

Connections

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Connections [v1.2]

Overview

Connections is a **collaborative storytelling game** originally created for the 'Us and Them' workshop December 2018. It is designed for 3-6 players and play time is 90-120 minutes. Using a flexible storytelling framework, and a set of semi-random prompts, players cooperate to create a future narrative. The game offers opportunities for imaginatively exploring risks and opportunities associated with social and technological change.

Sidebar: When and where is this story set? How much time does it cover?

It's up to you. The story could begin now or many years in the future. It could take place over years, weeks, or even hours. It will probably be global in scope. **As a default, let's say it starts around 2030**, but feel free to diverge from that.

Sidebar: Is it OK to ... ?

The answer is almost certainly 'yes'! This is a flexible and experimental framework. The key things to focus on are listening, collaborating, being imaginative, and telling the story that interests you most. If something isn't covered by the rules, feel free to make new rules up.

Materials

Provided:

- **Pen and paper**
- A great many **dice** of two different colours (we'll call them light and dark)
- A stack of **relationship 'cards'** (or use [this Google sheet](#))
- A table of **alternative connections**, used during the initial phase ([Appendix 1](#))
- A table of **random events**, used halfway through ([Appendix 2](#))
- An **endings table**, used near the end ([Appendix 3](#))
- Phones, laptops etc. may be useful for live research / inspiration
- Post-its may be helpful

Timeline (assuming groups of five)

15-20 min: **Initial phase**, deciding who your characters are

25-30 min: Act One: come up with **five scenes**, each centred on a different character

5-10 min: Randomly generate **Disruptions** and discuss their consequences

25-30 min: Act Two: come up with about **five more scenes**, each centred on a different character

10-15 min: Roll dice to determine **Endings** and come up with the finale

10-15 min: If there's time, identify and capture the main themes, discuss how to improve the story, what was plausible or implausible, what was interesting or worth developing further, etc.

Initial Phase (15-20 minutes)

1. Each player picks one **relationships card**, which will look something like one of these:

Prompts (you may swap one)	
— How do you know the player to your right?	Old friends
— Some need or objective that links you with the player to your right	To address an obsolescence problem
— Some place or organization that links you to the player to your right	
Prompts (you may swap one)	
— How do you know the player to your right?	One of you is spying on the other
— Some need or objective that links you with the player to your right	To become famous
— Some place or organization that links you to the player to your right	
Prompts (you may swap one)	
— How do you know the player to your right?	Consulting / advising / assisting
— Some need or objective that links you with the player to your right	To ensure a contract goes to a particular party
— Some place or organization that links you to the player to your right	
Prompts (you may swap one)	
— How do you know the player to your right?	Religious leader and follower
— Some need or objective that links you with the player to your right	To locate a missing person
— Some object or resource that links you to the player to your right	Expertise in alternative currencies
— Some place or organization that links you to the player to your right	A holiday house in the Finnish forests

You can pick one at random, or read them and choose one that interests you.

You should now have **eight relationships**, four with the player on your right, and four with the player on your left (how you know each other; some objective that links you; some object or resource that links you; and some place or organization that links you).

2. Based on these relationships, start to **develop your character**. As a group, discuss what these relationships could mean. They are just prompts, so feel free to interpret them however you wish. You don't have to decide every detail now, but it is important that you think about your relationships with both your neighbours. When you have some idea of who your character is, give them a name.

3. If you are having trouble making sense of your character, you may swap *one* prompt on the card you picked for an item from the **alternative connections** list (Appendix 1 or [this Google sheet](#)).

4. Finally, to prepare for the next phase, put a **big pile of dice** in the centre where everyone can reach them. There should be two colours, which we'll call "light" dice (associated with positive outcomes) and "dark" dice (associated with negative outcomes). Ideally there should be exactly twice as many dice as players -- half light, half dark.

Sidebar: Anything goes

To make a plausible story that makes sense, you'll need to interpret your prompts flexibly and imaginatively. Anything goes, so long as you agree it with the relevant players. For example, if the resource that links you with your neighbour is "a drone system," maybe that means one of you owns it, and the other wants to be allowed to use it. Or maybe you are working together on developing it. Or maybe it's top secret, and somehow you've both heard of its existence. Or you use drones to smuggle things back and forth. Or you have competing drone platforms.

Act One (25-30 minutes)

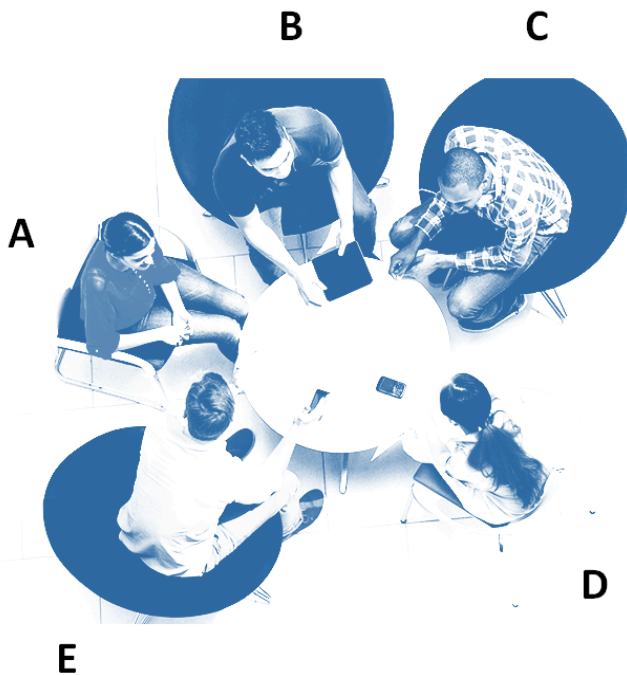
The story is made up of **scenes**. When it's your turn to start a scene, we refer to you as the **lead player**. This means the scene will end badly or well for you, and this outcome will be recorded by gaining a die (see 'Ending A Scene' below). Of course, the other player may also have a good or bad outcome, but you don't need to 'officially' register this.

Take turns being the lead player. When it is your turn, invite another player to join you in the scene. In Act One, it is usually best to invite just one other player to join you in your scene.

With the player you have invited, **create a scene in which your characters interact in some way**. The players who are not part of the scene listen (or offer suggestions, but only if asked).

A scene usually takes about 2-5 minutes of real time. The scene always **ends with a negative or positive outcome for the player who started it** (see below).

Between scenes, you may want to discuss as a group where the story should go next.



Sidebar: What is a scene?

It can take any form you like.

Try getting “in character,” and improvising a dialogue. But also feel free to use **other approaches**, i.e. just brainstorm what could happen next till you come up with something you like. A “scene” might actually take place over several years, if you feel it moves the story forward in an interesting way.

To begin with, it will be easier to create scenes with your neighbours, but as the story develops, it should be possible to create scenes with anybody.

Sidebar: How do I choose who to invite to my scene?

In a perfectly balanced game, in Act One, each player should act in two scenes: once as the person who initiates the scene, and once as the person who is invited. There are many possible orders (e.g. A-E, B-C, C-A, D-B, E-D is fine, so is A-B, B-C, C-D, D-E, E-A). Then in Act Two, you repeat, so each player is in two more scenes. There is no reason why a player can't be in two scenes in a row, if it suits the story. So if you're going first, you can invite anyone you like. If you're going last, there's probably just one person left to invite.

But also, it's not a big deal if you don't manage to stick to this -- it won't ruin the story or anything like that. A very symmetrical configuration, where everyone is in four scenes in total, may not suit the story you are telling. Just make sure you listen openly to the other players' wishes and ideas.

Remember that **the official positive or negative outcomes apply to the player who started the scene**. In other words, the invited player doesn't get given a die, only the lead player.

Ending A Scene

In the centre of the table is a pile of dice in the centre of two different colours (we'll call them light and dark).

At some point during the scene, someone must choose for it to end well or end badly for the lead character (i.e. the player who started the scene). This is signified by **taking a die from the central pool and silently placing it in front of the lead character**. Any player can do this.

- **Light die means a positive outcome.** The scene goes well for that character. They make progress toward their goals, and/or the goals themselves improve.
- **Dark die means a negative outcome.** The scene goes badly for that character. They don't get what they want. Their situation probably worsens.

When this signal has been received, the two active players continue talking, and gradually wrap up the scene in the way the die indicates.

N.B.: At this stage, the numbers on the die don't matter, just the colour. Keep the die in front of you, don't return it to the central pool. The reason for using dice will become clear at the end.



Sidebar: The rules for ending scenes are vague. Who decides, and how?

Give the scene a bit of time and space to develop. Don't jump in right away. You can ask yourself, 'What outcome feels most plausible?' and/or 'What outcome is most interesting for the story?' When it feels right, choose a positive or negative outcome.

Anyone can do this. Just be self-aware: if it always seems to be you who is deciding how the scenes end, step back and let others have a go.

If you are the player who started the scene, **you can even choose your own outcome** in the same way. Just take a light or dark die from the centre, and place it in front of yourself. (If you do this, you should normally ask the group for suggestions about how to implement the negative or positive outcome -- unless you happen to have an amazing idea).

Disruptions (5-10 minutes)

Disruptions occur at half time: ideally, when every player has been in two scenes (or after 50 minutes of total play time, if that comes sooner).

1. First, roll any three dice for a **random event** (see the table on the next page).
2. Second, discuss the impact of **climate change**. Decide on a level: 1.5°, 2.0°, 2.5°, 3.0°, 3.5°, 4.0°, 4.5°, 5.0°. How is this reshaping the world generally, and your story specifically? You may want to think through sea levels, deforestation, heat stress, famine, extreme weather events, biodiversity, destruction of coastal territory, tipping points, geoengineering, decarbonisation (including decarbonisation of military operations). If you want, you can use [Carbon Brief](#) for inspiration.
3. As a group, agree on any **additional disruptions or changes** you may want to think about. What is the geopolitical order like? How are demographics shifting? How has technological and economic activity changed? If you think you already have enough going on, you can skip this step.
4. **Briefly discuss** how all this could influence the story. Optional: if it suits the story, you may also want to agree to **skip forward in time** (e.g. "twenty years later ...").

Random Event Table (roll three dice)

3	The internet is badly damaged, destroyed, or compromised
4	Enormous, sudden worldwide food shortages
5	Geoengineering project has unanticipated catastrophic consequences
6	Large meteorite is coming to Earth, OR huge solar flare with geomagnetic storms
7	Westphalian state system transforms, traditional sovereignty radically changes
8	EU puts AI in charge of defence decisionmaking
9	Fundamental realigning of military alliances (very surprising from today's standpoint)
10	Parliament (or Congress) votes to end elections in the UK (or USA)
11	Fragmentation of China, USA, and/or Russia
12	A key country permits corporate entities and/or AI to stand for office
13	A pandemic, worse than the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic
14	A military coup and/or civil war in one of the world's top five economies
15	Supervolcano erupts
16	Military attacks from blockchain-based entity
17	Complete collapse of UK's (or all countries') power to collect tax
18	A large scale military conflict involving Poland, and/or Turkey, and/or others

Sidebar: Changing your character

If your story is set over several decades, you *may* decide it's necessary to change your character -- especially if they can 'inherit' your relationships and goals. For example, if you are playing Susan, the executive director of a NGO, you may decide that Susan retires at some point, and start to play Alex, a new executive director of the same NGO. Alternatively, you may decide it's better to stick with Susan, who may take on a new role elsewhere. Go with whatever feels most interesting.

Act Two (25-30 minutes)

The rules for Act Two are the same as for Act One, except that you may now (if the story calls for it) invite more than one player to join you in a scene.

Ending The Story (10-15 minutes)

When everyone has two dice in front of them (i.e. everyone has initiated one scene in Act One and one in Act Two), it's time to wrap up the story. Just before the finale, you may want to add a bit more story through group discussion. When you feel you're ready, determine your character's fate.

First, **roll the dice** that have been placed in front of you. If the dice are two different colours, your result is the **lower number**. If the dice are the same colour, your result is the **higher number**. Look up your result on the Endings Table:

	Catastrophic. Almost the worst ending imaginable. Humanity, or at least a large part of it, is doomed, and it's partly your fault. There is one ray of sunshine: your character probably does not survive long enough to see just how bad things are.
	Terrible. Your plans all fail. Anything you have created (technology, infrastructure, reforms, regulatory structure) is used in ways you never anticipated. The emerging world order is alien to all your values. Your character may or may not survive.
	Bad. Your character survives, but things are pretty bleak. With the benefit of hindsight, your key decisions were all wrong. All your attempts to create something good have had unintended side-effects and left damaging legacies.
	Pretty bad. Everything goes badly awry. Your plans did not go at all as you expected. Your information and reasoning were profoundly inadequate. You personally have suffered an ignominious fate. On the bright side, you accidentally did some good.
	Not bad. Not everything goes according to plan, but things work out for you anyway. You are flourishing and happy, and so are many of your friends and allies. Still, you can't help but wonder if you've really made the right choices ...
	Ideal. Whether through your own personal genius, or a bit of good luck, you avoid the worst dangers, and accomplish many of the things you hoped for. There are some surprises, but they're mostly good surprises. You've made a bit of the world better.

As a group, discuss how you want the overall story to end.

Then imagine this is the **closing montage of a movie**. Go around in a circle, and each player describes one last glimpse of their character, suggesting how the story ended for them.

Wrapping Up (Optional: 10-15 minutes)

If you want, you can spend some time at the end **discussing the story you've just told**. You can talk about things like:

- What were the main themes?
- How did the story work 'as a story'?
- Could it work to communicate expert knowledge to a wider public?
- How plausible were various elements of the story?
- Were there any tensions between realism and compelling storytelling?
- How else could the story have gone?
- What were the most promising aspects of the story in terms of problem-seeking and problem-solving?
- Do any aspects deserve further exploration?
- Would the story have developed in a different direction if different expertise were present?
- Could any aspects be written up in another form or medium?
- How did you find the storytelling system? Could it be used in other contexts? Could it be improved? Might it help to build imaginative flexibility?
- In what ways does the story reflect existing narratives or clichés about its subject matter?
- How did themes such as 'us and them,' 'friend and enemy,' 'good vs. bad' play out in this story?
- How does this creative method compare with the others? How could it be improved?
- Did this story raise any questions?

Reasoning Behind This Structure

More streamlined approaches are possible, e.g. you could simply collaborate on a story free-form, or keep the scene structure but remove the positive/negative outcomes and the Endings Table.

The rationale behind this structure is that it nudges the story, hopefully balancing **plausibility** with the sort of **tension** and **twists** that test the imagination and make for compelling storytelling.

- If your character had two good outcomes: More likely to get a happy ending (**plausible** -- adds a sense of realism)
- If your character had two bad outcomes: More likely to get a happy ending (a **reversal of fortunes** -- and you may feel like they've earned it)
- If your character had mixed outcomes: More likely to get an unhappy ending (**tension** -- they've had ups and downs, so how will it end?)

At the same time, there is obviously also a large element of randomness.

Appendix 1: Alternative Connections Table

In the initial phase, you may swap one of your pre-generated prompts for one of the ones below, or for one from [this Google sheet](#).

How you know each other: friends, family members, colleagues, rivals

Place that links you: school, university, workplace, neighbourhood, conference, research laboratory, government building, cafe, museum, gallery

Object or resource that links you: a vehicle, a hard drive, a prototype, a patent, an AI, medicine

Need that links you: to discover the truth, to make money, to improve security, to get revenge, to expand territory, to protect somebody/something vulnerable, to empower somebody

Appendix 2: Random Events Table

3	The internet is badly damaged, destroyed, or compromised
4	Enormous, sudden worldwide food shortages
5	Geoengineering project has unanticipated catastrophic consequences
6	Large meteorite hits Earth, OR huge solar flare with geomagnetic storms
7	Westphalian state system transforms, traditional sovereignty radically changes
8	EU puts AI in charge of defence decisionmaking
9	Fundamental realigning of military alliances (very surprising from today's standpoint)
10	Parliament (or Congress) votes to end elections in the UK (or USA)
11	Fragmentation of China, USA, and/or Russia
12	A key country permits corporate entities and/or AI to stand for office
13	A pandemic, worse than the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic
14	A military coup and/or civil war in one of the world's top five economies
15	Supervolcano erupts
16	Military attacks from blockchain-based entity
17	Complete collapse of UK's (or all countries') power to collect tax
18	A large scale military conflict involving Poland, and/or Turkey, and/or others

Appendix 3: Endings Table

☐	Catastrophic. Almost the worst ending imaginable. Humanity, or at least a large part of it, is doomed, and it's partly your fault. There is one ray of sunshine: your character probably does not survive long enough to see just how bad things are.
☐	Terrible. Your plans all fail. Anything you have created (technology, infrastructure, reforms, regulatory structure) is used in ways you never anticipated. The emerging world order is alien to all your values. Your character may or may not survive.
☐	Bad. Your character survives, but things are pretty bleak. With the benefit of hindsight, your key decisions were all wrong. All your attempts to create something good have had unintended side-effects and left damaging legacies.
☐☐	Pretty bad. Everything goes badly awry. Your plans did not go at all as you expected. Your information and reasoning were profoundly inadequate. You personally have suffered an ignominious fate. On the bright side, you accidentally did some good.
☐☐	Not bad. Not everything goes according to plan, but things work out for you anyway. You are flourishing and happy, and so are many of your friends and allies. Still, you can't help but wonder if you've really made the right choices ...
☐☐☐	Ideal. Whether through your own personal genius, or a bit of good luck, you avoid the worst dangers, and accomplish many of the things you hoped for. There are some surprises, but they're mostly good surprises. You've made a bit of the world better.

Appendix 4: Variations

It should be fairly easy to incorporate a larger group, e.g. with some players watching and offering ideas, but not participating directly in creating scenes.

Alternatively, two or more players can 'run' a single character.

You could also interpret 'character' *very* flexibly, e.g. a character could be an organization, or a nation, or a form of technology.

These rules have been inspired by the RPG *Fiasco* (Billy Pulpit Game). You may want to explore *Fiasco* itself for further variations and ideas.

Appendix 5: Notes from First Playtest

'Us and Them' SF Workshop, December 2018

Four parallel groups of 3-5. A great mixture of backgrounds and expertise (military, sciences and technology, writing, literary scholarship, etc.). We took most of the morning for the session, which was great (the timings listed above are a bit tight).

Group A's story involved the interplay between IP law, a novel energy technology, and access to reproductive services. Group B's story was about attempts to manage climate change through direct neural intervention, as well as the use of AI in strategic decision-making. Group C's story was about the settlement of Antarctica in a future shaped by multiple waves of pandemics. Group D's story explored themes of AI governance, memory manipulation, and innovative use of animals by organized crime networks.

Many participants reported really enjoying the experience, including one or two who said they at first felt skeptical and uncomfortable. The stories were all extremely big, bold, and a bit zany. They drew on popular culture (e.g. Wakanda, 'unobtainium'). They were usefully 'messy': filled with subplots; unexpected connections; apparently trivial details proving important; apparently important facts proving trivial. There was also some intriguing interplay between individual agency and larger social and historical processes. Overall, from the standpoint of fiction, and/or understanding future threats and other strategic and ethical implications of emergent phenomena, the stories felt like promising first drafts.

Suggestions for next iteration:

- Personally, I gained some useful experience of moderating, and have a much better sense of which aspects of the game are likely to be intuitive, and which need extra explanation. For example, next time I would emphasize that a character emerges from a player's relationship with BOTH neighbours, which must be considered simultaneously. At first, two groups adopted the (apparently reasonable) approach of breaking into pairs, and I needed to nudge them to work in a more fluid way. Also drip-feeding the rules about the dice didn't work terribly well. For instance, several players simply put them back in the central pool. It would be better to explain upfront the multiple functions of the dice (indicating negative or positive outcomes, keeping track of the number of scenes, determining the character's ending).
- Terminology change. It would be useful to have some clearer terminology to distinguish "the character who starts the scene" and "the character who is invited to the scene." It's not very intuitive that only one player gets an official outcome. I will probably tweak the wording here. Perhaps "main character" and "supporting character"?
- Relaxing a rule. I also think it would be just fine to let each player invite anybody (one or more) into their scene. Originally I thought it would be more fair to encourage everyone to participate in the same number of scenes, but on balance I think this is a bit difficult to keep track of and unnecessarily rigid. I think most groups probably did this anyway. I will update the rules.

- Climate change played a reasonably large role, but I think some explicit prompts would be useful. In a future iteration, I would probably introduce a second strategic shock random table, with a climate change theme.
- A diceless variation? All those dice worked fine, but might prove a barrier (not everybody has a million dice in their suitcase). Perhaps the dice should be replaced by tokens. Two tokens are assigned during play, and the third token is drawn from a hat (50/50 light/dark). Outcomes, in order of best to worst, are: three dark tokens, three light tokens, two dark and one light, two light and one dark.
- Will's suggestion: why not have four separate piles of cards, one for each relationship category? This is essentially what's happening under the hood on the Excel sheet, but it might be interesting to make it more explicit. E.g.: each player is dealt a hand of four cards. The flexibility comes from deciding where to place these cards. Players go round in a circle, each placing a card down either to their right or their left. Players cannot place a card where there is already a card in this category. Character development is thus a bit more structured and incremental. This would take a bit more investment in terms of materials, but I think it's worth trying. I may update the rules. An even more flexible version would give each player a larger deck (say, six cards).
- I wonder if it might be worth placing greater emphasis on unintended consequences? Perhaps this could be kept at the forefront of the players' minds by combining it with the 'negative vs. positive' outcome. E.g. the rule might be that every scene must end with an unintended consequence: a light die means that the character benefits from it, and a dark die means that they lose out or are placed at risk.
- I also wonder about ways of preserving the fun and freewheeling character of the game, and still empowering participants to explore apparently unlikely and even silly-sounding scenarios, while at the same time encouraging more rigorous and detailed interdisciplinary reasoning? It may be that there's a bit of a natural trade-off here, of course. Some experiments worth trying: have additional team members whose role isn't storytelling but rather fact-checking and other research; have initial prompt cards which carry 'educational' information and which exemplify a 'hard science fiction' attitude; have more random events, again accompanied by rich real world data; and/or explicitly treat the story as a first draft, and have another phase at the end oriented toward a plausible and rigorous redraft.
- Overall, I think it's worth exploring a FULL DAY VERSION. This would add an initial phase of structured discussions and brainstorming in order to select problems, and generate relevant CONNECTIONS, NEEDS, RESOURCES, and CONTEXTS. Add an afternoon phase in which stories are rewritten as plausibly as possible, supported by research.
- Of course, it could also be useful to explore a compressed version as well, that could comfortably be learned and run through in 90 minutes or so.