

The image features abstract black line art in the corners, consisting of several thick, curved lines that intersect and overlap, creating a sense of movement and connection. These lines are positioned in the top-left, top-right, and bottom-right corners, leaving the bottom-left corner empty.

The Bonds That Tie Us

by Alison Huang (drazillion.itch.io)

a GMless TTRPG about relationships; how they grow and how they fall apart.

Introduction

The Bonds That Tie Us is a TTRPG about characters, and their relationships with each other; how they grow and how they fall apart. It is a GMless game, meaning that everyone shares the responsibilities that a Game Master would traditionally fill, like determining the outcome of character actions, and moving the story forward. This also means that it is a collaborative game; everyone works together, rather than against each other.

It is designed with 3-5 players in mind. However, as long as there are at least three characters, the game will work, no matter how many players there are. It is intended that this could also work as a storytelling tool, with only one player and many characters.

Only six-sided dice, character sheets, something to write with, and a willingness to make things complicated, are required to play The Bonds That Tie Us.

The Bonds That Tie Us

Character

Name:

Pronouns:

Additional Information:

Stress

Roll **over** your Stress when doing something **kind or selfless** →

| | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

← Roll **under** your Stress when doing something **hurtful or selfish**

Bonds

Bond With:

Specifics:

Negative

Neutral

Positive

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| +3 | +2 | +1 | +0 | +0 | +0 | +1 | +2 | +3 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|

Bond With:

Specifics:

Negative

Neutral

Positive

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| +3 | +2 | +1 | +0 | +0 | +0 | +1 | +2 | +3 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|

Bond With:
Specifics:

| Negative | | | Neutral | | | Positive | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| +3 | +2 | +1 | +0 | +0 | +0 | +1 | +2 | +3 |

Bond With:
Specifics:

| Negative | | | Neutral | | | Positive | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| +3 | +2 | +1 | +0 | +0 | +0 | +1 | +2 | +3 |

Bond With:
Specifics:

| Negative | | | Neutral | | | Positive | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| +3 | +2 | +1 | +0 | +0 | +0 | +1 | +2 | +3 |

Bond With:
Specifics:

| Negative | | | Neutral | | | Positive | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| +3 | +2 | +1 | +0 | +0 | +0 | +1 | +2 | +3 |

Staying Safe

This is a game where players will probably roll dice against each other. It is also a game where characters are encouraged to hate and fight with each other. This means that boundaries can be crossed if you're not careful. With no Game Master, the responsibility of making sure everyone is fine with what's happening falls onto everyone.

Before playing, everyone should take a moment to express any boundaries that they have, that they are comfortable with sharing, with the rest of the group. Take these boundaries into consideration when playing.

If you're contemplating having a character do something that might potentially cross boundaries, but no one has explicitly stated that they have such a boundary, it doesn't hurt to ask.

Safety tools, such as the X-Card (<http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>) by John Stavropoulos, Lines and Veils, and the Luxton Technique, are also advised so that boundaries are not crossed during play. However be aware that such safety tools aren't a catch all.

Setting Up The Game

Creating The Setting

The game can be set anywhere where it would make sense that all of the characters know who everyone is, but they may not have interacted with each other.

You could set it in a bar, with the characters being its staff and regulars. You could have the characters be nobles from rival families, feuding over a city. The characters could be members of a guild in an online multiplayer game. There are many directions you could go.

Once the setting has been agreed upon, think about how it might give characters motivation to interact with each other. For example, if it is set in a High School, with the characters being students, the prom might be coming up.

Creating Characters

With the setting created, everyone must create characters that fit within that setting. Creating a character is simple; you just need to know their **name** and their **pronouns**.

As this is a game about relationships, you may also want to figure out their sexual and romantic orientations, or what genders they may or may not be attracted to. Remember that not being attracted to any genders at all is an option.

Remember to have conversations with the player of any character your character may be attracted to. Just because two characters have compatible orientations and genders doesn't mean they're attracted to each other, or are open to a relationship.

Feel free to figure out more details about your character, like what they look like, or their personality, but that is purely up to you. You also might want to discover those details over the course of play.

Bonds

When all characters are created, the Bonds, or relationships, between those characters must be established.

There are three types of Bonds: **Negative**, **Neutral** and **Positive**. They can be considered **One-Sided** or **Mutual**, depending on whether the characters feel similarly about the Bond or not.

Bonds can shift over the course of play, potentially changing the type of Bond they are.

Establishing Bonds

First, assign what type of Bond your character has with **the character on your right**. Then, when everyone is done, assign what type of Bond your character has with **the character on your left**. The type of Bonds you assign cannot be the same.

Your character's Bonds with any other characters are Neutral.

A Bond is Mutual if both players involved assigns the same type of Bond to it. Otherwise, the Bond is One-Sided.

Your Bonds may start in any of that Bond type's three segments. The segment that your Bond is in determines how many dice are added to rolls that use that Bond. This number of dice matches the segment's number.

If you have any Mutual Bonds, you must discuss with the other player which segment the Bond is in. Mutual Bonds are always in the same segment for both characters.

The specifics of each Bond may vary. For example, a Bond might be platonic, queerplatonic or romantic. Note that just because a Bond is Mutual doesn't mean that both characters necessarily view the Bond in the same way.

One-Sided Bonds can become Mutual if their segments match up. Mutual Bonds can become One-Sided if the players agree that the Bond is no longer Mutual.

Stress

Your character's Stress score indicates how pressured they feel at any given time, and determines how difficult it is to succeed on a roll.

A low Stress score means that they might feel relaxed and amicable, meaning that they may find it harder to act maliciously.

A high Stress score means that they might feel frustrated and angry, meaning that they may find it harder to act kindly.

The actual specifics vary depending on each character's personality and circumstances.

All characters start at 2 Stress.

Stress cannot go lower than 2, or go higher than 6.

A character is considered **out of play** if they spend an entire Chapter at 6 Stress, or if their Stress score is at 6, and their Stress needs to increase again. The specifics of what out of play means depends on the setting and circumstances.

Playing The Game

Chapters

The game itself consists of a series of **Chapters**. Each Chapter starts with **Chapter Questions** that help determine the contents of that Chapter.

Each Chapter contains multiple **Scenes**, in which players describe what characters do, and their interactions with each other. **Scene Questions** are answered at the end of each Scene. If any characters that were not part of that Scene would still be affected, a **Reaction** can then be declared.

This process repeats until all characters have participated in at least one Scene, or have chosen to **Abstain**, and everyone agrees that the Chapter is over. Then the next Chapter begins.

Abstaining

You can choose to Abstain from a Chapter, meaning that your character cannot be involved in any of that Chapter's Scenes. However, you must be able to explain why they're Abstaining. Are they injured or sick? In a different location to everyone else?

Abstaining causes your character's Stress to be reduced by 3 at the end of that Chapter. You cannot choose to Abstain for consecutive Chapters.

Note that Abstaining doesn't mean your character is out of the story. Their absence may impact Scenes. What happens when a character is needed, but they're not there?

You cannot Abstain for the first Chapter.

Chapter Questions

Each Chapter begins with questions designed to help determine what happens next. If you're stuck during a Chapter, you can also refer back to these questions.

The questions are designed to be read in order, moving to the next question if the last question doesn't apply.

If everyone already has a clear idea of what they want to happen next, you don't have to use any of these questions. Feel free to also come up with other questions as well.

The first Chapter is special, and has questions specifically to help start the game proper.

First Chapter Questions

Are there any Mutual Negative Bonds?

If there are, have the first Chapter begin with a Scene that involves two characters with a Mutual Negative Bond with each other, and a third character that has a Positive or Neutral Bond with one of those characters. How do the characters with a Mutual Negative Bond act around this third character?

Are there any One Sided Positive or One Sided Negative Bonds?

If there are, have the first Chapter begin with a Scene that involves a character with a One Sided Positive or One Sided Negative Bond, and a character they have that Bond with. What does that dynamic look like exactly?

Are there any Mutual Neutral Bonds?

If there are, have the first Chapter begin with a Scene that involves at least two characters that have Mutual Neutral Bonds with each other. What situation would force them to interact with each other?

Subsequent Chapter Questions

Will this be the last Chapter before the game ends?

If it is, don't introduce any new complications in the next Chapter. Instead, attempt to resolve everything that already been introduced.

Will there be a happy ending or will it all end in tragedy?

Are there any characters that haven't been focused on yet?

If there are, have at least one Scene in the next Chapter revolve around each of these characters. How do they fit into the wider picture? How could they make things messier?

Is there a particular Bond that is preventing everything from resolving peacefully?

If there is, have at least one Scene in the next Chapter revolve around the characters in this bond that does not necessarily include them. Do the other characters see this Bond as being a problem?

Have the characters had a chance to relax yet?

If they haven't, have at least one Scene in the next Chapter feature characters getting a break from all of the drama in their lives.

Do all of the characters have a clear goal?

If not, introduce a goal for every character in the next Chapter. This goal can be the same for everyone, or be different goals entirely.

Are any of the characters trying to ignore, or suppress, a truth about themselves, or another character?

If so, that truth becomes too difficult to ignore in the next Chapter.

What is the easiest solution to everyone's problems right now?

That easiest solution is unavailable in the next Chapter. Discuss how it becomes unavailable. What does everyone do without that solution?

Scenes

A Scene consists of a single encounter or situation between characters, that is described by the players involved.

Rolling Dice

When you do something in a Scene that is risky, or would otherwise have a chance to fail, you roll a six-sided dice.

If you can justify how one of your character's Bonds would help, you can roll additional six-sided dice, as determined by the number in that Bond's segment.

If you're rolling to do **something kind or selfless**, you succeed if your highest result is **above your Stress score**. You fail if your highest result is **below your Stress score**. Your character's Stress increases by 1.

If you're rolling to do **something hurtful or selfish**, you succeed if your lowest result is **below your Stress score**. You fail if your lowest result is **above your Stress score**. Your character's Stress increases by 1.

If your result is **equal to your Stress score**, you succeed at a cost that you describe. Your character's Stress increases by 1.

Contested Rolls

Characters can roll against each other in situations where the possibility of both characters succeeding or failing makes sense.

Otherwise, situations can be resolved with only one character rolling. Remember that if a character doesn't roll, they don't risk having their Stress reduced.

Keep in mind that if another player is happy with just letting your desired result happen, it can just happen. If another player tells you that your desired result is impossible, respect that.

Scene Questions

At the end of a Scene, those involved adjust their Bonds and Stress by answering the questions below, in order.

Do you think a relationship changed as a result of this Scene?

If yes, move that Bond by one segment to the left or right.

Do you think your character's Stress level reflects how they feel after this Scene?

If no, your character's Stress increases or decreases by 1.

In this Scene, did your character forgive, or reconcile with, a character that they have a Negative Bond with?

If they did, change that Bond to a Positive Bond and choose which segment it is in. Your character's Stress decreases by 2.

In this Scene, did your character have a falling out with a character that they have a Positive Bond with?

If they did, change that Bond to a Negative Bond and choose which segment it is in. Your character's Stress increases by 2.

In this Scene, did your character confide in, or show vulnerability with, another character?

If they did, and that other character supported them, comforted them, or confided with them as well, move that Bond by one segment to the right. Your character's Stress decreases by 1.

If they did, and that other character ridiculed them, rejected them, or dismissed their worries, move that Bond by one segment to the left. Your character's Stress increases by 1.

Reactions

After a Scene, and its Scene Questions, are complete, players can choose to React: a declaration that a character, that was not part of that Scene, is nonetheless negatively impacted by it.

When you declare a Reaction, your character's Stress increases by 1.

A Reaction could be a Scene involving other characters, or simply an acknowledgement that they are aware of what happened. Either way, they are considered to be Scenes, meaning that Scene Questions happen after Reactions. This also means that Reactions can be Reacted to.

Ending the Game

Once everyone agrees that the game is at a stage that feels finished, or feels like it should end, the latest Chapter is considered to be over, even if it wouldn't usually be allowed to be over.

One by one, describe what happens next for your character. How did the events of the game impact them? Have they changed for the better, or is their life now in tatters? Did they get what they wanted? At what cost?

If players are interested in playing as these characters again, consider what events would lead to the characters meeting once more. What will these characters be like in a year's time? Two years time? A decade? How do their dynamics change if new characters enter the picture?