

Game Briefing by Isa Foong

Week 1, 19 Jan 2024

Small exercise. This is called “Open Door Policy”.

This exercise should be done in pairs. Within each pair, assign one **STORYTELLER** and one **COLLABORATOR**. The exercise will begin with these opening lines:

STORYTELLER You walk through an open door.
COLLABORATOR What do I see?

From here, the **STORYTELLER**'s job is to provide details about what the collaborator sees. The **COLLABORATOR**'s job is to ask questions and interact with what the storyteller is describing. Tell this story for five minutes.

After the five minutes are up, swap roles and restart the exercise with the same opening lines. The **STORYTELLER** can draw from the details established in the earlier story or they can describe an entirely new scenario.

Optional Prompts. Include a stuffed toy bear. Include a newspaper clipping from 1965. Include a tuna mayo onigiri.

Post-exercise reflection.

(1) Think about the part of the exercise where you were the **STORYTELLER**. What did you find most memorable about telling the story?

(2) [*Especially for those who are new to TTRPGs, and if you're worried about role-playing*] Think about the part of the exercise where you were the **COLLABORATOR**. Remember what it was like to describe what you were doing with the singular pronoun 'I'.

Introducing the Game and System

Planning for this course started last October. Isa and Sherice discussed a bunch of existing games that might work for the class, but it was clear to us very early in the conversation that it would be ideal to design an original game that was specifically tailored for a philosophy classroom.

We will be using a system called *Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA)* for the course. Read Isa's *PbtA Primer* [here](#). If you're familiar with *Dungeons and Dragons 5e*: Our game will have way less mechanics, a lot more story. We're not going to have combat-based encounters, but there are going to be moments of conflict.

Dice. It is a **2d6 system**. d6 refers to the standard 6-sided die; 2d6 means you need two of them. Bring your own if you want; Game Masters (GMs) will also provide d6s.

[Philosophy Playbooks](#). Designed by Isa, with input from Sherice. We also consulted Abdul Ansari (*University of Michigan*), Ng Sai Ying '17 (*CUNY*), and Mak Rui Teng, Phoebe '22 (*NYU Shanghai*) regarding the accuracy of specific playbooks.

10 Philosophical Leanings: *Absurdism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Existentialism, Islamic Thought, Nihilism, Stoicism, Transhumanism, Utilitarianism*. (For those familiar with *D&D*, these are similar to classes or subclasses.) Some of these were drawn from the philosophies covered in Yale-NUS' *Philosophy and Political Thought* common curriculum course; the others were the result of a poll taken by Yale-NUS students last semester.

These come with recommended readings, which are a mix of academic sources and pop philosophy. (E.g. think of the distinction between the kind of readings of Nietzsche that are found in academic philosophy and the popular understanding of Nietzsche.) What is important here is the character's personal relationship with their chosen philosophical leaning, and it's not necessary that your character has an academic understanding of that view.

Resonance. When your character responds to a situation in a way that aligns with their philosophical leaning, you, your GM, or a fellow player character (PC) can give your character a point of *resonance*. *E.g. a stoic character responding without anger when someone behaves badly towards them*. (For those familiar with *D&D*, it's similar to giving each other inspiration).

Dissonance. When your character responds to a situation in a way that goes against their philosophical leaning, you or your GM can give your character a point of *dissonance*. *E.g. a stoic character becoming angry when someone behaves badly towards them*.

Note that *dissonance* is not a bad thing! It might feel bad for your character, but it's a legitimate and valuable thing for you to aim towards as the person playing that character. This is because it's entirely expected for a character to struggle with their current philosophical leaning, and *dissonance* might be the start of a growth arc for the character.

Resonance and *dissonance* cancel each other out. So if your character has two points of resonance and is then given a point of dissonance, the character ends up with one point of resonance.

Character Creation

Setting. We will be playing in a local Singaporean setting. Think current-day Singapore, with some elements of magical realism. We also request some suspension of disbelief from you: this is a very short campaign, so we're not going to have the time to establish an incredibly lore-filled world.

Characters. You can choose someone entirely different from you or someone very close to home (e.g. a self-insert undergraduate student at Yale-NUS). Their abilities should be within

the realm of possibility for a real human being. (*Question from the class: Can they be like Batman? Isa: If your character has enough money and trauma to be Batman, sure.*)

[Philosophy Playbook](#). Every character requires a philosophical leaning, represented mechanically through that philosophy's playbook.

Doesn't have to be a staunch leaning. For example, you might play a character who has only recently heard some appealing things about existentialism and has chosen to try aligning themselves with it.

Character's playbook might change. This might be something that you design into the character from the beginning: e.g. a character who grew up in a Daoist household, but is disillusioned by certain aspects of Daoism and searching for an alternative philosophy to live by. It might also be something that happens in response to what happens in-game, spontaneously or otherwise: e.g. if a stoic character starts to believe that their anger is justified, it might make sense for the character to reevaluate their commitment to stoicism and choose another philosophy.

A few examples of characters who exist in this local setting (but using DnD 5e instead). Isa plays a character named Billy Ong. Billy is a 40 year old handphone uncle. He's a total *lao beng* [Note from Sherice: the term is Hokkien and an abbreviation of *lao ah beng*, where *lao* specifies an 'old' version of an [ah beng](#)] and a former gangster. He feels like the current generation "has things a lot easier", and it's informed by his childhood experience of having zero support for his dyslexia and dropping out of school early as a result.

See the [Character Creation Guide](#). You'll be prompted to pick one playbook in Question 1. But Isa and Sherice's preference is for you to start with your character idea first. From there, see which playbook fits the character best.

Character Creation Timeline. (c.f. The course schedule on the syllabus.)

January 24 (Wed). [Character Proposal Form](#) must be submitted.

January 26 (Fri). *Session Zero* with your GM and party.

You do not need to have a fully realised character at this point. In fact, it usually takes quite a few sessions before the character starts to feel real, and it's always possible for character details to be revised or changed as the game progresses.

Still, a lot of this is going to be social. We're playing with other characters and not individually. So the more complete your character idea is, the easier it will be for GMs to discuss interpersonal things. *E.g. do the characters know each other? If so, how? Or are they complete strangers?*

January 28 (Sun). *Step 1.* Submit your fully filled-in responses to the [Character Creation Guide](#) by the end of the day on Canvas. This will be read by Sherice and your GM. *Step 2.* Upload that same document into your party's google folder under *Player Character*

Information. (If there's anything you want to keep secret from your party for storytelling reasons, feel free to redact or remove that information before your upload.)

Consent and Collaboration

Approaches to GM-ing. Game Masters might have different approaches to GM-ing. This will be discussed during their respective session zeroes.

Consent and Collaboration. There will be drama within the story. Your characters might trudge into areas that seem dangerous, grey, uncomfortable, and often a player *wants* their character to be challenged, to have moments of puzzlement (*aporia*), to be unsettled or distressed. But as players, we are primarily here to have fun. If the player learns something along the way, that's good. But the most important thing is to have fun, and safety is a prerequisite for ensuring that everyone is able to have fun at the table.

It's important that the table comes to a consensus about what the safety guidelines should be. We will be using various safety tools that may vary from table to table. See Kienna Shaw's compilation of common TTRPG safety tools [here](#). But for every table:

Establishing Boundaries. Before session zero, think about what boundaries you might want to draw. *A shallow example:* A player had a deep fear of spiders, so Isa changed the game encounter so that the party was dealing with feral puppies instead of spiders. (You might consider sharing this information in your [Character Proposal Form](#) under Question 15.)

X-Card. If a character, player, or the GM is moving in a direction that feels deeply uncomfortable to you, "X out" by either crossing your arms or using the provided x-card. When an x-card is used, the table will pause the game and reevaluate how to proceed.

Questions from the Class

Tesha: *What is the goal of the game?*

Primarily, to have fun. But there are different facets to this question. As a **table**, the goal is to collectively tell a story. As a **player**, your goal depends on what you're hoping to get out of the game, and this might inform the kind of character you create and how you play the character. As a **roleplayer**, your goal is to play the character truthfully. If your character is a pacifist and the group is gearing towards a violent solution, it would be truthful to the character to choose inaction or to attempt to persuade them otherwise. This leads to characters being in disagreement, and that becomes a part of the story you're collectively telling as a table. **Ideally, all these goals feed into each other.** Sometimes they do not, and if so it's a good time to take a step back as a table and figure out why that's happening and how it can be addressed.

Gabby: *Tips and tricks for roleplaying?*

Isa: The moment the game starts, you are no longer yourself. You exist in two states: character and player. If you need to speak as a player, say “hey, above the table [xxx]”. Don’t break character unless you have a mechanical or clarifying question.

You’re not just a player, character, storyteller. You are also an audience member. If it’s someone else’s moment to shine, listen; if it’s your time to shine, take your turn. Be generous with the time you have, and that includes being generous to yourself. If you notice a moment where someone is waiting to participate, usher them in. The best players always find ways to bring other characters into the scenario.

You really don’t have to do a character accent or voice like the trained improvisers and voice actors on Actual Plays. (“*You don’t need to be a Brennan Lee Mulligan, Matt Mercer, Arabia Lyengar...*”) What I’ve found most useful for getting into character is figuring out the small details about the person’s life. *How does your character sit? What clothes do they wear? How would they walk? What items are important to your character? (Think along the lines of inception: chess piece, coin, pouch, etc.) What is their favourite food? What is their main method of transportation?* If they travel by car, then that implies a certain economic status and way of moving through the world.

Sherice: I personally love playing characters who are gearing towards *dissonance*, and what I have found useful in really getting to the core of the characters I play is something that Carlos Luna once said in an *Adventuring Party* episode: “The first thing I try to have is a lie. So like, a lie that the character tells himself in order to get through the day or get through life, and in the hope that this will be confronted at some time and that it gets conquered or not conquered.”

Ending Remarks from Isa. TTRPG folks take fun so seriously that we make rules to have fun. I hope you decide to tell untold stories with us, whether it’s an untold story for yourself or about life in Singapore!

Tasks before our next Section (23 Jan)

Playbooks. Please make sure you’ve skimmed all the *Philosophy Playbooks*. Then, pick two Playbooks that you think you might want to use for the campaign and do some background reading on them. You can follow the provided reading recs or find your own sources. (Sherice will inform the class when the Playbooks are released.)

Character Proposal Form. Please read all the questions [here](#) before we meet on Tuesday.

Coming up soon: All *Character Proposal Forms* are due by the end of the day on **Jan 24**. The deadline is **Jan 24** because Sherice doesn’t want you to feel like you don’t have enough time to think things through before being pushed to commit to a character for the rest of the semester. But note that this gives Sherice only **one day** to settle the party assignments. So if possible, try to submit on 23 Jan after section. The earlier you submit, the more time that Sherice will have to properly think through the groupings and accommodate student requests. (Fill in the google form [here](#).)