

Underground Railroad: Example of Play

Background

Anna is playing Suan, the commander of the Highmountainer mercenary sky cavalry in the city of Gulfport in Koskant. (The sky cavalry ride winged horses.) Beth is playing Skyport Midnight, a Jorian talking cat. Carl, the third player, also has a main character who isn't in the initial scenes.

It's early in the game. Anna and Beth have agreed that Beth will set up a scene in which their characters meet and interact, demonstrating (and developing) who those characters are and creating a connection between them.

Anna and Beth, at the moment, have only these attributes on their character sheets:

Suan: Highmountainer (3); Commander of the Sky Cavalry, Koskant (5*).

Skyport Midnight: Jorian talking cat (4); obsessed with flying (5*).

* motivating attribute, see p. xx.

Suan has Physical 4, Mental 3, Emotional 3, Creative 2, Identity 3 as her pools.

Midnight has Physical 3, Mental 4, Emotional 3, Creative 2, Identity 3.

See p. xx on Pools.

They also have the following Special Effects (see p. xx):

Character	Special Effect	In the form of...	Linked attribute	Levels
Suan	Unusual Power	Minor magic: Domination	Commander	2
	Amplifier	Stun pistol (amplifies Domination)	Commander	3
Midnight	Unusual Power (always on)	Inherent magic, Talking Cat	Talking Cat	4

The setting material goes into more detail on what the magic powers can do.

Character Exposition

This phase is done cooperatively. Note how the players play off each other's suggestions and fill out their characters in the course of roleplaying. Primarily, this scene fills out Midnight's character.

A = Anna, B = Beth, C = Carl, S = Suan, M = Midnight.

Dialogue	Commentary
B: OK, the scene is the stables at the skyport. Suan's passing by and Midnight calls out to her: "Good evening, Commander."	Beth is <i>framing the scene</i> here (see p. xx). She lays out the <i>where, who</i> and <i>what</i> of the action. As the scene framer, she gets to say what Anna's character is doing initially.
A: Uh, OK, Suan looks around and sees nobody else there, so she focuses on Midnight and says, "You're the talking cat." She's taken by surprise.	If Anna disagreed, she could suggest an alternative, but she's fine with it. She describes her character's emotional reactions as well as her actions.
M: That's right; I'm a cat, and I'm talking.	Beth lays down four dice as she says this

Dialogue	Commentary
That makes me the talking cat.	to indicate that her "talking cat" attribute has a rating of 4.
S: Cute.	The players are speaking "in character" here.
M: Thank you. A: He'll take anything as a compliment that he can possibly parse as one.	Anna steps out of character to point out what underlies Midnight's remark.
C: Is that an attribute?	Carl is free to interject questions or comments, even though his character isn't in the scene.
A: Definitely. Derived from "Talking Cat", I think.	Anna writes in the attribute "Will take anything said about him as a compliment" on her character sheet under the "Jorian talking cat" column.
B: OK, Suan says, "That wasn't a compliment."	
M: Yes it was. A (writing on sheet): How I see it is the truth.	
B: Suan lets that one go and says, "Well, Mr Cat..."	
M: Midnight. Skypport Midnight.	
S: Well, Midnight, did you have something you wanted to say to me specifically, or...	
M: I believe you're interested in the background to that little disturbance at the Gilded Eel last night.	The disturbance at the Gilded Eel, and Suan's interest therein, are not preestablished facts; Anna is coming up with this on the fly, and feeding it to Beth to riff off.
S: You know something about that?	Anna bats it back to Beth to find out if there's more she wants to bring out.
M: I might. A (writing on sheet): Annoyingly cryptic.	Beth is both leaving it up to Anna to decide the details of the incident, and also showing an attribute of her character (still derived from "Jorian talking cat").
S: Suppose you tell me what you know. I mean, "Two elves walk into a bar..." it sounds like a bad joke.	Anna contributes an element, the elves.
M: It was, really. But before they walked into the bar, they walked off the airship. They were looking for a meal.	Elves travel in airships as part of the setting, so this fact isn't surprising.
S: How do you know this?	
M: I was there. I heard them say, in house Elvish, to Gar, who was passing by: "Hey boy, where can we get food?"	Beth contributes the character of Gar. He's only a name at this point.
S: Gar's hardly a boy. He's older than me.	Anna adds to Gar's character and indicates that Suan knows him too.

Dialogue	Commentary
M: These were the sort of elves who call any human "boy". Well, of course, Gar doesn't speak a word of Elvish; most stablemen don't. But he's very polite, as you know, so he said to them, "I'm sorry, Sir, I don't speak Elvish."	Beth fills out Gar's character a little further. Carl, who isn't involved in the dialog, could start a character sheet for him at this point; he has a name, an occupation, an age relative to Suan, and a personal quality (polite).
S: I presume you speak Elvish, if you know what they said.	This is an easy feed for Beth. Anna knows the answer, but Suan doesn't.
M: I speak the language of whoever I'm talking to. It's part of the talking-cat magic.	This is an automatic part of any talking cat character, so Beth doesn't need to write it on her sheet.
S: Convenient. What did the elves say?	
M: One of them said, half under his breath, "Stupid wog." The other one said, slowly and loudly, in house Elvish: "We wantee eatee. You fella tell where?"	Beth is drawing on the setting material's description of elvish attitudes to humans here, and interpreting it.
S: I begin to not regret doing what I did to them.	Anna foreshadows a later revelation: what exactly was the incident in the bar?
M: Exactly. Now, Gar is a nice chap, he feeds me sometimes, and I feel a certain...	Carl writes on his sheet for Gar, "Feeds Midnight sometimes".
S: Friendship?	
B: Midnight glares at her.	
S: Loyalty?	
B: Midnight glares at her again, and says, "...general well-disposedness toward people who feed me." Oh, attribute: "Portrays self as independent."	
S: So you did what?	
M: So I whispered to Gar, "Point down Skyport Way and move your lips, I'll send them on their way." Then I said loudly, in my best bad Elvish, "Sirs go long road, second corner left, look sign: Gilded Eel."	
S: Knowing that Kes keeps the Gilded Eel.	Another new character: Kes. Carl could start another character sheet here.
M: That's right.	
S: Kes, who is six foot four.	Kes gains an attribute from Anna.
M: Kes, who claims descent from the last human sacrificed by elves, yes.	And another from Beth, one that explains why Midnight sent the elves there.
S: They didn't spot you?	
M: It was dark. I'm ten inches tall at the shoulder and jet black. Even if they had, nobody expects cats to speak. Elves – elves like those, anyway – barely expect humans to speak.	Beth has Midnight give a physical description of himself for the other players to help them visualize him.
S: Well, I must say I understand a little	

Dialogue	Commentary
better now, but I still don't really appreciate a quiet drink in my favourite pub being interrupted by a brawl.	
C: That sounds like we could have a flashback conflict here.	Anyone can suggest a conflict, and they don't need to be time-sequential.
A: Good idea. Do you want to be Kes or the elves?	Carl will play a supporting character in the conflict scene. Anna is already playing Suan in the scene.
C: I'll be Kes, I've written up a sheet for him. Beth, you OK with that?	
B: Sure.	

Conflict

This example shows a three-way conflict. Most conflicts are two-way, but if there are more than two parties involved, this is how to do it.

Dialogue	Commentary
C: OK, I'll own the bar as well. It's a fairly standard tavern, one main entrance and a back entrance, with the bar forming three sides of a rectangle against the back wall. There's a flap for Kes to get out. He keeps a large club under the bar. It's not a particularly upmarket or particularly downmarket tavern; it's not dirty but it isn't sparkly, either. There are quite a few people, say about 20, drinking and talking. Where are you, Suan?	Because Carl didn't get to do anything in the previous scene, he frames this scene. As the owner of the supporting character Kes, he is the natural owner of Kes's setting, the bar, and he gets to describe it. The others could contribute if they wanted. Carl addresses Anna by her character's name as a shorthand. He could frame her into the scene anywhere if he wanted to, but he gives her the choice.
S: I'm sitting quietly at one end of the bar – the right-hand end, looking from the door – where the bar turns to meet the back wall.	Carl might well sketch up a small diagram and have Anna indicate Suan's location by pointing.
C: OK, Beth, the elves have come in, they've passed a remark, Kes has taken offense at their tone although he doesn't speak their language. OK?	Carl is framing the scene "tightly" – dispensing with a lot of preliminary maneuvering and going straight to the start of the conflict.
B: OK.	
C: What are our outcomes? Kes's outcome is that the elves leave, at this point. That's driven by his motivator, "Elves sacrificed my ancestor", level 4.	A character's outcome is both what they want, and what happens if the conflict goes their way. It has a level of desire from 1-5. See p. xx.
B: The elves' outcome is that they get a meal. Uh, level 3.	It would be theoretically possible for both these outcomes to occur, but it's unlikely to be that simple, given the setup. The elves' motivator for the conflict is a temporary, situational motivator.
A: Suan's outcome is to keep the peace.	Suan's outcome gives her a reason to get

Dialogue	Commentary
Level 5, because it comes from her "Commander" motivating attribute.	involved in the conflict and keep pushing for its resolution.
<p>C: OK, Kes is big – six-four. He keeps a bar near the skyport, he might have to intimidate people from time to time; let's say he has a "big man" attribute at 4 with a derived "intimidating" attribute, and a physical pool of 4; he's a barman, how about emotional 4, mental 2, creative 2?</p>	<p>Carl quickly assigns numbers to Kes's key characteristics – his pools and the couple of attributes that Anna and Beth have given him, one of which is motivating and hence drives his behaviour. Anything he doesn't mention, like the Identity pool or his occupation as the tavern-keeper, is assumed to be at the average value, 3. He's now conflict-ready.</p>
<p>B: Right, and the elves are pretty average except that they're motivated by "contempt for humans" at 4. Humans really disgust them. Is Kes motivated by his tavern at all?</p>	<p>Instead of discussing the numbers aloud, the players could alternatively describe their characters and lay down dice as they do so to indicate levels. Beth also offers a suggestion for Kes's character.</p>
<p>C: Yeah, why not? Just at 3, though.</p>	
<p>B: OK, you want to initiate?</p>	<p>Either Carl or Beth could start the conflict.</p>
<p>C: Right, I'm using "intimidating", with 4 dice, on the Emotional ground. I want to scare them into bailing out. <i>(Rolls dice)</i> OK, Kes draws himself up to his full height and out to his full width and glares at the elves. He looks pretty scary.</p>	<p>Carl rolls 4 dice, with 4s or less being successes since he is using his Emotional pool, set at 4. He rolls 1, 3, 3, 5, so he has 3 successes, and notes down the 1, which gives him a bonus reroll for anything to do with his "big man" attribute until the next break in the action (since he hasn't specified, the attribute he is using is the one at risk). He interprets this outcome in story terms.</p>
<p>B: The elves put their elvish dignity at risk by continuing up to the bar, where they hope to buy a meal. <i>(Rolls dice)</i> They belly up to the bar, looking down their noses at the big ugly human, and slap down some money. "Food," one says in house Elvish.</p>	<p>At the moment, the elves are acting together so they are treated as one character. Beth rolls 3 dice for "want a meal". The elves are average across all pools, so their success number is 3 or less. Since Beth hasn't specified a change, this is still on the emotional ground. Beth rolls 2, 3, 6, giving 2 successes. The 6 gives a penalty reroll for anything to do with their "elf" aspect until the next break in the action, though.</p>
<p>C: I'm going to use my reroll from the consequences last time. <i>(Rolls dice)</i> Kes leans towards the elves and looks at them scary-mad-eyes style. <i>(Demonstrates.)</i></p>	<p>Carl rerolls his 5, and gets a 3. He now has 4 successes and is winning the conflict.</p>
<p>B: The elves are going to change ground – you want to go first, Anna?</p>	<p>[Come up with a rule here on turns in multiway conflicts] It isn't a rule, but is a guideline (see p. xx), that if your opponent is beating you by more than the</p>

Dialogue	Commentary
	level of your motivation it's time to give up or change motivations and ground. The elves aren't losing by 3 yet but Beth changes ground anyway.
<p>A: OK, Suan can see the way the wind is blowing and will use Voice of Reason, derived from her Commander of the Sky Cavalry attribute, to try to calm the situation. <i>(Rolls dice)</i> She says, "Uh, Kes, let's not start anything we don't want to finish, all right?"</p>	<p>Suan's rating is 5 in Commander, and her Emotional pool is 3. Anna rolls 1, 2, 4, 5, 5, scoring only two successes. She has a reroll for Commander until the next break in the action, because of the 1. She writes "Voice of Reason" on her sheet under Commander.</p>
<p>B: Oo, bad roll. OK, one of the elves wants to leave – he's intimidated – but the other one says, "No. It's not about the meal any more; this hairy animal is disrespecting his rightful masters." So the elves change ground to Identity, and their outcome is to humiliate the human. So we go to "contempt for humans" and... <i>(rolls dice)</i> Oh crap. Uh, the elf yells at Kes, "Feed us, pig!", but his voice kind of cracks and he doesn't carry it off very convincingly.</p>	<p>Beth has 4 dice to roll now, and rolls 1, 2, 4, 4, giving her 2 more successes for a total of 4. However, she must re-roll one of them, since "contempt for humans" is derived from "elf", which was put at risk in the last conflict, and she rolled a 6 there. She re-rolls the 2 and gets another 4, leaving her with 3 successes in total. The 1 will give her a reroll until the next extended pause (since we are now in the second ground of conflict, the consequences are greater). Since the elves are minor characters and unlikely to recur, she just offsets the two rerolls against each other.</p>
<p>C: New outcome: the elves suffer. <i>(Rolls dice)</i> Oh, feeble. Kes yells back in their faces, "Get out of my bar, you murdering bastards!" Kind of with spittle, you know.</p>	<p>Because the ground has changed, each player can define a new outcome. Carl rolls Kes's four dice for "Elves sacrificed my ancestor" and gets 2, 4, 4, 5 – one success, since in the Identity ground his success number is 3. No bonuses this time, since he's using a different attribute. The score is: Kes 5, elves 3, Suan 2.</p>
<p>A: OK, Suan thinks this has gone far enough. She doesn't speak Elvish, so she's going to use her Domination minor magic on them, reinforcing their fear to try to get them to leave, at the same time trying to get Kes to back off. <i>(Rolls dice)</i> OK, I now have a total of 5. What do the elves have, Beth?</p>	<p>Since Anna doesn't specify a new outcome, Suan is still trying for "keeping the peace". Commander powers her Domination minor magic; she spends 2 Identity pool points, because her minor magic rating is 2, and rolls her 5 dice again. This time she gets 2, 3, 3, 4, 6. The positive consequence from last time and the new negative consequence cancel each other out for now, though the new negative will last until the next extended break.</p>
<p>B: Just 3. If Carl hadn't changed outcomes, you'd be going for the same thing and they'd be out the door. Hey, can</p>	<p>Beth asks the group for a ruling on a "fact" she's making up about the setting, because it may be controversial.</p>

Dialogue	Commentary
elves detect magic being used against them? Even average elves like this?	
C: Sure.	
A: Don't see why not.	
B: OK, the elves are angered by a human daring to try to dominate them, and they're changing to the Physical ground. They pull daggers. (<i>Rolls dice</i>) OK, total is now 5, they're slashing the daggers around in a dangerous manner, daring any human to have a piece of them.	Beth rolls her 4 dice for "contempt for humans" and gets 3, 3, 4, 5. The 5 is a negative consequence because she's using this attribute for the second time, and because we're now in the third ground of conflict, the consequence is that she must reroll a success each round until the number resulting from the reroll is itself a success.
C: Oh, excellent! Kes pulls the club from under the bar and starts waving it around. (<i>Rolls dice</i>) And connects, I believe. Since my intention is to hurt, I'll put that margin of victory of 3 towards reducing their Physical pool. How does that work with two opponents?	Kes is using "big man" here, so he gets 4 dice to roll and his bonus reroll. He rolls 2, 3, 4, 5 and gets to reroll his 5, but it still gives him a negative consequence, offsetting his bonus from this point on. His reroll gives another 4, so he is on a total of 8 points against the elves.
B: You want to split them up now?	
A: Let's keep treating them as one and take the 3 points out of their joint pool.	The elves have 3 points in their Physical pool and 3 points as their base Physical level; both must be removed to render them unconscious or kill them.
C: OK, I slash the club across and knock both of them back.	
A: Suan is definitely not going to let this keep going on. She draws her stunner pistol and blasts the elves. (<i>Rolls dice</i>) OK, they're out, and I'm winning. Carl, Kes has achieved his outcome at least in part, can he drop it now?	Anna rolls her 5 dice for Commander yet again – dropping her negative consequence number to 4 this time. She rolls 1, 3, 4, 4, 5, taking 3 negative consequences but scoring 4 successes, a total of 9 versus the elves' 5. This beats the elves by the degree of their motivation, but more importantly it exhausts their Physical pool, knocking them out. Suan's pistol works by amplifying her Domination magic; part of its description is that she only pays the pool points for the Domination spell, so she pays out 2 Physical points.
C: He might need some encouragement. Seeing the elves down is giving him ideas about boots.	Carl wants to continue the scene, but isn't offering to roll dice yet.
A: Suan turns to him, with the pistol still drawn, and asks quietly, "You want some too?"	
C: OK, he backs down. A few other guys in the bar are looking at the elves	Carl "owns" the bar setting and the background characters in it.

Dialogue	Commentary
speculatively, though.	
A: Suan points at two of the biggest and drafts them to carry the elves back to the skyport for her.	
C: OK, end scene. Anna, you took some negatives towards the end there, what you got?	Carl framed the scene, so he gets to say when it's over, though the others could overrule if they wanted.
A: Three at Bedeviled – I'll make that a temporary attribute, "Had to draw in a bar fight" and play it as loss of confidence in her Voice of Reason.	The three negative consequences at the third ground of conflict give Suan an attribute that will eventually "wear off" when the rerolls of successes themselves produce successes. This is referred to as being "bedeviled" by the consequence.
B: Nice.	