

Iron Triangle

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Intro

Why roleplaying games?

Unlike almost any other activity, roleplaying games combine:

- Playing a role, i.e. portraying someone other than yourself in a collaborative story with other people
- Playing a game, i.e. making choices constrained by rules in pursuit of a goal

If you're interested in a story, but not collaboration or choices, read or write a book. If you're interested in choices and collaboration, but not rules or goals, do improv. If you're interested in rules and goals, but not portraying someone other than yourself, play a boardgame. But if you're actually interested, roleplaying games allow you to do all of those things.

Why this game?

Unlike most roleplaying games, this game puts player choice first. There are no dice; it uses cards for simultaneous choice, not randomization. But as anyone who plays strategy or fighting games knows, absence of randomization doesn't mean absence of uncertainty. In this game it's possible for you and your allies to combine tactics to defeat your opponents before they can do any harm at all, but it's extremely unlikely.

Setting

- what subjects are off-limits
- genre
- time
- why are the characters together?
- level of technology or magic? if it's high, why is person to person conflict still relevant? Gun-fu, personal forcefields
- a place that's safe
- a place that's dangerous
- antagonists

Creating a character

Write down your choices on paper using pencil, since your character will change over time.

Choose a name

Choose a fighting style

Your fighting style is up to you, there are no rule benefits or restrictions. Unarmed, armed, multi-armed, as long as it fits the setting.

Choose a description

I highly recommend you draw a picture, even if you think your drawing skills are bad.

Choose a goal

Your character's current goal should be something potentially, but not trivially, achievable within one game session. The GM can deny trivial goals, but cannot choose a goal for you. You can wait until the end of the first session to choose a goal.

Choose backgrounds

Backgrounds are used to overcome problems, and are up to you. Be as creative as you like, whether that's "former cop" or "calligraphy instructor to the Exiled Prince of Xaran".

Distribute 3 points between backgrounds of your choice, no more than 2 in any one. You can wait until during play to decide on a background.

Choose a belief

Your character's belief should be something that can complicate problems and lead to hard choices.

Choose a flaw

Your character's flaw should be something that can lead to failure to overcome problems.

NOTE

Beliefs, flaws, and goals are not just filler to be forgotten about. You cannot level up without playing them. A little friction with other players is good, but if you choose things they are adamantly opposed to, they can veto your approach to problems during play. It's in your best interests to talk things out with them in advance.

Choose energy

Energy represents your mental and physical resources in a conflict. Distribute 10 points among the types Defense ○, Grapple ▣, and Attack ◆, with at least one point in each.

Keep track of your maximum separate from your current energy for each type. As you approach zero for a particular type, you're much less effective, and once you reach zero overall you're out of the conflict.

NOTE

Don't worry about optimizing, just go with what makes sense for your character concept. If you're really concerned about it, put 4 in Attack ◆, 3 in Defense ○, 2 in Grapple ▣, and the last point wherever.

Choose moves

Moves are the main things you do in a conflict to reduce your opponent's energy. You know a Defense, ○ ≡, a Grapple, ▣ ≡, and an Attack, ◆ ≡. Make up cool names for them.

NOTE

Don't worry too much about what the symbols mean right now. If you're still concerned about it, read the [Conflict Overview](#) and [Conflict Turns](#) chapter.

Level

You start at level zero. As you level up you can learn specials and combos, but you do not start with any at level zero.

Problems

The GM can add problems to the story that stand between the PCs and their goals.

Problems should have interesting potential consequences for both failure and success. Otherwise there's no point in using rules to determine the outcome, just continue the story. Problems typically involve inanimate circumstances or neutral NPCs; if an NPC is actively opposed to the PCs, it's a conflict.

- "Your bedroom door is locked" probably isn't a problem; it's your house, you have the key or can get a locksmith or kick the door in and nothing will happen.
- "The door to the library is locked" might be a problem, if something interesting will happen if you ignore it or take too long opening it.
- "The door to the library containing the forbidden scroll is locked, and you heard that the Elbow Clan are going after it tonight" is definitely a problem.
- "The door to the library is blocked by the Elbow Clan who are out for blood" is a conflict.

To decide the outcome of a problem, any interested players simultaneously choose one of the following options:

1. Succeed with a good idea
2. Succeed by spending a background point
3. Succeed with a significant complication
4. Fail in an interesting way

Higher numbered choices beat lower numbered choices. For instance, if one player chooses "Succeed with a significant complication" and the other chooses "Fail", the player choosing Fail gets to decide and narrate the outcome. Ties are broken in favor of the player who least recently decided the outcome of a problem, otherwise by the GM.

Succeed with a good idea

Describe a good idea for how you overcome the problem, building on the prior established facts of the story and setting.

Player: When we scoped this place out earlier, we saw the guard taking a break up on the roof. I bet there's a door there, maybe they left it unlocked.

GM: So there's an unlocked door up there, what do you see when you open it?

Succeed by spending a background point

Spend a background point in order to introduce new facts related to your background that help you overcome the problem. This could be physical items, knowledge, relationships to NPCs; it's up to you as long as it's plausibly related to the background. Any NPCs introduced are controlled by the GM after the current problem is resolved.

Player: Since I'm a detective, it makes sense that I'd have a lockpick gun, I can use that to open the door.

GM: Maybe something less high-tech for our setting?

Player: Yeah, regular lockpicks make more sense.

Succeed with a significant complication

Describe how you succeed, but with a significant consequence or hard choice. This typically involves your belief, or sometimes flaw.

Player: I believe innocents should be protected. This guard is going to be in trouble if the Elbow Clan shows up, I'm sure I can explain to him why he should let us in and get out of here.

GM: That doesn't sound like a complication. How about a hard choice - "protect" him by knocking him out, or explain the situation and he'll put himself in danger by looking for the ninjas.

Player: Ugh, yeah, what would I do... knocking him out is probably the lesser of two evils

Fail in an interesting way

Describe how you fail, and the interesting outcome that results. This typically involves your flaw, or sometimes belief.

Player: So I'm haunted by ghosts, yeah? The ghosts at the library are telling me that scroll is bad news, like Raiders of the Lost Ark bad. No way I'm going to touch that thing, we're just gonna wait for the ninjas to get their hands on it and see what happens.

NOTE

Why should players decide to create complications or failure? It makes for more interesting stories, and is required to level up.

Consequences of problems

Failure can involve consequences such as setbacks towards reaching other goals, loss of energy, escalation to a conflict, or a tick on a countdown. Failure cannot involve player character death, this isn't a game where "rocks fall, you die."

GM escalation of problems

The GM can redirect players that are contradicting established fact or breaking the rules, for instance choosing failure but then describing success. The GM cannot choose for the players, but if all of the players refuse make a choice for some reason, the GM decides the outcome of the problem.

Don't repeat

The story should be meaningfully different after a problem, succeed or fail, so it doesn't make sense to repeat an attempt at a problem.

Veto

Each player has at most one veto at any given time. It is spent once used, and you have an option to regain it by leveling up. Vetos allow you to undo another player's choice regarding the outcome of a problem (not conflict), and substitute your own.

You can use a veto after another player has narrated an outcome and before play has moved on. The vetoed choice doesn't take effect, i.e. the other player doesn't spend the background point or get credit towards leveling up for the failure. You cannot threaten to veto; if you say the word veto, you've used it. You cannot veto a veto; the first player to say veto wins. If there's disagreement on a tie, the GM decides.

If vetos cause significant strife among players, talk it out and re-set expectations.

Conflict Overview

When the NPCs in a scene are actively opposed to the PCs' goals, the GM can decide it escalates to a conflict.

Conflicts do not have to be violent, or even physical. The rules are the same for an alleyway chase, a samurai staredown to see who flinches first, or a bloody battle to the death.

To play out a conflict:

1. Establish the stakes.
2. Players decide who takes the first turn.
3. Play and pass turns.
4. Resolve the consequences.

Establishing stakes

The players decide the end and the means, i.e. what they want and how they're going to achieve it. The GM decides the consequences, which should be proportional to the players' decision. If the players intend to kill, it's a conflict to the death, and their characters can be killed. Entering a conflict to the death involves all player characters and requires consensus. In lesser conflicts, a player may sit out the conflict, but will suffer any consequences. Negotiate as necessary until the players agree with the potential consequences.

If the players cannot make a choice in a reasonable time or choose not to enter the conflict, the GM decides the outcome. In that case, the consequence should be limited to a significant setback to reaching their goal, or a tick on a countdown, not death.

Example stakes

GM: As you enter the library, you see two ninja grab the forbidden scroll and jump out the window. What do you do?

Players: Kill 'em so we can take the scroll back!

GM: Ok, a loss means you die, and even if you win you won't know what their plan was.

Players: Maybe we chase them down and interrogate them?

GM: Then if you lose they get away and their masters will know you're after the scroll. If you win you'll get the scroll back and a chance to question them. Ready?

Players: Yeah, let's go.

First turn

Players decide who takes the first turn. There are no rules for surprise or ambush.

Playing and passing turns

See the rules for [Conflict Turns](#) for determining the winner of a conflict turn. Once a turn is over, the winner decides who takes the next turn. In case of a tie, the GM decides. Players should pass to someone on their side who has not yet had an equal number of turns if possible.

Resolving consequences

Once all characters on one side are out of the conflict, it's over. The winning side gets to narrate the outcome, within the boundaries of the established stakes. In case of a tie due to the last characters being eliminated at the same time, the GM's side wins. In case of disagreement, the GM decides, including how the outcome relates to the next problem or conflict.

PCs can die only in conflicts. If a PC dies, the player may create another character. See [\[replacement characters\]](#). The players decide how to introduce the new character to the story as soon as possible.

Minor conflicts

For situations that are more than a problem but less than a full conflict, the GM can decide in advance that it's a minor conflict only worth playing a single turn. In that case the winner of the turn is the winner of the conflict. The consequences, win or lose, should be proportionally less than a full conflict.

Repeating conflicts

Do not repeat a conflict, even a minor one, until the situation has meaningfully changed. Simply resting and trying again is not meaningful change.

Conflict Turns

Rather than using dice or other sources of randomness to determine a winner, this game uses simultaneous choice from a clear ranking of actions and elements.

To play out a conflict turn:

1. Choose an opponent.
2. Choose a stance, then reveal.
3. Choose a move, then reveal.
4. Identify the winner based on move and disadvantage.
5. Resolve the consequences based on move, stance, disadvantage, and combos

Simultaneous choice

Choose an option in secret, indicate that you are ready, then reveal once your opponent is ready.

Cards work well for this by playing a card face down to indicate readiness, then flipping to reveal. For remote games, hold up the card with the back facing the camera, then turn to reveal.

If you don't have the preprinted cards for this game, write on index cards; just make sure the cards are not distinguishable from the back.

Hidden information

Once a conflict begins, remaining energy for NPCs and PCs is public information. NPC available moves and specials are not public information, but PC moves and specials are (since the GM could memorize them anyway).

Ranking of actions

Actions represent the basic objective of a move or stance. Defend blocks attacks; grapple grabs defenders; attack hurts attempts to grapple. There is no "best" action, each of them can be beaten by the appropriate choice.

Table 1. Actions

Meaning	Symbol	Beats
Defend	○	◆
Grapple	▧	○
Attack	◆	▧

NOTE

For a mnemonic, the number of sides ○ 1 < ▧ 4 < ◆ 5. AttACK rhymes with black, defend is round like a shield.

Ranking of elements

Elements represent additional detail of a move. Earth can't be burned by fire, water floods earth, fire boils water. Or if you prefer more mundane meanings, low ducks high, mid crushes low, high out-ranges mid.

Table 2. Three Elements

Meaning	Symbol	Beats
Earth, Low	☷	☷
Water, Mid	☵	☵

Fire, High	☰	☷

NOTE

For a mnemonic, the number of unbroken lines ☰ 0 < ☱ 1 < ☲ 2. If you don't want to play with elements for your first couple of games, that's fine. Ignore any mention of them and the basic mechanics will still work.

Once your character has leveled up and learned all of the 3-element moves, 2 more elements are available. Their ranking is:

Table 3. Five Elements

Meaning	Symbol	Beats

Earth, Low	☷	☷ ☯
Water, Mid	☵	☵ ☷

Fire, High	☲	☲ ☲
Heaven, Jump	☰	☲ ☯

Balance, Spin	☯	☰ ☷
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Jump beats low and spin, spin beats high and mid, etc. Note that there still isn't a "best" element, both jump and spin can be beaten by an appropriate choice from just low, mid, or high.

Choose an opponent

If it's your turn, choose any character on the opposing side. There are no rules for range or cover, assume you can get to any character in the conflict.

If it's not your turn and the opposing side chooses you, the rest of the rules for this turn apply symmetrically to you. Being able to choose an opponent is a tactical advantage, but it doesn't determine whether you win or lose the turn.

Choose a stance

To choose a stance, select a number between zero and your current energy corresponding to one type of action. Stances represent an outward impression of commitment to a particular action.

- If you choose a move corresponding to your stance and lose, you will lose the energy you committed.
- If you choose a move corresponding to your stance and win, you keep the energy you committed. Your opponent will lose an amount equal to the energy you committed times a multiplier associated with your move.
- If you choose a different move, the stance was a feint, you didn't commit the energy, and you get to keep it. It has no effect on either side's losses.

For local games, small wooden cubes in 3 colors work well for choosing stances - light for defend, dark for attack, and contrasting for grapple. Remaining energy is public information, but conceal your total amount while selecting cubes so that you do not give away your choice before revealing. Hold out an unambiguous fist containing selected cubes, then open your hand once both sides are ready to reveal. To feint, use an empty fist.

For remote games, or if you prefer cards, use cards indicating the type and amount. Use zero cards to feint.

Choose a move

Your most important move is surrender. If you play surrender, you are out of the conflict, and will eventually take your side's consequences of winning or losing the overall conflict, but do not suffer any energy losses for this turn. Surrender is not retreat; if you surrender in a conflict to the death your opponent can choose to kill your character immediately. If for some reason you have no other remaining moves, you must play surrender.

Other moves are defined by the name you chose, an action, an element, a base energy loss your opponent will suffer if you win, and a multiplier applied to the amount of stance energy you committed.

Table 4. Moves

Energy losses from disadvantage are cumulative with consecutive disadvantaged turns, at one point of energy per prior turn. Disadvantage ends once you end a turn without losing, play a move that doesn't match, or at the end of the conflict. It does not end once someone else is selected as an opponent, so leave your played move cards out face up to indicate disadvantage. This does restrict your available moves.

Combos

Combos are relationships between moves, that are learned separately from moves. Combos consist of a starting move and up to two options for followup moves. If the immediately prior turn was a loss for your opponent, you can play any combo you know that follows from the move that won. Combos do not affect ties, but if you play a move that combos and win, your opponent will lose additional energy.

Combo bonuses are cumulative with consecutive combo turns, at one point of energy per prior combo turn. Leave your played cards out face up to indicate a combo. This does restrict your available moves. A player can voluntarily end the combo before choosing a move in order to return all the moves to availability. Combos end once you lose a turn, play a move that doesn't combo, choose a different opponent, or at the end of the conflict.

You can play up to 3 consecutive winning turns to continue a combo, then must pass. This counts as one turn for purposes of players taking equal number of turns. The character you pass to can continue the combo against the same opponent if possible.

Identify the winner

Check in order:

1. If a move's action beats the other move's action, it wins.
2. If a move's element beats the other move's element, it wins.
3. If a move is disadvantaged, it loses.
4. Otherwise it's a tie.

Resolve the consequences

In a tie, each character loses energy equal to the base amount for the other character's move, but no additional losses. Ties end combos and disadvantage.

If you played the winning move, the opponent loses energy equal to the sum of:

- (your committed stance energy times the multiplier of your move)

- their committed stance energy
- the base amount of your move
- one point per prior win in your successful combo
- one point per prior loss in their disadvantage

The person controlling the character that lost energy decides how to distribute the loss among the different action types.

If you reach zero energy for one action type, mark it for purposes of [Leveling up](#).

If you reach zero energy in all action types, you are out of the conflict, and suffer the specified consequence. In particular, if it is a conflict to the death, your character is dead, even if your side wins the overall conflict.

Specials

Specials can be used to modify the rules in different ways. Once a special is used, it cannot be used again until after resting. Each character can use at most one special per turn.

The description of a special identifies at what time in a turn it can be used.

To use a special, play its card face down at the appropriate time. Before revealing it, give your opponent an opportunity to play a special of their own. If a special should be revealed at a time different from when it is used, the description will say so.

Some specials have requirements that must be met before learning, either in terms of character level reached, or specials learned first.

Some specials have multiple variations, each specific to a particular action type. For instance, Wax On ♠ is different from Wax On ○ . Each variation must be learned separately and counts as a separate special.

If specials conflict in regards to timing or effect, the player of the special closer to the bottom of the list below decides the outcome. If identical specials conflict, neither takes effect. If there is still a question, the GM decides.

NOTE

You are welcome to re-theme specials to be more appropriate for your character. For instance, if your character suffering from a hangover isn't funny to you, Drunken Monkey could just as easily be a helpful but capricious spirit.

Scouter

- Use before choosing an opponent, or before choosing a stance.
- Learn the moves, combos, and specials available to your opponent.

To Blave

- Use at any time matching another special you know.
- Can be used twice per conflict instead of once per rest.
- Has no other effect.

There Can Be Only One

- Use before choosing an opponent, or before choosing a stance.

- Choose a character. You and that character cannot choose a different opponent until one of you is out of the conflict.
- Either of you can respond to opponents choosing you as normal.

Pressure Point

- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn.
- You choose where your opponent's losses are distributed this turn.

Wax On ○ / ▨ / ◆

- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn.
- If the type of your opponent's action matches this special, you lose no energy from their stance this turn.

Santa Carla ○ / ▨ / ◆

- Requires: Level 5
- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn
- If the type of your stance and action matches this special, regain energy equal to the amount you committed to the stance this turn.
- Do not multiply the gain by your move's stance multiplier.
- You choose where to distribute the gain, but you cannot regain more than your maximum.

Dig Two Graves ○ / ▨ / ◆

- Requires: Level 5 and Wax On of the matching type.
- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn.
- If the type of your opponent's action matches this special, they lose energy equal to the amount you lose this turn.

I Already Know ○ / ▨ / ▲

- Requires: Level 10
- Use before choosing a stance.
- For this turn your opponent cannot choose a move with an action matching this special.

Yojimbo

- Requires: Level 5
- Use before resolving a different character's turn.
- Does not count against your limit of one special per turn.
- Choose a character. This turn you lose energy equal to the amount they would have lost, while they lose zero.

Liquid Metal

- Requires: Level 10
- Duplicate the effect of a special that has been used by a different character in this conflict.
- Use and reveal at the time appropriate for the duplicated special.
- Cannot duplicate specials after it on the list.

Drunken Monkey

- Requires: Level 10
- Use before choosing a move.
- Until this conflict ends, once per turn after revealing a move, you can replace your move with one chosen randomly by your opponent from your remaining moves.
- You cannot participate in the next conflict, even if you rest first.

The Way of the Samurai

- Requires: Level 10
- Use before choosing a stance.
- Regain energy up to your maximum.

- You cannot be removed from this conflict until it ends, even if you reach zero total energy.
- At the end of the conflict, you die irrevocably.
- Play out the conflict; even if the outcome is inevitable, the fate of your allies is not.
- NPCs cannot use this special, for obvious reasons.

Leveling up

At the end of a session, ask the following questions for each player:

- Did you play out a problem with complications or failure based on your **belief** or **flaw**?
- Did you accomplish your **goal**?
- Did you reach zero energy in at least one type of action during a **conflict**?

The answers should have already been clearly marked during play, but if there is disagreement, the GM decides.

Yes answers to all three questions mean you can level up. Increment your level by one.

When you level up, choose **one** of:

- Learn a move. See [\[five elements\]](#) below for restrictions.
- Learn one combo followup move, or change an existing one. You're limited to two followups per starting move.
- Add one to your maximum energy for one type of action. It must be a type that reached zero during a conflict.
- Learn a special.

When you level up, **also** choose **one** of:

- Refill up to 3 background points. You can have at most 3 total.
- Refill up to 1 veto. You can have at most 1 total.

Make sure to choose a name for any moves you learn. You cannot learn more than one copy of the same move or special; if you just want to change the name, you can do so for free.

If you do not level up, you can save yes marks for the next session, but cannot have multiple marks per question. Once you level up, erase all yes marks.

Choose a new goal, either now, or before the beginning of the next session.

If you think that your character's beliefs or flaws have meaningfully changed, you may rewrite them.

The same caveats from character creation regarding goals, beliefs, and flaws apply.

Five elements

After you have learned all the moves using the three elements ☰ ☷ ☱, you can learn moves using the fourth and fifth elements ☴ ☵:

Table 5. Five Elements

Meaning	Symbol	Beats

Earth, Low	☷	☷ ☯
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Fire, High	≡	≡ ≡
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Heaven, Jump	☰	☳ ☯
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Balance, Spin	☯	☰ ☷
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3

x3

Replacement characters

If the replacement for a dead character continues the deceased's fighting tradition, they can start at a level up to 5 or the deceased's level, whichever is lower.

Choose energy and starting moves as for a level 0 character, then make decisions for each level up. The level ups can involve learning a move or combo known by the deceased, but not a special.