NARSUS

Introduction

This is a page about using Risus to play Story Now. The purpose of this endeavor is to use this Nar-ified Risus (Narsus?) as the drama chassis for a playtest of the Lost-alike card game layer. The goal is to have a game that can create stories in a particular genre; this genre doesn't have a name, but is described as “regular human drama is what propels the story forward, but the drama takes place, and is intertwined with, an element of 'WTF is going on?!'” We would like to get a satisfying explanation for “WTF is going on” without anyone having to have made it up ahead of time.

Some examples of this genre are Severance, Dark, Silo, and the movie Dark City. The TV show Lost, itself, is an example of what we're trying to avoid. There was lots of weird shit, but no final explanation that tied everything together in a satisfying way.

Here's how to do it.

The Accord

Before playing we get together and have a discussion in which we, corporately, decide on the basic look & feel and genre conventions of the game. This is just like an “Accord” in a game of The Questing Beast (TQB) or the Three Statements from Sorcerer. It does not require a lot of text, but provides an initial context for creating characters.

Some Examples

- Dark City: 1950s urban noir, Automats, Public Transportation (electric trams)
- Dark: Small town Germany, Modern day, High-school and Adult drama overlap
- Severance: Office drones at an abusive mega-corp where technology has a retro-twist

Character Creation

The Tale

The Tale is an Advanced Option in Risus. Here, it isn't. Every character has a Tale. Risus suggests that the Tale should be 3 pages long. Don't do that. Instead, make it exactly like a Pool/TQB Saga: 50/100 words. The Tale is a quick non-mechanical sketch of the character. Include things like appearance, style, general situation in life, and so on. The Tale is also a mirror of the mechanical description of the character (more on this down below), so when you're writing the Tale, also be thinking about Cliches. In fact, you can do both things at once, going back and forth between Cliches and the Tale. If you think of a cool Cliche you want, revise your Tale to include it! When you're writing down your Cliches, scan over your Tale to make sure that you included all the ones you mentioned in it.

The Hook

At the end of your Tale, put your Hook. The Hook doesn't count towards your Tale's word limit. Hooks are another Advanced Option in Risus that are not optional in this game. A Hook is some kind of immediate challenge or problem that the character is dealing with, just like a Kicker in Sorcerer or an Issue in PTA. The purpose of the Hook is that the GM can use it to make trouble for the character, and, most importantly, provides the GM with the raw material they need to work with when framing the first scenes of the game.

The Cliches

You can call them “Traits” or “Aspects” or something if you're playing a serious game and the word “Cliche” bothers you. Sometimes it does me. Anyway, there's a little more structure here than in standard Risus.

First, your character has what Risus calls a “Core Cliche.” This is just like a Character Class in good old D&D, or “Cover” in Sorcerer, or your Playbook in an Apocalypse World game. In one of my old games we called this the “Niche,” because it gives the character a distinct area of operation. Anyway, it's a little bundle of effectiveness that includes things like social status, wealth, profession, skills, equipment, contacts, and so on. You can take it straight up (Head of I.T.) or you can spike it with whatever advanced techniques you like, e.g., “Was:/Is now:” from Dust Devils. (Was: the County Medical Examiner / Is now: a Homeless Wino).

Second, your character has an “Interior” or “Inward” Cliche. This expresses something about your character's belief system, worldview, moral code, and so on. In an old game of mine one player had a character who “Won't Back Down.” That was a pretty cool one.

Third, your character has an “Exterior” or “Outward” Cliche. This is a connection of some kind, such as a relationship, or membership in an organization. It's best if this is packaged with some specific color details, like “My Mom won't stop pestering me about Alternative Medicine” rather than just being a bald statement of the connection.

These 3 Cliches are required for every character, but you can have many more; up to 12 total, in fact (more about that below). If you're stuck on ways to spike your Cliches, here's a list of ideas from the Risus Companion:

- Race or Species
- Cultural Background
- Personal History
- Degree of Dedication
- Religion or Philosophical Bent
- Social Class and Financial Means
- Gender
- Group Affiliation
- Demeanor
- Appearance
- Ham-Handed References (Boba Fett's Daughter!)
- Goals
- Self-Image
- Subplots and Relationships

- Problems

Dice and Die Levels

You have 12 dice (regular 6-sided ones) to distribute among your Cliches. Every Cliche has to have at least one die, and no more than 6 dice can be assigned to any given Cliche. If you take just the 3 required Cliches above you can give each one 4 dice and have a pretty badass character. You don't have to do that though. You can create as many additional Cliches as you want, up to having 12 one-die Cliches. I wouldn't recommend that, though!

So what do these dice levels mean? Well, one way to look at it is simple effectiveness, just like your Class Level in D&D. A 1-die Cliche is something you suck at. A 2-die Cliche is something you're not very good at. A 3-die Cliche is something you're successful at. A 4-die Cliche is something you're really good at. A 5-die Cliche is for super experts, and a 6-die Cliche is for the best in the world (since no one can have more than 6 dice in a Cliche). You should probably put 3 or 4 dice in your Core Cliche, unless being bad at your job is part of your character concept.

On the other hand, you can also look at the dice as representing Story Importance. If you give a lot of dice to a Cliche, it means you, the player, want that thing to be important in the story. It also means that when that thing comes into play you, the player, will have more power to make the story go the way that you want it to go.

So what about if you want the story to be about how you're the world's worst pastry chef? You can do that two ways. Make your Core Cliche be “World's Worst Pastry Chef (1).” You will lose a lot of pastry-related rolls, and the GM will do a lot of narrating about how bad you are at pastry-making. OR you could make your Core Cliche “World's Worst Pastry Chef (6)!” Now you will win a lot of pastry-related rolls, but *you* will get to narrate how well things are going for your character at work, in spite of how bad he is at making pastry!

Dice Dice Resolution

Resolution uses the Combat (i.e., extended conflict) and Single Contest rules from Risus, with the Deadly Combat option. (In other words, your Cliche dice work like Sorcerer dice and not like Tunnels and Trolls). I see no reason to ever use the “GM picks a Target Number” roll. If, for some reason, the player ever needs to make an “unopposed” roll, the GM can just slap a Cliche on whatever it is and roll a Single Contest.

If there's a tie, discard the tied dice (just those two) and look at the next pair.

Pumps and double-pumps are allowed (double-pumps cost 2-dice per level during character creation, just like always); however, we will use no funky dice.

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