



Behind the Magic

A Fantasy Mockumentary Game

By Randy Lubin

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Introduction

In this game you'll create a fantasy mockumentary, playing a group of incompetent adventurers on a quest to save the world. Players will take turns setting and acting out scenes and also have "confessionals" with the Bard who is documenting their journey.

The game has shared facilitation responsibilities, but at least one person should read this document and guide the initial workshops.

Key Facts

- Players: 4-7, including the facilitator who also plays
- Time: 2-3 Hours
- Preparation: none, though one player should be familiar with the rules
- Location: A single large space where players can move around and act out scenes
- Materials needed: A printed copy of the rules, a few chairs, nametags (optional)
- Inspiration: Lord of the Rings, Spinal Tap, HarmonQuest, Strange Gravity, Hello from the Magic Tavern

Credits

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Facilitator Instructions

This game is designed for minimal prep work and facilitation. Your main responsibilities are assembling the materials, setting up the room, and leading the pre-game workshops. Try to read the full rules ahead of time so you can answer questions as they arise.

Materials

The only essential materials are a printed copy of these rules and handouts. However, character nametags are extremely helpful; use them if you can. Costumes and props are optional but encouraged – they can enhance the experience.

Room Setup

Use a large room with an open space in the center where you can act out scenes. It's helpful to have a few easily moveable chairs on hand, which you can incorporate into play. Choose one chair to use for confessionals and place it by itself, perhaps against a wall.

Print the handouts for the game and put them somewhere easily accessible, like on a table or taped up to the wall.

Running the Game

This game starts with a series of workshops to set play expectations, to explain the game's structure, and to build the quest, setting, and characters. Start by reading the **OVERVIEW** to the rest of the players and then instruct different players to lead the subsequent workshops. Keep the **GAME STRUCTURE** handout close in case anyone has questions.

The main section of play starts after the final workshop. It consists of Scenes, organized into Acts, and Confessionals with the Bard. Once play begins, you are just another player, without any formal responsibilities.

Optional: Preset Adventure & Dedicated Bard

If your group has little experience with these types of games or is less comfortable improvising, you may want to use the quick start adventure – **THE NEUROTIC NECROMANCER** – contained at the end of these rules. It has preselected scenes for the group to act out.

Another option for beginner groups is to have just one player – probably you – play the role of the Bard. This can help keep play focused and reduce player anxiety around choosing and ending scenes. See more advice on the **VARIANTS** page.

Game Structure

Workshops

- Overview
- Quest & Setting
- Character Creation & Confessional
- Scenes & Prelude
- Structure of Play

Act One: Setting off on adventure

- Sensory details
- 3-5 Scenes
- Confessional

Act Two: Getting into trouble

- Sensory details
- 3-5 Scenes
- Confessional

Act Three: Racing toward the climax

- Sensory details
- 3-5 Scenes
- Climax and Epilogue

Overview

We're going to create a ridiculous story about a group of incompetent heroes embarking on an epic quest, which they will likely fail. We'll start off with a few interactive workshops that will teach us the rules and help us build the characters and setting. Then, we'll tell the heroes' story by acting out a series of scenes – both during their journey and through interviews with the Bard who is along to document the quest.

Genre and Tone

This is going to be a fun and silly game set in a generic fantasy world – here is some guidance:

- Borrow heavily from fantasy cliches, tropes, and archetypes
- Feel free to remix things you've seen in stories and games
- When playing your character, ham it up and overact
- While interviewing with the Bard, overshare – there's bard-hero confidentiality
- Avoid in-character racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia

Let's go around now and each share our favorite fantasy story or game.

Safety

This is a lightweight game that should be fun for everyone. We're going to use a few safety techniques to ensure we have a good time:

- Cut and slow down: If any player needs to stop a scene due to physical or emotional safety issues, they should loudly say “Cut” – once the issue is addressed, resume play. If a player feels that a scene is getting too intense, they should say “Slow Down” and the other players should dial down the intensity.
- The door is always open: If you need a short break for any reason, step aside and take care of yourself. If you need to leave the game permanently, let everyone know.
- The players are always more important than game: If you ever need to decide between the actual needs of a real person and literally anything else, go with the person.

Quest & Setting

Quest Creation

Our plot focuses on a heroic quest – our adventurers are out to save the world. Let’s define that quest now, including our central villain. Pick from the following list or come up with your own.

- An evil **necromancer** is raising an army of the dead. They must be stopped!
- A **greedy dragon** has kidnapped our ruler and taken them to a rival kingdom. Go rescue them!
- An evil **wizard** is gathering artifacts that will elevate them into a deity. Stop them!
- A **powerful demon** has opened a portal to the underworld. Defeat them and seal it!
- A **charismatic bandit** is redistributing wealth from the rich to poor. Capture them!

Write down the quest on the **OUR ADVENTURE** sheet.

Setting Creation

This quest will take our heroes across the realm and each of our three Acts will take place in a different setting, which we will create using the following table.

Description	Nature	-or-	Civilization
Haunted	Forest		Kingdom
Floating	Clouds		Empire
Wartorn	Swamp		Federation
Bandit Filled	Hills		City States
Hidden	Riverlands		Enemy Territory
Enchanted	Coast		Farmlands
Impoverished	Archipelago		Ruins
Labyrinthine	Tundra		Metropolis
Unstable	Desert		Underworld
Lush	Mountains		Prison Colony
Sunken	Caverns		Trade Route

As a group, create settings by combining a Description with either a Nature or Civilization (e.g. The Haunted Forest). Pick three settings, one for each Act. This corresponds to the following questions:

- Act One: where does our adventure start?
- Act Two: where must our heroes pass through?
- Act Three: where will the climax take place?

When you’ve chosen your settings, write them down on the **OUR ADVENTURE** sheet, then place that sheet where everyone can see it.

Our Adventure

The Quest:

Our Adventure Starts In (Act 1):

And Continues Through (Act 2):

And Finishes At (Act 3):



Character Creation

Heroes

Now that we've established our quest and setting, we're going to make our characters and get to know them through our first confessional. Each player will have one hero they'll play throughout the game. We'll also share the role of the Bard, who is along to document the adventure. In some scenes, we might take on the role of minor characters who inhabit the land.

Build a character concept that includes a flaw and an archetype (e.g. A Cowardly Thief). Pick now from the CHARACTER OPTIONS handout or come up with your own. Announce your choices to the group, as well as your character's pronouns. It's okay if you have multiple characters with the same archetype, but it's generally good to have diversity.

You can choose to call your characters by their archetype or to give them names. There are example names in the handout. If you have nametags, each player should write their character's flaw, archetype, pronouns, and name (optional) on a nametag and wear it.

Here are some important things to know about all of our characters:

- You are committed to the quest from the start of the story
- You start together, though you may not know each other
- You can't quit the quest until the very end, though you can threaten to run away

The Bard

A bard has been tasked with documenting this adventure. They'll be following the heroes and interviewing them through reality-TV style confessionals. The Bard is not the star of this story, they are just here to shine a spotlight on our heroes. They will probably only be present during the confessionals, when we'll take turns playing as them.

First Confessional

We'll get to know our characters by doing our first confessional – pick up a copy of the CONFESSATIONAL QUESTIONS. Pick one player to go first and have them sit in the confessional chair. Have another player be the Bard and ask the following questions:

- What do you look like?
- Why did you join this quest?
- If you succeed, what would you do with the substantial reward?
- What prized possession are you bringing with you?

As the hero, keep your answers on the short side and remember to overshare. As the Bard, feel free to ask clarifying questions, but keep the attention on the hero. Once you have your answers, thank the character.

Then, the person who just played the Bard should sit in the hot seat and play through their character's confessional. Another player should step up to play the Bard for them. Keep rotating through confessionals until everyone has had a turn as both Bard and interviewee.

Character Options

Flaws			
Bumbling		Easily Distracted	
Egotistical		Overconfident	
Greedy		Timid	
Shirking		Amoral	
Reckless		Jaded	
Tactless		Naive	
Ill-mannered		Snooty / Privileged	
Cowardly		High Stress	
Archetypes			
Wizard		Peasant	
Ranger / Scout		Monk	
Warrior / Mercenary		Jester	
Merchant		Potion Maker / Alchemist	
Thief / Rogue		Apprentice	
Noble / Diplomat		Seer	
Barbarian		Healer	
Cleric		Con Artist	
Names (optional)			
Reder	Eras	Wigswe	Sybenn
Fluffy	Terey	Aveel	Earcow
Holna	Gauwalt	Erhild	Enen
Grognax	Aldhelm	Burha	Byme
Bealda	Riffin	Eotant	Aereth
Aelber	Lexand	Rix	Wicthe
Symes	Thilex	Hruna	Annan
Ames	Conwy	Cyna	Sturga

Confessional Questions

These are the questions the Bard can ask during each confessional. They are merely suggestions – feel free to ask follow up questions or make up your own questions based on what is happening in the story. Keep Confessionals short.

Character Creation

- What do you look like?
- Why did you join this quest?
- If you succeed, what would you do with the substantial reward?
- What prized possession are you bringing with you?

After Act One

- What do you miss about home? What's hard about life on the road?
- How do you feel about the party and who annoys you the most?
- Do you think the quest will succeed?

After Act Two

- Who is the biggest liability? Who is most likely to die?
- How do you feel about the plan or the odds of success?

Epilogue

- What just happened?
- What are your plans?



Scenes

We'll spend most of the game framing and playing out scenes where we take on the roles of our characters. Scenes are organized into three Acts across the three settings we created earlier. Each Act will have three to five scenes, depending on the group's interest. Scenes should be just a few minutes long and focus on a specific conversation or encounter.

Any player can propose a scene by giving a short pitch. For example, "I want to see the Overconfident Cleric and Cowardly Barbarian argue about which path to take through the forest." As a group, you can modify a pitch or nix it all together. The SCENE SUGGESTIONS handout has examples scenes for each Act. Scene can involve minor characters, such as a shopkeeper or bridge troll.

Good scenes often have a tension or question baked into their framing, sometimes this takes the form of a strong character goal. Try to set up the *what* of the scene but not the *how* – in the previous example, we say that the Cleric and Barbarian are arguing but not what their preferred routes are – we would find out through play.

There's no need to start the next scene exactly where the previous one left off; scenes don't even need to be thematically linked. When in doubt, look to the scene suggestion handouts for inspiration.

Setting a Scene

When setting a scene:

1. Pick which heroes and minor characters are in the scene
2. Assign players to the roles of the minor characters
3. Set the context – describe the scene's location, participants, and include at least two sensory details

Example: The party makes camp for the night in a grassy clearing. As the first stars come out, they can hear far off growls from unknown beasts. The Overconfident Cleric and Cowardly Barbarian argue about the best path through the forest.

It's totally okay to have scenes with just two or three players. If a player hasn't had a scene in a while, try to include them.

There are three other types of scenes at your disposal:

- Bard's Exposition: As the Bard, narrate a portion the adventurers' quest. This is great for covering parts of the story that wouldn't be interesting to roleplay: a large battle, a travel montage, etc.
- Montage: Act out a series of short scenes that share a premise. Examples: traveling over a distance, fighting a battle, being kicked out of quaint villages.
- Villain Scene: Set up a scene that explores what the villain is working on at that moment. This might feature the main antagonist and their minions or captives.

Scenes, continued

Ending a Scene

You can end a scene at any time by loudly saying “Scene.” Anyone is allowed to end a scene, but whomever pitched the scene is responsible for making sure it doesn’t last too long. It’s always better to end a scene too early than too late.

If the scene ends with a major question unanswered, quickly narrate a resolution. This gives the next player the freedom to set a scene that isn’t directly related to the current scene.

Micro-Confessionals

Players can always jump into the confessional seat and monologue to the Bard. This can happen both during and between scenes. If a confessional happens in the middle of a scene, just pause the rest of the action until the confessional is done.

Advice on Scenes

- Don’t split the party in any permanent manner – it’s okay for two characters to wander off to collect firewood, but future scenes should plausibly start with the entire party in one place.
- Try not to talk over each other. If there are two conversations happening, cut back and forth between them instead of acting them out simultaneously.
- Don’t contradict the fiction – keep building on what your fellow players have established.
- When in doubt, make the obvious choice – don’t feel like every scene framing or character action has to be brilliant or creative. Surreal premises can even get in the way of a good, funny story. Comedy will naturally arise from the character interactions, even in a mundane context.
- Not every scene has to be funny. A quiet or dramatic scene can make a great counterpoint to the comedic scenes.
- If you aren’t sure what’s going on, ask someone.
- Ask for feedback on your scene ideas.



Prelude: The Villain

Before we begin Act One, let's check in on the villain of our quest. First, we need to decide how dangerous our villain is. We'll do so by simultaneously putting our thumbs up (talented) or down (inept).

Take the number of thumbs up and subtract the number of thumbs down, then look up the result.

The Villain	
1 (or better)	The villain is extremely capable and a clear threat to the realm.
0	The villain would be a threat but something is hindering them. Perhaps their own ego, incompetent minions, or a flawed approach.
-1 (or worse)	The villain is a mess and is set up for failure. Any other heroes would have an easy time defeating them but unfortunately it's up to you.

Have a brief discussion about what the result means. Then frame and play out a scene in the villain's lair between them and some minions or captives.



Structure of Play

We're almost ready to play, we just need to cover how the three Acts flow into each other. Each Act starts with sensory details, continues with three to five scenes, and ends with a confessional.

Sensory Details

At the start of an Act, each player will offer a sensory detail for that Act's setting. Examples: the howl of nearby wolves, the stench of rotting flesh, the fluttering banners with royal colors. This helps ease the players into the setting and smooths the transition. After you've all added a detail, start pitching and playing out scenes.

Confessionals

Acts should have three to five scenes, though players are welcome to make more. Once the group is satisfied, you can advance to the next confessional.

Conduct the confessionals just like the one we did during character creation. Consult the CONFESSIONAL QUESTIONS handout for Act specific questions. As before, make sure each player has a turn as both Hero and Bard.

After the confessional, you're ready to start the next Act with another round of sensory details for the new setting the adventurers are entering.

Climax and Epilogue

Act III ends just before we find out if the heroes succeed or fail. There's a special process for determining the outcome. Consult the CLIMAX AND EPILOGUE handout when you're done with Act III scenes.

You are ready to play!

You now know everything you need to start the adventure. When you're ready, describe sensory details for Act I and then start playing out scenes. When in doubt, consult the SCENE SUGGESTIONS and CONFESSIONAL QUESTIONS handouts.

Scene Suggestions

Act One

- Get to know each other's backstories and motives
- Establish party dynamics – who takes the lead?
- Travel through 'friendly' lands
- Accidentally cause trouble with locals
- Create a strategy for the quest
- Hear rumors of trouble ahead
- Stock up at a local merchant
- An ally prepares you for the journey



Act Two

- Get hopelessly lost
- Debate tactics
- Find a safe haven in the wilderness
- Suffer or overcome obstacles
- Make enemies with locals
- Encounter agents of the antagonist
- Gather information
- Cause collateral damage

Act Three

- The party's darkest hour
- Clear the air or rally
- Decide on the final approach
- Make final preparations
- The calm before the storm
- Last chance to turn back
- The plan starts to fall apart

Anytime

- An argument or discussion
- A bet or proposition
- A revelation or shared backstory
- Speculation about the villain
- Conversation while in battle
- Bard interview (multiple players)
- What just happened?
- Someone asks the Bard to edit the record
- A new obstacle is discovered
- The execution of a plan
- The villains minions
- The group is held captive
- A montage

Climax and Epilogue

Vote on the Quest's Outcome

By the end of Act III, the party should be on the verge of completing their quest. The players will now vote to see if the quest succeeds or fails. On the count of three, each player should stick out a hand with a thumbs up (succeed) or thumbs down (fail).

Take the number of thumbs up and subtract the number of thumbs down, then look up the result:

The Quest's Outcome	
2 (or better)	The adventurers pull off an outstanding success
1	The party succeeds, but only by accident
0	The threat has been temporarily averted – it's someone else's problem now
-1	A pyrrhic victory – the quest is technically complete but at a massive cost
-2	The quest is a failure and the heroes have fled, died, or been captured.
-3 (or worse)	The quest has failed and the party has made things worse

Have a brief discussion over what the result means, then jump into the final confessional.

Final Confessional

In the final confessional, the Bard asks *“What just happened?”* and *“What are you going to do next?”* If it makes sense, two adventurers can do a joint confessional.

Sometimes a player's character will die during the climax. If this happens, the Bard can cast the spell *“Speak with Dead”* and conduct the interview with their temporarily resurrected corpse.

Once everyone has given their epilogue, the game is over. Well done!



Variants

Facilitator as Bard

You can play the main part of this game without a facilitator and the players will share the responsibility for keeping the story moving. There is plenty of scaffolding to help you along. However, if a group is new to roleplaying or larp, you have the option of appointing a facilitator.

The facilitator can play the role of the Bard throughout the game. They are responsible for:

- Suggesting scene ideas if the players are stuck
- Introducing each scene with a narration “And so our heroes found themselves...”
- Ending a scene and optionally providing a brief narration to wrap it up

When playing the Bard in a scene, they should stay out of the spotlight and keep the focus on the Players. They are there so that the other Players can have quick, humorous asides “Um... can you leave this out of your tale?” or “When you write this down, make that giant twice as tall”

Tabletop

You can play this game seated at the table, narrating your character’s actions (tabletop), or by moving around the room and acting as your character (larp). I highly recommend trying the larp version – it increases the energy level and heightens the comedy. It will work well even if none of the players have larped or acted.

If you’re playing this game around a table, through video chat, or on a podcast, consider the following tweaks:

- Find ways for your characters to verbalize the actions they are taking. Example: “Ooph! I, uh, didn’t fall, I just thought this would be a good time for some push-ups”
- Have more scenes focus on interviewing characters after major events rather than during them.
- Write the adventurers’ archetypes and flaws on folded index cards so they are visible to all.
- Have one dedicated Bard rather than sharing the role (see more below).
- X-Card: Keep an index card on the table with a big ‘X’ on it. If content arises that a player doesn’t want to have in the story, they can point to the X-Card and everyone should pretend that it didn’t happen. If isn’t clear what the offending content was, stop play and clarify.

Variants, continued

Map Making

Feel free to draw these locations on a map. Have the origin and destination in opposite corners with the “Thru” location somewhere in the middle. Keep adding to the map as the story progresses.

Large Groups

If you have a larger group of adventurers (8+), you can have the group split into smaller parties to accomplish sub-goals or take different routes to the next destination. Have each group play out their scenes in separate spaces. Have the groups meet up at the start of each act and update each other in character, and swap adventurers.

Staged, with Audience Participation

You can also run Behind the Magic as a staged improv show with audience participation. This works best with a dedicated Bard who can set up and end scenes in character. It’s also helpful to have a dedicated villain. If you trust the audience, you can pull them on stage as minions and NPCs.

You can have the audience help with:

- Quest Selection
- Setting Generation
- Character Creation
- Sensory Details
- Scene Prompts

A potential frame story is that the Queen has commissioned a new play from the Bard and the Bard needs the audience’s help to make it amazing.

The Neurotic Necromancer

- Quick Start Quest -

If your group has never played a game like this, you can use these pre-scripted list of scenes to run through. Feel free to deviate from it as inspiration strikes – skip scenes or make up your own. Don't forget to add sensory descriptions and have confessionals between Acts.

Quest: An evil sorcerer –The Neurotic Necromancer – is raising an army of the undead to take over the land. Stop them!

Setting:

- From: The Impoverished Farmlands
- Thru: The Enchanted Forest
- To: The Unstable Ruins

Act I: Setting off on Adventure

- The heroes discuss their skills (all heroes)
- Two heroes make a bet about who will receive more glory (two heroes)
- A local is angry at one hero who stole their food (two heroes, one villager)
- The heroes complain about the locals (all heroes)

Act Two: Getting into trouble

- The heroes are hopelessly lost and debate what to do (all heroes)
- One hero mistakes a villain's minion for an ally (one hero, one minion)
- The heroes discuss their odds of defeating the villain (all heroes)
- One hero wonders if the villain is all that bad (two heroes)

Act Three: Racing toward the climax

- The heroes lay out their final plan (all heroes)
- The heroes make their final preparations (montage with all heroes)
- Two heroes scout ahead to observe the villain (two heroes)
- The plan starts to fall apart (all heroes)

