

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.

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 for failure. 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 △, ○, and ● have one meaning. In this playbook they have another.

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

Co-Moves ► Moves with a ○ or ▷ 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 △ are optional moves. You should decide before you start playing a new series 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 △ so that you remember your choice and stay consistent.

Moves ▷ Moves are literally the only things you can do in this game. "Aptitudes" and "resources" describe the character, but moves are what let them do stuff that matters.

"Story moves" let us 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 apeshit*) to move the story forward. For figuring out what kind of thing would be cool to happen if they failed, it hardly matters if they're using a club or a blowtorch.

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 ▷ 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 in different ways.

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Resources ► 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 ► 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 people.

State a limit ► This means you too! Just say, “Jill, I know that might be how she acts, but I’m not comfortable with playing out your character doing that. Could we skip it?”

Invent fiction ► Let them invent fiction, goddamnit! 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 black 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 colored protrusions”. Nobody will picture what you have in your head, and 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 Δ, as they’re typically game-breaking in a game not designed to incorporate them directly. The only Δs 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-breaking 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 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 a simple 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.

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.

Template Playbook