a scene, everyone will decide what the goals of the scene are. Goals are the high-level beats that will happen during the scene. Rather than being summaries of what will happen, they should be abstract enough that the way the goal is fulfilled is open to interpretation.

3.1 Beginning a Scene

Choose a scene wrangler to keep everything on track. One player is the scene wrangler for each scene. Their task is to keep the scene from going on too long or getting severely sidetracked. They also guide the scene to a conclusion once all of its goals have been completed. Have them start by writing the number of the next scene at the top of a blank index card.

Write a conflict on the scene card. The first goal of the scene must be a conflict which involves at least two characters, and may briefly mention how the conflict is resolved. Two conflicts are already predetermined:

- First Scene: One of the Antagonist's Minions is defeated by the Protagonist's powers.
- Final Scene: The Protagonist defeats the Antagonist, thwarting their sinister goal.

Use Lock-or-Change to determine scene goals. Add goals to the scene card until every player has locked one goal or the scene wrangler says to stop.

If anyone can't think of a goal, use the Example Goals table ([§4.3](#)).

3.2 Playing A Scene

Don't stop for paperwork. During a scene, writing on cards should be minimal and unobtrusive. If new character details are added, wait until the scene is over to write them down on their card.

Use "yes, and" to progress the story. When the mode card shows "and", the story should be moving forward. Each player can talk freely and assert something about the story as true, unless it involves a character whose card is being held by someone else. Don't contradict anything anyone else has said.

Use "yes, but" to resolve conflicts. When anything someone has asserted might be contested by another character, flip the mode card over. At this point, each statement should be about negating, reversing, or foiling the previous statement. When nobody has any more ideas, the conflict is resolved. Flip the mode card back over.

3.2.1 Example Scene

Joseph, Holly, and Diego are playing together. The goal for the first scene is that one of the antagonist's allies is defeated by the protagonist's powers.

Joseph: Francesca has been trekking through the woods for days, and she comes across a hut.

Holly: Yes, and she calls out in greeting and is met by a kindly-seeming man named Roosevelt. "Hello, my dear! Would you like some tea?"

Diego: *(Taking Francesca's card.)* Francesca thinks she might be able to knock the old wizard unconscious when he's off-guard and take his stuff. She says, "Oh, I love tea! Do you have any Darjeeling?"

Joseph: The old wizard now realized why Francesca looked so familiar—his diabolical master described her as the one trying to reclaim the relic he's storing!

> *(Holly writes down "Roosevelt" at the top of a blank card.)*

Diego: "And some sugar, if you have it."

Holly: Roosevelt nods, then slyly puts a drop of poison in Francesca's tea.

> *(Johnathan flips the Mode card over from "and" to "but".)*

Diego: Yes, but her emotion vision lets her see Roosevelt's oily hatred mixed into the tea! She throws the tea at the wizard, then draws her gun and shoots!

Joseph: Roosevelt conjures a magic spell that deflects the bullet!

Diego: But Francesca knew which spell he would use, which leaves him unprotected from the side! She managed to ricochet the bullet exactly right!

Holly: That won't stop Roosevelt! He vanishes in a flash of light, teleporting to right behind Francesca, ready to attack!

Diego: But he was too distracted from the ricochet to notice that I backed up to the wall! Now he's magically merged with the wall and stuck!

> *(Nobody has any ideas on how to counter that, so the conflict ends and the mode card flips over. The scene ends. Diego adds "emotion vision" to Francesca's powers. Roosevelt gets a summary: "Nice guy, but a wallflower.")*

3.3 Ending A Scene

Wrap up and title. When all of a scene's goals have been fulfilled, the scene wrangler should end it with some closing narration. Finally, the scene wrangler writes a title for the scene at the top of the scene card.

Update cards. Take a second to write a summary for any allies that were introduced, as well as any new powers or limits.

4. Examples

Gimme a number. To use these tables, ask someone[1] to pick a number between 1 and 48—the corresponding number is your result.

4.1 Example Seeds

Places
1. a secret moon
2. an underground observatory
3. a sentient crystal planet
4. a magic consignment shop
5. dark art school
6. a sideways city
7. 3,959 miles underground
8. a baseball diamond

Types of Characters
9. demon architects
10. malfunctioning robots
11. wizard lords
12. magical spiders
13. infernal bureaucrats
14. soul couriers
15. leaders of the mountain realm
16. sentient boats

Time
17. the week leading up to prom
18. winter
19. eighty million years from now
20. the day after the war ended
21. the ungilded era
22. 1880
23. laundry day
24. one year before The Ascension

Stuff
25. the greatest treasures of all[2]
26. cursed un-mirrors
27. weaponized cosmic horrors
28. magical instruments
29. haunted generation ships
30. reality fibers
31. plant-animal hybrids
32. illegal legal documents

Types of Powers
33. shadow mutations
34. hedge magic
35. exquisite equitation
36. emotional visualization
37. *very* specific transmutations
38. ideology cannons
39. academic achievement
40. machine sorcery

Mood
41. cute
42. spooky
43. cool
44. awkward
45. thirsty
46. sparkly
47. grim
48. bizarre

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[1] You can also ask Siri to do this, or roll a d6 to pick a category and then a d8 to pick an item in that category.
[2] Besides love and friendship.

4.2 Example Characters

Antagonist Name
1. Kevin Blechdom
2. Donald Deacon
3. Solenoid Pépin
4. Gronald Greagan
5. Monad Megan
6. Money Pendant
7. Georgia O'Keefe
8. Johnald Pregnant

Antagonist Detail
9. deeply curious
10. magnanimous
11. mild gluten allergy
12. embarrassed by obscenities
13. impeccably glamorous
14. student of architecture
15. humble to a fault
16. an excellent dancer

Antagonist's Sinister Goal
17. destroy The Golden Throne
18. assassinate Quing Wembley
19. assemble relic fragments
20. obliterate the western reaches
21. reclaim *The Yamato*
22. conquer the midlands
23. reach The West Pole first
24. break the vending machine

Protagonist Name
25. Janine Jaquette
26. Turnbow Turnip
27. Brenda Bresson
28. Enrique Ennis
29. Ferne Ferrera
30. Roosevelt Rohloff
31. Elinore Ellers
32. Ramon Rastad

Protagonist Detail
33. quick to anger
34. a hooligan
35. mistrustful
36. self-important
37. an excellent knitter
38. forgetful
39. awkward
40. ignorant

Protagonist's Virtue
41. grace
42. benevolence
43. love
44. honor
45. beauty
46. knowledge
47. justice
48. truth

4.3 Example Goals

The protagonist...
1. gains a new power
2. makes an impossible choice
3. is transformed
4. is temporarily stopped
5. makes a mistake
6. has an insight
7. makes a huge advance
8. takes an incredible risk

An ally...
9. shows up just in time
10. makes a sacrifice
11. gets separated
12. makes a promise
13. has a secret identity
14. is secretly a minion
15. has a revelation
16. costs the group

A power...
17. complements another
18. is super effective
19. behaves unusually
20. is the inverse of another
21. is the same as another
22. doesn't work
23. is unusable until the last second
24. changes into something new

The antagonist...
25. exploits the protagonist's virtue
26. reveals one of their powers
27. nearly defeats the protagonist
28. defeats an ally
29. overcomes their own limits
30. escapes from a conflict
31. becomes warped
32. has a temporary setback

A minion...
33. returns unexpectedly
34. defeats themselves
35. is betrayed
36. gets overconfident
37. is unceremoniously defeated
38. realizes the error of their ways
39. takes something precious
40. sets a trap

A limit...
41. renders a power useless
42. causes its owner's defeat
43. does not exist
44. has a workaround
45. is horse-related
46. affects someone else
47. is falsely communicated
48. becomes a kind of strength