



## UCB Game Workshop

### About

In this workshop, our goal is to practice improvising short funny comedy scenes.

To do that, we will learn to play "The Game" of the scene - it is a structured, step-by-step approach improvisers use to create comedy. Below you'll see the explanation of the key concepts you need to understand to play The Game, and a list of exercises we'll practice during our workshop.

Come join our [Discord Community](#) to play with us.

### Key Concepts

**The Game** is a single comedic idea the scene is focused on, the core premise that summarizes what's funny about the scene in one sentence. It is a pattern of unusual behavior, justified in a believable way, which we will gradually heighten to make the scene progressively more absurd.

Finding and Playing the Game:

- Create the **Base Reality** - Who, What, Where - characters in a situation doing something. Establish a believable, ordinary world and characters, so that anything funny or unusual can clearly stand out in contrast to it.
- Find the first **Unusual Thing** - play the scene until something unusual, surprising, absurd, unexpected, or weird happens, something out of the ordinary in the context of Base Reality, a behavior that breaks from the pattern of normal life.
- **Justify** the Unusual Thing - come up with an explanation for the absurdity, invent a logical rationale for the unusual behavior, make it believable, ground it in reality.
- **Heighten** the absurdity, make the Unusual Thing even weirder, take it farther away from the expected reality we have established at the beginning.
- Repeat the last two steps to continue the pattern of unusual behavior, progressively heightening and justifying the absurdity. End the scene as soon as we've made it as absurd as we can.

### Base Reality - Who, What, Where

In this exercise we'll learn to establish the "Base Reality", the key elements necessary for any scene:

1. **Who** the characters are, and the relationship between them.
2. **Where** the scene takes place.
3. **What** the characters are doing.

Base Reality is a believable situation that isn't trying to be funny, an ordinary world we create so that anything funny or unusual can clearly stand out in contrast to it (like a setup for a joke). Comedy comes from the contrast between the strong expectations established by the Base Reality, and the unusual thing that breaks them.

Some guidelines: Use "Yes, and" to build on each other's ideas, agree with your scene partner, don't negate their contributions to the scene. Make statements, don't ask questions. The scenes work best when you begin with the characters who already know each other, and care about each other.

#### Exercise: Establish Base Reality

- Two players play a three-line scene. (Player 1 says a sentence, Player 2 responds, Player 1 responds with the final sentence.)
- Their goal is to establish the Base Reality in these 3 lines: where the characters are, who they are, what is the relationship between them, and what they are doing.
- Discuss the scene as a group, make sure that the players have clearly conveyed all 3 elements, and we all have a clear picture of what's going on in the scene.

#### Exercise: Play Believable Characters

Think of it as an acting exercise where our goal is to get good at playing believable characters.

- Two players play the scene until the characters, location, action, and relationship are established.
- First round, pairs of players take turns playing the scenes set in our world - normal and ordinary reality. Play characters who are similar to yourself.
- Then, we play the scenes set in a fictional reality - can be fantasy, sci-fi, action movie, drama, etc, with characters who are different from the improvisers. But our goal is still to make the scenes as realistic and believable as possible - think Game of Thrones, Lost, not Futurama.
- Players who are watching the scene should raise their hands if they see anything not believable.

### The First Unusual Thing

In this exercise we'll practice discovering what's funny about the scene and agreeing on it.

Our goal is to come up with The Game - a pattern of unusual behavior. The Unusual Thing is the first element in your scene that breaks from the expectations set by the Base Reality. The Unusual Thing introduces the absurd behavior or a piece of information, and the rest of the scene will be focused on heightening and exploring this absurdity (we won't introduce more random unrelated absurd ideas).

#### Finding the Unusual Thing

The First Unusual Thing can be discovered in two ways:

- One of the players can deliberately introduce an absurd element into the scene by making a "strong move" - saying a surprising line that intentionally breaks the established expectations.
- Players can discover it "organically", when they focus on playing a believable scene, and carefully listen for anything unusual, interesting, absurd, surprising, unexpected, or weird. Some behavior or a piece of information that breaks from the pattern of normal life, something out of the ordinary that stands out in the context of the Base Reality.

Common types of unusual things:

- Unusual or exaggerated behavior, a surprising emotion, a weird character trait, a strange way of looking at the world, an unexpected relationship between the characters.
- Subverted expectations. What would you normally expect to see in this Base Reality, and how can you do something mildly (or wildly) different?
- Wildly inappropriate response. What's the normal, logical response in this situation, what is the expected reaction? How can you do the opposite, or something very different from that?
- Clash of Context. Combine two things (such as character, location, or action) that don't belong together, introduce a character or an attitude that doesn't belong in this situation.

#### Framing the Unusual Thing

It's very important that both improvisers have a clear understanding of what is the unusual thing their scene is focused on. To make sure both players are on the same page, once you notice an unusual thing, you want to **Frame** it - draw attention to it, let your scene partner know that you think they have said or done something unusual.

To communicate to your scene partner that you have noticed the unusual thing, you can:

- React with an exclamation as soon as you hear something unusual. ("What!?", "What are you doing!?", "Excuse me!?", etc.)
- Repeat the unusual line back to the other player, word for word, like you would if you were confused by something in real life.
- React honestly to the unusual thing, clearly conveying the confusion a normal person would experience when presented with something weird.
- Agree, and add specifics that make it clear what you found to be unusual.

#### Exercise: Creating the Unusual Thing using Strong Moves

In this exercise we'll practice deliberately introducing an absurd element into the scene.

- Two players play a 3-line scene.
- Player 1 says the first line, trying to establish a very ordinary, normal, boring, unremarkable Base Reality.
- Player 2 says the craziest, most absurd and surprising thing they can think of. Be bold, go wild, break expectations, make it as weird, stupid, and ridiculous as you can.
- Player 1 responds to it by framing the unusual thing, reacting to the craziness as a normal person would.

#### Exercise: Discovering the Unusual Thing Organically

In this exercise we'll practice carefully listening for the Unusual Things that come up organically.

One of the things that makes the good improvisers good is that they don't let any details pass them by. Any little thing can be framed as unusual, it doesn't have to be "interesting" or "funny" right away. Scenes can be built from those ever-so-slightly off-kilter moves that a lot of people might skip over - these subtle unusual things become funny as we heighten them later. So practice being the person who doesn't let anything get by them, call out the tiniest things that strike you as odd.

- Two players play a short scene (30-60 seconds).
- Start by establishing the ordinary Base Reality. Aim to play believable, realistic characters. Don't try to be funny.
- Carefully listen for any subtle Unusual Things, anything even a tiny bit unexpected or out of the ordinary. As soon as you notice in the audience notices the Unusual Thing first, they raise their hand.
- Pause the scene, have a brief discussion. What was the unusual thing? Do both players have the same answer in mind? What are some other unusual things you have noticed in the scene? How could this unusual thing be heightened?
- Players continue the scene for 30-60 more seconds, trying to heighten the unusual thing they found - exaggerate it as far as you can, try to quickly make it much more absurd and ridiculous.

### Justifying The Unusual Thing

The purpose of justifying the unusual thing is to support the reality of the scene, to make the absurd believable. Our goal is to provide some logic, philosophy, rationale that justifies the absurd behavior, explains why the character is making absurd choices.

You justify the absurdity by answering: "**If this unusual thing is true, then why is it true?**" (or "What belief would cause the character to act this way?"), and trying to find answers that make sense. These logical answers, juxtaposed with the absurd behavior, will make the scene even funnier.

A good justification is like telling a good lie, the more logical and believable it is, the better.

Good justifications are often based on the beliefs the character has, their philosophy, a relatable history of view. They aren't based in their past (because justifications are based on the character's history have already happened, and are difficult to repeatedly use in the scene), and they don't explain away the absurdity and make it seem normal. Justification can be silly as long as it feels right to your character.

#### Exercise 1: Accusation

Player 1 will play the "Voice of Reason" character, and Player 2 will play the Comic character.

- Player 1 accuses Player 2 of something.
- Player 2 "Yes And" the accusation by admitting that they did it on purpose, and then provides an explanation for why they did it, justifies it in a way that makes sense from their character's perspective.
- Player 1 pushes back against this justification, challenges it in some way.
- Player 2 justifies that again.

#### Exercise 2: Premise Lawyer

- Player 1 states a weird belief or stance on something ("Monkeys should replace all 5th Grade Teachers!", "Everyone should have a prom every year of their life!", "Sharks are really puppies stacked together in a rubber suit").
- Player 2 acts as a "premise lawyer", and explains why that's a true and totally obvious and reasonable stance to hold.

### Heightening

We use Heightening to build on the First Unusual Thing, to turn it into a pattern of increasingly unusual behavior (The Game). Each heightened game move deviates further away from the expected pattern of reality, we repeatedly hit the comedic idea, making the scene progressively more absurd.

To Heighten, ask yourself "**If this unusual thing is true, what else is true?**", "What are the possible consequences of it?". Repeatedly answering this question creates a comedic pattern.

It is important to heighten the absurdity that already exists in the scene, rather than adding more random absurd elements (which will make the scene chaotic and non-sensical).

#### Exercise 1

- Two players tell a story in the style of Baron Munchausen's tall tales, each player telling one sentence of a story on their turn.
- The story should start out ordinary and very believable. Then the first unusual/unrealistic thing the players mention should be progressively heightened to become outrageously unrealistic and hard to believe.
- When the story becomes too unbelievable, a 3rd player should say "No way!" and challenge them to justify, clarify, add details, explain why it's actually true.
- Keep telling the story until you can't think of a way to heighten it any further, or can't justify the absurdity in a believable way anymore.

#### Exercise 2

- Start with a suggestion for a character, a location, or an action.
- Player 1 describes the Base Reality (characters in a situation doing something).
- Player 2 comes up with the Unusual Thing, a behavior or a piece of information that breaks from the expectations set by the Base Reality. Think about what you'd normally expect to see in this Base Reality, and come up with a way to subvert it, do something different. You can introduce an unusual or exaggerated behavior, an unexpected line of dialogue, a surprising emotion, a weird character trait, a wildly inappropriate response to this situation, an unexpected relationship between the characters, a character or an attitude that doesn't belong in the scene.
- Player 3 justifies it, by answering "If this Unusual Thing is true, then why is it true?".
- Then players take turns Heightening this Unusual Thing, by asking "If this is true, then what else is true?". Heighten it 3 times, make the last one as absurd as you can.

#### Suggestion

Birthday

#### Player 1 - Base Reality

A kid celebrating a birthday party.

#### Player 2 - Unusual Thing

The birthday cake is made out of broccoli.

#### Player 3 - Justification

Because the parents want to help the kid to lose weight.

#### Player 1 - Heightening

The gift is gym membership.

#### Player 2 - Heightening

"Go on, Toby, jump in a bouncy castle, do you know how many calories ten jumps can burn?"

#### Player 3 - Heightening

The birthday wish is "I wish I had better parents."

### Playing the Game

In this exercise, we will combine all the skills we have practiced to improvise comedy scenes.

To summarize, our scene should have a repeated pattern of unusual behavior (the game). Every time we revisit the unusual thing, it should get more exaggerated (heightening), and every moment in between should ground it in reality (justifying).

Typical scene structure looks like this:

- Use "Yes, And" to build on top of each other's ideas and set up the Base Reality.
- Discover and Frame the First Unusual Thing.
- Justify it, ground the absurdity in reality. If this unusual thing is true, then why is it true?
- Heighten the absurdity 3-5 times. If this unusual thing is true, then what else is true?
- End the scene once we have heightened the game as much as possible, and made it as absurd as it can be.

Common scene types:

- The grounded "strait man" character deals with the Comic Character with absurd behavior (an ordinary construction worker adopts a spoiled rich kid, a normal guy deals with his paranoid neighbor).
- Peas in a Pod - two Comic Characters with matching points of view, who are unusual in a similar way (two duller goth kids at a birthday party).
- Two different Comic Characters are at odds with each other (a college nerd and a party beast are roommates, "by the books" cop and his "loose cannon" partner).
- Fish out of Water. A comic character in a normal world, or a normal character in a comic world (a party girl has to become a spy, a pothead becomes a CEO, a hillbilly in a big city, a regular guy marries into a dysfunctional wealthy family).
- A supernatural (magic or sci-fi) premise leads to absurd consequences (an AI car goes to increasingly horrifying lengths to protect its passenger, a birthday wish renders a lawyer unable to lie).

#### Exercise

Two Players improvise a short (3-5 minute) scene using all the principles we have learned

### Learning Resources

[The Basics #1: What Is A Sketch and How Does It Work?](#)

[The Basics #2: Surprising Truth](#)

[The Basics #3: Where Do You Get Your Ideas?](#)

[The Basics #4: Brainstorming and outlining](#)

[The Basics #5: Turning a Blank Page into a Rough Draft](#)

[Dissecting "Philosophical Truth or Dare" \(excellent sketch example\)](#)

[What Makes Improv Funny?](#)

[UCB - The Game](#)

[A quick guide to Game of the Scene](#)

[UCB Manual \(audio version\)](#) - the ultimate, book-length explanation of improv comedy that delves deep into what "The Game" is, how to find and play it.

[Step by Step to Stand-up Comedy \(audio version\)](#) - an excellent book about joke writing.

[Guidelines on initiating the scenes.](#)

# Other Fun Games

## Resting the Game (draft)

Confession scenes.

- Start with a base reality.

- One of the players make a confession. Make it extreme and bold.

- Transitioning from base reality into the confession and back into base reality from the confession.

BR is calm and specific, confession is extreme and emotional. from one vibe to another. Taking care of the scene, who you are to each other, why it's important. work, your relationship. relax the pressure to be funny.

game and base reality. part a and part b of the song. you're at a bar, someone plays jazz guitar, we didn't start the fire, just wouldn't stop same line. find the game, then go back to base reality. go into game, then back into base reality.

make confession very different from base reality, tonally, different moment.

## Absurd Associations

In this game we'll practice making surprising connections between ideas that are not normally associated together.

### Exercise

- Start with a random suggestion for a location, character, or an action.
- Player 1 names an aspect of the suggestion - something they normally think of when they hear the suggestion, something closely related to it (it can be a character, a location, a thing, an action, an adjective, or a detail). They take this aspect out of context, and associate it to something wildly different from the suggestion, the most unrelated thing they can think of, an idea that is closely related to the aspect, but is not normally associated with the suggestion.
- Player 3 takes that association, and combines it with the suggestion, mixes the two ideas together.

#### Suggestion

Celebrating a birthday.

#### Player 1

Take an aspect: A birthday magician.

Associate it with something wildly different: Harry Potter.

#### Player 2

Combine the two ideas: Harry Potter has to get a job as a magician at a kid's birthday party.