Not-Too-Silly Stories

by Jens Alfke ~ January 2, 2010

This is a free-form, story-oriented, rules-lite, GM-less roleplaying game. It's a bit like a highly simplified version of Universalis. I designed it to play with my kids, hence the use of Silliness as a constrained resource to keep the stories from getting out of hand...

As of this writing, it has been played exactly once, so it's very rough. Take everything with a grain of salt.

Equipment.

- **Cards** — bits of paper for character & item sheets. (3"x5" is a good size.)
- A **pencil** or pen.
- **Importance tokens** — these are used to "create" things and their attributes.
- **Power tokens** — these mark attributes that can "attack" or otherwise exert influence over other things.
- **Silly tokens** — spend these to make silly things happen (or to make a character or item silly)
- **Yay! tokens** — reward another player for doing something great
- **No! tokens** — veto something another player tries to do
- A **Me Next totem** — to track which player wants to take the next action
- **Coins** to flip to resolve challenges & conflicts.

  For tokens I use those little flattened glass beads, in different colors for the different types. You need to be able to fit a bunch of Importance / Power / Silly tokens onto a card, so they should only be about 1cm across.

Setting the First Scene.

- Everyone gets 12 Importance tokens, 6 Power tokens, 4 Silly tokens, 3 Yay! tokens, and 2 No! tokens[1]. The Me Next totem goes in between the players, within everyone's reach.
- **Decide who goes first**.
- On your turn, **create stuff**. You can create a setting, character, item card; you can add attributes to a card; or you can add extra tokens to an existing attribute. (See below for details.) If you create a new card you can add extra attributes to it on the same turn.
- **Pay for what you added!** Put an Importance, Power or Silly token on the card for every line you wrote. (Yes, if you run out of tokens you can't add anything more and have to skip your turn.)
- **Negotiate any No! responses.** If another player really doesn't like what you're adding, they can threaten to veto it by playing one of their No! tokens. See the "No!" section below. Try to work out a compromise; otherwise you'll lose the tokens you just played. (If the other player thinks your addition is powerful or silly, the compromise might involve your *adding* Power or Silly tokens to it, thus tying them up and limiting the amount that can be added in the future.)
- **Keep going around** until everyone's satisfied (or has run out of tokens). Remember, you don't have to create everything in the game ahead of time! You can add more during play. Right now you just need enough stuff to play the first scene with: a setting and at least one character per player.

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1 This is just a first guess. I haven't play-tested much yet, and the numbers should be tuned for the style of game you want, too.

Creating Stuff.

There is no GM. Every player has an equal power to create and alter the world, limited only by her supply of tokens. The things that can be created are:

Settings. These are the places where scenes take place; every scene has one (and only one) setting.

Characters. There's not a strong distinction between "player" and "non-player" characters. At any one time a character can be owned by a player, or unowned and available for any player to narrate; but during a scene players can take and release characters.

Items. These are major objects that are important enough to get their own cards.

Attributes. These make a thing non-generic: notable traits or component objects that are worth calling out and paying for.

(Really, most objects — a chair, a tool belt — can just be added to an existing card as an individual attribute; an item with its own card would be something important or complex — like a car or a magic sword — that might change ownership and/or have its own attributes.)

Bookkeeping.

If you create a setting, character or item, take a new card and write its name and a brief description at the top. Put the payment token on the card next to the name. Then put the card in the center of the table, or leave it in front of you if it's a character you want to own right away.

If you create an attribute, write it on the thing's card on a new line, leaving enough space for tokens, then put your payment token(s) next to it.

Payment.

You have to pay a token to create a new thing or to add an attribute to it. Usually you pay an Importance token, but you might use a Power token to mark an attribute as having attack or influence power, or a Silly token to make a thing or attribute able to do something that doesn't make sense.

The token you pay goes onto the card, next to its name or to the attribute you just added.

You can pay more than one token for an attribute, to make it stronger; this is especially useful with Power tokens, where each one boosts its attack/influence. You can pay the extra tokens up-front, or add them later.

Playing a Scene.

While playing a scene, most of the time you'll be narrating what the characters say and do, although you can definitely still add components just like above.

Taking turns.

Turn-taking is less formal than during scene-setting: it doesn't have to go in order around the table. If a player wants to do several things in a row and no one objects, she can. If two characters are having a conversation or otherwise interacting, then it makes sense for those two to alternate actions. Or if a player just doesn't have any great ideas at the moment, he doesn't have to take a turn.

If a player who's not taking a turn wants to reserve the next action, she takes the **Me Next totem** from the center of the table and puts it in front of herself. This guarantees her the next turn after the current player is done with his current action. *As soon as she starts her turn* she returns the totem to the center so it can be used by somebody else.

If you wanted to take the Me Next totem but someone else beat you to it, you have to wait till they start their action, then hold out your hand to them for the token. You'll get the next turn.

If people start squabbling over the Me Next totem or grabbing it out of each others' hands, you can either enforce a rule that the nearest person in clockwise order to the current player gets the token; or maybe you should just go play a different game instead…

Paying for actions.

Many actions are free, unless they're powerful or silly; in that case you have to spend one of the Power or Silly tokens attached to the character or item responsible. (Just as during creation, the other players might deem your action to be powerful or silly even though you didn't think it was, and use negotiation backed by No! token threats to get you to either dial back the action or spend tokens.)

Challenges & Conflicts.

Two especially important types of actions are *challenges* and *conflicts*. A conflict is when two characters oppose each other (whether fighting, chasing or arguing); a challenge is like a conflict against an inanimate object (like climbing a fence or picking a lock.)

[You don't need to have a challenge if the outcome is obvious and uncontroversial. If your character wants to squash a bug or dial a friend's phone number, just go ahead and narrate the desired outcome. But if another player disagrees and thinks it should be a challenge (pointing out that the bug is a fly, and hard to catch), then negotiate a compromise: choose a different action, scale back the action, or play it as a challenge.]

An *attack* is a challenge or conflict whose goal is to have an effect on its target — wounding a character, talking a guard into believing you belong there, breaking a hole in a wall. But not all are attacks: climbing a wall is a non-attack challenge, and sneaking past a guard is a non-attack conflict.

The challenger and the defender each flip coins to decide what happens. How many coins? Each side starts with one, and adds another coin for each token of each attribute that's relevant. A challenger who's making an attack can *only count Power tokens*. The target, or a non-attacking challenger, can always use all tokens of any relevant attribute. Some attributes, like "weakling" or "wounded", are negative and will if relevant *subtract* a die!

A challenge succeeds if the challenger gets *at least as many* heads as the target. However, an attacker can only affect the target if he got more heads — you can narrate a tie as the blow hitting but being absorbed by armor, or the guard deciding that even though you sound legit, he's not allowed to let anyone else in. For each extra head, the attacker gets one coin to spend on the effect of the attack. Most often this will be used to add some sort of negative "damage" attribute to the defender, but you could instead remove a token from an attribute to make it weaker, if that makes sense in context.

Silliness!

Players have a limited ability to be *silly* — to make a creation or action that violates the laws of the game setting or is otherwise pointless or out-of-character. This ability is limited because it can otherwise spiral out of control and destroy the coherence of the game (especially when kids are playing!) The limit is enforced by the Silly tokens.

An intrinsically **silly creation**, like a lawnmower item in a prehistoric setting, or a "shoots toilet plungers" attribute on a gun, requires its creator to spend a Silly token. The token goes back to the token pool, out of play, not onto the creation's card. The item can then be used normally in a way that makes sense for it. The lawnmower could be used to mow a field of grass; but mowing the fur off of a mammoth would be a silly action requiring more tokens.

If you want a character or item to be able to perform **silly actions** during play, you need to give it (or its attributes) Silly tokens. These go on its card like Importance or Power tokens; the difference is that Silly tokens *get used up*. The silly action has to be paid for by discarding a Silly token back to the pool.

Note that you can add Silly tokens during play (if you have any spare ones) as well as during creation.

What's considered silly?

Whether something is silly is obviously a subjective matter; it depends on the setting, the tone of the game, and the moods of the players. If you think an action or creation is silly but the player responsible isn't spending a Silly token, speak up and negotiate! Maybe they'll agree to spend a Silly token, maybe they'll tone down the action, maybe they'll convince you it makes sense. In the last resort, you can threaten a "No!"...

"No!"

During scene-setting or play, you can spend a No! token to veto something another player does, if you don't want it to happen — creating something, adding to it, or an event. Discard your No! token, and the other player must discard any token(s) he used to pay for the vetoed action.

In practice it's better to save a No! as a last resort — the threat of it can be almost as powerful. First, express why you don't like the action and try to work out a compromise. If that fails, let the player know that, if he goes ahead anyway, you'll veto. The implied threat of losing his token(s) may dissuade him without it actually having to come to pass.

"Yay!"

Yay! tokens are the opposite of No! tokens: you give one to another player for doing something especially creative, funny, ingenious ... anything you like enough that you want to reward it. The reward is that a player receiving a Yay! token can also draw an Importance or Power token from the pool, to use later. And if the Yay! was in response to a silly creation or action, the player can draw a new Silly token.

The recipient keeps the Yay! token too, and can bestow it on another player later.

Subsequent Scenes.

At some point it's time to end the scene and start a new one. Maybe the characters are moving to a different setting, maybe you want to cut to a different group of characters, maybe the players have run out of tokens to make anything happen, or maybe everyone's just ready to end for the day. The players then agree to end the scene.

Before the next scene, hand out more tokens to the players. [How many?]

Set the next scene the same way you set the first one: start with a blank table and take turns adding stuff. However, you can *re-introduce* existing characters, items and settings into the scene at a cost of only one Importance token (paid back to the token pool.)