

GM: Mutagen Meta Playbook

Audience ► This playbook is for GMs of a game using the Mutagen Engine. There're no secrets, so players are welcome; but the GM's experience is not the same as the player's, and this playbook doesn't mince words about it.

Prereqs ► Read the Mutagen Meta section at the back of this playbook. Everything builds from that. Also read a PC playbook so you have an idea what that's like.

Fiction first ► Everything in this game flows from the fiction, not the other way around. Play by figuring out what would logically happen in the "real" world, then figuring out which game mechanic might apply.

A good example is harm: injuries create harm, not the other way around. One of the NPCs shot somebody in the chest: we all know that's a life-threatening wound, so they take that's 2 harm. If you got shot with the exact same gun in the hand? 1 harm. In the face? 3 harm. The gun doesn't do some fixed amount of damage, see? It's based on what y'all said happened in the story.

Love the PCs ► You've gotta love the PCs. You've gotta be their biggest fan in the whole world. You've gotta be curious about them. This is a matter of attitude, and it's your responsibility; this isn't about your players making cool enough characters.

We're mediators and facilitators, not auteurs ► If you want to have an epic quest line plotted on a 3-act structure with predetermined encounters and maybe branching results, you're better at plot than I am, and I encourage you to write a book.

Our role as a GM in this game isn't to carry the PCs through a plot. Our job is to provide problems to solve, NPCs and scenery, suspense, and consequences. Otherwise the PCs should be writing as much of the story as you can get them to. The more of the story you've got them writing, the more epic your contributions feel when you do come in with something you've been working on.

Plan to improv ► Instead of spending your prep time plotting out intricate storylines and nuanced recurring villains that your players often ignore, just write down cool ideas you have in a notebook. One of these could be an NPC concept, a neat item, an idea

for an adventure hook, or a location. Just put down a few key details that distinguishes this corner bar from that corner bar, and move on to the next idea.

Then when your players decide to go off to wherever on their own agendas, you can deftly slip in these fragmentary ideas like you've got a whole world meticulously prepared. They won't even notice you've only got 8 words written down about Tobias Trim because you've got them doing all the storytelling and inventing fiction anyway, right?

Just give them the problem ► Don't bother trying to balance story problems so that they're "solvable". First off, not everybody can fix every problem. But more importantly, PCs in this typically game have larger than life powers in-world, and players have ridiculous amounts of narrative control. They typically can find a solution to most problems—often awesome and shocking solutions you'd never predict.

Failure's also always an option. Since you don't have any plot planned, you don't need the PCs to overcome that challenge just to keep the plot on track. You can always just let them take the loss and try something else.

Name (almost) everybody and everything ► Go online and get a name generator and just make a huge list of names. Print it out, bring it to the table, and whenever the PCs interact with an individual NPC, give that NPC a name from the list. You don't have to be dogmatic about this—sometimes the bouncer's just "the bouncer"—but I find it adds a lot for nearly everybody to have a name.

Oh, and just tell the players. Part of the point is to make the players see the NPCs as people, which doesn't work if you hide the name. If an NPC's identity is secret, give them an alias.

The symbols are different here ► In the rest of the playbooks, the symbols \triangle , \circ , and \bullet have one meaning. In this playbook they have another.

Free Moves ► Make moves with a \bullet whenever you think it'd be cool, or whenever another move suggests it.

Co-Moves ► Moves with a \circ or \triangleright are called co-moves. They have the same name as a move in a PC's or meta playbook. When a player makes a move, play the appropriate co-move (if there is one).

Game Options ► Moves with \triangle are optional moves. You should decide before you start playing a new campaign whether or not you want to use the move, as these typically have big impacts on the story. If you decide you're going to use one of the optional moves, fill the \triangle so that you remember your choice and stay consistent.

Moves \triangleright Moves are literally the only things you can do in this game. "Aptitudes" and "resources" describe the character, but moves are what let PCs do stuff in the present.

Aside from story moves, the rest of the moves a PC has deal with basically "exceptions to the rule". Normal people don't throw fireballs, but wizards do and get a move to let them defy the norm. If throwing fireballs is super common in your world, then it wouldn't need a move.

Aptitudes \triangleright Aptitudes basically let us say what a character is good at. Without aptitudes, every PC would have the same chance of succeeding at anything; and any PC would have the same chance of succeeding at everything. Separating aptitudes from moves lets us link them in interesting ways, letting players do the same things via different methods.

Resources \triangleright On a technical level, everything the PCs or you "have", including stuff like "status", is a resource. But also resources are probably the easiest base concept to grasp: they're notes, or points, or some combination of notes and points. They start full, and stay that way, until a move says otherwise.

Respect our limits \triangleright I highly suggest finding a gaming consent form and having your players fill it out before the first session. This is a non-confrontational way to find out what somebody really might have a problem with. Then when you're building your world and scenarios, you can avoid things that will upset folks.

State a limit \triangleright This means you too! Just say, "Jill, I know that might be how she acts, but I'm not

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comfortable with playing out your character doing that. Could we skip it?”

Invent fiction ▷ Let them invent fiction, damnit! If they’re not contradicting something established or that you’re holding in surprise, just enjoy the ride.

Push them to engage by leaving blanks in your world. For instance, write down a dark ritual with blanks for the horrible implements, and ask the players what each tool is as the sinister priest pulls it from his robe. A few scenes like this, and they’ll be volunteering stuff.

Don’t sweat the meta ▷ To a large degree, this goes for you too. Don’t whisper in players’ ears and pass notes. Don’t hide names of people or places (unless the literal name itself ruins a surprise; in which case, maybe rename it).

If you’re playing some kind of fish-out-of-water game, don’t go describing a cellphone as a “black crystalline slab with several raised protrusions on one edge”. Nobody will picture what you have in your head, so it won’t be a cool puzzle... it’s just fucking confusing. Say what it is, and let the PCs roleplay not knowing what it is.

Dispute fiction ▷ This is complicated and ultimately emotional. In other games, it comes up when PCs die—so Mutagen eliminates that issue—but it can still come up if you kill off a favorite NPC in an unsatisfying way. It’s also liable to come up if you just arbitrarily erase progress toward PC goals—and for good reason.

Bought and free items ▷ Be careful approving PCs to buy △, as they’re typically game-altering if the world’s not designed to incorporate them directly. The only △s in Common are for superhuman levels of Health, but some PC playbooks include them.

☛ **Consult the GM** ▷ Stuff with ☛ tends to be not so much game-altering as stuff that will mean something very different in different games. A player might take Spooky Shit assuming it’ll let them talk to ghosts; but there are no ghosts in your world, and you think Spooky Shit is about government conspiracies. So the icon gets y’all talking.

(Progress) Bars ▷ A progress bar is super simple. You can make them prettier, but here’s an ugly example:

You defuse the bomb: □□□□

It’s a thing that’s gonna happen, and it’s a number of ticks for it to happen. Use more ticks to represent more complicated or time-consuming tasks.

Use bars to represent rising tension or progress. They can also be used to represent long-term tasks and projects.

The point of a bar is to show rising tension to the players. There’s no point in making one if you’re going to keep it hidden.

Tick a bar ▷ Don’t tick bars just based on time passage.

Lose what you spend ▷ The critical part here is that you spend your resource, roll, then find out what happens. This is critical because if you ↗ on special moves, you often restore the resource you just spent.

Status ▷ These sometimes trip people up, especially if they’re used to computer RPGs. In this game, a status is literally anything appropriate—there’s no list of statuses. Moves might set or refer to some specific status, but for the most part it’s anything that’s true of something that might change at some point.

Ex. broken arm; exhausted; hungry; bleeding out; vulnerable to mistletoe; looking fly; limping; recognized by the Duke; on fire.

No need to be dogmatic about writing stuff if it’s going to be short-lived. Nobody’s “on fire” for long.

Read the dice ▷ The critical part here is that dice results aren’t in terms of success or failure, but in terms of “narrative momentum”.

Narrative momentum - This concept represents the ease and control with which the PCs are moving through the story. It’s put in these terms so that we keep the fiction first and focus on interesting evolution of the plot.

Imagine a locked door; the only reasonable entrance. The rest of your interesting story is inside.

If dice rolls decide literal success and failure at a task, it’s easily possible that your thief fails to pick the lock; your brute fails to smash the door. How does your story evolve from here? Abandon it? Deus ex machina? Re-rolls? Defy your story’s logic and say there’s an even less fortified entrance? And what does it say about the PCs that they couldn’t competently thieve or brutalize?

In this game, instead of dice deciding whether you succeed or fail at a task, they decide whether you get what you want in the immediate and how your attempt affects your ability to get what you want in the near future.

The default state of most characters in most stories is → (carrying momentum). They’re moving forward according to their plan, dealing with the challenges that they’ve prepared for—they have the initiative. An action hero is kicking ass, but each ass-kicking is its own small challenge. A lawyer is handling a tough witness, but the opposition still has a case.

Low points for characters come when they ↓ (stall momentum). Their plans unravel somehow, and they’re forced to regroup and react—they’ve lost the initiative. The action hero is flanked and surrounded. Opposing counsel brings out some slam-dunk evidence.

Note that in the ↓ examples, our PCs didn’t do anything wrong. They didn’t go from kicking ass and lawyering to floundering incompetently; they’ve just run into a new, bigger problem that demands they regroup and try a new strategy.

Which also isn’t to say that ↓ never implies failure. If it makes sense and is interesting for the PC to fail at their task, that might be part of ↓. But their failure should come with some kind of new and interesting narrative problem so that the story can keep moving forward. They should never just be in a position to “try again”.

Sometimes a character faces a challenge that they overcome, but which costs them something in the process or makes it harder for them to stick to their plan. In game terms, we say they ↘ (lose momentum). The action hero takes a wound, forcing

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him to fight off-handed. The lawyer humiliates opposition to win a point, making an enemy.

On rare occasions, a character gets what they want plus they find themselves in a position to more easily get what they want next. They ↗ (gain momentum). The action hero appropriates a machine gun from his last foe. The judge sustains the lawyer's objection, and also realizes there's been a procedural error in her favor.

When we roll in this game, especially for a story move, we're not asking chance to decide whether or not the PC can do what they're good at. We're asking whether being good is enough to get them what they want, and where they stand with regards to their next problem.

Low/Zero Effect ▷ Sometimes a PC's plan to achieve something just wouldn't work. Not in the sense that they'll fail to complete the plan, but in the sense that completing the plan won't achieve anything. You should limit effect sparingly, only to keep player actions in line with the story world's logic.

This is also your main tool to keep players honest about what abilities they're trying to roll with. Low Effect might strain credulity, while Zero breaks it.

Use Low Effect when the PC will get less of what they want if they succeed. He's armored, but it's cloth—less harm. You're a fast driver, but you're in a jalopy—closer race. You want to **▣Fighting** to cook for a troop of people in a war zone—yeah, I can kinda see that.

Use Zero Effect when the PC will get none of what they want. It's full plate—no harm. You're fast, but the car's on fire—you're walking. You want to **▣Fighting** to re-plant an orchid—how's that work?

Story moves ▷ These moves are the core of this whole game. They PCs push a story forward while maintaining risk and surprise. You could tell a complete RPG without anything but the story moves, although characters would feel bland and undifferentiated.

Story moves deal with universal goals that RPG PCs might have from moment to moment in a story. They

cover the vast majority of risky, exciting shit that happens in a game. But they don't care how they do the thing.

For instance, everybody can try to break an important object (go apeshit⁷) to move the story forward. For the sake of figuring out what would be cool if they ↘ while doing it, it doesn't matter if they used karate or a blowtorch.

Make a story move ▷ You'll often need to help players figure out which story move they're actually making. Ask what they hope to achieve with their actions and pick the move that goes with their narrative goals, don't focus on how they're trying to get it or what aptitudes they're trying to use.

Once you have their actual goals and therefore the move figured out, they can decide based on their described action if they've got an aptitude that's helping them. Be lenient, but keep players honest about whether their aptitude is really at the core of their action.

The individual story co-moves have a lot more concrete information and examples.

GM: Common Playbook

This is gonna be a little out of order. Story moves are on their own pages so you can re-order them wherever is convenient in your playbook.

Resources

Concept ▷ This is a main XP hook for PCs. Try to help your players define a bold concept. It shouldn't drown in details, but it should give a clear picture of what that character's "about".

Ex. Creepy but lonely Victorian child vampire.
Ridiculed investigator touched by the paranormal.
Detective with a cheerful demeanor and cold heart.
Brawler with a tragic past and a ruined shoulder.

Drives ▷ This is a secondary XP hook for PCs. Again, try to keep these bold. Also try to keep them actionable: something they can actively, objectively pursue.

It's okay if they want to choose concrete long-term goals ("find lost father"), but encourage folks to have at least one more abstract ("spread corruption") or immediate ("find Twinkies") Drive. They probably can't look for their lost father in every story, but they can always scrounge for snack cakes.

🔧 **Profession** ▷ This works with "Professional Skills" to give PCs access to specialized but "mundane" skills. The idea is to let someone put down "Doctor" or "Plumber" and access the skills and knowledge a doctor or plumber would have.

One issue is that I don't know what's "mundane" in your world, or even in your story. You could be med students telling a story set in a hospital, and you've got highly-technical playbooks written for each medical specialty. Or you might be playing in the stone age and there's just no such thing as a doctor. Or you could be telling a story where "Space Pirate" is just a day job.

The best candidate for a profession is a job secondary to the focus of your story, but still "possible" in your world. Secondary here doesn't mean that the skills themselves are irrelevant (a doctor might use her skills a lot in a combat-heavy story), but that you're not trying to directly explore the specific powers and skills of that job.

The other concern is that they choose a very broad profession label that basically serves as a catch-all aptitude. The broadest example I can think of is "Soldier", which in the modern military could mean doing anything from flying helicopters to programming computers. Other examples might include "Scientist" and "Thief". Honestly, even a "Doctor" is probably a specialist in the real world.

Ask the PC what they trained in specifically, what they actually do. Were they a mess cook or special forces infantry? Do they study beetles or lightning? Do they pickpocket or burgle? Family medicine or podiatry?

Once you've narrowed down their career to a realistic degree, it's rarely a catch-all.

Health ▷ They've only got 3 health, but your PCs are only as squishy as you want people to be. Remember that injuries cause harm which depletes health. So if getting shot in the gut isn't a big deal in your world, call that 1 harm.

Letting them buy △ effectively promotes them to superhuman. Because an injury can only do up to 3 harm, a healthy character with rank 2 of health can canonically get hit by a bus or a bomb and stand back up.

Resist ▷ See the *resist consequences* co-move.

XP ▷ See the *Earn XP* co-move.

Aptitudes

These are intended to be "universal", just broad classes of "mundane" stuff that people can get good at. Remember that character concepts are defined in bold strokes, so it's okay for what they're good at to also be defined in bold terms.

I'm going to save space by not walking through every one of these. It really doesn't matter where your table decides some particular activity fits—there's no balance issues or anything like that to worry about.

👻 **Spooky Shit** – Just make sure you're on the same page as your PC about what "spooky" means in your world. There might be nothing supernatural in one game world, so this is just about theatrics. In another world, you'd use this to commune with ghosts. It could also refer to conspiracy theory, again "real" or not.

🔧 **Professional Skills** – See the Profession co-move.

Moves

Resist consequences ▷ This is a PC's main tool to redeem shitty rolls, and they have to buy resist by accepting fun consequences when they'd otherwise sail through, so definitely make the new complication way less bad. You might even consider just making the complication disappear and treating the roll as →.

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Story Moves

You know already, but these are the backbone of your story. Regular moves might say you can throw a fireball, but only a story move tells us what happens when it hits.

Since they get so much use, story moves are set up differently from regular moves. Each one has a column of its own. It starts with a description of what a PC named “PC” is trying to achieve in the story.

If PC is acting on or against another animate thing or person, that animate entity is called “Alex”.

👉 Blocks like these mention goals that are commonly confused for that story move’s goal—they’ll tell you the right move.

Most PC move blocks list the momentum results from best to worst (↗→↘↓).

However, story moves start with →. This is for several reasons:

1. → is the “default” outcome for the move. If it’s not interesting to roll, this is the outcome.
2. I write ↗ outcomes as “differences” from the default → outcome.
3. The ↓ outcome is in a clear and consistent place.

Bullet-point option blocks are exactly that: options. They’re not exhaustive lists. Any time you can think of some cooler or more specific to what’s happening in your story, do that! The options are to give you ideas, not limit you.

Fuck ‘em up

PC wants to inflict injury on someone to maim, neutralize, or kill them. This doesn’t have to be in combat, for instance if PC set someone up for an “accident”.

👉 The victim is inanimate—*go apeshit*.

👉 PC actually wants Alex to do some specific thing, like run away, shut up, or hand over the money—*compel compliance*.

→ PC does the injury as they’ve described. If Alex is a PC, they *take harm*. For NPCs, consider having them retreat, pass out, or die. Only desperate or determined fighters are likely to counter-attack.

↗ Bonus:

- PC picks an injury status for Alex.
- Alex has cool loot.
- PC’s attack takes out additional enemies.
- Alex’s allies are intimidated.
- Better physical position (e.g. high ground).

↘ Complication:

- PC gets injured in the struggle—by Alex, their ally, or the environment.
- Alex or the struggle is noisy.
- There’s (meaningful) collateral damage.
- PC’s weapon is temporarily disabled.
- Someone (unintended) saw it happen.

↓ What stalled them?

- PC missed.
- Alex has armor or cover.
- Alex parries, dodges, or evades.
- Some mechanism or device fails.
- Someone else gets in the way.

What’s next?

- Alex counter-attacks.
- Alex summons help.
- Alex escapes.
- The authorities arrive.

Compel compliance

PC wants Alex to do something specific. Not just a reaction, but the particular thing that the PC wants. PC’s desire could be anything from “be quiet” to “learn this concerto”.

PC doesn’t need to use threats or force on Alex. They could use commanding presence, clever manipulation, or just bribery.

👉 PC wants Alex to feel positively about them—*schmooze ‘em*.

👉 PC wants to distract Alex or get them to believe a falsehood—*fool ‘em*.

→ PC gets their way and Alex does as PC says. If Alex is a PC, they get 1 XP for going along with it, but they don’t have to.

↗ Bonus:

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↘ Complication:

↓ What stalled them?

What’s next?