

# DEATHBIRD BLACK

The comedy noir RPG

ALPHA-3 VERSION (Post-Ronnies 2011)

By Baxil, 2011.08.02

Heat smothers the dark streets of the city. Sirens wail in the distance as some hardcase squanders his last few minutes as a free man. A dame upstairs sobs the soulful notes of a broken heart into the phone. Saxophone music slinks in from the street below, and smoke wafts like the memory of a departed lover's kiss through your mind. (The memory, that is, not the smoke. The memory wafts through your mind, and the smoke wafts through your kiss ... .. no, I mean, through your lover ... wait, the lover was your memory, it's the streets wafting through – **AUGH, START OVER**)

You are a hard-boiled man (or woman) in a gritty, corrupt world. Lust, greed, vengeance, jealousy – one of these is the bitter taste in the back of your throat. Some might call it a sin. You call it a mission. And you're not going to let anything stand in your way (except maybe your own flaws).

Meanwhile, the city is seething around you. The night is steamy, and ready to boil over at the slightest provocation. And in the shadows, steely eyes glint from above a demonic black beak\*, silently driving people into ever greater acts of desperation.

Waiting to unleash chaos and hell ...

With one mighty CAW.

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**  
**SAYS ...**



“That would be me.”

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# WHAT IS DEATHBIRD BLACK?

This is **comedy noir**. What that means: It is a comedy game set in the 'film noir' genre. Character bleakness, cynicism, pessimism, etc., are thematic. Player bleakness, etc., is counterproductive. Play it for the laughs. Add alcohol if your group swings that way.

## PLAY OVERVIEW

Game starts with play area setup and (for new players) the Reading Of The Rules. After the chaos dies away (enjoy the peace while it lasts), each player draws cards to determine their characters – a process you'll get very familiar with. One player is chosen to become the starting GM; GM duties rotate around the table during play.

During play, PCs' main objectives are to accomplish their Goals (which require the aid, or opposition, of the other players). The characters' Flaws provide roleplaying opportunities, and occasionally complicate Goal pursuit.

Every so often, the in-character opposition will boil over into chaos as the Deathbird arrives on the scene. Deathbird scenes stop regular play and involve a ritualized catharsis of incomprehensible crosstalk and flying objects. When the dust clears, at least one character will be dead, at least one character will be guilty of murder, and maybe some goals will get accomplished while everyone else is distracted.

The murder attracts the eye of a hard-boiled detective, who arrives on the scene and interrogates the killer. Justice will be served! (Or at least that's the theory. We're all cynical enough to know it doesn't work out that way.) After one of the characters pays for the murder, the victim becomes the new GM, new characters are created as necessary, and the game returns to free play.

Play continues until the Deathbird's meddling comes to a climax (the deck runs out of cards), at which point the survivors get slaughtered in an epic finale.

# GETTING READY

You will need:

- **4-9 players** (including you); ideal for 5-6
- **Two sets of dice** \* (d4s through d20s), and a few extras
- Some sort of **dice target**, such as: a bucket; a small (empty) garbage can; or a large mixing bowl
- A standard deck of **playing cards**
- One printout per player of the **Characters Sheet**
- (Optional but highly recommended) A **birdlike stuffed animal** (with no pointy bits!)

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**  
**SAYS ...**



“Play with dice that hate rolling high. They might get lost. If not, you'll get to watch all your friends deal with crappy rolls. Either way, you win!”

# PREPARING DICE

You will need a pair of matching dice for each player in the game (except for the GM). By “matching,” I mean two dice with the same number of sides – they don't have to look identical. They will be passed around the table continuously, so either borrow all the dice from a single player, or else take notes on what belongs to who. Dice may also get lost during play, so set aside some spares. Based on the total number of participants\*, here are the sets to use:

- 4 people – 2d6, 2d8, 2d10
- 5 people – 2d6, 2d8, 2d10, 2d12
- 6 people – 2d4, 2d6, 2d8, 2d10, 2d12
- 7 people – 2d4, 2d6, 2d8, 2d10, 2d10•, 2d12
- 8 people – 2d4, 2d6, 2d6•, 2d8, 2d10, 2d10•, 2d12
- 9 people – 2d4, 2d6, 2d6•, 2d8, 2d10, 2d10•, 2d12, 2d20

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**  
**SAYS ...**



“Game balance is going to be a little lopsided for some group sizes, but this is noir, life isn't fair. And the dice are always in motion.”

2d6• – means one set of d6's should have numbers, and one set should have pips (dots).

2d10• – means one set of d10s should have 1-0, and one should have 10-00. (The latter set is still scored 1 to 10, but this makes them easy to tell apart.)

## PREPARING THE PLAY AREA

Before your friends arrive to set the evening on a downward spiral of misdirection, treachery, and ice-cold soda, let's get you set up for the heart and soul of DEATHBIRD.

That **dice target** we mentioned? You want to set that up somewhere semi-near your gaming table. Ideally, it should be far enough away that **about 80% of dice thrown will miss**. A good starting distance is about 1.5 feet away per 1" of opening (1m per 6 cm). This means a small garbage can should be approx. 15-18 feet (5-6m) away, which is on the far side of an average room. Adjust this distance based on player feedback.

Do your best to get it equally far from all players (this won't happen, but try). Do your best not to have it directly behind anyone's chair. Everyone needs a line of sight to the target.

## CREATING CHARACTERS

This is a bloody, backstabby noir game. Don't get attached to your characters — their life span might be measured in minutes. So the creation process is as simple as possible.

- 1) Draw three cards from the deck.
- 2) Use one of those three cards (your choice) to pick a character Archetype from the table in the back of the rules.
- 3) Use one of the remaining two cards (your choice) to pick a Flaw from the table in the back of the rules.
- 4) Use the final card as the seed for your Goal. See next section.
- 5) Now pick a name. (The earlier choices will affect this.)
- 6) Grab your new character's two matched dice, and set them within easy reach. (Which dice are yours? See two sections down.)

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**



**SAYS ...**

“Some groups may prefer 'Hardcore Mode' for character generation: use the three cards in order. This may lead to strange characters, but let me tell you, we see all types down here.”

What's that? “I want attributes!” you cry? “What's my backstory” you cry? Look, don't overthink this. You've got a stereotype. Play with it! Ham it up! If none of your card combinations make sense, drink another beer, and then swap cards with your buddy while nobody's watching, you dirty cheater.

One last thing: Someone needs to start as the GM (and not make a character). Give the job to whoever has read the rules the most, or choose a volunteer (like the guy who walked away a few seconds ago to use the bathroom). Don't stress — you'll all play GM at some point.

# CHARACTER GOALS

You knew this was coming: everyone wants something in noir.

A character may only have one active Goal (but any number of accomplished ones). You start with a Goal. If you accomplish it during Free Play (and manage to survive through the Deathbird scene), then in between Free Play scenes (when players are replacing dead characters), draw a card for a new one. If your Goal becomes unattainable during a scene (e.g. your target died), do the same thing. If your Goal is getting stale because you've been failing at it for multiple scenes, ~~kamikaze yourself ASAP~~ draw a new one.

A goal has three parts: WHAT it's about, WHO you want it from, and WHY you want it.

WHY you want it is governed by the suit of your Goal card:

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| <b>Hearts</b>   | <b>Lust.</b> (Get love/sex from your target.)                           |
| <b>Diamonds</b> | <b>Greed.</b> (Get something for yourself that your target possesses.)  |
| <b>Clubs</b>    | <b>Vengeance.</b> (They've wronged you. Right it.)                      |
| <b>Spades</b>   | <b>Jealousy.</b> (They have something you envy them for. Deny them it.) |

Once everybody has their WHY, the table collectively chooses their WHOs all at once. Here's how to do it: Every (non-GM) player gets ready and then simultaneously points at the person whose PC they'd like to target. Then adjust the results until no two players are pointing at the same person. Maintaining an existing goal has priority over creating a new goal. Beyond that, be quick and adult about conflicts; the GM will decide if you can't.

It helps to pick someone you have good comedic rapport with; it's polite to pick someone who has been quiet (or just finished GMing), so you can draw them into the game.

WHAT it's about is a lot more flexible. The WHY is the motive; the WHAT is the MacGuffin, or the desired circumstance. If something interesting leaps to mind, use it! \*

If you're drawing a blank, ask your WHO's player for a suggestion, or take the number of the Goal card you drew and consult the table in the back of the rules.

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**



**SAYS ...**

“If you're coming up with details or Complications midgame, base the issues off of previous events! The more labyrinthine and incestuous the plots get, the more in the spirit of noir it will be.”

## READING THE RULES: DICE AND GOALS

You, with the rules. Yes, you, reading this. Once everyone has a starting character and goal – and not before! – it is your job to collect all the dice and read the underlined parts out loud to the group:

“Alright, this is how the dice system works. You use the dice for two things – rolling to accomplish your goal, and defending yourself against the Deathbird. We’ll cover the Deathbird later – it’s super easy. And this is how you roll for goals.”

At this point, pick up the two biggest\* dice from the collection.

“You roll both of your dice. Use the HIGHER of the two numbers. If your roll meets or beats an 8, you succeed.”

Demonstrate. Then make a show of putting those dice in front of you.

“So bigger dice are better for your character. Which is why I’m taking the best ones.”

Smile. Wait until they stop throwing things at you.

“But! The longer your character survives, the bigger dice you get. And bigger dice make you more likely to die when the Deathbird comes.”

“There’s one other catch. Anytime you roll doubles, you automatically succeed – at the cost of falling victim to your Flaw. Roleplay out how that flaw is affecting you. Hint, hint: This is a great opportunity for others to use it as leverage against you.”

At this point, distribute the other dice pairs however you want (we recommend playing favorites based on how they reacted to your speech).

You’ll also have to redistribute dice before each new Free Play scene. Here’s how you do it: Everyone who died gives up their dice. Then, starting with the person with the biggest dice (break ties in favor of the lowest score), everyone upgrades to dice with more sides if possible, and keeps their current set if not. Finally, any new character entering play gets the leftovers (i.e., the worst sets).

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**



**SAYS ...**

“Biggest generally means 'having the most sides', but if any of your dice are of an unusual size, you may wish to grab those, to prevent them from being used as ammunition.”

## FREE PLAY: THE PLAYERS

Free Play is open roleplaying, with a few rules about accomplishing Goals and what brings about Deathbird scenes. All the action comes from the players, so let's go over that first.

**Your job as a player:** Play your character. Attempt to accomplish Goals, in intricate and/or backstabby ways. Struggle against your Flaw, in amusing and/or hilarious ways. Assist or oppose other players as they attempt their own Goals, and narrate the results of those interactions.

Here's how Goals work: This wouldn't be noir if you could stroll in and get what you want. At least two other PCs have to be involved before you can try to accomplish your Goal.

“Involve” means just that. They don't have to be helping you, they just have to be aware of and face consequences from your actions. If you gun down two PC cops on your way to the MacGuffin, they're involved! “Involvement” can also mean making a deal with other PCs to look the other way; directly using their assistance; etc. And yes, your target can be one of the two involved parties (but doesn't necessarily have to be).

The rule of thumb is, involved parties have something at stake in your Goal roll. If they're helping you, then something should happen to them if you fail. If they're opposing you, then something should happen to them if you succeed.

Once you've declared your Goal attempt to the GM and the GM has acknowledged the other PCs' involvement, then roll your dice! (How to roll is covered in “Dice and Goals” and will be read to you before game starts.)

Here's how you react when you end up opposing another player's attempt at a goal: Be generous. Describe an obstacle your intervention creates, and listen to how they deal with it. If their plan seems reasonable (or if it makes people laugh!), agree with them that it ought to work, and let them roll the dice. If it's lame, describe another setback; they can try something else after the GM shifts the spotlight to other players for a bit. Note that saying “it doesn't work” twice in a row is lame; if someone fails and then tries again in a totally different way, you should give them the chance to roll. If you're at an impasse, the GM will decide. Don't let rules arguments bog down the game.



## **A special note on character death**

In Free Play, you are the ultimate arbiter of your own character's survival. The GM cannot kill (or totally incapacitate) you. Other PCs cannot kill (or totally incapacitate) you without your permission – fatal blows will miraculously glance off lapel buttons, miss vital organs, etc. However, if you ever choose to die because of another PC's actions, everyone should stop for a moment while you narrate a touching and powerful death scene. After which the GM should immediately call the Deathbird, giggling insanely.

Using this invincibility to block another player's Goal is lame – for both you and them. No Goal should ever require the death or total incapacitation of a PC. Savage beating, sure, but not death.

## **Goal success and failure**

If you **succeed** at a goal roll, narrate your success and add that goal toward your score (note: YOUR score, not your character's. Character death does NOT reset you to 0). Create another goal after the Deathbird scene; until then, help or oppose other players, roleplay, and kibitz mightily.

If you **fail** at a goal roll, then narrate how and why you failed. You may try to roll against it later in this scene, but only under different circumstances (e.g. with a different character's help). It's lame to immediately retry a goal; don't monopolize table time.

# FREE PLAY: THE GM

Don't worry – it's easy! The players are going to be handling most of the creativity. You're a facilitator. A facilitator WITH POWERS TO SUMMON DEMONIC AVIANS. Awww yeah.

**Your job as a GM:** Set the scene when Free Play begins. Keep the game moving and ensure everyone participates. Be a calm, fair judge in inter-player disputes. Call a Deathbird scene when appropriate. Describe locations and general color. Play NPCs when necessary.

Here's how to set the scene: Just pick something noirish. It's only for color; the PC interaction is the meat of the game. Bars, nightclubs, dark city streets, etc., are good starts.

Here's how NPCs work: They're kinda like the chorus in a Greek play. They exist and can interact with the PCs, but they should be few and their roles minor. In general, they should be dealt with when directly interacted with, and should otherwise be background color.

Do not let PCs use NPCs as a way to resolve their problems. That is not what they are there for.

Here's some guidelines on when to start a Deathbird scene: You should Deathbird to bring a frantic roleplaying moment to its climax; to close off a Free Play when many goals have been finished; or to mercy-kill a dull/deadlocked scene.

If there's in-character fightin', it's a judgment call. Interrupting good roleplaying is lame. But Deathbird scenes are also your only way to resolve deadly conflicts. Err on the side of players having fun.

In an ideal world, you would give every player a chance to roll for their Goal once before Deathbirding. This won't always happen. Don't interrupt plans in progress, but don't hold up the scene for slow-moving players.

What if 2+ characters are locked in a deadly conflict and short-circuiting to Deathbird is the only way to get them out of it? Maybe you can try saying, "Alright, that will be resolved momentarily with the Deathbird's arrival. But first, while you were doing that, Alice and Bob here were having their own conversation across the room ..." and guide play through as many scenes not involving the "stuck" PCs as you can.

## **GM Tips**

If you're getting overwhelmed by the chaos or there are people not getting to do stuff, then institute a turn order. Otherwise just handle it how your group usually does.

The prime directive of comedy games is: keep it moving! If someone's making a huge epic monologue that bleeds and breathes noir, or if there's an in-character argument that's simmering with great roleplaying energy, that's great, but lingering in them too long can create mood whiplash. This game works best when everyone's **parodying** noir with face straight and tongue in cheek.

Don't let the characters split up! Invent reasons, no matter how implausible, that they have to stay there in the scene. This lets them all keep interacting until the dying starts. Plus if they're scattered throughout the city, then killing each other in Deathbird scenes might get weird.

## READING THE RULES: THE DEATHBIRD ARRIVES

Right before your first Free Play scene, hand the rules to your starting GM.

Alright, GM, go ahead and read the underlined parts out to the group:

“One of my jobs as GM is to play the Deathbird. Let me tell you a little bit about him, and then what the Deathbird means to our game.

“Some say the Deathbird is a supernatural curse on the city – summoned when three people lit a cigarette off of the same match. Some say the Deathbird is a metaphor for the insanity at the heart of your city. Some say the Deathbird is the helper of Satan himself, attracted to sin and punishing the sinners.”

If you have a plush bird like we suggested, hold it up now.

“Whatever the truth, when you see the Deathbird, it means murder. Maybe even YOUR murder. Everyone in the city knows to fear his evil CAW. And at some point, very soon, you WILL be hearing it. So here's what you have to do.

“The Deathbird always caws three times. On the first caw, you MUST stop everything you're doing, and shout in panic. Exactly like this: (Shout briefly, not longer than a second.) “AAAAAAH!” “Got it? Let's try it.”

At this point, caw, and savor their beautiful, beautiful screams.

“Great! On the second caw, you have to react before it's too late. You'll have about two seconds to tell me how you're killing the Deathbird before he can kill you. I won't be able to understand you, because everyone will be talking at once, but it's important that you LOOK ME IN THE EYE and call out an attack. Silly, serious, whatever, but you have to say SOMETHING, QUICK. Can we give it a try?”

At this point, caw, and appreciate the chaos.

“Sweet! And then, on the third caw, this is where the dice come in. Take your two dice, one by one, and throw them into the” (bucket, bowl, whatever) “over there. As quickly as possible – no aiming! This represents you fighting off the Deathbird. For each die you get in the target, something good happens. Every time you miss, you get caught up in the crossfire as you guys drive the Deathbird off. And when there's crossfire, there's murder.”

If you don't have a plush bird, now stop reading out loud.

Otherwise, once you've answered any questions that might come up:

“Oh, and one final thing. You see the Deathbird \* here?”  
(hold it up) “He'll be flying around you, starting when the first caw sounds. Last player to hold him before the dice throwing finishes has to roll a penalty die — so if someone tosses him to you, keep him moving! And keep it fast and gentle, ok?”

Ok! (Remember: toss him at someone when you first caw.)

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**



**SAYS ...**

“I am A Deathbird, not THE Deathbird. There are other Deathbirds with different names. Now might be a good time to name your group's Deathbird and give him (or her) a personality. Horrible puns are encouraged.”

## HANDLING DEATHBIRD SCENE DICE

So what are the consequences of your players' dice-throwing? Simple. Every die in the target is worth a point toward that player's score. If that player has an unresolved Goal, they may narrate how they accomplished it amid the chaos.

Every player with a die **outside** the target looks at the result of that die roll. (If a player missed with both of their dice, their result is the LOWER of those two.) The PC with the highest result just got murdered, and will become next scene's GM. The lowest result killed the victim.

**The 15-second rule:** Under no circumstances may anyone spend more than 15 seconds of game time looking for wayward dice. (We recommend counting out loud.) Treat missing dice as misses, and roll your replacement to get your result.

**Penalty die:** A player who has to roll a penalty die (for holding the Deathbird last; searching for lost dice; or stealing the GM's Fritos) first finds what their result would have been. Then they reroll the die their result was on; if it's higher, they take that instead.

A penalty die for a player who didn't miss means they have to roll one die as if they did.

**Ties:** All tied players suffer the consequences. If there are three people rolling 8's and nothing higher, three people just died. If there are four people rolling 1's, then the murder victim has four different fatal wounds. In the unlikely event that every player gets the same roll, then the PCs just slaughtered each other in a glorious TPK. Rejoice!

With multiple murder victims, GM duties will go to the person with the highest score, and the other victims create new characters for the next free play round. **But first!** The murder must be avenged!

## THE DETECTIVE ARRIVES

There's a body on the floor, and the Deathbird has flown the coop. Someone's got to be held responsible! So, with sirens blaring, the authorities arrive to clean up the mess, and the grizzled detective\* (played by you, the GM, in your last task before drawing up a new character) confronts the murderer.

This is a brief one-on-one scene between you and the murderer (if there are several, choose one: break ties in favor of lowest score). You have the murder weapon, you have the motive, everything should be open-and-shut ... but you're cynical enough to know this city is full of double-crossing bastards and multilayered plots. So you'd better wring a confession out of this mook before you chuck anyone in the hoosegow.

Confront the murderer. Tell them what killed the victim and the incredibly damning thing that made you pin it on them. (Monogrammed handkerchiefs, unique murder weapons, or fingerprints are good standbys. As for the murder weapon, if you actually managed to hear what that player yelled during the Deathbird scene, you can use that. Or just make something distinctive up. Are they playing a chef? “She choked to death on whipped cream. Got anything to say about that?”)

The murderer can either **take a stand** or **shift blame**. Here's how it works.

Taking a stand is the classic “You'll never take me alive, coppers!” moment, going out guns blazing. If they have an unresolved Goal, the murderer can make one last desperate attempt at it (rolling dice like usual). Then they die in a hail of bullets. JUSTICE ... SERVED.

Shifting blame works like this: Everyone in this damn city is a self-serving liar and you're too smart to fall for their tricks. A plausible alibi is easy enough to say with a straight face ... but something ridiculously outlandish and easily disprovable? Who would dare lie like that? No, the only reason to say something so brazen is that it must be the truth!

So, the murderer has to try to pin the blame on another PC in a funny, implausible way. And they have to do it with a totally straight face.

If their demeanor cracks, there's your admission of guilt. Blam. JUSTICE ... SERVED.

If they get through it without smiling ... well, you've got far too much caseload to verify the story. Shoot that PC to death instead, and give the former suspect one point toward their score in apology for your unfair suspicions. JUSTICE ... SERVED.

\* *MEPHISCAWPHELES*



**SAYS ...**

“Give your detective a name and a few distinctive traits. Make him a recurring character. The detective that always cleans up after me is the hard-boiled, cynical Sgt. Ace Spade, who narrates everything he does in first-person past tense.”

## ENDING THE GAME

So, remember that deck of cards you've been drawing new characters and goals from? Don't replace cards that you draw! Put them in a discard pile somewhere.

Games with fewer players should go through the deck once; large games, either once or twice depending on mood and energy level. Either way, when the last card is drawn, it's a moment of truth. The scene you're preparing for will be your last!

When the cards have run out, anyone who is stuck without an Archetype, Flaw, or Goal can get one by grabbing at random from the discard pile. Don't spend more than a few seconds figuring new characters out. The last scene is no time for subtlety.

Gather the characters. The GM should sketch out a scene ripe for climax: either the Deathbird's curse spirals the city into riots, or Satan gets summoned, or the Army invades, or the madness lifts and the PCs stand clear-headed as the sirens draw closer. Whatever. As long as it's going to result in fire, explosions, and bloodshed.

Give the players just enough time to introduce new characters and engage with the scene before Deathbirding.

Go through the usual caw sequence – but DON'T RESOLVE THE THROWN DICE, and don't summon the Detective. Instead, describe in a sentence or two how the Deathbird's victim is the worst possible person for the PCs to have just accidentally killed (the head of the rioters, the mayor, etc). Oops.

At that point, each player in turn gets to narrate one final action and its consequences. PC invincibility is explicitly turned off for these actions, but you cannot deny another player their final action by killing them; they will still get to do something as they die.

This is your last chance to make a mark on the game world. Make the most of it!

## AFTER THE GAME

Find any dice that are still missing. Count up your score. Enthuse about the most awesome gameplay moments while everything's still fresh in your mind.

Fear the caw.

\* **MEPHISCAWPHELES**

**SAYS ...**



“If you want a slightly less predictable end to the game, shuffle a joker in on your second drawthrough. Drawing the joker ends it, rather than running out of cards.”

## DESIGNER'S NOTES

\* *MEPHISCAWPHELES*



*SAYS ...*

“Caw caw caw!”

This game was written with the cue words WINGS and MURDER from the February 2011 Ronnies. I started by toying with the idea of “a murder of crows”, went through a couple of refinements (yes, my game had a moody goth teenage phase), and realized I really needed to write a comedic game this time around. From there, I settled on representing “wings” by the major mechanic of the Deathbird Scenes, with flying dice and a flying bird, as the narrative centrality of the bird itself fell away. This freed me up to give the game a little more thematic focus, and it settled into its current bastard film-noir pastiche state.

In future revisions, it would be great to give the writing of the game itself more of a noir tone. More balanced dice would also be nice, but not at the cost of complexity (the current system is a compromise based on the time limit).

I welcome all feedback: baxil at tomorrowlands. dot-org , or via my website at <http://tomorrowlands.org/contact.html> .

This game is available via my website, <http://www.tomorrowlands.org/gaming/>, as well as the 24-Hour RPG site, <http://www.lkmlkt.net/cat/24-hour-rpg> .

## DESIGN/PHOTO CREDITS

Fonts used: Mona Lisa Solid ITC for headings; American Typewriter for body text.

All images are used under Creative Commons license.

Crow head, by “jen 64”: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/61745644@N00/276085897>



## INSPIRATIONS AND FELLOW TRAVELERS

This game is indebted to Steve Jackson Games' TOON for basically everything in the comedy department. The “make the GM laugh” bonus in early versions is from the house rule that has turned up the dial to 11 on every TOON game I've ever run: “If you make the GM laugh, it happens.”

The “draw a card” character/plot generation is used in dozens of games out there, but one game that was especially instructive to me regarding the pluses and minuses of that system was Jonathan Lavalley's “Over The Wall” (a fellow submission to Game Chef 2010).

The conversational tone of my rules is a direct nod to Vincent Lumpley's “Dogs In The Vineyard,” which uses it to amazing effect.

The score-becomes-votes mechanic in early versions was lifted from James Wallis' “Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchhausen.”

The original idea for the Deathbird was to have something that read like a space alien's take on the movie “The Crow.” It got awful crazy from there, but you can still sorta see the ancestry if you squint.

If you like the theme and lightheartedness of Deathbird Black but want to play the genre straighter, check out Fiasco — “Fiasco is inspired by cinematic tales of small-time capers gone disastrously wrong. You'll play ordinary people with powerful ambition and poor impulse control.” Find out more at <http://www.bullypulpitgames.com/games/fiasco/> .



# CHARACTER GENERATION\*

\* *MEPHISCAWPHELES*



SAYS ...

“Expanded character tables are coming in a later version of the game.”

A

- Character: A noble insurance claim inspector - pure of heart, strong of body, insufferable of spirit.
- Flaw: Heroism. (Must drop everything they're doing to help someone in need.)

2

- Character: A glamorous femme fatale (or the male version, an -mme -tale).
- Flaw: Backstabber. (Must double-cross anyone who does anything to assist them.)

3

- Character: An ingenue forced into a life of depravity, trying to maintain his or her innocence and positivity.
- Flaw: Naivete. (Believes anyone that wants it should have a shot at redemption, no matter how improbable their newfound morality.)

4

- Character: A corrupt cop, cynical and world-weary.
- Flaw: Trigger-happy. (Shoot first, then ask “Should I shoot at them?”. Yes; shoot more.)

5

- Character: A down-and-out writer of crime fiction, living in desperate poverty.
- Flaw: Imagination. (Anytime things start going wrong, they must gleefully escalate the situation, talking about how much more interesting this would be with more adversity.)

6

- Character: The jilted spouse, or ex-spouse, of one of the other characters.
- Flaw: Obsession. (No matter what their current Goal is about, they will go to great lengths to spy on, disrupt, or hook up with the obsessed-over character.)

7

- Character: A grifter, making a living through cons, with their lies catching up to them.
- Flaw: Luckless. (Nothing goes their way. Their failures are remarkably improbable and inconvenient. Even their successes turn bitter.)

8

- Character: An aging athlete, long past their prime but with something to prove.
- Flaw: The Spirit Is Willing. (The flesh is weak.)

9

- Character: A scrappy gangster with a hair-trigger temper.
- Flaw: Pursued. (Must constantly hide from some external force.)

10

- Character: A scheming politician, rising to power amid shady deals and double-crosses.
- Flaw: Famous. (Everyone knows you, and either loathes you or has a favor to call in.)

J

- Character: An ambitious young reporter or photographer, angling for the big scoop.
- Flaw: Inquisitive. (They **MUST** know what's going on. Especially when it means trouble.)

Q

- Character: A moral and conscientious priest with a troubled past.
- Flaw: Dirty Secret. (They **REALLY** don't want people knowing what they've done in the past. So, naturally, they will leap at any chance to deny it, no matter how trivial.)

K

- Character: A hobo - once rubbing elbows with high society, now they've lost it all.
- Flaw: Addiction. (Must continuously seek out some substance or action, at great personal cost and inconvenience.)

# GOAL SUGGESTIONS

This is a quick reference guide for things and events that could be the specific target of characters' goals. Don't feel constrained by the list; it's here as a brainstorming device if appropriate WHATs for character goals don't already exist. If you like something from a different column better, use it – just remember that the motive behind the goal is dictated by the suit, whether that's “obtain” or “destroy” or “expose.”

Some of these are plots, some are MacGuffins; they're all simply ideas.

“T” stands for Target – i.e., the WHO. “C” stands for the Character with the goal.

|    | <b>Lust</b><br>(Hearts)        | <b>Greed</b><br>(Diamonds)                | <b>Vengeance</b><br>(Clubs)            | <b>Jealousy</b><br>(Spades)         |
|----|--------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| A  | Love letters from T            | Rare books                                | Copied manuscript                      | Love letters to T                   |
| 2  | Sappy love poems               | A cat's endowment                         | Pay child support                      | A child's affection                 |
| 3  | Erotic photos of T             | Sapphic scrolls                           | Illegitimate child                     | Switched at birth                   |
| 4  | Exotic perfume                 | Exotic flowers                            | Exotic poison                          | Extinct animal skin                 |
| 5  | Lingerie                       | Rich relative's will                      | Murder weapon                          | Black bird statuette                |
| 6  | Hotel room keys                | Briefcase of cash                         | Stolen invention                       | Plane tickets                       |
| 7  | Get commitment to elope        | Car keys/title                            | Sabotage car before C and T's big race | Smash up T's well-maintained car    |
| 8  | Get T to propose to C          | Get T to propose (w/ 15-karat diam. ring) | Break T engagement as T broke yours    | Break T engagement so C can step in |
| 9  | Kidnap for love                | Kidnap for ransom                         | A partner murdered                     | False accusations                   |
| 10 | Regain lost love               | Egyptian jewelry                          | The truth will out                     | Secret diary                        |
| J  | Choose C over T                | Crown jewels                              | Exile                                  | Outbid at auction                   |
| Q  | A quickie out back             | Grab T's wallet                           | A solid beating                        | Humiliate T                         |
| K  | Consummate their torrid affair | Sign deal for expensive purchase          | Poetic justice for an old wrong        | Help spouse catch T cheating        |