



# Primetime Adventures

## A Game of Television Drama

Second Edition PDF

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Special thanks to my wife Meredith, who is the coolest.

A portion of the net profits from the sale of this game will be donated to the Progressive Animal Welfare Society ([www.paws.org](http://www.paws.org)).

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# The Greatest TV Show That Never Was

*“I know it sounds hokey but I think, ultimately, on television you can’t hide who you are.”*

– Robert Urich

## What is Primetime Adventures?

Primetime Adventures is a game where the participants create and play out a weekly television show. In this book are rules for creating a show and its cast and sets, and for playing out adventures as if they were the show’s episodes.

Each time you play a game of Primetime Adventures, you and the other players create a story, one episode of a fictional TV show, as if it were airing in its weekly time slot. One player will be the producer, who looks after things like the supporting cast members and villains. The producer provides the adversity in the game, introducing situations for the cast members to interact with and build upon. The other players will be responsible for the show’s main characters and will decide how those characters respond to the situations in that episode. At the end of a game session, which usually takes a few hours, the characters on the show will have completed one episode of that show, and the imaginary credits will be rolling in time with the show’s theme music.

Exactly what happens during an episode is up to the players, but a good episode will explore both a major situation for the entire cast as a group, and individual challenges for the starring characters, as they deal with personal problems, fears, or other ordeals. The most interesting characters on television are far from perfect, and they have personal troubles just like anyone else. Mary the movie star may have pride that frequently gets her into difficult situations; Bill the bartender

may be self destructive because he lost a loved one. Personal matters like these not only make a nice contrast to the large scale threats that characters tend to face on a weekly basis, but also, as you’ll see later, form the heart of this game.

The stories you tell with Primetime Adventures will be influenced by the kind of show you and the other players create. If it’s a show about police, you’ll probably have adventures that involve investigation and department politics. If it’s a show about tomb-raiding archaeologists in the 1920s and 30s, then the adventures will feature ancient mysteries and globe-trotting action. That’s only in general, though; not every cop show focuses on a criminal and a crime scene every week.

Ultimately what the adventures are about is people. The police detective’s troubled marriage, or the archaeologist’s troubled past: those are the things that keep viewers tuning in for more, and that’s what this game focuses on.

## Things You’ll Need

- At least two players, though it’s better if you have at least four
- Paper, or copies of the player sheets (you can download them from [www.dog-eared-designs.com](http://www.dog-eared-designs.com))
- Pencils
- A deck of playing cards
- Poker chips, beads, pennies, or something else that you can use to keep track of things in the game

### Role-Model Shows

We generally watch TV because we're engaged with what happens. The best TV gives us as viewers more than one thing to care about at any given time, and that almost always means dynamic characters. You're probably familiar with the shows that don't, the ones that seem formulaic after only a few episodes. That's because the characters are static; they don't deal with things that give them an opportunity to change. All we have in those shows is the plot, and there's really only so many different plots.

Now think of a show where the characters have complex relationships with one another and where those relationships might change over time. With this kind of show, there's more than one thing for the audience to care about. You're tuning in not just to see how they cure a patient or catch a criminal, but also whether two former lovers can learn to work together, whether a father can reconnect with an estranged son, whether a doctor can forgive herself for losing a patient, and whether a rookie cop can find his own self confidence. Which kind of show would you rather watch?

These series listed below are examples of the second kind of show, those that contain complex character relationships and multiple engaging struggles in every episode.

#### ***Alias***

As the central character of the show, Sydney Bristow has several personal challenges. Season one focuses on how her job interferes with her personal life. She can't tell her friends what she does, can't connect with her father, and can't be romantically involved with the person she wants. In season two, that changes to focus more on her relationship with her parents, especially her mother. It's an easy premise to create quick adventures, and all the cast members have important and intertwining roles.

#### ***Angel***

This show, while ostensibly about a group of monster hunters, is really about a search for redemption. The weekly monster, especially in the early seasons, is pretty much a metaphor for something personal that one of the characters is struggling with. Angel is trying to atone, while Wesley is dealing with feelings of inadequacy, and Cordelia is trying to find her true strength.

#### ***Battlestar Galactica***

As of this writing, I consider *Battlestar Galactica* to be the best series on television. Period. The crisis the characters all face only serves as a vehicle to explore their personalities and relationships with one another. Co-creator David Eick says of it, "the thing that we're really exploring is not that threat from without, but how it turns itself inward and how it becomes insidious and internal, and how it begins to break us down from inside ourselves."

#### ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

This show does a great job of blending the villain of the week with the personal problems of the characters. Buffy saves the world on a weekly basis, but she is constantly pulled away from the comforts of a normal life. The fact that her friends fight alongside her doesn't seem to help her feel that she belongs anywhere in particular. In fact, her friends must cope with physical and emotional risks of their own.

#### ***Desperate Housewives***

Here's a brilliant example of an ensemble cast all connected by a mysterious event. In each episode, you get a mix of serious and comical adventures, involving the individual situations of the main characters, their relationships with one another, and the mystery of their dead friend. Each of the five main women struggles with riveting personal obstacles. You can tune in each week to see suspense, romance, betrayal, murder, slapstick and more.

#### ***Felicity***

Though the show centers around the emotional world of the titular character, the show has a strong ensemble feel because her world is mostly made up of her relationships. Felicity, Noel, Ben, Elena, Julie, Sean and Megan all try to find out who they really are as human beings, making their way through breakups, parents, new love, infidelity, exams, sex and commitment. It's a fantastic character drama appealing to a wide demographic.

#### ***Firefly***

Of all the shows listed here, *Firefly* probably does the best at providing a true ensemble cast. While Mal is the captain, he's not necessarily getting more screen time. The characters each have a personal story, and the show suggests all the ways in which the characters might change over time. Will Zoe and Wash remain happily together? Will we learn about the preacher's mysterious past? Will the doctor find a way to cure

his sister? These personal stories contrast with the overarching story of people trying to get by from day to day.

### ***Gilmore Girls***

This show provides really sympathetic, believable characters with highly engaging struggles. The trio of grandmother, mother and daughter move in and out of trouble with grace and humor. This show has everything to do with the beauty, complexity and heartbreak of personal relationships. It's great comedic drama without being unbearably heavy.

### ***Lost***

This is a well-done drama about survival and human relationships, the story of the survivors of a horrific plane crash in the south Pacific. What I like about this show in particular is the mix in each episode of current events and a specific character's backstory. While the writers have come up with some interesting adventures for the castaways, it's the personal stories that sell me on the show.

### ***Six Feet Under***

The cast of *Six Feet Under* have excellent examples of internal struggles, all of which are borne out of fear. Nate tries to overcome his fear of commitment and learn to trust. David is afraid to admit his sexuality to his family, while his internal battle with religion leads to self destructive behavior. Claire is on a quest for identity. These issues are woven together over the course of the season through their business of death and burial.

### ***Sports Night***

Aaron Sorkin's short-lived series that wasn't really about sports is a great example of a mostly light-hearted show that still provided engaging stories and characters with complex lives. Divorce, sexual assault, job security and more mingle with witty banter and awkward romance amid the trappings of news television.

### ***The Wire***

*The Wire* is an excellent, underrated crime drama with complex characters on both sides of the law, played by a talented and diverse cast. Omar, one of the most morally complex characters on TV, suffers from the violent murder of his boyfriend. Kuma and Daniels are both forced to choose between their careers and their families, and McNulty slips and slides down a path of self destruction, coming up for air just often enough to keep the audience's sympathy and attention.

#### **Where's My Favorite Show?**

*There's a ton of shows out there that are great examples of series you could create with Primetime Adventures. I just haven't watched them all, so don't assume that what you see here is an inclusive list. It just happens to be a list of shows that I like. People say good things about CSI, for example, but I've never watched it. You know what you like, and you can probably figure out why it would belong on this list if you were the one making it.*

## An Example of Play

A typical evening spent playing a game of Primetime Adventures might look something like the following example, where Cara, John, Meredith, Pete and Wil are all playing a series they created called *Bootleggers*, a 1920s-era family drama.

**Pete (the producer)** – *“I think it’s Meredith’s turn for a scene, right?”*

**John** – *“Yeah, that last one was mine, so Meredith should be next.”*

**Meredith** – *“Good, I have an idea ready. It’s with Roxy and her new upper-crust friends, and the focus is character, and the agenda is her trying to impress them.”*

**Pete** – *“Where’s this taking place?”*

**Meredith** – *“Whoops, I forgot to think of a location.”*

**Cara** – *“How about a speakeasy? She can be trying to show off about how she knows the cool clubs and stuff like that?”*

**Wil** – *“She did sneak out to be with these friends of hers, so it makes sense that they’d go someplace inappropriate.”*

**Meredith** – *“Yeah, that’s perfect! At a speakeasy.”*

**Pete** – *“Speakeasy it is. Let’s begin with you inside somewhere, already holding drinks, listening to the band. Your new friends are still a little standoffish, so you haven’t quite made the impression you’d like.”*

(Notice how Pete sometimes refers to Meredith’s protagonist, Roxy, as “you.” It’s pretty common to do that in the game, and just as common for a player to refer to his or her own protagonist as “I.” )

**Meredith** – *“hmm, well, Roxy had better think of something bold and brash to do . How about if –”*

**John (laughing)** – *“Oh, wait! I have a great idea!”*

**Wil** – *“Ha! I did too, but you go first.”*

**John** – *“I’m spending a point of fan mail to have Billy enter the scene. The family knows she’s snuck out, and Billy has snuck in here on her trail.”*

**Cara** – *“So Roxy’s sixteen-year-old brother is going to be the one to catch her in a speakeasy with the friends she’s trying to impress? Oh, that’s beautiful.”*

**Meredith** – *“Hey, not if I can help it!”*

**Pete** – *“I think we just found the conflict. Let me grab the cards.”*

From this example you can see that there’s a lot of sharing of ideas and cooperation going on, which makes it different from a competitive game like, say, Scrabble®. At least when I play Scrabble I’m not helping the other players come up with word ideas; in a game like Primetime Adventures, however, the *characters* in the stories may be competing against one another (or worse!), but the *players* will always be working in cooperation.

In fact, you could imagine the game as being divided into two parts. The first is where all the players create an image together of what’s happening. Who’s there? What does the scene look like? What are people talking about? The second part is determining what the important characters want, and whether or not they succeed at getting what they want. The first part is about the players cooperating, and the second part is about the characters competing, sometimes with each other, sometimes with supporting characters, and sometimes even with themselves. In the example above, Billy wants to discover Roxy with her friends. Roxy wants to impress her friends. Those two goals sound like they might be at odds, but any outcome will make for an evening’s entertainment.

## Basic Rules Concepts

What follows is a cursory description of the rules for playing Primetime Adventures. You'll find more in-depth rules later on in the book.

### Players

Everyone who participates in a game of Primetime Adventures is a player. Every player in the game is responsible for certain elements of the story. Except for the producer (explained below), each player takes control of one main character (a protagonist) and will decide that character's motivations and decisions. Players can also contribute to the details surrounding minor characters, locations, and other parts of the story. When you read the book and you see references to "players" and "producer," you can assume that "players" means everyone else who's not the producer, unless the rules specify otherwise.

### Producer

The producer is a player with special responsibilities, sort of like being the banker in Monopoly®, only much more so. Instead of choosing a main character, the producer makes choices for antagonists, and provides adversity for the characters in the game to respond to. The producer also acts as a facilitator and mediator in the game.

### Protagonists

Protagonists are the stars of the show. They are the characters the audience cares about the most, the ones the audience wants to see happy or victorious or safe. In a sense, this game is about the protagonists more than anything else, so the rules almost always point directly at them.

In play, each protagonist is controlled by one player.

### Episodes

An episode in Primetime Adventures is one session of play. Each time you and your friends sit down to play a game of Primetime Adventures, you will create one episode.

### Scenes

Much like a TV show, a game of Primetime Adventures takes place in scenes, which can be initiated by all players. A scene is a segment of play that takes place in a specific area – like a room, or a roadway – and covers a specific agenda that

the initiating player has in mind. That could include things like "gain more information about a person" or "chase after the escaped prisoner" or "make a good impression on the mayor."

### Conflict

A conflict in a game of Primetime Adventures is a situation where a protagonist wants something important to happen. When a conflict occurs in a game, the player must declare what it is that the protagonist wants, and a hand of cards determines both the outcome and who gets to narrate it.

### Story Arcs

Interesting characters are imperfect. They face internal battles and personal challenges, like redemption, self destruction, a dysfunctional relationship, or lack of trust. In the midst of earth-shaking crises and threats to all human life, these personal struggles make inconvenient appearances. Foiling a villain's dastardly plans becomes all the more difficult when a hero is distracted with thoughts of divorce, for example.

To reflect the importance of these more real-life problems, Primetime Adventures uses a technique called the story arc. Each protagonist has a personal story arc, which tracks the progression of a character's personal matters from episode to episode. A story arc consists of an issue, which identifies the source of the struggle, and an episode track, which charts out how prominent the issue will be from episode to episode.

### Fan Mail

Fan mail is a pool players can draw from to help protagonists (theirs or other players' protagonists) succeed or fail in dramatic situations. Players earn fan mail in play by doing things that jazz the other players. Spent fan mail sometimes increases the producer's budget.

### Budget

Budget is a pool of dice that the producer can draw from to make dramatic situations more difficult for the protagonists. The producer starts with a certain amount of budget and may gain additional budget when players spend fan mail.

### Traits

Traits are descriptors that help to define a character's heroic abilities. Since no two characters will be alike, the game uses traits to define the important differences. A 20-year veteran

on the police force will be heroic in a different manner than a professional dog trainer. Being a veteran police officer is a trait. So is being a dog trainer. They each help protagonists to succeed at their goals.

Traits in Primetime Adventures are classified as two types: edges and connections. They aren't meant to catalog every aspect of a protagonist's abilities. Merely the ones where the protagonist excels. The police veteran above may well know how to cook a meal, or ride a horse, but those abilities are not what brings in viewers every week. It's the areas where the protagonist is remarkable or distinct that make them attractive.

**Edges** are traits that describe a protagonist's skills, learned abilities, special talents, history, and general knowledge. Edges can be professions, cultural backgrounds, convictions and more.

**Connections** are relationships that a protagonist has with supporting characters on the show. These other characters can lend assistance to the protagonist with knowledge, abilities and resources of their own.

A player can use a protagonist's traits to improve the outcome of a situation where the trait applies. When a character is doing research, being a retired professor will help, but being an auto mechanic probably will not. The protagonist with the

professor edge, then, can apply that trait to learn more from the research.

Each trait can be used in this manner a number of times in each episode equal to a protagonist's current screen presence (see below). After that, the player must spend fan mail each additional time he or she wishes to use the trait.

### Screen Presence

Screen presence is a measure of a character's importance to a particular episode, and is used to resolve a conflict. A screen presence score will range between 1 and 3 from episode to episode, and determines the number of cards that a player is dealt in a conflict. Depending on what the cards say, the player will be able to narrate a protagonist's successes and pitfalls during a scene.

Primetime Adventures doesn't determine the number of cards you get based solely on a character's strength or skill. Instead, the game awards players with a number of cards based on how important that protagonist is to the story, and sometimes that story importance outweighs capability. If a protagonist's screen presence is high for an episode, then that player will get more cards. Likewise, if a protagonist's screen presence is low, that player will be dealt fewer cards.





# Creating a Series

***“I was just sort of joking that if Felicity were recruited by the CIA, you would suddenly have this wealth of stories you could do, and though I knew you could never do that on Felicity, it occurred to me that it could be another show.”***

**JJ Abrams**  
**Producer, *Alias***

You should plan on setting aside at least an hour toward the creation of the television show that you want to play. It works much like starting up a TV show. One of the players usually has an idea germinate in his or her head, and makes a pitch to the other players: “hey, I have this idea for a game. You want to play in it?” The others will have various responses: “I don’t know. Can it take place in the 1920s? I like stories about the 1920s.” And a discussion begins about what the game is going to be like. Imagine that you’re in a conference room at some TV studio. Write down ideas on a white board.

Brew some coffee. Roll up your sleeves.

No matter who thinks of it, all the players should sit down and talk about what kind of game they want it to be, and hash out a few things. This is not a game where one person says, “I’m going to do XYZ, and you can be a part of it if you agree to my terms.” The show is created by the group. It’s a good idea to show up with a few ideas, but don’t get your heart set on something very specific.

## The Producer

Determine first who in your group will be the producer of the show. The producer’s role is a little different, and once the producer is decided upon, he or she will act as facilitator for the rest of the creation process, asking

questions of the other players, keeping things moving along and making sure everyone is playing the kind of game that they’d like to play.

During an episode, the producer’s main job is to provide antagonism for the protagonists, in the form of crises, moral dilemmas and occasionally a plain old villain. The producer also has to multitask, feeding individual storylines, incorporating the wishes of players, and playing the part of many supporting characters. Although the producer has a fairly broad influence

on the game, it tends to be in the form of subtle nudges and pushes. At times it may be a strong influence, but the producer shouldn’t be seen as the only player whose input is important.



## Me? The Producer?

You will probably have a good idea of whether the producer’s job is right for you. If you think that it’d be fun to play a lot of parts, to be responsible for keeping the pace, to make sure everyone gets their share of participation, and to come up with responses to great ideas on the fly, then you’d probably like being a producer.

Note that being a producer does not mean that you have to think up all the story ideas, or that you have to spend a lot of time preparing for the game. Good heavens no!

It's possible to play a game of Primetime Adventures with no preparation at all. Being the producer should be fun, not homework.

### Producer Authority

Primetime Adventures is a very democratic game. Many of the rules leave some room for interpretation, and often when ambiguities arise in play, it's best to resolve them with a group agreement. However, in any case where play starts to drag, the producer has the authority to make a snap decision and get things rolling. It's okay to discuss the decision later, but in play, the producer's ruling is, well, it's a rule.

### Budget

The amount of budget a producer can draw from depends on the current screen presence scores of each protagonist. For each episode budget equals twice the sum of all the protagonists' screen presence, plus three. So if you have three protagonists whose screen presence scores are 2, 3 and 1, the producer's budget will be:

$$2 \times (2+3+1) + 3, \text{ or } 15.$$

That equation may seem a little weird (and maybe painful), but it helps to give the producer just the right amount of adversarial power.

### The Premise

Every show is about something. You should be able to explain it in about one sentence. Are the characters FBI agents uncovering an alien conspiracy? Are they the crew of a spaceship, transporting illegal goods around the galaxy? Are they 1920s gangsters? That's the premise of the show, and figuring out what exactly that might be is the first step in preparing a game. Someone may have brought specific ideas to the table, but everyone should have a voice in the decision.

A season of play in Primetime Adventures is either 5 or 9 episodes long (*I know, weird number stuff again, but it works out nicely*). Most groups seem to prefer 5, but you should consider what you're going to do in conjunction with how many players there are and what kind of show you want to create. The smaller the ratio is between players and number of episodes, the heavier the focus will be on character drama.

#### Bootleggers: Premise

*Cara, John, Meredith, Pete and Wil are getting ready to play a game of Primetime Adventures. Pete has agreed to be the producer.*

*They decide that their show will be called Bootleggers, a drama set in 1920s Milwaukee, about a family involved in the business of bringing illegal booze across the border from Canada.*

*There's five of them, and they're planning on playing a five-episode season. That's a 1:1 player/episode ratio, which should allow for greater focus on character drama, and that's exactly what they're after.*

### Setting Conventions

Every show has a setting, which includes a place, and usually a time period. The wild west? Paris in the early 1600s? A space station in the future? If you have a premise in mind, this part is probably pretty easy to figure out. But before you go any further, everyone should make some notes and speak up about any important details that they do or don't want to have in place. Don't worry about minutia, but get a good idea in your head about the big things. If this is the 1920s, are there any specific aspects of the decade that you want to explore in the game? Jazz, perhaps, or Prohibition (if it takes place in the United States), or maybe even post-war mentality.

Just as important is to make clear what you don't want to address in the game. Maybe, if it's a Wild West series, you're worried about how Native Americans will be portrayed. Or maybe you don't like the idea of including supernatural elements. Make sure you speak your mind. This game should involve things that you want. It might not be everything you wanted, but there should be a compromise.

#### Bootleggers: Setting Conventions

*The group agrees that Bootleggers will contain content appropriate for network television. They're playing at Wil's house, and his children may be in the room, so he doesn't want there to be any rough language. Meredith also wants the race issues of the time handled with some sensitivity. John wants to make sure that any violence on the show isn't gratuitous, so that it conveys the brutality of organized crime during Prohibition.*

### Tone

Two TV shows with similar premises and settings will not necessarily be that much alike (though some shows seem like

that). Compare *Gilligan's Island* and *Lost!* Numerous elements can differentiate them. Is the mood of the show upbeat and fun, or dark and brooding? Can characters accomplish impossible feats, or are they constrained by an attempt at realism? If they have extraordinary abilities, are they the only ones? Are there loads of witticisms being made? If it really were a show, how would it be filmed? Would the music be lively or moody?

All that stuff is the show's tone. You might not know all the answers at first, but you should at least think of a few ideas before you get too far. The more you clarify the tone, the easier it becomes to play the game. It's especially important to agree on the show's tone in order for the players to create appropriate issues for their protagonists. If every protagonist has a deep, brooding issue that provides insight into the human mind, except for one, who has an issue that's shallow and comical, play might feel a little awkward.

### **Bootleggers: Tone**

*Bootleggers, the group decides, is going to be a pretty serious drama. It may have occasional light-hearted moments, but overall it's going to be about troubled family relationships.*

*The show will be about everyday people; there's no fantastic elements involved, no big effects budget.*

## The Cast

The show needs a cast, and that includes a set of starring characters who will each be overseen by an individual player. The stars of the show are referred to in *Primetime Adventures* as protagonists. Protagonists are more important to the show than other characters, so in game rules they'll be represented with greater abilities. Each player except the producer gets to create one protagonist, and that player will be responsible for the decisions and personality – and the overall story – of that protagonist.

## Protagonist Concept

Protagonists in *Primetime Adventures* are heroic and imperfect. They have interests and needs that often conflict with the goals of the group. There's never really a question about whether they're capable of saving the day. The question is about how their personal matters will interfere, and what they may need to give up in order to succeed.

Also keep in mind that this is supposed to model a TV show, and the protagonists need to make sense being on the same show together. If it's a "cop" show, it would be boring – and kind of pathetic – for every cop to be a maverick who doesn't play by the rules and disrespects authority. Personality, motivation and background all matter as much as the skills of the protagonist, and they should be weighed carefully by the whole group. Your show needs characters who are interesting and have personal interactions that are worth watching every week. Who in the cast is going to get along with the others, and how well? Do some protagonists have a history together? Is there any political or sexual tension between any protagonists?

All the players including the producer should get together to create the cast as a group. Some games encourage group character creation, but in *Primetime Adventures*, it's a must. Don't let the more outspoken players dominate this step. It can be really easy to get excited about an idea and drown out everyone else. This step isn't a competition, so make sure everyone's had the opportunity to share some ideas.

After everyone comes up with a concept, you should jot down some notes about your protagonist: general appearance, personality, manner of speech, some background information, and so on.

There's no need to write a detailed biography of your protagonist, although you can if you like. For now, it's sufficient to concentrate on broad strokes, things that will make the protagonist distinctive, interesting, and above all, full of fuel for storytelling later on. Why commit to an idea in the bio at the beginning of the series when you might come up with better ideas during the show?

### **Bootleggers: Protagonist Concepts**

*The protagonists of the show will all be members of a family: a widowed father and three children.*

*Cara is playing James, the father. He's a gruff, detached man, the head of the business. He's in his late 40s, and somewhat weathered looking.*

*Wil is playing Robert, the older son, who was a decorated hero in the war. He's in his early 20s, quiet and serious like his father.*

*Meredith is playing the daughter, Roxy, who's something of a would-be socialite. She's about 19 or 20.*

*John is playing William, or Billy, the younger son, who is jealous of his hero brother and wants his father's respect. He's 16 and a troublemaker.*

### Story Arc

This week on the show there's yet another nemesis who's out to destroy the world. Is that really what your character is most concerned with? In the shows that Primetime Adventures emulates, the characters' personal lives are often more important than the all-encompassing threats they're facing. Plus, those threats often serve to bring their personal lives into the limelight. Will your protagonist neglect family and loved ones in order to bring a criminal to justice?

Protagonists' personal stories are represented by a rules device called the story arc. Story arcs serve to track a protagonist's personal struggle over the course of a season, and to divide appropriate amounts of attention between protagonists from episode to episode. They are an opportunity for a player to choose the direction his or her character takes, and to influence the direction of the show as a whole.

A Character's Story Arc has two parts: the issue, and screen presence.

### The Issue

*"Mom, why would someone kill themselves?"*

*"Well, sometimes people are so unhappy, they think that's the only way they can solve their problems."*

*"But Mrs. Young always seemed happy."*

*"Yeah. But sometimes, people pretend to be one way on the outside, when they're totally different on the inside."*

*"Oh, you mean like how dad's girlfriend is always smiling and says nice things, but deep down, you just know she's a bitch?"*

*"I don't like that word, Julie. But yeah, that's a great example."*

– Julie and Susan, *Desperate Housewives*

A protagonist's issue is his or her most defining characteristic. It is that against which the character struggles the most. Much more than a character flaw, the issue is insight into how the protagonist behaves, and how that protagonist thinks about him- or herself. Through issues players have an opportunity to

see the complexity of a protagonist that might otherwise stay hidden beneath the surface.

If there's a strategy involved in choosing an issue, it's about maximizing your opportunity to explore something meaningful to you, and that applies to all the choices you make in creating the protagonists. If you think of Primetime Adventures as a game like Scrabble® or Monopoly®, the logical question to ask is, "what should I do to help me win?" But this isn't a game in the sense of who wins or loses. It's more of a collaborative activity. In fact, it's often the case that choosing traits and concepts that make the protagonist seem vulnerable or even incompetent will afford you a more enjoyable experience in play.

### Issue Examples

Real TV shows have up to 23 episodes each season during which to develop a character's storyline, so you might easily come up with more than one possible issue for the characters on shows you like. Take Jack on *Lost*, for example. He's got this baggage with his father that's coming up, some self worth stuff, maybe a slow-burning romance with Kate, and a self-imposed burden of responsibility. Since a season in Primetime Adventures is only going to be 5 or 9 episodes long, there's no way you could cover all that stuff.

**Atonement** – This character might have done something very bad once and now works hard to help others so that he or she might be redeemed. This is an interesting issue, as the character's motives may come into question at times, and it begs the question, is doing good in order to atone really a noble act?

*Examples: Angel on Angel, Irena Derevko (maybe) on season two of Alias, Mike Delfino on Desperate Housewives, Aeryn Sun on Farscape.*

**Control-Obsession** – Fear of chaos or the unknown will make this character bossy, manipulative, narrow-minded, intolerant, deceitful and/or rigid. Control-obsessed characters may believe that they are acting in the best interests of their friends and family, or may only be concerned with themselves.

*Examples: Bree on Desperate Housewives, Emily Gilmore on Gilmore Girls, Jack Bristow on Alias.*

**Commitment Phobia** – this character dodges any kind of commitment, whether it's relationships, career, projects,

or dreams. It's fueled by fear of being disappointed or disappointing someone else, and fear of failure.

*Examples: Lorelai on Gilmore Girls, Ben on Felicity.*

**Grief** — Grief makes people do strange and unpredictable things. They can be aloof, manic, and often unreliable. The character with grief as an Issue will strain his or her relationships with the cast and other loved ones.

*Examples: Buffy at the beginning of season three of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Sydney on season one of Alias, Sayid on Lost, Omar on season one and two of The Wire, Doctor Brown and Ephram on Everwood.*

**Romantic Troubles** — This character can't quite seem to get his or her relationship stuff in order, and it's looming over the character's head like a cloud. It may be an existing relationship, or maybe it's a secret (or not so secret) love.

*Examples: Half the cast of Sports Night, Luke in early seasons of Gilmore Girls, Jin and Sun on Lost.*

**Self-Destruction** — A character with self-destruction is having trouble coming to terms with some part of him- or herself. It may have to do with a character's physical appearance, social status, race, past, or emotions. Regardless, the character puts him or herself in harm's way, burns bridges, and severs or rejects relationships.

*Examples: David Fisher in season one of Six Feet Under, Sawyer on Lost.*

**Self-Worth** — Maybe everyone struggles with self-worth from time to time, but for this character, it's a really rough battle. It's an ideal Issue for characters who start out in what looks like a "sidekick" role, unsure of how they contribute to the group.

*Examples: Wesley in season one of Angel, Will Tippen in season two of Alias, Charlie, Michael and Jack on Lost.*

**Temptation** — This character walks a fine line, constantly tempted by something that's pretty much universally considered bad, like abuse of power, drugs, gambling, and so on, but he or she is unable to be completely removed from it.

*Examples: Willow on seasons six and seven of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Charlie early in season one of Lost.*

Remember, these are just a few examples. Choose or create an issue that hits home for *you*.

### Bootleggers: Protagonist Issues

*James' issue, says Cara, is his inability to come to terms with the death of his wife. He represses his grief, and it will strain all his relationships, and puts him at risk of making terrible choices, especially in terms of how he puts his sons in danger.*

*Robert's issue is the impact the war made on him, the horrors left churning in his head, with everyone around him thinking he's an invincible hero.*

*Left without a role model, says Meredith, Roxy believes she needs to look out for herself. Her issue is her relentless desire for fame and fortune, as she hopes to use the notoriety of the business to catapult her into high society.*

*Billy is rebellious and reckless. John says Billy's issue is his feeling of inadequacy as he tries to live in the shadow of his brother the hero and gain the respect of his father. He will often make foolish choices in his effort to prove himself.*

## Screen Presence

Screen presence is the second part of a protagonist's story arc. Over the course of a television season, a protagonist's story will receive varying amounts of attention. In some episodes, a protagonist will play a prominent role, while in others, he or she will be secondary or even tertiary to other protagonists. That level of story importance is measured by the protagonist's screen presence. In any given episode, it will be a 1, a 2, or a 3.

**If it's a 3...** the protagonist is the center of attention. It's the protagonist's spotlight episode. Each protagonist has only one spotlight episode per season, where the elements of that protagonist's story all come together. The player of a spotlight protagonist has more influence over the outcome of events.

**If it's a 2...** the protagonist plays a secondary role, and the player's control over scene resolution is reduced.

**If it's a 1...** the protagonist plays a minor role, and will have a small amount of influence on scenes.

Television seasons are around 22-25 episodes long, which is a bit much for a weekly or bi-weekly game. Primetime

Adventures offers two options for season length, to be agreed upon by the group. Which option you pick will depend on the time you have to play.

- Long Season: 9 episodes. Choose five episodes with screen presence at 1, three episodes at 2, and one episode at 3.
- Short Season: 5 episodes. Choose two episodes at 1, two at 2, and one at 3.

In the case that two protagonists have their spotlight on the same episode, that episode should be extraordinarily dramatic, maybe a two-part cliffhanger. No more than two protagonists can have their spotlight on the same episode, though. The spotlight episode also cannot be the pilot or season premiere. The show needs time to introduce protagonists to the audience.

Something to remember about issues and the story arc is that they won't develop the protagonist for you. In order to get any kind of value out of the story arc, you and the other players have to think about who the protagonist is, and where he or she could go.

### Bootleggers: Screen Presence

*The group all work together to create story arcs that work well with everyone else's. Billy's issue, for example, has a lot to do with his relationship with both his brother and father, while Roxy's is less tied to the others. They agree that since Billy's is the most connected to the rest of them that his spotlight would be excellent for the season finale.*

*Billy's story arc has a slow buildup: 1 - 1 - 2 - 2 - 3.*

*Roxy's and James' issues are both related to the death of Roxy's mother, and they entertain the idea of having their spotlights on the same episode. Instead, they decide to make them one after the other, with Roxy's coming first, followed by James'.*

*Their story arcs look like this: Roxy 2 - 1 - 3 - 2 - 1, James 1 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 2. James' screen presence is secondary on both Roxy's and Billy's spotlights, since he has some connection with both of their issues.*

*Robert's issue is more isolated, since it has to do with things that happened while he was away in the war. They decide that it would be better to address it early on, and have the rest of the season keep track of his progress. His story arc looks like this: 2 - 3 - 1 - 1 - 2. Wil thinks Robert should be at a 2 for Billy's spotlight, since Billy's issue has to do with his jealousy of Robert, and that could easily trigger emotions in Robert.*

## Traits

Traits define what's special about a protagonist. Some are known for their strength, some for their skills, and some for their pets. There is no comprehensive list to choose from. You simply create traits that apply to the kind of protagonist you want to play.

Traits aren't rated by scores—protagonists either have them or they don't. Traits may be as broad or as narrow as you like, but the other players will have to approve them. For example, "communes with the spirits" may be an acceptable trait for a show that directly involves the supernatural, but it may not fit well in a gritty detective drama.

## Edges

***"Every time I learn something new, it pushes some old stuff out of my brain. Remember when I took that home winemaking course, and I forgot how to drive?"***

**— Homer Simpson, *The Simpsons***

Edges are a kind of package of abilities, which can include skill, privilege, knowledge, and networking. Contrary to the name, edges can also include flaws or weaknesses. They're best presented with a story behind them, something that makes the character distinctive. For example, instead of "strong," try something like "bodybuilder." The latter implies a membership at a gym, subscriptions to related magazines, and a circle of fellow enthusiasts.

### Example Edges

**Retired Intelligence Agent** — This protagonist will be skilled in the use of spy gadgets and will retain vast numbers of contacts on all different sides. He or she is current on international politics, can speak several languages and stay cool under stress. As for obligations, well, who knows when he or she might be pulled back in? The retired agent is probably still being watched.

**Control Freak** — Sure, it makes for a great issue, but it also has its advantages. This protagonist has a knack for maintaining order, whether or not it's something everyone else wants. He or she has amazing organizational skills and can be very clever when it comes to manipulation. All other fears tend to be dwarfed by the fear of losing control, so it sometimes appears that the control freak is actually very brave.

**Parent** — It's surprising, the things a person learns by being a parent. This protagonist is good at serious multitasking, making it on very little sleep, and being authoritative yet affectionate. He or she will have a circle of friends that seems at times to be exclusively made up of other parents of children the same age.

**Student Athlete** — The student athlete enjoyed a full college scholarship thanks to his or her athletic prowess. This protagonist will still be in great shape and be able to endure a strenuous schedule, sometimes with little sleep. He or she can find focus under severe pressure and can pull off a few impressive physical feats. The student athlete may be recognized from time to time with a warm reception.

**Political Activist** — The activist believes in a cause, enough so that he or she suffers for it. This protagonist will know how to incite others to act, how to research information, and how to remain determined in the face of adversity. The activist will have some skill in persuasion, and will have many contacts to call upon, though their interest in supporting the activist may not stretch far beyond their common cause.

### Bootleggers: Edges

*Meredith comes up with "Flapper" as one of Roxy's edges. As a would-be socialite, she knows the cool clubs, the passwords to get in, and how draw positive attention to herself while she's there.*

*Wil chooses "War hero" as one of Robert's edges. He really is a capable soldier, level headed and brave in the face of danger. It also benefits him publicly, as his story's made the newspapers. Law-abiding citizens extend him courtesy and respect, while gangsters know not to mess with him.*

*John creates an edge called "Delinquent" for Billy. It helps him to do petty crimes, skip school and similar things. It's also useful in disappointing his father, living up to what he assumes James' opinion of him is.*

## Connections

*"Claire, are you depressed?"*

*"I'm not going to even answer that."*

*"Well, whatever you're going through, I hope you're not going to blame me."*

— Ruth and Claire, *Six Feet Under*

Characters on a TV show have relationships with other people on the show, and those relationships often have a significant effect on the things that happen. Your protagonist might have a best friend, or an ex-lover, or an ever-present-yet-annoying neighbor, and how he or she feels about them will influence the protagonist's decisions. It will even influence how those decisions turn out. These relationships are referred to in *Primetime Adventures* as connections.

While edges can be used to arrange contacts and find allies when a protagonist is in need, connections use the reverse approach. These characters are permanent – or at least semi-permanent – supporting cast members on the show, and will make regular appearances. They can then provide the equivalent of edges or resources to protagonists when they appear in a scene, or they can evoke a sort of emotionally inspired tenacity in the protagonist, causing him or her to succeed based solely on love or anger or exasperation.

Just like edges, connections should be chosen for maximum storyline potential. Look at the protagonist's issue for guidance. Is the protagonist prone to anger? Come up with a connection who provokes that anger or who is easily hurt by it. If the protagonist is trying to escape his or her past, choose a connection with ties to that past. The more you have that leads you and the other players toward your protagonist's issue, the better your play experience is going to be.

### Example Connections

**Edgar** — Edgar is the protagonist's loyal butler, trained in self defense, acutely aware of the latest fashions, and always ready to advise on proper etiquette.

**JC Townsend** — JC runs a helicopter tour business. She's a long-time friend of the protagonist and somehow manages to get herself talked into lending out her helicopter for dangerous and questionable purposes.

**Marvin** — Marvin is a figment of the character's imagination, possibly the result of a traumatic experience. He seems to exist primarily to serve as the character's conscience, making tsk noises and raising an eyebrow. He also does an effective job of distracting the protagonist in public places and causing people nearby to stare.

**Trish** — Trish is the protagonist's know-it-all roommate, who never seems to hold a job, always gets into trouble, and consistently gets on the protagonist's nerves. However, Trish seems to know just about everyone in every place in the city that serves alcohol and is an amazing source of trivial information.

### Bootleggers: Connections

*One of Robert's connections is Sarah, his high-school sweetheart. She married someone else while he was off in the war, and he still carries a torch for her. Sarah herself seems to be conflicted about it, which makes things all the harder for Robert, who wants to do the right thing.*

*James has a connection named Joe, a friend of his since childhood who's on the police force. Joe tends to look the other way with regard to James' criminal involvement, but he has limits. He seems to be the only one at the moment who can get James to open up even the slightest bit.*

*Roxy has a connection named Claire, the daughter of a shipping magnate, whom Roxy is working very hard to impress. Claire has some degree of fame and influence via her father, and hasn't made up her mind about Roxy yet.*

## Choosing Traits

Each protagonist should start play with 2 of one kind of trait, and 1 of another. That is, you can pick 2 edges and 1 connection, or 1 edge and 2 connections.

## Nemesis

Many great characters have a nemesis, someone whose goal is to make life miserable for that character. He or she shows up now and then and causes all sorts of problems.

***"Listen to me, you son of a bitch. You have been a plague on my life. You repulse me. Every time I sat across from you listening to your lies, all I could do was fantasize about slashing your throat!"***

***"Well, I can't pretend to be surprised that you feel that way."***

**—Sydney and Sloane, *Alias***

Players have the option of creating a nemesis for their protagonists. There is no advantage or disadvantage, other than providing an opportunity to create part of the story.

Two protagonists can share a nemesis, and the nemesis can even be the primary threat in an episode; however, the nemesis is probably a popular character on the series and shouldn't be permanently removed without serious forethought.

## Example Nemesis

**Edie Britt, *Desperate Housewives*** — In season one, Edie and her aggressive sexual conquests make it hard for divorcée Susan Mayer to find new romance with the new guy across the street.

**Mitzi Dalton Huntley, *Six Feet Under*** — A ruthless rival, Mitzi will stop at nothing to get the Fishers to sell out to Kroehner, the bloated, soulless megacorporation she represents.

### Bootleggers: Nemesis

*John wants Billy to have a nemesis who's a rich bully around the same age. Meredith suggests that he be the younger brother of Claire, one of Roxy's connections.*

*Meredith prefers that Roxy not have a nemesis this season, focusing instead on her relationships with friends and family.*

*James' nemesis is another bootlegger who's competing for territory in Milwaukee.*



**William Rawls, *The Wire*** — This guy makes me mad just thinking about him. His sole concern for his career often leaves Lieutenant Daniels and his team in a tough position.

## Fan Mail

Fan mail represents the success of the show and the popularity of the starring characters. At the start of the first episode, a protagonist has a Fan Mail score of zero. During play, this score will hopefully increase as the player helps to create an exciting story for the protagonist.



## Sets

While the scenes of the show are not limited to pre-defined sets, it can be useful for the group to agree upon certain locations where things can take place. In play, sets help frame a scene and give the group a foundation to work from. Over time, sets accumulate details that players can use during the game to enhance that sort of “immersed” feeling and develop continuity.

For example, in season 2 of *Gilmore Girls*, Luke makes Lorelai a chupah for a wedding that she doesn’t go through with, but in later seasons you can still see it sitting out in her yard. The nice thing about it is that it might trigger memories for the fans who have seen multiple seasons of the show. *Hey, that’s right, he built that for her, and didn’t they almost get together? I wonder if they’re ever going to hook up...*

## Personal Set

There are often locations on TV shows that are closely tied to a specific character. The set might be a character’s office, or home, or it might be a favorite hangout. It might even be a place in the character’s imagination. In *Primetime Adventures*, protagonists have personal sets, which help the protagonist to develop into a more complex character. Creating a scene that takes place on a protagonist’s personal set allows that player to uncheck a trait that had previously been used during the episode.

Personal sets can also be shared by one or more — even all — of the protagonists. Maybe instead of a set, it’s a prop, like Sawyer’s letter on *Lost*. Or maybe it’s a mannerism that comes up in stressful times, like when Ben on *Felicity* scratches the back of his head whenever he’s talking about something difficult. The whole point is to create an environment that gives the audience cues about something important going on. When a player brings in the personal set, everyone else in the game goes, oh, we need to focus on character development now.

### Example Personal Sets

**Luke’s Diner** — Name for me an episode of *Gilmore Girls* that doesn’t include a scene at Luke’s. Okay, then name two. Really, there can’t be many. I’d call this Lorelai’s personal set more than Luke’s, as Luke’s development tends to happen when he’s away from there. Her being there constantly reinforces her relationship with Luke and many of the other people in Stars Hollow.

**The Beach** — It’s kind of hard to have any scene in *Lost* on the beach without it involving some big personal moment. I mean, you have the waves quietly sloshing, and probably a breeze, and there’s a good chance that the sun is low in the sky. Perfect for the deep introspective stuff.

#### Personal Sets: Bootleggers

*Robert’s personal set is a flashback to the trenches of the war, where he has conversations with his fellow soldiers.*

*James’ personal set is the barn on the family farm, which is now used for storage and distribution of illegal booze.*

# Creating a Series

Series Title *Bootleggers*

Player Name *Cara*

Protagonist Name *James McGrath*

Concept *Widower, father, bootlegger*

## Story Arc

Issue *repressing his grief over his wife's death.*

Screen Presence Per Episode

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Screen Presence

This Episode



Personal Set *The Barn*

Nemesis *Mitch, a rival bootlegger*

Fan Mail

## Traits

### Edges

*Father of three children*

### Connections

*Joe, a police officer, childhood friend*

*the "ghost" (memory) of his wife*

Series Title *Bootleggers*

Player Name *Wil*

Protagonist Name *Robert McGrath*

Concept *Older Son, confused war hero*

## Story Arc

Issue *getting over the horrors of war.*

Screen Presence Per Episode

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Screen Presence

This Episode



Personal Set *The trenches of World War I*

Nemesis

Fan Mail

## Traits

### Edges

*War Hero*

### Connections

*Sarah, High school sweetheart*

*Tom, a fellow war veteran*

# Creating a Series

Series Title *Bootleggers*

Player Name *Meredith*

Protagonist Name *Roxy McGrath*

Concept *Would-be Socialite*

## Story Arc

Issue *looking out for herself; social climbing*

Screen Presence Per Episode

② ① ③ ② ① ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Screen Presence

This Episode



Personal Set *Her Bedroom*

Nemesis

Fan Mail

## Traits

Edges

*Flapper*

*Fast Talker*

Connections

*Claire, a rich girl*

Series Title *Bootleggers*

Player Name *John*

Protagonist Name *Billy McGrath*

Concept *Troubled Teen*

## Story Arc

Issue *living in his brother's shadow*

Screen Presence Per Episode

① ① ② ② ③ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Screen Presence

This Episode



Personal Set

Nemesis *Archie, Claire's younger brother*

Fan Mail

## Traits

Edges

*Delinquent*

*Pretty Boy*

Connections

*Gretchen, a mother figure*

## The Beginning

Starting a game often involves a few stumbling blocks and awkward moments. To make things easier, the group should set aside some time during the series creation process to discuss how the series ought to begin.

Most TV series begin with a change in the characters' lives. They've moved to a new place, they've just lost something or someone important, or they've found something new. Whatever it is that starts your series, it should signify a beginning for the protagonists as well as the show itself. If the

series is about superheroes, the beginning might explore how they acquire their super powers. If it's about police officers, maybe it's their first day on the job.

*The Wire brings the police characters together as they're assembled to form a special task force. We learn about them as they learn about each other.*

*Desperate Housewives begins with the suicide of Mary Alice Young and introduces us to the cast as they come to terms with what has happened.*

## More Example Shows



**Premise** – A mysterious substance has affected a small percentage of the students at Bridgewater College, giving them an extraordinary power they call “the Blur.”

The show focuses on a group of students who have discovered that they each have this strange power, which manifests differently in each of them. Unknown to them, a professor at the college has caused the Blur with his diabolical experiments, and is doing his best to keep them from finding out. While the Blur is an extraordinary power, the show explores how it becomes a burden to the protagonists.

### Cast

- **Alice** – A meek student who has come to Bridgewater to restart her life, but the Blur is letting her past catch up with her. For Alice, the Blur manifests as a destructive weapon-like force. Alice’s issue is her tempestuous relationship with her father, a rich and powerful man.
- **Lauren** – An over-achiever with a tendency toward over-responsibility. Lauren’s Blur power is a mind-controlling ability. Her issue is her tendency to focus on other people’s problems while burying her own.

- **Nicola** – A physics student haunted by the death of another student. Nicola’s Blur power is time and speed control. Her issue manifests in a fear of her own powers, a belief that she is dangerous to those around her.
- **Preston** – A spoiled, rebellious kid from a well-to-do family. Preston uses the Blur to project focused sound waves. Preston’s issue is his self-destructive behavior and lack of accountability.

**Sets** – A house where the protagonists all live, classrooms, the laboratory, coffee shops and various places on campus.

**The Beginning** – it’s the morning after a serious fight with some strange enemy, and none of the protagonists has a clear memory of it, but they worry that they may have killed someone.



**Premise** – The show takes place in the late 19th Century in England. The characters are working as secret agents for Queen Victoria, precursors to the famous double-0 agents. The show is over-the-top with its character abilities and strange age-of-steam inventions, almost Jules Verne in nature. Each week, the heroes travel the globe to defeat mad scientists and Victorian-era terrorists with plots to take over the world.

What would set the show apart from other shows of its kind would be the moral and ethical decisions the characters face from episode to episode. What will they do out of loyalty?

### Cast

- **The Leader** – Charismatic, dashing, flamboyant, inspirational. An expert fencer and a really snappy dresser. He’s haunted by the memory of a loved one he couldn’t save. His issue manifests as a tendency to push himself, to deny failure at perhaps too much of a cost.
- **The Tinkerer** – Can build nearly anything out of brass and gears. She’s secretly in love with one of the other cast members, and hopeless at romance. Her issue is this love, and how it complicates her already complicated life.
- **The Explorer** – Been everywhere from the Antarctic to the Amazon. Excellent shot with a rifle, and knows the customs of many countries. He has sworn revenge against the evil man who swindled him of his wealth and slandered his reputation. His issue is how his drive for revenge keeps him from being at peace.

**Sets** – Sets for this show will probably change radically from episode to episode, as many adventures will take place in exotic locales; however, each character should still have a personal set. Plus, there will likely be some sort of headquarters set.

**The Beginning** – the series begins with the founding of the agency, as the queen summons the heroes together.



**Premise** – This is a children’s show about Moose, who has moved to the city and is trying to make his way. He works as a temp for the horses who pull the carriages in central park when they get sick.

Episodes in the series would focus very purely on relationships, belonging, and wants, with plot almost always playing a minor role. This is possibly the most issue-driven series of the examples.

*Note: Moose in the City isn’t my idea. It’s the creation of Vincent Baker, Alexander Cherry, Ron Edwards, Calder Johnson and Gordon Landis, and it was actually played. So if you’re looking at all these example series and*

*thinking, “it looks really hard,” here’s an example of what you can do in maybe fifteen minutes. It’s easier than you think.*

### Cast

- **Moose** – The titular character, Moose is in fact an actual moose. While the other characters are played by live actors, Moose, depending on the budget of the show, would be either computer-generated or maybe a big puppet. Moose is kind of slow talking and ponderous, very simple. His struggle is all about identity, can he succeed in the city without giving up who he is?
- **Jimmy** – A neighborhood kid who’s kind of shy and quiet. He likes to draw a lot. He’s struggling with learning to communicate better with others.
- **Wendy**– Another neighborhood kid who is full of support and kindness for others but often doesn’t get the support she needs in return, especially with her parents going through a divorce.
- **Susan** – Moose’s adult friend, Susan is an executive who’s really good at “money stuff.” She’s struggling with the shame of leading a double life, keeping her work and personal experiences so far apart from each other that it hurts.

**Sets** – The streets of the neighborhood, the park, the protagonists’ apartments.

**The Beginning** – Possibly Moose’s first day in the city, when he meets the kids and finds a job and place to live.



**Premise** – The crew of a rescue spacecraft risk their lives to save spacefarers in trouble.

Episodes would revolve the three protagonists performing perilous rescues in dangerous environments. Each of them has a troubled past and an uncertain future. As the series develops, they turn to one another for support. The format would be a steady mix of action and drama.

### Cast

- **Brea Mackle** – Brea is the ship’s pilot, a former fighter ace who doesn’t like to talk about her military service, and the daughter of a famous diplomat. She harbors a serious grudge against a planetary government, although we don’t know why at first.
- **Nate Spisak** – Nate is the ship’s medic. He’s the newest addition to the crew and is secretly suffering from an addiction to a strange narcotic. It’s also possible that he might be using an assumed name and keeping many secrets from the others. He’s an exceptional medic and really knows his way around the shadier parts of cities and space stations.
- **Gustav** – Gustav is the muscle, protecting the crew from trouble when they do rescues in dangerous locations. He’s fueled by some insecure need to impress people, possibly related to the fact that his older brother is a successful mercenary.

**Sets** – locations aboard the ship, the main concourse of the space station where the ship is based.

**The Beginning** – The series begins with Nate’s first day on the job, replacing the previous medic who died on the last mission.

# SPARTANS



**Premise** – The show focuses on a warrior training school in ancient Greece. Many episodes will focus on the daily life of the students and teachers. There will probably be some anachronisms to allow for additional character development. To get characters off campus, one assumption about the setting might be that Greece’s army is currently insufficient to protect it from threats, so the students and trainers need to take action themselves. *Troy* meets *One Tree Hill*!

### Cast

- **Achilles** – Son of the goddess Thetis, the young Achilles may grow up to be the greatest warrior Greece has ever known, and may already be so. As of now, he is a brash young boy, foolish and overconfident.
- **Laertes** – A wise and experienced warrior, having been to many battles. Laertes is past his prime and occasionally has a poor time facing his mortality.
- **Appolonia** – An amazon warrior, skilled with a bow, torn between her love of battle and a promise she made to serve her family.
- **Patrochus** – A new student at the school, Patrochus seems to be the most dedicated warrior ever to set foot in the school. That’s because when he gains the skill he needs, Patrochus intends to kill Laertes, to gain vengeance for the death of his father.

**Sets** – Sets would include various locations around the school, and various locations around the Aegean Sea.

**The Beginning** – It’s the first day of school.



**Premise** — Unbeknownst to their friends and families, a group of single women, wives and moms has formed a secret agency of covert operatives. Behind the backs of their families, they recover stolen files, fight terrorists, crack codes, and disarm warheads. Meanwhile they are sworn to secrecy and appear to live normal lives.

The key to this show is to contrast an empowering secret life with a hard struggle in the domestic world. Think *Charlie's Angels* meets

*Thelma and Louise*. Or maybe *Mission: Impossible* meets *Sex and the City*.

#### Cast

- **Megan** — A master of martial arts and an expert gymnast, going through a painful divorce that influences her ability to focus on the mission. Will she let her frustration get the best of her?
- **Valerie** — Computer hacker, demolitions expert and mother of a very rebellious teenager. When her daughter is caught cheating in school, will she be there to make things right, or will she be too busy saving the world from a diabolical terrorist?
- **Joan** — Crack driver and crack shot, comes through every mission without a scratch. Wishes she could say the same about her love life.

**Sets:** A secret headquarters, homes, city streets, office buildings, alleyways, etc.

**The Beginning** — Spies for Hire starts with the events that lead to the creation of the secret agency. They discover that they all have exceptional skills going to waste and decide to do something about it.



# Creating an Episode

***“A writer has a responsibility to tell stories that are dark and sexy and violent, where characters that you love do stupid, wrong things and get away with it ... because that’s what makes stories into fairy tales instead of polemics.”***

**– Joss Whedon, creator, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

If you’ve gone through the steps outlined in the previous chapter, you’ll hopefully have a big fistful of story ideas. This chapter is about taking those ideas and creating something meaningful and satisfying out of them, in cooperation. If the last chapter was about the “who” and “what” of Primetime Adventures, this is the “how.”

Each time you sit down to play a game of Primetime Adventures, you create an episode, a good story with a clear beginning and end, which involves all the protagonists, settings and other story elements outlined in the previous chapter. A good goal to aim for when playing the game is to complete one episode in a session of play.

## Kinds of Episodes

**Episodic** – Up until recently, most TV series followed an episodic storyline. Episodes of this type focus most of their attention on a single story, and little on events that have happened in previous episodes. You could play them in any order with little impact. These sorts of episodes apply best to a series where protagonist issues are less dramatic and need less long-term development; in a series filled with intense drama they should be used sparingly. Protagonists will change only over the course of multiple seasons.

**Serial** – Serial episodes pay strong attention to continuity and how protagonists change over time. There may or may not be an overarching story involved, but the audience will definitely recognize whether a given episode comes earlier or

later in the season. This type of episode is preferable when you’re playing Primetime Adventures.

## The Pilot Episode

***“I know my transcripts are a little... colorful.”***

***“Do you think, uh, ‘colorful’ is the word? Not, uh, ‘dismal’?”***

***“It wasn’t that bad.”***

***“You burned down the gym.”***

**–Buffy and the principal, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

The pilot episode is the first game session of a new show. As with a TV series, the pilot episode serves to see how everything works and test out concepts. It should function in play like any other episode, except that everything is being evaluated by the players regarding whether it’s worth keeping in the game. Every protagonist has his or her Issue introduced, and the Producer will bring in some hopefully recurring characters.

When the pilot is over, everyone should check in to discuss what they liked or didn’t like. Everyone at this point has the opportunity to revise or completely remake their protagonists.



### Special Pilot Episode Rules

The pilot episode occurs outside a regular TV season. Assume that it's shot by the studio to see whether the series is worth airing. Because of that, a pilot does not automatically count toward a protagonist's story arc. Each protagonist in the pilot episode should have his or her issue set at 2, so that everyone gets an equal opportunity for evaluation. If the pilot gets approval from the group, then you have the option of plugging it in as the first episode, in which case players might need to revise their story arcs so they start at 2. Or you can make the next episode the official first episode of the season. It's up to the group.

#### Bootleggers: Pilot Episode

*In addition to exposing the issues of the protagonists, the pilot episode of Bootleggers addresses the economic impact of prohibition on Milwaukee and explains James' desperate decision to adopt criminal behavior. It also takes place on the day that Robert comes home from the war.*

### Spotlight Episode

*"What could possibly make us even for the Tampa job?"*

*"How about the known whereabouts of the man that ruined your life?"*

—Sawyer and Hibbs, *Lost*

Every protagonist has one spotlight episode per season, and it presents a player with a clear opportunity to reveal that protagonist's complexity. Spotlight episodes are the ones where the studio knows they have a doozy and promote it like crazy all week. For this episode, the spotlight character blossoms in front of the camera, and by the end, that character can't help but to have grown.

So how do you do that? Well, it depends on the kind of series being played, and the kind of issue the character has. The easiest way is for the producer to present a situation that brings a character up close and personal with his or her issue. If the character has romantic problems, have the episode be about a love interest. If the character is struggling to redeem him- or herself for evil deeds done, put that character into a situation where temptation beckons, or where former victims demand justice. The players have free will to decide how

their characters will respond, and from that, everyone learns about who that character is, and where that character might be going.

At the conclusion of the spotlight episode, everyone in the group should have a bit of insight into what that character's issue will be in the following season. It may remain the same, or it might turn into something new.

Note that a protagonist doesn't have to change during the spotlight episode, undergoing some kind of epiphany or transformation. The spotlight episode just needs to illuminate (no pun intended) the protagonist's issue and hint at some possible outcomes.

#### Bootleggers: Spotlight Episode

*Roxy's spotlight episode brings to a peak her obsession with social climbing and presents Meredith with a question: just how far will Roxy go to get what she wants? In previous episodes, Pete, the producer, has paid careful attention to the choices Meredith has made for Roxy. For this episode, he escalates things drastically.*

*In the opening scene, Pete creates a problem for Roxy: her wealthy and influential friends have grown bored of her and are preparing to completely ostracize her from their clique. Roxy decides to impress them by revealing the truth about her father's business and tells them that she can get them as much alcohol as they want.*

*For the remainder of the episode, Pete introduces conflicts that involve police, rival gangsters and Roxy's family, requiring Roxy to choose what really matters to her and how much.*

### Two-Part Episodes

Some episodes may be too big to fit into one session of play. Any time two protagonists have their spotlight episode at the same time, that's going to be the case. The group may also agree at some point —maybe during play— that there's so much going on that they should finish it up next time rather than force a conclusion.

Gameplay will be the same except that the end of the first game session, part 1 of the episode, needs to end on an exciting note, and the second session, the conclusion, has to be twice as exciting as the first one.

## Scenes

*“We’re going to reveal the seedy underbelly of small towns, starting with yours.”*

*“Stars Hollow does not have a ‘seedy underbelly’. We don’t even have a meter maid.”*

– Paris and Rory, *Gilmore Girls*

Episodes are divided into scenes, a scene being a period of uninterrupted action in a general location, such as a conversation between two protagonists, or a chase down city streets. A scene should always provide one of two things: information essential to the plot or a greater insight into the characters. It should focus on something new; a scene, however insightful, loses its impact the second time around.

**Good scenes:** a protagonist learns who the villain is, a protagonist gets a friend to trust her, a protagonist expresses grief over the loss of a loved one.

**Poor scenes:** a protagonist makes out a shopping list, a protagonist expresses grief over the lost loved one for the fifth time in the same episode, a protagonist enters a room and fights some monsters, loots their bodies, and leaves.

## Creating a Scene

Scene creation starts with a request from a player. In play, everyone takes turns requesting a scene, and the player whose turn it is to make a request must declare three things to the producer: the scene’s focus, the scene’s agenda, and its location. The producer takes the three pieces of information from the player and establishes the scene, describing what the audience sees when the scene begins. The establishing narration will usually take a few sentences, after which the producer may say “what do you want to do?” or “go ahead.” Then the players take the roles of their protagonists and either describe or act out the things that their protagonists do or try to do.

### Scene Request Checklist

**Focus:** The focus of the scene is its high-level purpose, *either development of a protagonist or advancement of the plot*. A scene can be about anything, or at least anything that makes sense being on the series, but the point of whatever it is that actually happens should tie into the focus.

**Agenda:** The agenda is a general description of what happens in the scene. It shouldn’t explain how the scene resolves, but instead should explain what the likely conflict is. An example of an agenda on the show *Lost* would be “Locke and Boone are trying to open the secret hatch they’ve found buried in the ground.” Knowing whether the scene addresses plot or character will tell you what sorts of things should take place while they’re working.

**Location:** Where’s the scene taking place? An existing set, or a new one? If it’s an existing set, the players will probably have some established information to work with, like set details, handy props, people likely to be encountered there, and so on. If it’s a new set, all that information is up for grabs.

If it’s your turn for a scene, and you can’t think of all the elements to include, don’t forget that you have other people playing the game with you who would probably be happy to give you some ideas.

### Scene Creation: Bridgewater

**John (the producer)** – “Okay, Cara, you’re up. What’s your scene?”

**Cara** – “Um. Plot scene. In the lab. Nicola is examining all the rings she and the others have collected.”

**Meredith** – “Have it be at night, because that’s spookier.”

**Cara** – “Okay, just for Meredith, it’s at night.”

**John** – “I figured you’d be getting to the rings pretty soon. The scene begins first with a shot from outside, showing that it’s late, and there’s a single light on in the building. Of course it’s coming from her lab. There’s a quick cut to the lab interior, where Nicola is preparing a slide. What do you want to do?”

## Whose Scene is First?

The producer always creates the opening scene, providing the other players with something they can respond to. After that, the option should always go to a player whose protagonist is in the spotlight for that episode.

Once the spotlight player is taken care of, or if there is no spotlight for the episode, the turn order can just go clockwise, or counter-clockwise, for the duration of the episode.

Sometimes a player might have an idea for a scene that takes place in the evening, while a player whose turn comes after

that player has an idea that takes place during the day. When situations like that arise, the group can opt to take turns out of order.

### How Many Scenes Can I Create?

As mentioned above, everyone, including the producer, should be able to create several scenes during an episode.

## Contributing to a Scene

Once a scene has been created by a player, a scene is “played out” with the contributing players having characters in the scene do and say things. The producer will play the part of supporting characters, and the other players will take charge of their protagonists.

A player has the authority at all times to make decisions on behalf of his or her protagonist. What does the protagonist say? Does the protagonist want to look for clues? Is the protagonist content? Does he or she want to get in a fistfight with the bouncer, or chat up someone at the pool table? Those decisions are all up to the player. Everyone should feel welcome to blurt out ideas that they think would be great for another player’s protagonist, but with the exception of conflict resolution (see below) you are always the final authority for your own protagonist.

### How to Play Your Protagonist

How you choose to describe the actions of the protagonist under your control is open to a lot of possibilities. You may want to “get in character” and act out the part of a character, coming up with a distinct voice and mannerisms, and you may want to refer to a protagonist in the first person, saying “I look in the window” when you want the protagonist to do so. Or you may prefer to describe the action in more of a narrator stance, describing what happens as if reading from a book. Either of these choices is fine, as well as anything that falls in between.

As far as the group goes, you may find that some players who really like to play up the “acting” side of things will feel let down or distracted by players who do not, and vice versa. You might want to discuss this with the rest of the group to make sure everyone understands everyone else’s preferences before play begins.

## Conflict

- Chris loves Mary, but Mary is getting married to someone else in five minutes.
- Danielle’s abusive ex-boyfriend is trying to get back together with her for the third time, and she always has trouble telling him no.
- Somewhere inside the building, a terrorist is preparing to kill two hostages, and rookie-officer Keiko has no backup.
- Preston’s friends are counting on him to help them take down the enemy, but his ex-girlfriend has just walked into the bar with her new beau.

All of the above examples illustrate conflict, the rift between what a character wants and what he or she actually has. A conflict can be a physical challenge, or a social, a mental or even a spiritual one, but its outcome should always make a powerful impact on the story, regardless of what happens.

### Conflicts Are About Want

Primetime Adventures addresses the personal struggles of protagonists via their issues and their relationships. Conflicts often address those struggles directly, placing the want in front of the protagonist. Does the protagonist have what it takes to get it? Is he or she ready? What does the protagonist want more?

### Conflicts Are About Tough Choices and Consequences

Sometimes a scene will set a dilemma before a protagonist, asking you as the player to decide which of two things matters more to the protagonist. The conflict will help to resolve what the consequences are, if any, of making that choice.

### Introducing Conflict

Most scenes should involve conflict, as it’s exciting and drives a story forward. Players will often request scenes that have very obvious conflict potential. Other times a scene will be requested that does not. Players may also take measures during a scene to steer the story toward a conflict. In either case, the final responsibility for introducing conflict into play rests with the producer.

Any player can call for a conflict at any time during a scene where there is potential for one. If a conflict is glaringly obvious and no one is calling for it, the producer is obliged

to do so. Likewise, if a scene continues along with no sign of conflict in sight, it's the producer's job to narrate events that promote conflict, and then to bring the conflict into play.



**Example Conflict — Who's Involved?**

*This conflict includes Billy, Roxy and Roxy's friends. James and Robert aren't in the scene, and Cara and Wil are content to sit it out.*

**Step 2: What are the Stakes?**

The stakes are what the protagonist really wants out of the conflict: love, justice, confidence, the safety of friends or of oneself: there are limitless possibilities, and they depend on the situation that leads into the conflict as well as the nature of the protagonist. If your protagonist and mine are having an argument, for examples, maybe what yours wants is for mine to feel guilty, and what mine wants is for anyone listening to agree with her. Or maybe both protagonists just want to feel like they've made the best argument. It really depends on you and me and what we think our protagonists want most.

For every conflict, each player with a protagonist involved must clarify exactly what the stakes are for that protagonist. Depending on the outcome of the conflict, the stakes are the thing that the protagonist will or won't get. That is, if your cards are better than the producer's cards, your protagonist wins the stakes. If they're not, your protagonist does not win the stakes.

**Action**

So how is your protagonist trying to get those stakes? Sometimes that's pretty straightforward, as with the argument example above. Our protagonists, yours and mine, are arguing to get what they want. Sometimes it might be less obvious than that, and the producer or other players will speak up if they're not sure what your protagonist is up to.

**Bootleggers: Example Conflict**

*On page 7, the introduction features an example of play that ends on a conflict. This conflict is pretty easy for the producer to spot, as the protagonists have put themselves at odds with one another.*

*Roxy has snuck out of the house against her father's wishes, and even worse, she's talked her way into a speakeasy. If her father finds out she's here, she'll be in even bigger trouble. Roxy wants to show off to her friends.*

*Billy, on the other hand, is desperate to win his father's approval, and hopes that finding Roxy will help him accomplish just that; however, it will likely hurt Roxy's social standing if she's found out.*

**Step 1: Which Protagonists are Involved?**

A conflict must always involve at least one protagonist. It can be two protagonists at odds with one another, protagonists united against one or more supporting characters, or multiple protagonists and supporting characters all with disparate goals. However, you can't have a conflict that only involves supporting characters.

A protagonist must be in the scene to be involved in the conflict. A player who wants his or her protagonist to be in the conflict must pay a point of fan mail to have the protagonist enter the scene, at which point the protagonist can get involved.

**Example Conflict — Stakes**

*Meredith says the stakes for Roxy are: "can Roxy continue to impress her friends?" The action she's taking to get the stakes is to make sure Billy doesn't make her look bad in front of them, so she's trying to hide from him.*

*John says the stakes for Billy are: "can Billy impress his father?" He's going about it by trying to catch Roxy at the speakeasy and look clever.*

### Step 3: Spending Budget

Once intent and stakes have been decided, the producer will decide how difficult to make the conflict, meaning how many cards he or she is going to draw in opposition to the protagonists.

The producer gets one card for free in every conflict. Each additional card costs 1 point of budget, and the producer can spend up to 5 points of budget on a single conflict.

#### Why make it difficult or easy?

If you're the producer, your guidelines for setting difficulty are pretty simple: spend budget on conflicts where you think it would be interesting if the protagonists failed, or when you'd really like a shot at narrating the outcome. Usually that's going to correspond to high stakes, but it's really just up to you and what you're feeling at the moment.

#### Example Conflict — Spending Budget

*Pete, the producer, is pretty excited about this conflict, as it seems important in a fundamental way to both Roxy's and Billy's development as characters. He elects to spend 3 budget on the conflict, giving him a total of 4 cards in the draw.*

### Step 4: Applying Traits and Fan Mail

Once the producer has set the difficulty, the players whose protagonists are involved must then decide how many cards they'll get for their protagonists. Each player has a number of free cards equal to the protagonist's current screen presence and can gain additional cards by spending traits and fan mail. Each trait or point of fan mail counts as an additional card. Applying a trait counts toward one of its uses in the episode.

Any player whose protagonist is in a conflict can apply any of the traits on his or her sheet to gain an extra card. Chances are there will be times when the application of a certain trait may seem far fetched, but there is no rule that prevents a player from doing so. It's up to you as a player, when your protagonist is in a conflict, to police yourself. If you win narration, you'll be expected to apply that trait to the narration in a way that doesn't hurt the integrity of your protagonist or the show in general. If you don't think you can do that, maybe you shouldn't apply that trait.

However, anyone who can narrate the application of an unusual trait in a spectacular way will probably earn fan mail from another player (see page xx).

*Note: When you spend fan mail to get extra cards, keep track of those cards separately before you reveal what they are. Set them slightly to one side or in front of the other cards..*

#### Bootleggers: Example Conflict — Applying Traits

*Roxy's screen presence is at 3 this episode, as is her spotlight, so Meredith gets 3 cards to start with. She really wants to see Roxy get what she wants, so she applies her edge: "flapper," saying that Roxy knows her way around a dark crowded speakeasy and should be able to outwit Billy. She also applies her connection with one of the rich girls who's here with her, explaining that she knows all the right things to say to get the girls to stand still and block Billy's line of sight. That gives Meredith 5 cards altogether.*

*Billy's screen presence is at 2 this episode, so John only gets 2 cards. He applies one of Billy's edges, "delinquent," to help him as an obviously underage kid not to stick out while he looks for Roxy. John also spends his only point of fan mail to get one more card, giving him a total of 4 cards.*

#### Influencing Conflicts from Outside

A player whose protagonist is not in the conflict can influence the conflict by spending fan mail to gain cards. They can be applied toward the cards of the producer or any player with a protagonist in the conflict, however the player spending them sees fit. The player should decide where the cards apply before revealing their result.

#### Bootleggers: Example Conflict — Outside Influence

*Wil thinks it would make for some really interesting drama if Roxy were to fail, so he spends one point of fan mail to get 1 card, which he says he will add to the producer's hand.*

### Step 5: Deal the Cards and Read the Results

As the difficulty, traits and fan mail are declared, the producer can go ahead and deal out the appropriate number of cards to each participating player, face down.

Once everyone has all the cards they're entitled to, the cards can be flipped over to reveal the results. Every red card (i.e. diamonds and hearts) a player is dealt counts as a point. If you have more points than the producer, you win your stakes. If the points are tied, players win the stakes if they have more *hearts* than the producer. If there's still a tie, victory goes to whoever has the lowest heart (or lowest diamond if neither has hearts). If nobody has any red cards, deal everyone another card.

### Bootleggers: Example Conflict — Results

The producer gets 5 cards, like so:



= 2 points

Wil gets 1 card, added to the producer's total:



= +1 point

Meredith gets dealt 5 cards as well:



= 3 points

John gets dealt 4 cards:



= 0 points

The results: With Wil's extra card, the producer has a total of 3 points, which is more than John's 0. Meredith also has 3 points, but the producer has more hearts. Neither protagonist gets the stakes in this conflict. Roxy doesn't impress her friends, and Billy doesn't impress his father.

## Step 6: Narration

So once you clarify who did and didn't get the stakes, you need to figure out how it all happened. The entire group participates in the narration, but one player has the authority to synthesize everyone's contributions and say for certain what it was that did or didn't happen.

Remember the following when narrating, and especially when you have the authority:

- Narration must explain how each protagonist either wins or loses the stakes, as declared by the cards.
- Narration must include appropriate behavior for the protagonists involved.
- Narration must take into account any traits used by the players, and any stated action.

### Determining Who Has Authority

Narration authority goes to the player who was dealt the single highest card in the conflict. If there's a tie for highest card, then red cards trump black cards, clubs trump spades, and hearts trump diamonds.

### Bootleggers: Example Conflict — Narration

*Meredith and John have both been dealt an ace, but Meredith's ace of diamonds trumps John's ace of clubs, so she gets the authority for this conflict.*

*So how did that happen? She suggests that Billy does catch her in the club, and it makes for a big scene and embarrasses her friends, but it also draws the attention of the bouncer, who realizes that Billy's just a teenager and throws him out. Roxy is humiliated and flees the speakeasy, leaving Billy out in the alley to be scolded by James and Robert for not being tactful enough.*

*John describes what he thinks Billy would say, and Cara and Wil pitch in with what they think James and Robert would say, and as a group they work out the details, with Meredith giving it the final stamp of approval.*

## Some Conflict Advice

*"Why can't we use the starboard launch?"*

*"It's a gift shop now."*

– Starbuck and Tyrol, *Battlestar Galactica*

Meaningful conflicts can be tough to get the hang of. Here's a couple pointers.

### Bring in the Issue

Any good conflict involves a protagonist's issue. The player chose that issue because he or she finds it interesting. It's a guarantee that any conflict where it comes up is also going to be interesting to that player. If I make a protagonist with self doubt, I want it to come up in play. That's where I want my

protagonist to struggle, so I ought to try and relate it to what's at stake in any given conflict.

"Do we defeat the bad guys" in and of itself doesn't say anything about a protagonist's issue, so it makes for lousy stakes. That doesn't mean, however, that you can't have a cool slam-bang action scene. It just needs to connect somehow. If my protagonist's issue is self-doubt, make the stakes "does my protagonist show courage in the fight?" Now there are two benefits. The first is that I as a player get cool character development no matter what happens. The second is that whoever is narrating has much better information to draw upon.

### Bootleggers: Bringing in the issues

*The conflict just described plays on both the protagonists' issues. Roxy wants to be a socialite and needs the approval of her high-society friends. Billy wants to be someone his father is proud of. Winning or losing the stakes of the conflict will add fuel to either protagonist's story arc.*

### Earlier is Better

Don't hesitate to get right to the conflict, especially the first few times you play the game. It can be easy to start talking and describing and maybe acting out dialogue (you know, however you like doing it), and next thing you know, fifteen minutes of play time have passed and no conflict. Oops.

The first couple times you play any game it's going to feel a little clumsy, and that may interfere a bit with the whole imagining of it. Still, until you get the hang of it, you might just have to call a halt to things and say, I think we need a conflict here. What is it? If you do that and really get the hang of what conflicts are like, it'll make play a lot better later on.

## When is a Scene Over?

The point of any scene is to address a focus (plot or character), so a scene can be considered over once the player who created the scene is satisfied that it has done so. Most often it will end following the resolution of a conflict, though players may want to add some in-character dialogue or other details first.

## Scene Cuts

It's common on TV shows for scenes to be interrupted at tense moments, only to cut to a different scene with different protagonists. The viewers at home shift around uncomfortably in their seats, desperate to know how the scene is going to resolve.

Why not do that in Primetime Adventures? The producer, if he or she wants (or at the prompting of another player), can cut away from a scene at an appropriate moment, starting a new scene. It can be a really good idea to keep the pace of the show up. One good spot to cut away from a scene is just as a conflict begins.

### Bootleggers: Scene Cuts

*Just as Billy enters the speakeasy and begins to look for Roxy, Pete tells John and Meredith, 'hold that thought,' and cuts away to a scene with James and Robert.*

## Earning Fan Mail

Fan mail works like star power, making sure that a popular character does exciting things during a show, like saving the day. Characters earn that popularity by revealing depth and complexity. Therefore, players earn fan mail for their protagonists by seeing to their characters' growth.

Fan Mail should be tracked by coins or poker chips or some other form of physical tokens. Whenever there's a conflict, the producer adds one token for every point of budget he or she spends on a card to a bowl or other container. The collection of tokens there are called the Audience Pool.

Any time during an episode, any player except the producer can take a token from the audience pool and award it to another player as fan mail. At most each player can award one point of fan mail per scene. What the award is for depends on the player awarding it, but it can include snappy dialogue, great use of traits, exciting narration, advancement

### Bootleggers: Earning Fan Mail

*Cara says she loves John's description of Billy's behavior upon being thrown out of the speakeasy and gives him a point of fan mail. Likewise, John says he thinks Meredith came up with some great ideas and awards her a point of fan mail.*

of the plot, or whatever makes the game more fun. At the end of the episode, if there are any tokens left in the audience pool, they are discarded.

### Spending Fan Mail

Any amount of fan mail can be spent on additional cards for a conflict, but the player must keep track of them separately from the other cards, such as by setting the dealt cards slightly off to the side. Any cards bought with fan mail that count as points (that is, those that come up hearts or diamonds) earn the producer a point of budget at the end of the conflict. Ones that don't are discarded.

Fan mail may also be used to allow a protagonist to enter a scene. Simply spend a point, and explain how the protagonist shows up. Fan mail spent to enter a scene automatically returns to the producer's budget.

#### **Bootleggers: Spending Fan Mail**

*In the previous example, John's point of fan mail doesn't get him a red card, so the fan mail he spent is discarded. Wil's point of fan mail, on the other hand, netted him a 6 of hearts, so the point he spent goes into the budget.*

### Unspent Fan Mail

Players are under no obligation to spend fan mail within a given period of time. Any fan mail earned during an episode that hasn't been spent can be saved until the next episode.

## Putting the Episode Together: from Scene to Story

So now you have a series, full of complex characters, and you know how to create scenes and resolve conflicts. It's 7 p.m. on a Thursday night, the food has been ordered, and you have until 10:30 to crank out a kick-butt episode. What the heck do you do? How does everyone work together to create a story?

Once it's clear what everyone's responsibilities are, it's time to actually put scenes together to create the episode. Real television scripts follow a certain format that's divided

into "acts," and you can use this format if you like, to help structure your game.

## Acts

Acts in movies and on television shows divide up the progress of the story, from the introduction of a problem to its resolution. Many movies are written using a three act structure, but hour-long television dramas will usually have four acts, to accommodate commercial breaks. Your group isn't really constrained by actual commercial breaks, so you can choose three or four acts, however you please.

### Act 1: Introduce the Problem

There's a question that every story must answer: why are the characters doing this? Why are they being adventurous instead of collecting paychecks and watching TV themselves? The first act of a movie or television show introduces the reason why the characters are doing what they do.

The first scene of an episode is created by the producer, and will introduce a problem that the protagonists can't or at least shouldn't ignore, creating the foundation for the episode. What exactly the protagonists do is up to the players, but they'll certainly have to do something.

Some examples include:

- A friend of one or more protagonists is missing/dead/in trouble.
- The protagonists find evidence of a new threat against them.
- The protagonists discover something mysterious.
- A friend of one of the protagonists, has started acting strangely, such as breaking off all relationships or getting into fights.

Act 1 will usually conclude when the protagonists have decided how they want to react to the situation at hand. It's also the place to start feeding the issue of the spotlight protagonist, and to plant the seeds of the plot threads to come.





**Bridgewater: Act 1**

*Mike, Stacie, Laura, Alan and Josh are playing an episode of Bridgewater (see pp. 39-40). Mike sets up the opening scene with Preston, played by Josh, returning from school to the protagonists' shared house. Entering his room, Preston sees a mirror image of himself staring back menacingly. A clone? They fight, and the real Preston wins, while the fake one dissolves into a puddle of goo.*

*Now the protagonists have a problem to solve: who's making weird gooey clones of them? Who else might be a clone?*

**Act 2: Complications and Contrasts**

If resolving the problem were easy, it would make for a really boring and short episode. So it's never easy, even if it seems to be initially.

Act 2 is all about what stands in the way of the protagonists achieving their goals. There are bad guys with big knives, or there's a high-security alarm system, or someone's friend or

**Bridgewater: Act 2 — Complications**

*Stacie creates a scene where Nicola is in her laboratory on campus, attempting to analyze the gooey residue left behind by the clones. While Nicola's preparing, her love interest, one of the other lab techs, makes a surprise visit and interrupts her work. Nicola has to keep him from finding out what she's working on without upsetting him or falling behind schedule.*

loved one is being uncooperative or inconsiderate. No scene should be without its roadblocks.

At least one player should consider taking the opportunity for character development in the second act. Contrasting story threads should develop, and protagonists in supporting roles should be doing things that put attention on the spotlight protagonist.

**Bridgewater: Act 2 — Contrasting Stories**

*To contrast the self-control issue of Lauren (the spotlight protagonist), Josh creates a character scene for Preston where Preston ignores the tasks assigned him and instead plays pool in a smoky bar.*

**Act 3: Second Complication or Plot Twist**

Just when everything seems to be taken care of, the third act introduces yet another problem. The villain they were after turns out to be merely the henchman of an even more powerful villain, or what appeared to be a case of burglary turns out to be linked to a string of unsolved homicides. Action in the third act should continue to escalate in scale.

The third act often ends with an epiphany moment for one or more of the characters, a revelation about why things have been happening the way they have, or why it's been difficult to resolve certain problems.

**Bridgewater: Act 3**

*In Act 3 of the Bridgewater episode, Lauren has gone to her love interest, professor Sloane, for help in solving the mystery of the clones. The players discover that Sloane is apparently in cahoots with the people creating the clones, and now Lauren is in terrible danger.*

**Act 4: Resolution**

Act 4 provides the climax of the episode, a final confrontation with the problem. In this act, somebody wins, and somebody loses, and most often that happens as a result of the protagonists' choices. Both the main story and the subplots should reach a point where, although they may not be resolved for good, someone involved has either gotten or not gotten what they wanted.

**Bridgewater: Act 4**

*Lauren, with her blur power, has little difficulty overcoming Sloane, but she has to make a choice about what to do with him. She chooses to let him go, and has to face the consequences of how that will affect her and her friends in the future.*

*In contrast, Nicola's relationship with her love interest has improved, and by the end of the episode he has asked her out to dinner.*

*Preston's shirking of his responsibilities has created a rift between him and Lauren, and while that story is far from over, the episode ends with Lauren telling him she can no longer trust him.*

**Denouément**

The spotlight player has the privilege of narrating a denouément scene at the end of the episode, highlighting the aftermath of the spotlight protagonist's story. This scene foregoes the usual conflict rules and grants the player narration rights. It's most often a quiet, short scene.

**Bridgewater: Denouément**

*Laura chooses to create a denouément scene for Lauren. She describes Lauren sitting quietly in her room, looking at a photograph of her and professor Sloane.*

**Commercial Breaks**

Any player, including the producer, can call for a commercial break during the game. Usually they will happen at tense moments within a scene, or in between scenes.

Commercial breaks are a good opportunity for a player or the producer to pause and think when an interesting complication or dilemma has occurred. They're also useful pauses for the producer to check in with the other players and see how the episode is going for them.



**“Next Week On...”**

At the end of every episode, the group will describe a teaser of the next episode, to represent ads that the station might run at the end of a show, during the week or just before the show starts. Real-life previews are typically made up of quick “moments” of the upcoming episode, one- or two-second glimpses of what’s to come. Previews in Primetime Adventures are just the same, and each player, starting with next episode’s spotlight player, gets one moment to describe. The producer gets to contribute one as well.

As a rule, the preview moments usually suggest all the problems that the protagonists are going to face, so appropriate preview moments would imply complications or dramatic situations.

This is powerful storytelling fuel for everyone involved. Players can ensure that an upcoming episode includes locations, people and problems that they want to see, and producers leave the table with a page full of story ideas for the next play session.

**Bridgewater: Next Week On...**

*Mike, the producer of the Bridgewater series, offers a next-week-on shot of two scientists working at some kind of operating table. The camera pans over to reveal the face of Lauren. A voice says, “She’ll be ready in three hours.”*

*Josh describes a shot of Preston surrounded by clones of all the protagonists in a dark alley, saying, “so it’s gonna be like that, is it?”*

**Jobs to Do**

First, everyone should understand what their responsibilities are during the game session. Everyone has to work together to make the episode successful and fun.

**The Jobs of the Producer**

**Create the spark** –The producer always kicks off an episode, and that’s a big responsibility. Something needs to happen that the protagonists (and the players) can’t resist or ignore.

**Keep the pace** – Scenes should all have a purpose, and whatever’s happening in the scene should be meaningful. The producer should keep an eye on scenes to make sure

they don't wander too far from the agenda of the player who created them.

**Create conflict** – When there's no conflict, there's no story. Well, maybe there's story, but it's really boring. Give the protagonists problems. Lots of them. Drive them toward moments of crisis. That's when stuff gets really good.

**Say yes to the players** – Producers will usually have the opportunity to create more scenes than the other players, and should make sure that those scenes don't push protagonists in directions that they don't like. That means that producers should make it a habit of agreeing with the ideas that the players come up with in scenes. If you're dropping the protagonists into immediate situations, let the players resolve it however they like.

**Make sure that protagonists shine** – The point of the game is, after all, to make a terrific story. For that to happen, protagonists need to be involved in exciting situations where, even when they're overpowered or helpless, they're still interesting and sympathetic. They get the last word at the right moment, and so on. The producer should always look out for the protagonists in that regard.

**Weave elements together** – Producers should respond to the actions of the other players and make the scenes appropriate to the players' interests. Having a scene apply to multiple interests is a great way to accomplish that.

### Weaving Elements: Bootleggers

*In previous scenes, Cara has had James investigating a mystery character that has been sabotaging their shipments for a rival bootlegger. At the same time, Wil has had Robert involved in heated arguments with an old friend from school. Pete, the producer, creates a scene where James finds information that points to Robert's friend. Is he the mystery character? What will James do?*

**Take time when you need it** – Primetime Adventures can be kind of hard sometimes. Players will come up with crazy ideas, and you have to respond to them and keep the story moving. If you're stumped, call for a 5-minute commercial break and think about what you want to do next.

## The Jobs of the Players

**Say yes to the scene** – Despite the best efforts of every player, not everything is going to work out the way you hoped

it might. Other players are bound to narrate something about your protagonist that just isn't quite right, or the producer will put your protagonist in a position that just doesn't suit him or her. Likewise, you may join a scene with an agenda that's contrary to what you had in mind for your protagonist.

The best thing to do in these situations is to go along with it and raise any objection at the end of the episode. Agree with what's been presented to you and make the best of it. When the group is done playing, explain to everyone why that didn't quite work for you, and everyone will be aware of it next time.

**Promote your protagonist's issue** – You know best what's up with your protagonist, and you'll have the opportunity to create at least one scene that you can use to further develop him or her. What will your scene or scenes be about?

**Support the other protagonists** – Just like the producer, you have a responsibility to the story, and the story isn't always going to be about your protagonist. Make an investment in the other stories by helping the other players out. Sometimes your protagonist might be the butt of a joke. Sometimes your protagonist stands back and lets another protagonist "handle the situation." If you make the other players' protagonists look good, they'll do the same for you.

**Build on what has already been established** – What you choose to do in an episode, regardless of whether it's a scene you create, should build upon what has already happened in the episode. At the very least, it should not conflict with what has happened. If you had a good idea for a scene, but someone has created a scene before you that keeps the scene from making very much sense, it's a poor idea to go ahead with that scene as you had imagined it.

### Building on Established Info: Bridgewater

*In a follow-up scene to Preston's fight with a strange clone of himself, Josh comes up with the idea that Preston is really upset by the fight, and reveals that Preston has a twin brother that he doesn't get along with at all.*

**Find Conflict** – Nothing that happens to your protagonist will reduce your ability to participate in the game; you don't lose cards or play time or any of that sort of thing. So there's no reason not to get your protagonist involved in really hairy situations. The producer's going to be pushing the stuff out

there. It's up to you to engage with it. Don't sit still. Charge forward.

### If your protagonist's screen presence is 3...

It's your spotlight episode, so the producer will be most likely directing attention your way. This is your opportunity to make a statement about your protagonist, so think big.

#### Screen Presence 3: Rescue 2313

*In the current episode of Rescue 2313, Gustav is confronted with the opportunity to save his older brother, whose ship has crashed in hostile territory. Gustav's issue is about his need to impress others, so John, playing Gustav, creates a scene that makes Gustav's brother the source of Gustav's need. His brother has always been the hero, the caretaker, the one everyone's impressed by. Gustav would want nothing more than to impress his brother, and maybe he can do that if he pulls off this dangerous rescue.*

### If your protagonist's screen presence is 2...

You're playing a supporting character for this episode, unless there's no spotlight protagonist this time. In either case, you have several options available for how to direct your protagonist.

One option is to provide cues that the spotlight player can use to develop his or her protagonist's issue. If the issue is about anger, have your protagonist make the spotlight protagonist angry. If the issue is about trust, do something to build or break trust.

Another option is to create a parallel story with your protagonist that contrasts the story of the spotlight protagonist. If the spotlight story is about a failing relationship, you could have your protagonist start a new relationship or improve an existing one.

#### Screen Presence 2: Rescue 2313

*During Gustav's spotlight episode, Wil sets up a scene for Nate where he buys some of the drug that he's addicted to, and one of the other protagonists sees him. Nate is ashamed, which creates a contrasting story to Gustav's drive to impress his own brother.*

### If your protagonist's screen presence is 1...

Your protagonist is a very minor character in the episode if your screen presence is 1. In such case, consider the options above for screen presence of 2, but keep it a little more

subdued. Your protagonist will do best at supporting the others in play.

#### Screen Presence 1: Rescue 2313

*Brea Mackle's screen presence is 1 for the episode, so Meredith creates a scene where Brea and Gustav are trying to break into a storage locker somewhere on the space station. Meredith plays Brea as a sort of sidekick for the scene, making witty remarks while Gustav remains very serious and focused.*

### If there are no spotlight characters...

The lower the screen presence scores of the protagonists, the more room there is for the producer and other players to introduce strong plot elements. If everyone's screen presence is 1 – and it happens – the episode should be almost entirely plot focused.

## Theme Music

Your series definitely needs its own theme music, don't you think? There are some great scores available on CD, but one that's too recognizable might easily throw the focus of the show off target. For example, it's probably best to avoid music from those films about the do-gooders with the light-up swords and mystical powers.

#### Theme Music: Bootleggers

*Appropriate background music for an episode of Bootleggers would include film scores from The Godfather, The Untouchables, Miller's Crossing and Road to Perdition.*

## Cinematography

Since it's a TV show, players should tell it like it is. Everyone should feel free to describe close-ups, sweeping shots, and so on. Bring out the tone of the show by describing how it would appear on the TV screen. The examples listed below are far from inclusive:

**Rack Focus:** A shot with two elements in it, one in the foreground and one in the background. Only one element will be in focus at a time, and at some point, the camera will shift focus between the two.

**Smash Cut:** An especially abrupt cut edited to deliberately jar or startle the audience, usually to make some kind of ironic point.

**Match Cut:** A transition in which something in the scene that follows in some way directly matches a character or object in the previous scene

**Point of View:** indicates that the camera is seeing from a particular vantage point, that we're looking through a character's eyes.

**Freeze Frame:** The image on the screen stops, freezes and becomes a still shot.

**Montage:** Used to show a series of scenes, all related and building to some conclusion.

**Off Camera:** The character that's speaking is present in the scene but is not in the camera shot.

**Off Screen:** The character that's speaking is not present in the scene.

**Tracking Shot:** The camera follows a character as he or she walks around in a scene.

**Wide Shot:** The camera sees all the characters present in the scene.



# Creating a Season

***“I was just trying to write the truth of one woman. But I felt if I wrote it well enough, I might be able to capture the truth of maybe many, many women.”***

**– Marc Cherry, creator, *Desperate Housewives***

The kinds of shows you will create with Primetime Adventures depend on character growth to make them really work, and characters need time in order to grow. That’s why it’s important when playing the game to make sure that a season of play is more than just a collection of random episodes tossed together. In an ideal season of play, players should be able to say with some certainty that their protagonists learned something, for better or for worse.

## Franchise

Viewers tune into television shows on a regular basis because they expect to see certain things in a given episode. In every episode, the characters on the show set out to achieve a predetermined goal: smuggle illegal booze, fight evil with superpowers, solve mysteries, get an education, or steal valuable secrets from foreign countries. It could be anything, but for any given series it’s always the same thing.

In the industry, that certain something that a show delivers every week is called franchise. Franchise is the formula, the template, upon which a show’s writers base their weekly scripts. As with fast food, if you turn on a show with a clearly established franchise, you know pretty much what you’re going to get.

Establishing the franchise of a series in Primetime Adventures benefits players in a number of ways. First and foremost, it helps to establish consistency in the show. Franchise will make the game feel more like a TV show and less like a bunch of

unrelated stories all slapped together. Second, franchise helps the producer come up with a problem to introduce for a given episode, and it gives players some boundaries to work within, making their choices easier. Third, franchise helps to place more focus on the protagonists. If, in general, the same sort of thing is happening every episode, it’s the actions of the protagonists and their personal lives that will make the show different and exciting.

### Franchise: Bootleggers

*Bootleggers is a show about a family involved in the smuggling of illegal booze in the 1920s. The show’s fans will expect any given episode to involve criminal activity, politics, and family drama.*

## Overarching Plot

***“Oh, Mary Alice, what did you do?”***

**– Susan, *Desperate Housewives***

The producer has the opportunity during a season to introduce an overarching plot, a major problem that takes multiple episodes to resolve, maybe even the entire season. Such a story should ideally affect the events of the series as a whole, and not just one protagonist. It should never interfere with the story arcs of the protagonists.

Note that by ‘plot’ I don’t mean anything with a predetermined outcome. Connecting episodes is as easy as

stating or even implying that multiple events are somehow related to one another, or introducing a supporting character who provides antagonism across several episodes. Often you can easily involve a protagonist's nemesis.

### Overarching Plot Examples

***Desperate Housewives*** – The mystery surrounding the death of Mary Alice Young.

***Six Feet Under*** – The plot by Kroner to take over the Fisher family business.

***Sports Night*** – A ratings race threatening the survival of the show.

#### Overarching Plot: Bootleggers

*The pilot episode of Bootleggers has established that the family is involved in the business in order to save the farm. Pete introduces an overarching plot where a rival from Chicago has his eye on the Milwaukee territory and wants to drive the family out.*

*This long-term plot fits well with the series because it forces the characters to decide how much their home is worth fighting for.*

## Using Story Arcs

*“I wanted to live, to see my friends again, to explain, to the people I loved and trusted, my side of what happened.”*

*“We know what—”*

*“You don't know anything.”*

– **Wes and Gunn, *Angel***

Momentum in a season of play is tied to the story arcs of the protagonists. Each protagonist's issue is the outline of a personal journey that the protagonist is on. In play, the producer's job is to feed players situations that connect with their protagonists' issues and keep the protagonists going. The general problem going on in an episode isn't as important as the decisions a protagonist makes because of the problem.

By the end of a season, the behavior of a protagonist in relation to his or her story arc should in fact tell a story about that protagonist. It may not always explain why the protagonist makes every single choice, but it should definitely explain who the protagonist is.

The story arc has a lot of fuel built into it, and a lot of room to work. The choices a player makes in planning the story arc should also mean something. You can have any episode in the season except the first one be the protagonist's spotlight episode. Why did you pick the one that you did?

If the spotlight episode is early in the season, it means a quick buildup is necessary, and that's where players can direct the bulk of their attention. If it comes late in the season, players can contribute small pieces that accumulate over time.

### Example Story Arcs

- **Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, *Angel*** – Wesley displays the most incredible transformation of any character I've ever seen on television. Over five seasons, but mostly in season three, he changes from incompetent and foppish to skilled and hardened, and it all happens believably, based on the events that transpire. He narrowly escapes death, betrays and loses his friends, and finds his only companion to be his enemy. It's really extraordinary.
- **David Fisher, *Six Feet Under*** – In season one, David grapples fiercely with the conflict between his faith and his sexual orientation. It leads him down a horribly self-destructive path, but he reaches the end of the season with a new understanding and acceptance of who he is.
- **Ben Covington, *Felicity*** – In the beginning of season two, Ben's fear of emotional connection leads him to break off a new relationship with Felicity, whom he fears might be falling in love with him. Over the course of the season, he struggles over faith in himself to be strong enough for her, in the end bravely reaching out to her again, completely open and ready.

#### Story Arcs: Rescue 2313

*Wil is playing the character Nate Spisak, a doctor with a mysterious past whose Issue is an addiction to a powerful narcotic. Over the course of the season, Wil, with the help of the producer and the other players, explores what the addiction means, why and how Nate became addicted, and what that says about the direction Nate is taking. His dysfunction causes tension between Nate and the other protagonists. Some want to help him, and others are disgusted with him.*

*Nate, Wil slowly reveals, is using the drugs to escape the pain of a terrible loss, with which Nate is finally confronted during his spotlight episode.*

## Theme

*“These are tough times. If a man can get a job, he might not look too close at what that job is. But a man learns all the details of a situation like ours, well, then he has a choice.”*

*“I don’t believe he does.”*

—Sheriff and Mal, *Firefly*

A theme in literature - and that includes TV and Film - is an underlying philosophical statement made by the people telling the story. Not as preachy as a moral, the theme often expresses insight into human nature, especially in the various styles of science fiction. Not every story has or needs a theme, but themes can turn the adventure into something much more rewarding than “we figured out the clues and caught the bad guys and then had a beer.”

In terms of Primetime Adventures, the theme is best identified as what the protagonist has learned as a result of the decisions he or she made. It’s typically composed of two elements: the protagonist’s issue and something that all the protagonists have in common. That is, if they are all working at the same job, then the theme may have to do with the job. If they’re all family, the theme will revolve around family.

### Examples of Theme

Don’t treat these as gospel, by any means. It’s difficult to sum up shows that have run for several seasons in only a few words. Often it’s easier to spot a theme in a single episode than it is across the whole of the series.

- **There is no freedom without family** – *Firefly*. The crew and passengers of *Serenity* are all seeking freedom of a sort, and they discover that its real value only emerges when they’re fighting to help one another.
- **You can’t control the ones you love** – *Gilmore Girls*. There’s two mother-daughter relationships at work in this show, and Lorelai, in the middle of it, is trying hard not to control her own daughter’s life the way Emily tried to control her own. Over the course of the show, she discovers that she does in fact find the urge to control Rory as soon as Rory steps off the path Lorelai expects her to take.
- **You can’t go home again** – *Farscape*. Each character on this show is trying to regain something that

they’ve lost. As the show progresses, they discover that their journey changes them far too much, and what they thought they wanted is less appealing.

### Addressing Theme

Theme is a product of all players involved, the result of the telling of the story. It’s not for the producer to determine ahead of time what the theme is. Instead, the producer decides how to present scenes and characters for the protagonists to react to, often based on the story arcs of the protagonists. The producer looks at the protagonists, and based on who they are asks a question. How the protagonists answer is what determines the theme. Ideally each protagonist will make a different statement, but all the questions will have something in common.

#### Addressing Theme: Bootleggers

*Bootleggers is about a family, so the overall theme will have to do with family relationships and how they relate to each protagonist’s issue.*

*James is grieving over his departed wife and lets this grief come between him and his children. His realization of this pushes him even further into self destruction. His contribution to theme: ‘if family doesn’t come before personal pain, it only leads to more pain.’*

*Robert is trying to overcome the horrors of the Great War, and he is able to find no comfort from his family. He turns instead to his high-school sweetheart, and it only causes trouble. His contribution to theme: ‘there is no substitute to family.’*

*Roxy is trying to make a better life for herself, and by doing so she is forced to hurt her father and brothers; in doing so, she finds her new life less appealing. Her contribution to theme: ‘it’s impossible to completely separate oneself from family.’*

*Billy is trying to gain the approval of his father and in doing so creates tension between himself and his brother and sister. His contribution to theme is perhaps ‘you can’t sacrifice family for family.’*

## Changing a Protagonist

*“I think we switched places in a way. Freshman year, if somebody said three years from now that I had any direction –ANY direction– and that you’d be the one confused about what you were doing, I wouldn’t believe them.”*

—Ben, *Felicity*

Characters in Primetime Adventures develop and change, but they don’t generally become more powerful. And even if



they do, it's not reflected in game mechanics. Protagonists will always have the same number of traits, and they will always have Screen Presence based on their Issues.

However, it's possible that a character's traits could change as the character changes, especially during a character's spotlight episode. In such case, the player has the opportunity to create a new trait for the character that replaces an existing one.

## Changing the Issue

As protagonists change, it's only natural that their issues should change along with them. Protagonists in Primetime Adventures will always have an issue of some kind, and a protagonist's new issue will probably result from the protagonist dealing with the old one.

A player can choose to change his or her protagonist's issue at any time following the protagonist's spotlight episode. The new issue cannot be changed until the protagonist's next spotlight episode.



### Changing the Issue: Bootleggers

*James' issue for season 1 is grief and how he deals with it. Over the course of the season, Cara, playing James, decides based on the outcome of various conflicts and storylines that James handles his grief poorly, and his issue for season 2 is about his spiral into self destruction, as he turns to alcohol and continues to push away his children.*

## Changing a Trait

There are three times available for a player to change a trait, if he or she wants:

- Between seasons of the series.
- At the end of that player's spotlight episode.
- At a pivotal moment during the protagonist's spotlight episode.

Again, this new trait must replace an existing trait of the same kind. That is, a player cannot remove an edge to gain a connection. It may or may not mean that the protagonist doesn't have certain abilities anymore. What it does mean is that the trait that's been replaced will not have a mechanical impact on the story.

Changing a trait should imply an important change in the protagonist, one that the player wants to make very clear.

### Changing a Trait: Bootleggers

*Roxy's issue of 'making it big' changes after season one, and Meredith decides that her Flapper edge no longer makes sense in conjunction with that. She comes up with a new edge that's more suitable to Roxy. That doesn't mean that Roxy wouldn't still be familiar with popular music, fashion, and various clubs. That just won't be as important to her story – or to Meredith – as it used to be.*



# Appendices

## More Examples of Conflict

### Rescue 2313 — A Battle of Wits



#### Introduction

Meredith has requested a character scene for Brea and Nate while they're looking for information in a seedy bar. It's a character scene, so the conflict shouldn't really be about finding the information. It should be about Brea personally. The producer recalls that Brea has a nemesis and thinks that he would make a perfect source of conflict for Brea. He says

that Brea's nemesis is in the bar with several of his cronies, sees Brea, and yells out an insult in front of everyone there.

#### Who's Involved?

Although Nate is present in the scene with Brea, Nate's player, Mike, says he's staying out of it, so it's between Brea and her nemesis.

#### Stakes

Meredith says Brea wants to maintain her reputation in the pub, and she'll do so by besting her nemesis in a battle of witty insults.

#### Spending Budget

The producer sees this as a moderately important conflict, with potential for good character development, but it's not a blockbuster event. He decides to spend 2 budget on it, for 3 cards.

#### Screen Presence and Traits

Brea's screen presence for this episode is at 2, so Meredith gets 2 cards for free. Brea has an edge called "diplomat's daughter" which is pretty easy to justify in a battle of wits, and Meredith wants Brea to win in this duel, so she checks off one use of that edge, giving her 3 cards against the producer's 3.

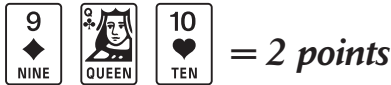
#### Outside Influence

John is playing Gustav, who's not in the scene. The only way John can contribute to the conflict is by spending his fan mail. Since he personally hates Brea's rival (who reminds him of

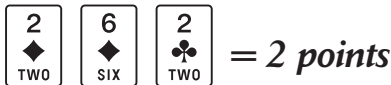
someone he used to work with), he’s eager to see Brea take him down a notch. He spends a point of fan mail to get 1 card, which he will add to Meredith’s total.

**Results**

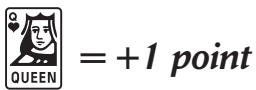
The producer flips over his 3 cards:



Meredith flips over her 3 cards:



Last, John reveals his 1 card:



John’s card is enough to give Brea the stakes (3 points vs. the producer’s 2), and because it’s the highest card played in the conflict, it gives him the narration.

**Narration**

John describes Brea calmly delivering a brutal insult that has Brea’s rival nearly respond in violence, then lose his nerve and storm out of the pub, humiliated, while the pub regulars cheer for Brea.

**Spies for Hire — A Car Chase**

Here’s an option to add some dramatic tension to an action scene like a battle or chase. It only works well when the producer and at least one other player are drawing three or more cards.

- Deal out the appropriate number of cards, face down, as usual.
- Instead of revealing all cards at once, cards are flipped in three segments, where each player flips a minimum of one card. Players who have been dealt more than three cards can decide during which segment they will play additional cards. Players with fewer cards must skip the first and/or second segments. All players involved in the conflict must flip a card on the final segment.

- For each flip, narration goes to the highest card flipped for that segment. The winning side for that segment is based on the red cards revealed for that card flip only, with hearts beating diamonds and higher hearts beating lower ones.
- The winning of the stakes is determined as usual (i.e. whoever has the most points altogether).

**Introduction**

Joan, played by Danielle, and Megan, played by Julie, are pursuing a terrorist down a crowded freeway. This terrorist has in his car a nuclear device that he and his allies intend to detonate at the stadium.

**Who’s Involved?**

Joan and Megan are obviously involved, but Tim, who plays Valerie, could spend fan mail to enter the scene somehow, but he says he’s content with outside influence for this one.

Scott is the producer, and as always, he’ll be playing for the terrorists.

**Stakes**

The intent of Joan and Megan is straightforward: stop the terrorist from detonating his nuclear bomb. But what’s really at stake? The players all agree that “does the bomb go off or not” is pretty inappropriate for the series. It’d be much too grim for there actually to be a chance for that to happen. Therefore the stakes need to come from somewhere else, and they need to be equally important.

Tim suggests that Joan’s new boyfriend is also nearby on the freeway, and she needs to either hide herself from him or make sure he doesn’t get hurt. Danielle likes the idea of the first option, as it allows for the possibility of light comedy and interesting future complications.

As for Megan, Julie says her stakes are whether or not she can avoid a lot of collateral damage to nearby cars. Its relationship to her divorce issue seems unclear at the moment, but Megan’s screen presence is only a 1 this episode, so Julie’s happy focusing the conflict more on Joan.

**Other possible stakes**

*Another option for stakes for this conflict could be “can they bring the terrorist to justice?” Sure, they’ll stop the bomb, but will the terrorist get away? That would be a pretty good one.*

### Spending Budget

Scott, the producer, has three points of budget remaining, and he spends them all, as this will probably be the final conflict of the episode. That gives him a total of 4 cards (remember the producer always gets one card for free).

### Screen Presence and Traits

Joan's screen presence is 2 this episode, and she has the edge 'crack driver,' which seems an obvious fit. That gives her three cards. Danielle elects to spend a point of fan mail to give her four cards altogether, evening the odds between her and the producer.

Megan's screen presence is only a 1, but she has an edge called 'expert gymnast,' which Julie says she's going to involve, having her leap from car to car in an attempt to get to the terrorist. That gives her only 2 cards, which is tough odds. Julie has no fan mail left to spend, so she's stuck with only the two cards.

### Outside Influence

Tim has fan mail, and he's spending a point to play a card in Megan's favor, as he likes Julie's description of what she's doing.

### Results

Everyone gets their cards dealt face down. Scott and Danielle each have 4, Julie has 2, and Tim has 1.

Tim has to play his single card on the third flip.

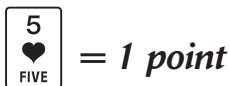
Julie has to play one of her two cards on the third flip, but she can play her remaining card on either the first or second. She opts to play it on the first flip.

Danielle has an extra card that she can double up on one flip. She opts for the final one.

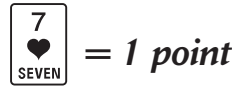
Scott also has an extra card, which he will play on the second flip.

### First Card Flip

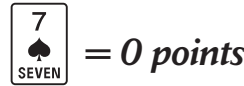
Julie's card (for Megan)



Danielle's card (for Joan)



Scott's card (for the opposition)

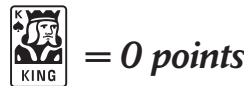


So far the protagonists are making some progress.

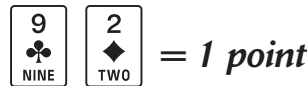
### Second Card Flip

Julie gets no cards this flip.

Danielle's card (she has previously identified this one as the fan mail card):



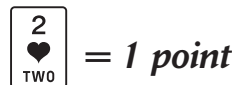
Scott's two cards:



So now things have evened back up.

### Third Card Flip

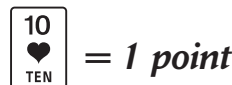
Julie's final card:



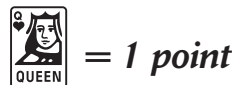
Danielle gets two cards:



Scott gets one card:




And Tim gets a card:



Altogether, everyone's cards look like this:



**Tim:**  = +1 point

**Danielle:**     = 2 points

**Scott:**     = 2 points

The results: with Tim’s help, Julie gets the stakes with a total of 3 points vs. Scott’s 2. Scott and Danielle are tied with two red cards each, but Danielle’s 7 of hearts is lower than Scott’s 10, so Joan barely succeeds.

**Narration**

For the first card flip, Danielle has the final authority on narration, so after listening to the ideas from the others, she says that what happens is the chase starts out strong, with Joan deftly weaving in and out of traffic, occasionally ducking down below the window as their car gets dangerously close to her boyfriend’s. Megan climbs out the car’s sun roof and gets ready to leap into the terrorist’s car, yelling at Joan to watch out for the other cars.

For the second flip, Danielle gets narration again, with the king of spades. Since Scott is the only one to get a red card for this flip, everyone throws out ideas for how the situation develops problems. Danielle settles on Tim’s suggestion for Megan that she jumps to the terrorist’s car, but is hanging precariously onto the side while nearby cars swerve away in a panic. Joan brakes and backs away to avoid being spotted, and the terrorist is busy trying to shake Megan loose.

For the final flip, Tim gains narration with his queen of hearts. With help from the others, he says that Joan zooms forward, getting a semi in between her and her boyfriend, and also being able to pull up and give Megan something to brace against so that she can climb all the way into the terrorist’s car and subdue him.

Because Tim’s card – bought with fan mail – came up red, the producer gains a point of budget.

**Bridgewater — Romantic Rivalry**

Most conflicts assume that there’s a way that protagonists in opposition can still both win the stakes. But what happens in those rare cases where both protagonists are after the exact same thing, and only one of them can get it?

If that’s the case, resolve the conflict as usual, and then add one final step to the results: after you compare the protagonists’ cards with those of the producer, compare them with each other. The player with the higher point total comes out the winner.

**Introduction**

Situations like this just happen sometimes: Alice and Nicola both like the same guy, Mark. The trouble is, he’s been a good friend to both of them over the school year, and he’s been giving them both mixed signals. They’ve had enough of the confusion and want to settle the score.

**Who’s Involved**

Alan is playing Alice, Laura is playing Nicola, and Mike, the producer, is playing as the opposition. Josh and Stacie don’t have protagonists in the scene.

**Stakes**

What’s at stake for Nicola and Alice is the same thing: “Can I get Mark to choose me?”

**Spending Budget**

Mike, the producer, can’t really resist making this a tough conflict. He’s going to spend 4 budget and give himself a total of 5 cards.

**Screen Presence and Traits**

Alice and Nicola both happen to have the same screen presence this episode, so the conflict isn’t specifically about one of them in particular. It just happens that Alan has requested this scene for Alice.

Alan has two cards for Alice’s screen presence, plus he applies Alice’s trait “shy and introverted” for another card and spends a point of fan mail to give himself a total of 4 cards.

Laura gets two cards as well for screen presence, and she has the advantage of having Mark as a connection, so she gets a card for that. In addition, she applies the trait ‘honor student’ to win him over with her brains. To top all that off, she spends a point of fan mail to give herself five cards.

## Outside Influence

Josh is feeling entirely diplomatic and wants the conflict to be even, and it doesn't hurt that he has a soft spot for the shy, quiet types. He spends a point of fan mail to play a card for Alice, making the conflict 5 cards each way.

### Results

Mike's cards:



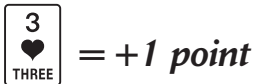
Laura's cards:



Alan's cards:



Josh's card:



According to the results, both Alan and Laura beat the producer (thanks to Josh's red card), meaning that they both get Mark to choose them. But can that work? Doesn't Mark need to choose one? That in part is up to the narrator's final call, but because Laura got a better hand than Alan, the narrator and the rest of the group can use that information in deciding what happened.

### Narration

After some kibbitzing, the narrator, who happens to be Alan (highest card), declares that after a serious confrontation, Mark says "I'm sorry" to Alice and walks away with Nicola. However, as he's walking away with her and gives her that look — you know, *that* look, the one that tells everyone in the audience that he loves Alice and is clearly conflicted despite the choice he just made.

And just to make it clear, there's always a way to set stakes in a conflict so that both protagonists can win. In this case, Alan's goal might have been to have Mark confess love for Alice, and if that were the case, there would be no conflict between that and him choosing Nicola. It's all up to you and what you want your protagonist to want.

## Audience Participation

If you ever have guests at your game, you can involve them — assuming they're interested — with the following rules.

An audience member sits in with the group like a regular player but does not control a specific protagonist. He or she may request scenes in turn like any other player and can give and receive fan mail like any other player.

For every conflict, an audience member is dealt one card. He or she can play the card to support any other player's hand (including the producer!) but must decide before seeing what the card is. This card also applies toward winning narration.

## Series Creation Summary

- Decide who will be the producer.
- Come up with a premise for the show.
- Create each protagonist.
  - Choose an issue
  - Map out a story arc.
  - Choose traits.
  - Optionally create a nemesis.
- Create sets.
  - Choose a personal set for each protagonist.

## Episode Structure Summary

- Act 1: The problem — something the protagonists can't ignore.
- Act 2: Complications — something that adds to the problem.
- Act 3: Additional Complications/Twist — new problems replace the original problem, or things are not what they seem.
- Act 4: Resolution — the story reaches a climax.

## Scene Creation Summary

- Each player requests three things:
  - Focus - plot or character.
  - Agenda - what the scene is about, in general.
  - Location - where the scene is set.
- The producer provides an appropriate conflict.
- The producer narrates the opening of the scene.
- Participating players then act out the scene. The producer plays the parts of non-protagonist characters.
- A scene is considered finished after the resolution of a conflict, if there is one, or when the players are satisfied that agenda and focus have been addressed.

## Conflict Summary

- Decide who's involved. At least one protagonist must be involved in order for a conflict to be resolved.
- Determine the intentions of the protagonists and what's at stake in the conflict.
- Players and producer decide which traits and how much fan mail or budget to apply to the conflict.
  - Players draw cards: screen presence plus traits applied plus fan mail spent.
  - Producer draws cards: 1 card plus 1 for every point of budget spent (up to 5 points of budget per conflict).
- Successes are red cards. Hearts trump diamonds. Low cards beat high ones.
- Highest number of successes wins the conflict, and highest individual card wins narration.

## Budget-Fan Mail Ecosystem

- The producer starts each episode with budget equal to two times the screen presence of each protagonist plus three ( $(\text{screen presence} \times 2) + 3$ ).
- The producer can spend up to 5 points of budget on a conflict. Those spend points are transferred to the Audience Pool.
- Players (not the producer) can draw points from the Audience Pool to award other players with fan mail, on a point per point basis.
- A point of fan mail can then be spent by a player to draw an additional card in a conflict.
- Each fan mail card that comes up red is converted back into budget for the producer. Those that don't are discarded.

## Parting Thoughts

Hey, thanks for taking the time to check out this game. I hope you have fun playing it.

If you have questions about the rules, or a particular love or hate about some part of the game that you really want to get off your chest, you can contact me here: [matt@dog-eared-designs.com](mailto:matt@dog-eared-designs.com).

Also be sure to visit [www.dog-eared-designs.com](http://www.dog-eared-designs.com) to see if other people share your feelings about the game. While you're there, you can download a protagonist record sheet and maybe some other cool and useful things.

— Matt