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A game by Vi åker jeep

Front seat: Thorbjörn Fritzson, Tobias Wrigstad

Back seat: Olle Jonsson, Emma Björnehed, Luisa Carbonelli, Joc Koljonen

HOSTAGE



Introduction

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to violence!” Well now, that’s actually not true about this game. Albeit a game about hostage situations and terrorism, we are not trying to focus on the action and whether people live or die, but on what happens between the characters as the story unfolds. This game is not about winning or losing, living or dying – it is about creating the best drama and the best story. It lets you take a stab at the very core of role-playing and collaborative story-telling.

This game is not so much a scenario as a framework for creating scenarios. You will combine a number of different stories, plots and traits involving different numbers of persons, and dramatic curves that determine how the plots progress and conflict resolution.

To play the game, you should be at least three people: two players and a GM, but you can easily scale to many more. If

you want, a player can even double as the GM.

This article does not contain any spoilers, so don’t be afraid to read on, even if you are going to play the game. Read the entire thing, and then follow the 6-step instruction in the How to Play-section to get going. Good luck, and enjoy.

Central Story

The players are terrorists that have seized the New York Stock Exchange trading floor and hold all stock brokers hostage. They are packed with explosives and threaten to detonate them unless their demands are met. The demand central for the story, is that the terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui, currently in federal prison, should be brought to them. If the police fails to deliver him within 24 hours, they will blow up the building and the people in it, themselves included. This will cripple the entire US market.

All the players have infiltrated the stock exchange for some time now as stock traders, janitors etc. This morning, one player posing as a janitor smuggled explosives in to an adjacent janitor station. When the trading floor was almost full, at 08:54, the players put on jackets with explosives and trigger buttons and rushed out on the floor, threatening to blow

themselves up. They seal the entrances and force the guards to surrender their weapons. They are now in control of the building, and the hostage situation is a fact.

The trading floor of the stock exchange is filled with stock traders, some who were colleagues of (or friends with) the infiltrating players only yesterday. They fear for their lives. Many cry.

What's About to Happen

The police outside will soon have surrounded the building, positioned snipers and are waiting for the hostage negotiator (NPC) to arrive. She wants to talk the players down and make them surrender. She is also going to listen to their demands and see what she can do about the safety of the hostages.

Unless your game rocks anyway, the players should succeed in getting Zacarias Moussaoui (NPC) brought to them. What happens then is really up to the players. Zacarias does not know any of them.

The game can basically end in three ways: the players escape, blow themselves up, or are taken alive. These are equally interesting in different ways. Note that the dramatic curves don't dictate the outcome, but how the outcome is played. A good GM can make any ending a success (or a failure).

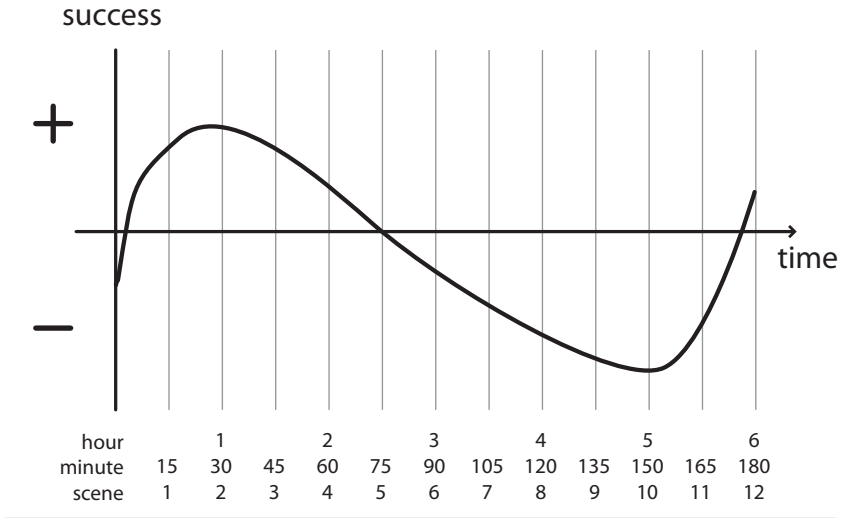


Figure 1 — "Hollywood Curve"

Playing Hostage

If your game was like this curve, everything would be smooth in the beginning, but after a while things would start to go south. About 2/3 in, you would have the crisis, but all of a sudden, things start to go better, and in the end things really go well. We want you to structure your games after curves like this.

Just as with plot-levels, we supply example curves that you can use straight off, but nothing prevents you from making up your own.

For example, the Story curve can be Hollywood, the plot curve Aristotle and the trait curve Tragedy. Thus, in the middle of the game, the hostage situation is going not so well and love is getting hotter, but the character risk being exposed as the traitor she is.

Transparency

You have a choice whether to play transparently or not. If you do, then all plots and curves should be publicly displayed and open for everyone to see. If not, only the Story is public – all other plots are known only to the players who they involve. The GM also control all curves except the trait curves, which are private for each player (and the GM).

Transparent play is like watching a Bond

Plot Levels

In Hostage every character is involved in three different plot levels – Story, Plot and Trait. Story is the main story thread, Plot is inter-character story threads and Trait is a personal trait or want of your character. Here, we supply a number of pre-fabricated examples, 4 Stories, 8 Plots and 12 Traits, but you can easily create your own.

For example, the story can be figuring out *Who Survived?*, plots are *Love Affair* and *Revenge*, and trait is *Traitor*.

Dramatic Curves!

Hostage is based on dramatic curves that control conflict resolution and the outcome of all stories in the game. A dramatic curve is a way to show the progress of a story. As an example, on the previous page is the dramatic curve of most Hollywood movies.

movie: you know he will make it, the question is how, and who lives and dies as a result. Non-transparent play is more about being surprised and taking risks. Both ways of playing are good. Pick whichever you like the most.

Time-Slots or Scenes

You should decide up-front how many hours you want to play, alternatively how many scenes you want to play. When the time is up, or the specified number of scenes have been played, the game is over. The GM keeps a clock or scene count.

If you go for scene-based, partition all curves into the selected number of scenes. If you go for hours, use 15-minute intervals instead. Here is what a partitioned curve might look like:

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts are resolved according to the dramatic curves. If a conflict arises (e.g., a player is negotiating with the police), look at the angle of the curve in the scene (or at the current time) of the curve that most relates to the conflict. If the curve is going up, the player wins the negotiation. If the curve goes down, he fails. The angle of the curve controls how good the success was (or bad the failure). If two players are involved in a conflict, we use the “duelling derivatives” system: the player with the most upwards-going curve wins, and how good the win (or bad the loss) is determined by the difference in the angles. Thus, if both competing players have upwards-going curves, the loss is small. If the curves are identical, there is a stand-off.

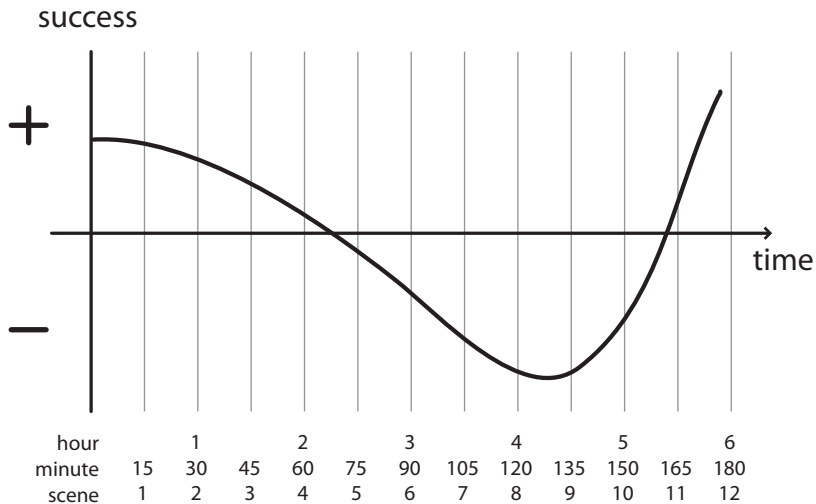


Figure 2 — “Hollywood Curve”

Note that the curve to be used is the one that most relates to the conflict. If a character wishes to shoot a police man to escape and the Story curve is in a negative dive, he will fail. But if he wishes to shoot several police men to impress an object of admiration, and the admiration curve at the same time is positive he will succeed. Thus, the dramatically interesting behaviour is rewarded with success.

If you play non-transparently, the GM has all the curves and resolves all conflicts. Regardless, the GM decides what curve to use to resolve a conflict.

Following the dramatic curves rather than using chance elements (like dice) will hopefully facilitate the creation of good, dramatic role-play. Sometimes imagination fails improvisation. If that happens, a quick look at the one of the curves assigned to the stories can inspire the player. If the love curve is in a sharp drop: start a fight. If the treason curve is in a sharp rise: betray the entire party. Generally, the mood of a story is good when the curve has a positive value, and bad when it has a negative.

Character Pools

We recommend that all characters that are not the players' main hostage takers are placed in a character pool. Characters in the pool can be played by the GM or any player. It can be quite fun to play the hostage negotiator for a while, or the guard who is forced to lay down his gun.

Creating a Character

The main tools for character creation are the Plots and Traits. The plots ensures that every character has a relationship with two other characters that has some bearing on the story. The traits serve the character with motivation or sense of purpose.

Unless you play with secrets, discuss the Plots and Traits with your fellow players to create the best characters. If A and B share a Love Affair plot, and A and C share a Sibling Conflict plot, maybe B has had an affair with C too, and that caused the conflict?

What you need to know about your character is how to play it and how it interfaces with the other characters. This is mostly given by the Plots and Traits. Everything else, you should decide on-demand during the game.

Characters don't have stats, equipment lists or hit points. That is not needed as we rely on dramatic curves to drive the game. If you are in dire need of rope in a scene where the dramatic curve is going down – there is none. If you are injured, choose the most appropriate dramatic outcome. If you are close to the end in a Who Survived? story, choosing to die seems like a cool thing to do. Probably not otherwise. Think like this: "Limping is cool because we can use it to create drama later as I cannot run."

Getting Going

To play hostage, you need at least three people: two players and a game master. We think five is ideal.

1: Select a GM. The GM will have the usual tasks – playing NPC's, resolving conflicts, etc. Also choose whether to play transparent or not.

2: Decide on a Story. Either choose from our examples or make one of your own. Talk about what you think is cool, and what you want to have the most of in your game so that you are all clear on that. Also choose (or create) a dramatic curve for the story.

3: Every player chooses (or creates) a Plot that involves her and the player to the left and a dramatic curve for it. This way, every player will be involved in two Plots.

4: Every player chooses (or creates) a Trait for her character and a dramatic curve for it. Flesh out your character and introduce it to the other players.

5: Decide on how many hours or scenes you want in the game and partition the curves accordingly.

6: Decide on how the game should start and start playing!

Plot Level Descriptions

Below we describe the different stories and plots that create the game. Choose these however you want: together as a group, by rolling a dice, etc.

Story

The Stories are different takes on the central story. Choose one that fits your mood and wants and discuss how to play it before you actually start. We have four suggestions, but you can easily create your own.

The Straight Story

Play the central story straight off. The players must decide what to do with Zacarias. They could treat him as a hero and give him an explosives jacket of his own, or they could treat him as a traitor (for not committing suicide when arrested) and kill him. Or try to escape with him, or let him escape and sacrifice themselves. It's entirely up to the players to decide.

If you want, the curve can denote the stress-level of the hostage and hostage takers.

The Fake Story

The terrorists are not Islamic, but US right wing extremists. The plan is to kill Zacarias when he arrives at the trading floor and the explosives are mostly fake. It should be enough to cause a big ruckus in which they will be able to escape posing as hostages.

Curve-wise, the GM could use a low point or a particularly dramatic drop in the curve to expose the characters as fake. Likewise, the players could do the same with a high point of the curve.

Who Survived?

The story is decided before play: the entire attack failed and one of the terrorists were caught and is now being interrogated to find out what happened or they where all killed and an FBI team is investigating the attack. The story is played as flash backs with the players acting out the story. The players take turns playing the person being interrogated, maintaining the suspense of finding out who survived.

The flash-back way can be combined with the fake, the straight, or a completely new story. This is a good way of coming up with a new story since it's played in pieces and when immersed in a scene, it's usually easy to come up with ideas for future directions. The scenes acted out need not be the true – the person interrogated could be lying and the same scene could be played several times modifying it according to every new statement from the detainee or when investigators turn up new clues.

In the last case, the curve can be used to determine the degree of truth to a scene.

What If ... ?

Just as *Who Survived*, but with flash-forwards instead of flash-backs. The players are sitting in a secret location planning the attack, and the flash-forwards show possible outcomes due to the plan. If one plan fails, go back and re-plan and try the new one out. The players act out the speculative scenarios on what is go-

ing to happen, pausing, arguing and dismissing ideas as “No, we can't do that, they will shoot us here, see? We have to take out the guards first.” and so forth.

The curves can be used to determine the success and failures of the plan(s). Also, the last bit of the curve can determine if they actually dare to go through with the plan or not.

Plots

Plots are between two characters. If you play with secrets, it can be an idea not to disclose certain Plots. For example, imagine the love story plot chosen in secrecy.

Love Story

Love can complicate things. Especially in a situation like this. Will you really sacrifice the life of your love? What happens if you must choose between your mission and your love? How do you act if your love is unanswered? Two love affairs can also be combined into a classic triangle drama.

The curve can be used either as a relationship thermometer: Positive, the love is blossoming, negative, the love is fading; as a misery indicator for the person unhappily in love with the other, etc.

Rivaling Siblings

Two of the characters are siblings and rivals fighting for the same man/woman, their father's affection, or an inheritance, etc. Sibling rivalry is (supposedly) really

strong, and there will most likely be a lot of pride in the mix as well.

As with the love story, the curve can be a thermometer, but in practise also an indicator of the hate passion of the characters. If on a sharp rise or on a positive high, the characters can be expected to turn on each other instead of performing their duty.

Them or Us

“It’s you and me against the world. No one else understands us and all are against us.” This is a case of classic paranoia usually found in tight relationships like in sects or between abused siblings. Whatever the reason, the characters are tight and will distrust any outsider to the point of betrayal.

Revenge

What better way is there to revenge your father than to make sure the entire world watches his killer being blown up? For some reason, that should be decided beforehand, one character has it in for another and is planning a revenge. Revenge need not be fatal and can also be the story of someone on the receiving end of the oppression story.

The sharpest rise in the curve should be the moment of revenge. Other than that, the curve is a hate indicator. The Hollywood curve would probably mean that the character learns to love and respect her enemy but will kill him anyway in the end because he is sworn to.

Admiration

A character admires another, possibly without reservation. This can be a mentor relationship, a young person idolising an older, an older person admiring the energy, bravado and recklessness of a younger, or no reason at all. The admirer might try to act as his idol, or draw the attention of his idol, and is probably more loyal to her than to the other characters.

The curve can be used to create a good scene where the idolising character is fatally disappointed by the idol and is disillusioned. The curve can show the idol’s mistakes or the admirer’s mistakes in showing off in-front of or mimicing the idol.

Vicious Circle

Think *Thelma & Louise* or Mickey and Mallory in “*Natural Born Killers*”: They love or adore each other with such passion that they eventually burst into flames. Characters in a vicious circle will push each other further and further until they one day step over the line. Their loyalty will always be with each other.

Curve-wise, at a high point, they will cross the line and be killed or do something extraordinary.

Distrust

“I just don’t trust you. It doesn’t matter what you do, I will never trust you anyway.” One character will be on the receiving end of this story and will constantly be distrusted by the other. Conversely, the receiving character will probably do

as much as possible to gain the other characters' trust.

Curve-wise, a high-point might mean that the character does something to earn distrust, or the inverse.

Oppression

This is the inverse of Admiration or Love Story. The oppressor, perhaps older with a higher status, oppresses the other character in some way. This might happen openly, or when no-one else is watching. The oppressor will take any opportunity to hurt or humiliate the oppressed character who will probably be fueled by hate (think revenge story).

The oppressed will be humiliated the most at the steepest rise in the curve, and resist the oppressor in the sharpest drop in the curve. Everywhere else, hate (from the oppressed) and despise (from the oppressor) will follow the curve.

Traits

Due to lack of space, we cannot give examples of how to interpret curves for all traits. Look at the examples for Traitor, for clues on how to think. Think of the curve as the character's dramatic curve – is she doing bad or well, and what does that mean.

Traitor

Will, if the moment arises, betray one/ some/all of the other characters during the game. He might defect to the police, or reveal details to the police.

A negative curve means no opportunities to betray, really bad means maybe slipping up or giving up false information. A good curve means opportunities to e.g., secure evidence, giving away information, or avoid suspicion.

Unbeliever

Doubts the cause and might defect it, or convert to the other side. Perhaps he won't take orders, go easier on the hostage, etc.

Nervous Wreck

Might suddenly not dare something or slip-up due to nervousness. Always afraid.

Fanatic

Is the opposite of the unbeliever and nervous wreck. Has no scruples and hits harder.

Kamikaze

Does not fear death. Maybe he has nothing left to lose. Maybe even seeks death.

Good

Idealist that wants to minimise the damages done in the full-filling of the goal. If that is not possible, he might consider giving up rather than do more damage.

Bad

Sadist, takes pleasure in being evil and causing harm. The opposite of the good.

Befriended

Befriended one of the hostages when she was under cover. She might not have been recognised yet. Might have sympathies for, or want to save the friend.

Drug Addict

Unstable (violent/apathetic/etc.) if she cannot get her drug. Might search hostages for drugs. If high, anything can happen.

Double Agent

Like the traitor, but with an established role with the other side. Might be an undercover CIA operative, or something else.

Bad Luck

The worst things always happens to this guy.

Default: Realist

This is the standard trait for players. This guy is just a realist, and she doesn't need a dramatic curve.

Actual Play Report

We played The Fake Story, not scene-based. In capsule format, these are the main events:

Playing stock brokers at NYSE. One player and the GM played actual stock brokers, that we could interact with later.

Revealing the explosives and forcing people to the ground.

Forcing a guard (GM) to lower his gun.

Force a panicking stock broker (other player) to calm down using force, which was very unsettling for a Unbeliever player.

Securing the entrances and getting an overview of how the police was doing on the outside.

The police throws in a phone and makes contact.

The first talk with the hostage negotiator, which we lost.

Putting pressure on the police through a fake killing and dealing with panic among the hostages as a result.

The police calls again, we hung up and "killed" again.

The police calls again and this time promises to bring us Zacarias.

Cut-scene: Federal prison. Zacarias' release.

Back at NYSE, medics arrive to check on the Hostages. A Traitor player discloses that there are no dead bodies to one medic, so we have to keep him, angering the police.

The police calls to figure out what we are doing and how many we are. We blow them off.

Cut-scene: The police storms the building killing two of us before the explosives go off. It turns out this is only a fantasy in the head of a hostage, who was also a friend of one of the players.

Zacarias arrives, confused. He says something in Arabic (that none of us speak), and our cover is blown. We drag him into a back room and lock him up.

The hostages don't understand what has happened.

We give up 20 hostages in exchange for Zacarias, as promised. An Unbeliever player takes off his disguise and mixes with the hostages and escapes.

The Traitor player blows the whistle on the Unbeliever using the phone. The police starts interrogating the hostages to rat the Unbeliever out. The player whose terrorist character is now out of the building plays Zacarias from now on.

We leave the hostages briefly and approach Zacarias. This is a high-point of the game where we get to disclose who we are and make him shake. He believes we are CIA agents in a plot to kill him.

At this point, a player turns out to be a double agent. Using a security officer's gun, he tries to break free with Zacarias in a Mexican stand-off.

He breaks out only to realise that the police has moved in while we were focused on Zacarias. He is forced to surrender his gun and is taken into custody. In the back room, two of us share a Them or Us plot. With our only gun, we kill the third player and injure ourselves, placing the gun in the hand of the third, hoping to pass as hostages.

The police falls for the bluff and take us to the hospital, where we escape to leave the country.

There is a lot that happened that we cannot describe. There was a non-fatal revenge story that was not so central, and an interesting drug abuse with a high-

point when the medics arrived. Our GM used several cut-scenes to show what happened in the interrogations with the police, that the hostage negotiator was having personal troubles, we played hostages as a pregnant woman's water broke, etc., all of which made the game richer.

End Game and The End

The game can end in two ways: either the story runs to an end or you reach the number of scenes (or time) you decided to play for. Ideally, these should co-incide. If you didn't resolve the scenario by then, the GM decides the outcome and narrates it. Resolving the game before the time is up is OK.

If you played non-transparently, don't forget to disclose your secret plots and tell the other players how they ended up. Maybe you were trying to betray them all the time, but you never had a chance to do it.

If you played the What if ...? story, the final scene should show if the players go through with it. If you played the Who Survived? story, the final scene should disclose who survived.

If you have any feedback on the game – you loved it, hated it, missed something, have invented a cool add-on – we'd love to hear from you (preferably in English or Swedish, but we can read Finnish too). The email address is hostage@jeepen.org.

