Mutagen Meta Playbook

This playbook, which is probably one of several in your playbook, defines the concepts used in a game we're all playing together—you, your GM, any other players at the table (virtual or otherwise), and me.

The goal of this game is to improvise a story to engage, entertain, and excite everyone at the table. There's no other way to win, and the only way to lose is for someone to stop having fun.

Everyone uses the rules in their playbooks to push the story forward. We use rules so that we can introduce meaningful limitations, flaws, risk, tension, and surprise while maintaining consensus. Other than that, we're all just bullshitting to have fun.

Moves – A move is an action you take to solve some problem you have in the story. The problem might be something obvious and external, like a sliding avalanche. Or it might only be a problem for you, like your hand not containing a fireball when you'd like it to.

Some moves are very broad and open-ended, while some are very narrow and specific. Some might resolve in nearly an instant, while some might take a long time. Some are always active, and some have specific trigger conditions. Often you must spend a resource to make a move.

Most moves describe an in-game effect, but meta moves relate to some aspect of the game itself. This is a meta move.

Make a move – Yada yada.

Respect our limits – This game is for everyone at the table. If somebody needs to *state a limit*, immediately cut away or fade to black from whatever is upsetting them. Talk as a table about how to continue the story while embracing the limit.

State a limit – This is a game to have fun. If some theme, activity, or imagery of the story is ruining your fun, speak up. You don't have to explain why, you only have to indicate what.

Think for the camera – This game works better when we think like we're directing a tv series more than writing a novel. Focus on what we can perceive with our (supernatural?) senses here in the moment.

Invent fiction – This game shines when you speak up to refine, improve, or augment the scenario. It needs to make sense, and the GM has final veto, but the only firm rule is: don't contradict anything already established. **Use this to set up a move or just to make shit cooler.**

Ex. *They're wearing my favorite designer. My fur is saturated violet. Lucky I've always got my boot knife. Maybe the roof collapsed in one corner. It's a huge gun, just a fucking giant revolver with shells like Vienna sausages. Surely there's a forklift in this warehouse.*

Be curious, not cautious – This game is more fun when we play to find out what happens than when we play to keep your character content. Stories about people who never take risks, never get hurt, who never fail leave fewer memories than stories about a hot fucking mess.

Don't sweat the meta – In this game, it's okay for you to know things that you don't know, and to act on that knowledge when it would make shit cooler. Likewise, don't talk around what you're doing. Be plain so that everybody at the table can understand the badass shit you're up to.

Dispute fiction – Sometimes the GM will say something they think is cool, but that just ruins the story for you. You're trying to *be curious, not cautious* but whatever the GM said just seems to cheapen the whole damn thing for you. Speak up and negotiate an alternative.

This isn't the same as *resist consequences*. Don't use this to gain an in-game advantage. Use this when something happens that would make you turn off a show you were watching.

Labeled items – Some item names are written with a colon. For example, "Thread: Conjure elements". In this case "Thread" is the label, and the item is "Conjure elements". An entire subsection of your playbook might also be labeled; this is the same as if every item in that section were individually labeled the same way.

Instead of a specific item, a move may mention a label instead. This refers to any or all item names prefixed with that label.

Bought and free items – Some items are presented with an empty ○ in front of them; these items must be purchased during character creation or with XP during play. Items with a filled ● are free if your playbook contains them.

Items prefixed with △ are bought only if your playbook, a move, or the GM says you get them. They cannot be bought otherwise.

Items with neither △, ○, nor ● are automatically in play if your playbook contains them.

Rolling – A move may say that you roll dice to find out what happens. You'll always roll 2d6. Depending on the move, you might add a modifier—often an ability. A move or the GM may also tell you that there's a penalty or bonus to the roll. Sum everything then cap at ±3 before adding it to the dice.

The results of a roll will be one of the following:

⚅⚅ 12+: Critical Success
⚅⚄ 10-11: Full Success
⚅⚀ 7+: Qualified Success
⚁⚀ 2-6: Failure

Clocks – Clocks are an abstract representation of tension mounting with progress or activity over time. A clock has a title and some number of ticks between 1 and 8, both decided by the GM. When the last tick is filled, whatever the title says happens.

Usually the title says exactly what's going to happen. but even if it's a surprise, the title should at least be an opaque reference that folks will understand after the event occurs.

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The time a clock represents is highly abstract. It might be a few seconds to blow the vault before the guards arrive. Or it might be months before you've completed your dissertation.

The number of ticks in a clock corresponds to the abstract complexity of the task or process. More complicated processes just naturally take longer coming to fruition. For events truly dependent on the passive passage of time, each tick might represent a fixed interval of time—but only for that particular clock.

Tick a clock – Tick a clock when a move or the GM says to.

Resources – A resource is some tracked asset or quality of your character referenced in certain moves. Some are just notes you keep, but most resources are tracked with points. Each point of a particular resource is represented with a ☐. Some resources come in ranks of advancement, permitting you to hold more points.

When you restore or gain a resource, fill a ☐. You cannot have more of a resource than you have ☐ for that item. If all your ☐ are full when you're supposed to gain the resource, just don't fill anything.

When you spend or lose a resource, erase a filled ☐. If you don't have any filled ☐, you cannot spend the resource, so you cannot make moves that require you do so. If you don't have any filled ☐, and a move's effect tells you to lose a resource, just don't erase anything—any other effects or consequences of the move still happen as normal, though.

Abilities – Abilities describe proficiency well beyond the expectations on a random human being. They might be skills you've developed to professional or exceptional levels, or they might be truly extraordinary or supernatural techniques.

In short, while moves say what your goal is to solve a problem, abilities describe *how* you achieve that goal.

When you first get an ability, it starts at +0—even this gives you almost a 60% chance of success. Each additional ○ you buy gives you another +1 to your modifier.

If you haven't bought an ability, but use a move that says to roll with it anyway, roll with -1.

Some abilities have more than 3 ○ available. Buying extra ○ lets you soak up penalties to rolls, but doesn't let you exceed the maximum modifier.

Status – A status is a short, descriptive phrase describing a condition or state that is true; potentially about you, anybody else, or even an item or place. When a move or the GM says you or something of yours gets a status, write it down. As long as it's written down, no aspect of the fiction can violate its truth.

You can have an unlimited number of statuses. Likewise, they are not restricted to a predefined list. Write your active and permanent statuses down in a notebook.

Remove a status – You can erase a status when a move or the GM says you can, or when it no longer makes sense for it to be true.

Exploit status – When you make a move, you can describe how you're capitalizing on a status currently in play to add +1 on your move. You can only exploit one status in a move.

Effect Level – When you make a some moves, before you roll, the GM will tell you what level of effect you can expect to have from a 🎲🎲. For instance, you want to *fuck 'em up* using your 9mm against a battle tank: even if you succeed in making the shot, you're probably not going to achieve much but scratch the paint. On the other hand, if you're gunner in the tank, *fuck 'em up* is gonna be a lot more effective in returning fire.

Effect levels are as follows:
- Zero – your move will have no benefit, even with a 🎲🎲.
- Limited – your move won't have its usual punch. You might do less harm or only partially complete your goal.
- Standard – your move will do what it says.
- Great – your move is really gonna knock 'em dead. You might do more harm or complete your goal very efficiently.

Harm – Harm is abstract damage inflicted on an animate creature or inanimate object. A single injury can do 1-3 harm.

The scale is calibrated roughly to the human body. 1 harm causes a serious injury. 2 harm causes a life-threatening injury. 3 harm will kill most any vanilla human instantly.

When applied to inanimate objects, just gauge whether the object would be damaged or broken based on common sense. Fragile items probably break after 1 harm, but 3 harm will just bounce off a battleship's armor.

Basic Moves – Basic moves share a common formula. Any move listed in your playbook under a Basic Moves heading uses this formula.

When you make a basic move, state your goal and describe how you're achieving it. Based on the narrative and your description, the GM will tell you your *effect level* and any bonuses or penalties to the roll. You can decide whether you want to go for it or amend your plan.

If your description or a move has you making the move using an **ability** you've got, roll with that. Otherwise roll with **-1**.

🎲🎲 You succeed stunningly and gain some additional benefit that the GM will decide.
🎲🎲 You succeed as you've described.
🎲🎲 You succeed but there's some trade-off, consequence, or complication that the GM will decide.
🎲🎲 Something didn't go right. It might not be your fault, but you didn't achieve your goal.

This playbook is a bit different. I'm a GM, you're a GM. It's chill here. We both know your experience of an RPG is not the same as your players—before, during, or after your sessions. You're not bitter, cause you love it, but let's be real.

I assume you're willing to read a bit more than the players. I'm going to give you advice like commandments and expect you to ignore me when it's cooler to do so. I expect you know what's cool—at least what you and your players will think is cool.

This game is intentionally terse and dense, packing a lot into a few pages. As a result, I've made a lot of compromises in terms of omitting philosophy and background information, or defining common RPG terms, slang, and notations. There's so much general RPG information available online that's applicable to every system, I don't see the need to repeat it.

If this is your first time with an RPG claiming to be fiction first, watch some people on YouTube play *Blades in the Dark* or *Scum and Villany*—or maybe this game someday. It's a lot closer to telling a campfire story than it is to tactical simulation.

Don't get out the minis. This game isn't about minutiae.

The symbols are different here – In the rest of the playbooks, the symbols △, ○, and ● have one meaning. In this playbook they have another.

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

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

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.

Template Playbook