

**One's a straight  
shooter.**



**One's a total wild  
card.**

**But on the case they are always...**

# **PARTNERS**

**A detective story game for exactly two players**

**by Steve Dee**



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Dedicated to Glen A. Larson and Stephen J. Cannell, who took me in to their worlds as a young boy and made me a writer.

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# The Rundown

“A good cop can’t sleep because he’s missing a part of the puzzle. A bad cop can’t sleep because his conscience won’t let him.”

- Ellie Burr, *Insomnia*

**Partners** is a storytelling game for exactly two players. It emulates the genre of police procedural and mystery solving television. For the purpose of these rules we assume you are familiar with this well-worn but fabulous formula. Some storytelling games assume that one player knows the solution to the mystery, or the book or game box does, and the players must solve it. Others assume that the players make suggestions and the storyteller improvises around those. This is a game where nobody knows the answer until a random card reveals it, and then everyone works together to link scenes and explain the random events that occur. The cards will tell you who did it, but you have to work out how to make it make sense.

If you’ve played other story games or roleplaying games, this is similar but there’s no gamemaster and certainly no pre-written adventures or campaigns. The role of players is not quite the same either, since you are more authors of the show than actors in it and you tell the story more than you play it out. It’s a lot like doing character generation except for the entire story.

One of the key elements of **Partners** is the trope in mystery shows where scenes progress through a kind of word association. One character in the scene will bring up something somewhat tangential. But some part of that statement will inspire the other character to a new thought about the case, leading directly to the next scene. In **Partners** we emulate that (and lovingly satirise it) by using random word generation.



## Gear Up

To play **Partners** you’ll need:

- Something to write on and with
- The two Role Sheets for your team, found at the end of these rules
- An Episode Sheet and Docket Sheet for the episode, also found at the end of these rules
- A regular deck of cards (no jokers)
- A random word generator. We recommend [randomwordgenerator.com](http://randomwordgenerator.com) or [www.thewordfinder.com/random-word-generator](http://www.thewordfinder.com/random-word-generator) or your nearest dictionary.

The other key element of **Partners** is each person will be controlling several characters throughout the story and moving between those characters as the scenes change. You’ll also adopt different roles in scenes, and swap back and forth. To solve the crime, both of you will have to be clever and imaginative and find ways to link random words and events into a fun, crazy story. It will take teamwork. It will take support. You’re going to have to act like...partners.

## How To Use This Book

If you’ve played roleplaying games or story games before, this doesn’t play out like most of them. However, it has some of the same structure: first you’ll make up the characters in play, then you’ll build episodes together. To get started, you can jump straight to *Building Your Partners* and *The*

*Rest of the Roster*. Those two sections build the cast of the show. Then by following the steps in *On*

*the Docket* and *Hit The Streets* you'll go through the steps bit by bit to make your show. If you want to take some time first to set up a more concrete structure to follow, go to *The Show Bible*. If you want options for long term play, or for more than two players, we have those after the core rules. Finally, there's a whole bunch of examples to get you started.

### **Only Two?**

Most roleplaying games allow for a wide variety of player counts, but **Partners** is built specifically for two. You can easily play it with just one player though, and it makes an excellent way to generate story ideas if you are a writer! For playing with more players, there are some guidelines provided alongside the main rules.

### **Permanent Records**

**Partners** is written assuming you're playing face to face. You might be taking short notes with a pen and paper but you're not telling the story to anyone else or preserving it for posterity. But in these modern times there is much to be said by playing using written means such as email, or recording your episodes in a journal or shared document. Since scene setting responsibilities are passed back and forth, the game is perfect for journaling like this, and we heartily recommend this play style also. Likewise the episodes produced make excellent fodder to be written up into stories after the game.

# A Brief Aside About Cops

*“Do you want to be a cop, or do you just want to appear to be a cop? It’s an honest question. A lot of guys just want to appear to be cops. Gun. Badge. Pretend they’re on TV.”*

- Queenan, *The Departed*

**This game is a kind of police propaganda.** And as the world wakes up to the need to drastically defund, abolish and rebuild the police as something other than protectors of the capitalist class, it’s necessary for us to talk a little about how police are presented in this game, and might appear at your table.

The first ever detective story was *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Edgar Allen Poe, written in 1841. The hero C. Auguste Dupin was the world’s first fictional detective, but he was based no small amount on Eugene Francis Vidocq. From the ages of 14 to 34, Vidocq was constantly either committing crimes or on the run from the police. Eventually, exhausted, he turned himself into a police informer to finally stop being put in prison. By teaching the police how to think and act like criminals, he invented not just criminology but the idea of going undercover. During the political unrest and enormous poverty of the Napoleonic era, crime was rampant but uniformed cops were not trusted and could not even enter certain areas. They were (rightly) seen as violent agents of the state sent to crush the poor. With Vidocq’s methods of infiltration, the solving of cases increased greatly. Vidocq was far from a fairytale of a good cop, but his early successes, his friendship with the playwright Balzac and his decision to publish his own autobiography meant his legacy as a real Sherlock Holmes was assured, and his association with the police was part of that legend.

Dupin however, did not work directly for the police. Nor did Holmes; nor did almost any of the great detectives of mystery fiction: Poirot, Marlowe, Jessica Fletcher, Velma Dingley, all private citizens. Audiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century would never have believed for a minute that the deductions of Holmes could come from a police officer: the cops were well known as violent, incompetent thugs. It’s no accident that the Keystone Cops chose that profession to mock, nor that these truncheon-wielding buffoons are often villains in early cartoons. In the modern police, detective is a position (not a rank), and their role in detecting crime is descended from Vidocq’s ideas in that it is rarely about solving mysteries and far more about going undercover.. For the most part, detectives in the real world focus on the enemies of the state or rivals to their capitalist enterprise; they don’t solve crimes.

## Cops Cause Crime

The According to UK figures, fewer than 10% of all crimes reported to police are solved to the ability to make any conviction, and over 80% of all things police are called to deal with aren’t crimes at all. Half of all crime is never reported, rising to over 80% among ethnicities likely to face disbelief or harassment. Police are seldom in danger, with their profession being one of the safest in the world. When cops go on strike, crime always goes down and community safety tends to go up. The primary charges cops bring to court are due to suspects engaging with the police and “resisting arrest”. While we’re here, forensics is increasingly being revealed as far less reliable than we are told (see the Appendix for more.)

But this trend in mysteries changed when Jack Webb came along.

In 1948, Webb worked on a thriller called *He Walked By Night*. The film was lacklustere but the studio got much needed publicity by taking details from a real case and hiring a policeman as a “consultant”, Sergeant Marty Wynn, to add an air of reality. Webb had previously written for radio stories of his favourite detectives like Sam Spade and his noir contemporaries, but this was a new idea: presenting mystery shows as if they were documentaries, and starring cops. Webb had the studio hire Wynn as a stunt and studied police jargon for the name of his new show: *Dragnet*. Each episode began and ended with a disclaimer that “the stories were true, only the names have been changed” and ended with dramatic court verdicts.

Webb was a huge fan of the police and hated that they were shown in the media as endlessly corrupt and ineffectual, and he wrote his show to change all that. And it did: the radio show ran for ten years, the TV show another ten, then came the films, and the reboot in the 60s, in the 70s it turned into Adam 12. Around it, detective fiction followed suit: by the time *Hill Street Blues* was being hailed for its realism the cops were just what Jack Webb had made them out to be: working class joes like you and me trying to do good. And private eyes like Thomas Magnum and Jim Rockford swiftly became a thing of the past in the 90s. In linking cops to the heroism, moral righteousness and puzzle-solving allure of the detective hero, *Dragnet* was the tip of a wedge that orchestrated a revolutionary rebranding. Now television is saturated with cops, and they’ve replaced the private investigator as our society’s symbol of justice done; of crime unraveled and the perpetrators caught.

Cop drama wasn’t alone in celebrating the cop of course; the Western did this as well with the elevation of sheriff as the moral hero. Like the cop, the sheriff is often torn between duty and justice, and more importantly between gunning the guilty down in the justice they deserve or dragging them to a court for something obviously far too lenient. From the war years onwards, America set itself up as the policeman of the world, doing “bad things for good reasons”, and to sell that idea it sold that same idea on a civic scale on the small and big screen. And it works: it has been shown by study after study that the biggest predictor of whether a person respects police and is afraid of crime is the amount of police shows they watch, and it has nothing to do with their lived experience with either.

Since the mystery genre is so entwined with police, this game is therefore part of this tradition. The very name, *Partners*, is an allusion to police tropes, and the original version of this game was based mostly off the TV show *Lucifer*. All of this is not just a long apology or excuse, however, but a reminder to be aware of that propaganda so you can work to disentangle yourself from it, even while enjoying the fiction it has produced.

That said, we wouldn’t want to stop you from using police in your game if you want to, even as a prime focus or as key cast members. It is *perfectly fine* (no, really!) to establish a premise of cops being good and useful, not entirely corrupt and driven to solve mysteries. As long as the premise is drawn knowing it is a fantasy, this is a great and noble story to tell and a wonderful way to have a good time. Enjoy any police stories you encounter, tell those kind of stories with this game, and then go out and burn down a police station afterwards. For legal purposes, that is satire.

Alternatively, disconnect yourself from the modern police saturation and make your Partner heroes anything but cops. Look at the older TV shows and books and model those instead. We’ve tried to give you the tools to make your mysteries and mystery solvers whatever you want them to be.

## Jargon

We use a lot of TV jargon in **Partners**. Some of it is about policing and crime, some of it is about television tropes. Most of it should be clear from context but it isn’t, a good place to look for the former is Wikipedia and for the latter, try TV Tropes at [www.tvtropes.com](http://www.tvtropes.com)

# Building Your Partners

"In an investigation, one dude always has to go opposite the other dude"  
- Troy, *Community*

Before you can create an episode, you must create your team. Playing a game of **Partners** involves playing a roster of six different characters. This section explains the simple process of back and forth that lets you come up with all six. Three will be controlled by one player, and three by another, but all six will be connected. Each set of three controlled by a player will be collected on a single sheet. Effectively, the characters that share the same sheet have relationships that generate little conflict, and that do not change. Characters on different sheets have complex relationships that cause drama and evolve over time.

Follow these steps to build your team.

## 1. Choose Who Will be The Straight Shooter and who will be the Wild Card

You'll have a chance to swap roles between episodes, and characters are shared, but you need to pick one for creation. Both will help solve the mysteries, just in their own unique styles. **Do not talk about anything else.** You'll see why at step three.

Choose the Straight Shooter if you want to play characters who care – about other people, and about what people might think of them. The characters on that sheet are all malcontents, they feel things very strongly and deeply and when things are not how they should be, they must act.

Choose the Wild Card if you want to play characters that don't care that much. Not about the world, and certainly not about what other people say. The characters on that sheet are content with things the way they are, or aren't likely to do anything if they are bothered. Of course, every now and then something niggles. The niggles are the interesting part.

### What Makes A Wild Card?

The important thing to remember is that the Wild Card isn't always the one wearing the loud Hawaiian shirt. In *Bones*, the lady who is geeky and button-down is in fact the Wild Card because she has little skill with or concern for social mores and conventions. In *Inspector Morse*, the Wild Card is Morse because, again, he's socially inept and outcast. Even though he's the detective in charge, he's the goofy one. Sometimes, the Wild Card is the wild card because they care about the law *too much* (like Frasier in *Due South*, The Good Cop in *The Good Cop* and The Rookie in *The Rookie*), while the sensible Straight Shooter is the one who cares about real world concerns that the Wild Card ignores. Now, the Wild Card CAN be the party animal, like Lucifer in *Lucifer* or Tony in *NCIS*, which brings us to the point: ANYONE can be the Wild Card or the Straight Shooter, and any trait can justify it. It's how it's played that matters. The Wild Card frustrates the Straight Shooter; that is the law set in stone. Justify it with literally anything you like.

## 2. Take Your Respective Sheets and Separate

Print copies of the sheets at the back of the book, and grab a pen or pencil. You can also use scrap paper if you want BUT you need to be in two different rooms or sitting apart from each other for this



part. So if you're copying down from the book, you'll have to take turns, passing the book between you.

### 3. Answer the questions about the Partners

What did you do before you were a detective? This doesn't mean that you can't be young and just out of the police academy, if that is an idea you like. It just means your past informs your decision. Why join the academy in the first place? Before is also because: why become a detective? Everyone has a reason.

How can we tell you're the straight shooter/wild card? It's not just a reason, it's how we can tell. It's the things you say, how you dress, how you put your feet up on the desk whenever you sit down. It's all these and more.

Finally, what about your counterpart do you in fact respect? A good team compliments each other, and despite the aggravation, you are drawn together because your opposite has something you lack.

Be brief, no more than ten words or so per answer. More will be revealed as the series goes on. Plus we already know a lot about you from the fact that you shoot straight or are a wild card.

**Important: Do this separately from the other player.** This is so that you end up with a complimentary effect where the TV show you create is completely unplanned and could not have been created working together. Don't add any more answers than described UNTIL you come back together.

*Example: Kate is playing the Straight Shooter. She decides she follows the rules to keep people safe, and wonders what kind of person values safety. On a whim she writes down "Before I was a detective I was an astronaut and space is super dangerous". In the other room, Sarah writes down "Before I was a detective I was a defence lawyer with a smart suit and a smarter mouth". When the two come together, they decide that being an astronaut means the show needs to be set in space! Good thing they still need lawyers in space. Kate decides her character internalized her need to be safe as an astronaut. You can tell she's the straight shooter because she always double checks everything and carries spares, like a good astronaut. Sarah decides her lawyer is clearly the Wild Card because she always thinks of some non-obvious reason a crime happened, which she would sell to the jury. Kate thinks her character needs a wild card because she wishes she could not be in charge of everyone's safety all the time. She admires the Wild Card's ability to let go. Sarah decides her lawyer is full of guilt about getting bad guys off. She wishes she had once done something to help the world, instead of hurt it.*

## Break Cases, Not Friendships

**Partners** is a game where players make suggestions and the tale grows by having those suggestions be added into a lovely unpredictable mix. Nobody should block by saying they don't like someone else's ideas, and what is said should always be accepted with enthusiasm, with an additive spirit of shared storytelling. That said, if you are playing your game with someone you don't know well, you might want to be clear from the start whether you have any limits or restrictions on what is and isn't appropriate for your show. Not all detective shows are created equal, and it can be subtle how they differ: the violence and corruption on *The Shield* is different from the violence and corruption on *The Wire*. Although it's fun to know nothing about the content, figure out what rating your TV show might get, and what hour it might be shown, on which channel. Also, be ready to use an X card or a time out if anyone brings up something that makes someone feel uncomfortable. Always play safe.

### 4. Compare Notes, Check Your Content and Create Names

Now you get to come back together and make sense of it all. Only when you do this will you know what your show is really about. This is the time to discuss any issues that are outside your comfort zone or just your idea for a show. Check your content levels. Name your show and name your characters. To help with tone, pick a timeslot and/or network as well.

*Sarah is surprised that Kate is playing an astronaut and isn't the weird one – but goes with it. It suggests a show where being an astronaut isn't extremely rare but is rare enough to make someone a hard-ass. They think about maybe setting the show in 1960s Florida, solving crimes against the background of the space race, but Sarah feels it doesn't fit her sleazy lawyer character. They decide instead to set the show in space, on the moon. They don't want to be cops so they decide that on Lunar Base Asimov there's a big organized crime problem, intertwined with evil corporate control. For years Sally has been protecting them but she's had a come-to-Jesus moment and set up her own law firm protecting the innocent. Amy is an ex astronaut who worked for a space exploration corp; she needs to blow the whistle and make the world better. They remember the short lived 90s show Legwork about a lawyer-cum-private-eye and note it down as a reference.*

*Kate decides her character's name will be Lieutenant Amy Ride. Sarah names her character Sally Shade, known to be the shadiest lawyer in town*

### **5. Swap Sheets And Create One Secondary Character For Your Opposite**

Give your sheet to the other player. They choose either of the two remaining characters on the sheet, and answer the questions. Do it so the other person can't see, as before – the lack of consultation is what makes it interesting and unpredictable. These characters are discussed more below, with advice on filling out the questions, and on who these characters are.

### **6. Swap Back and Fill in the Other Character**

Get your sheet back and fill in the character left blank on your sheet. Make sure everyone has a name and you understand your relationship to them. Then you're ready to play! More on these characters is coming up ahead.

*Example: Sarah decides that the Touchstone is a mobster Sally once got off scot free. She talks to him to remind herself why she left being a defense lawyer. Kate decides that the Superior is the governor of the colony, who deep down prefers things to be quiet and still so there's enough oxygen and kelp chips for everyone. She will come to blows with him about this, clearly. Handing the sheets*

## **Names Always Come Last**

Naming people is one of the hardest things about writing anything and mysteries require so many people. Fill in everything else first then think of good names, collaborating with each other to help brainstorm. The same goes for generating suspects below. To speed things up, grab a baby name book or use an online name generator like <https://www.name-generator.org.uk/> Remember too that names don't matter that much in mysteries – it's the butler who did it, or the angry mistress, not James or Charlotte.

## **Swapping Roles**

**Partners** is based on the model where the Wild Card and the Straight Shooter stay the same. On the other hand, great dramatic moments can happen when they switch over. That can be for just one episode, like when Bunk cheats on his wife in *Life on the Street*. Or it can be part of the whole schtick, like in *Rush Hour*. In a much more subdued form, Stabler and Benson in *SVU* often take turns switching about who is going to be the more intense this week.

*back, Kate decides the Subordinate is their front desk secretary who runs errands and has never been off-moon and never shuts up about how nice Earth must be. It's a fun tic, so Sarah decides to reverse it: she makes her oddball an old hermit ex-miner who is terrified of space, but who has been on the Moon long enough to know everybody and everything, so he makes a good informant.*

# The Rest of the Roster

*“Well, Ducktective, it looks like you really quacked that case!”*

*“Don’t patronize me, son”*

- *Gravity Pines*

Every mystery solving double act is based on a core duo. The rest of the crowd varies. In **Partners** we’ve come up with a set of four others that captures most of the dynamics at play. Not every mystery show will fit our format but most of them will slot near enough. We’ve provided lots of examples of them in the source material. Note that not all these shows focus on two central figures who are opposites; they still often feature these archetypes in their supporting cast. Likewise you can shift ensemble shows so they can be played with the *Partners* rules.

## The Superior

Everybody answers to someone. The Partners always have somebody who is in charge of them. Sometimes this is good: it stops them breaking the rules, keeps them focused and points them in the right direction when they get lost. Sometimes it is bad, because the Superior has other bosses, and he doesn’t care about your case. In a police chain of command, the Superior is almost always the direct superior of the two Partners but there are other ways to imagine them. They could be a lawyer or judge who must try or convict the cases they bring in. They could be an old mentor or teacher one or both are trying to impress. They could be someone outside the police force who pulls the strings or controls their power, access or resources, or controls some other aspect of their lives, like access to the Touchstone. Sometimes the Superior can be a powerful criminal or some other enemy, who is dueling with the detectives. Or it could be someone who might be an enemy, but it’s not clear, and until the Partners know for sure, they have to watch their step. The Superior is often given societal aspects we associate with respect: they are older, more conservative, have a parental role. On TV they are typically old white men but again, we can do better.

The Straight Shooter has the most storied relationship with the Superior. The Wild Card doesn’t care enough to be cowed by the Superior’s power. That’s one reason why the Straight Shooter gets so infuriated. She’s trying to deal with the Superior and their demands, but the Wild Card refuses to help. Hence the Superior is on the Wild Card’s sheet. The Straight Shooter and the Superior cross swords often. They both often want the same thing, but disagree about how to get it. Sometimes the Straight Shooter is the Superior’s attack dog, but the Superior has to be sure to poke the Straight Shooter in just the right way to make it happen. Sometimes it’s all the Superior can do to protect the Straight Shooter from themselves, and from damaging their good name or that of the whole police department. The Straight Shooter is very bad for the Superior’s blood pressure – and vice versa.

*Example Superiors: Vetinari (to Vimes – Carrot is the Wild Card), Doakes in Dexter, Gibbs in NCIS, Terry and Captain Holt in Brooklyn 99, Brass in CSI, Adam, Anita van Buren and all the other great Law and Order bosses, Captain Gates in Castle, Rawls and Daniels in The Wire, Stottlemeyer in Monk, Carlton Lassiter in Psych.*

## The Oddball

The Wild Card can't carry a TV series on his eccentricities alone. There always needs to be someone else a little bit strange. The guy with the weird hobbies or the strange demeanour. He's too smart and useful to just be the Subordinate, but not antagonistic enough to be the Wild Card themselves – at least until they get their own show. In police procedural shows the Oddball is very often in a medical, tech or scientific role, because that's how American television deals with smart people: the audience can't be made to feel inferior so the smart person either becomes the Subordinate if mockable, or the Oddball if not. The Oddball, like the Touchstone, can also come from a completely outsider culture, providing a contrast to the crime world and a palette cleanser for the audience. They might not actually be that odd to the audience, or to the city they police, but they are to the Partners or to the world of fighting crime. Sometimes the Oddball is weirder than the Wild Card – the Wild Card is just straight enough to be a detective, and the Oddball shows us a more extreme version of them. Sometimes a way to get one or two characters to be the Oddballs is to have them play out a romantic subplot.

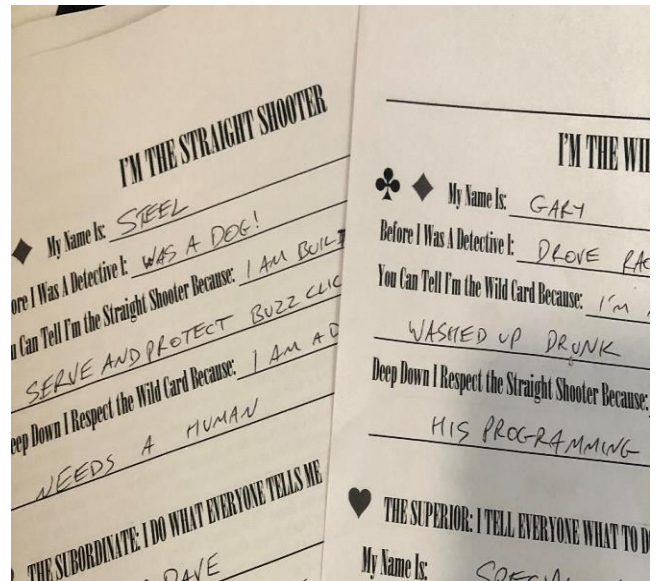
The Oddball and the Wild Card double up a lot, hence they don't have a lot of drama in their relationship. Scenes together lead nowhere; they both occupy the same role socially, societally and dramatically much of the time. But for the Straight Shooter, the Oddball is another cross to bear. Just like the Wild Card, they are infuriatingly strange. Unlike the Wild Card, they seem nicer or more approachable or different. They're not always around, so their relationship is less directly antagonistic. Because of this, the Oddball brings out the side of the Straight Shooter that admires the Wild Card, and helps them explore that relationship. Just as the Touchstone humanizes the Wild Card, the Oddball softens the Straight Shooter.

*Example Oddballs: Abby in NCIS (but not McGee, see below), Ella in Lucifer (who is almost a direct copy of Abby), Munch and Ice T in SVU, Eli in Lie to Me, Boyle in Brooklyn 99, Huggy Bear in Starsky and Hutch, Agatha in Magnum P.I., Ryan in The Good Cop*

## The Subordinate

Somewhere in the life of the Straight Shooter and the Wild Card, there's someone beneath them both. They're often an employee, someone whose job it is to serve one or both partners. Likely they work at the police station, but they could just as easily be a maid or a handyman or a doorman or even a butler. They could be the guy who makes the coffee or the donuts. Subordinates don't have to be an employee, however; there are other ways to be below others, especially since the Subordinate only has to be below one of them. They can be socially low, in the eyes of the Partners, such as an ex-lover or someone from their past. Or they can be someone society sees as lower, because they are young, or old, or foreign or outcast in some way. They aren't weird enough to be the Oddball though (see below) and are someone whose status makes them easily mocked, and comfortably mocked. *Note that who television portrays as acceptable for mockery is of course a dark area that reveals our comfortable bigotry; remember there is no need to model TV so much it makes people uncomfortable. We can always rise above the source material.*

Whether the Subordinate is below the Straight Shooter or not, it doesn't matter: the Straight Shooter's relationship with them remains static. The Straight Shooter expects the Subordinate to do their job





and be the one thing in their life they don't have to care about. Usually the Subordinate doesn't get in the way of the Straight Shooter. But to the Wild Card, the Subordinate is a plaything. The Wild Card pokes at the Subordinate, either to exert their dominance or to inspire the Subordinate to be more dominant. Or both in the same scene. The Wild Card gets push back from most people, but the Subordinate puts up with it, and the Wild Card needs more attention than that. So he pokes and pokes, and causes mischief.

*Example Subordinates: Dan in Lucifer, McGee in NCIS, Herc and Prez in The Wire, Dano in Hawaii-50, Kevin and Javier in Castle, Ted Early in Life, Torres in Lie to Me, Kimball in The Mentalist, Zak in Bones, Mike in the Closer. God I love Mike.*

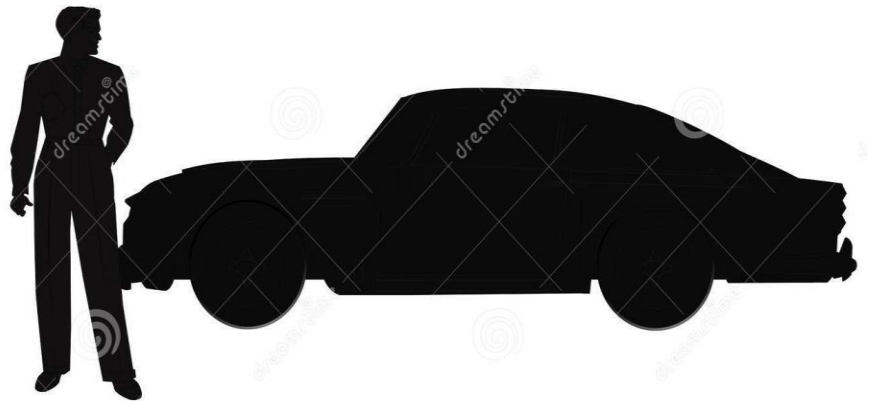
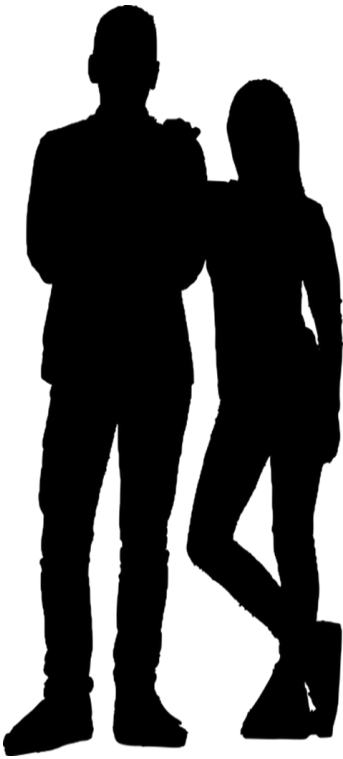
### The Touchstone

The Partners ultimately, are all about their work. If they have passions, they pursue them with equal fidelity and blind devotion. But eventually the

real world always comes calling, for them – and more importantly, the audience. The role of the Touchstone is to exist outside the world of crime, murder and police, and in a very different world instead. The Touchstone is very often a child, as they are a stand-in for innocence while also being able to be brutally honest. Could be the Straight Shooter's child (like in Lucifer) or the

Wild Card's child (like in Castle) but the effect is the same: they bring the tough heroes down to earth, taking the wind out of their sails and the cork out of their ass. At the same time, they remind the Partners of Why They Fight. To make the world safe for the Touchstone. Or because the Touchstone did it before them, if they are an elder or mentor character. In many shows, the Touchstone is actually dead (Lie to Me, The Mentalist) and is only shown in flashbacks. Very occasionally the Touchstone is a criminal, the one that the cops never quite catch but not powerful enough to be a Superior. Quark in DS9 could be considered a Touchstone, to Odo and Kira. So could Garak, in his own way.

The Straight Shooter often has the biggest emotional connection to the Touchstone – it's their child they need to protect (and juggle with their job), their family they let die, their father's reputation they must uphold. So why is the Touchstone on the Straight Shooter's sheet? Because again, their relationship never changes. The Straight Shooter will never truly be good enough (or cool enough) for the Touchstone, in the Shooter's head. And the Touchstone will always forgive the Shooter for being human. But for the Wild Card, the Touchstone is a mystery that throws them off balance. The Touchstone is untouchable. Again, it's about negative attention: the Subordinate appeals to the Wild Card because they don't push back and the Touchstone has no need to push back. Their jimmies cannot be rustled by the Wild Card's schtick. So the Wild Card must keep going back to investigate. Or to desperately try and earn enough respect to warrant being noticed, or obeyed, or thought of as cool. Often the Wild Card has hurt the Touchstone and is trying to make amends or rebuild the relationship.



*Example Touchstones: Trixie in Lucifer, Alexis in Castle, Cal's mother in Lie to Me, Constance and Jennifer in Life, Stabler's daughters in SVU, Angela in Bones, Hailey in Happy, Natalie in Monk and weirdly, Henry Spencer in Psych.*

### More than Two Players?

There are three ways to play **Partners** if you have more than two players. The first way is Ensemble Mode. Choose two players to be the Straight Shooter and the Wild Card, and have the other players take the roles of characters from the Rest of the Roster. This is good for three or four players because the minor characters have much less to do, so the other players can share those roles. This is also a good option for people who are new to story games, shy or just not feeling creative: they can watch much of the time instead. In Team Mode, divide all players into two separate groups and each team gets a sheet. That team is in charge of developing their sheet and playing those characters. Whenever a scene occurs, a new person from each team plays the characters required.

Next, there is Pass the Mike Mode where players act in sequence along a line. The first two players will get the most say in the nature of the Straight Shooter and Wild Card but each new step in character generation is passed to the next person in line. The characters belong to the whole group and are simply controlled by which ever two people are next in line to play.

*Example: Glenda, Lars, Steve and Jai all decide to play Pass The Mike Mode. Glenda decides she's going to play the Wild Card and Lars will fill in the Straight Shooter. Next up Steve will decide who the Subordinate is and Jai will write up the Superior. Glenda decides who the Touchstone is, and so on. In the first scene, Steve will be playing the Wild Card as they are the next player in line, and Jai will play the Straight Shooter.*

The final option is to change how many main characters there are: in a game with three players you can have two Wild Cards and one Straight Shooter, or vice versa. With four players, you can have two of each. Don't add more minor characters as you will already have quite a lot of things to keep on screen! *Teenage Bounty Hunters* is an example of a show with two Wild Cards (Sterling and Blair) annoying one single Straight Shooter (Bowser). In *Beverly Hills Cop* you have one Wild Card (Axel Foley) and two Straight Shooters (Taggart and Rosewood). The "two vs two" mode ends up looking like an action squad: you have two characters who

## The American Family

One of the recurring tropes in all sorts of American TV shows is that the characters quickly end up resembling a family unit, because producers and executives and advertisers know this is the best way to make your show accessible to a wide audience. The Superior acts like a stern patriarch, often coupled with a less-stern mother figure, and then the main characters act like the children. In the case of *Brooklyn 99*, this is made explicit (and is hanging a lampshade on the trope) by how both Jake and Amy refer to Captain Holt as their surrogate father (with Jeffords acting like a mother). If you need a strong hook in a flash, look around for parent-child models.

In *Partners* terms, you can think of *Brooklyn 99* thus: Amy is the Straight Shooter, Jake the Wild Card, Charles the Subordinate, Holt the Superior, Rosa the Oddball and Terry is the Touchstone, with the last few changing depending on the episode. Terry loves being the Oddball.

## Rotating Casts

In some mystery shows, the supporting cast changes as often as the murder suspects. Not just between seasons, but every single episode, because the hero wanders around the place connecting with different friends and relatives and events. In some cases, the Wild Card will have a new Straight Shooter every single episode as they move from town to town. Can't decide on an option for one of the four support cast on the Roster? Change them each time. *Jonathon Creek* is a great example of a show where the Superior changes each episode. In *The Fugitive* and in some Western shows, the Touchstone was always someone different each week. A situation with lots of underlings could have many Subordinates – like on a starship, perhaps. Another idea is have several people take one role. Medavoy and Martinez are the Subordinates in *NYPD Blue* as a double act. In *Bones*, the Touchstone is sometimes Angela but can equally be Bones' mysterious and oft-returning family members. As long as the roles remain, you can bring in any folks you like.

are stoic and long suffering and two who are outlandish and emotional. You can see this in things like *The Fifth Element* (Korben Dallas and Father Cornelius vs Leeloo and Ruby Rhodd) or in *Justice League* (serious Batman and Wonder Woman vs the sassy Flash and Aquaman). Note though that you can't do this for all films as very often the Straight Shooter/Wild Card element is attached to a mentor/student dynamic or a love story which is outside this model. Doesn't mean you couldn't play *Star Wars* as Leia and C3PO being the Straight Shooters to Wild Cards Han and R2D2, of course....



# THE SHOW BIBLE

*“That won’t work – he’s gay and she’s an alien”*

- The Doctor, *Doctor Who*

Detectives come in all kinds of shapes. Consultants. Lawyers. Doctors. Private investigators. Writers. Teachers. Journalists. Dogs possessed by angels sometimes. So why are cops so prevalent in fiction?

It’s not just for propaganda: it’s because it’s easier to write stories for them. Every mystery story needs a reason for a detective to become involved in what is often a deeply private or secretive matter, a steady supply of evidence turning up at regular intervals, and easy access to a variety of evidence gathering scenes. Cops have these in abundance: we believe that mysteries arrive at their door many times a day and that they have the power and access to conduct suspect interviews, collect physical evidence and witness statements, engage public reporting, conduct search and seizure and of course take the criminal to justice at the end. If you want to make your show not about cops, that involves figuring out exactly what kind of things your detectives can and cannot do, and how they go about doing so. Defining these things lets you figure out what kind of TV show you are making. In TV writing jargon, the “show bible” covers these elements. Grab the sheet that says Show Bible and fill it out in steps.

## 1. The Blurb

Forget name for now. Names, as we said in the prior section, come last. But every show needs a hook, a way to sum it all up. Chances are, in your sketch of the two leads, you’ve got some idea already of what it’s all about. Most detective shows are about how person X (plus or minus person Y)

### Or Keep It Loose

When more than one person is involved, writing things down clearly can be a great help to keep everyone on the same page and giving a nice springboard for ideas that head in the same direction, not too far “off script”. On the other hand, if you’re feeling in sync with each other and just want to see what happens, skip the bible and head straight onto episodes. This section is entirely optional. That said, you should always talk about safety tools no matter what (see part six).

On the other hand, you can do the opposite and do the Bible first up, before the Partners and the Roster, if you like things to be less random and more predictable. You can figure out what best suits you, how freewheeling you want to play it. We trust you to know better than us.

solve mysteries and fights crime. But you may want to add a bit more to it than that, so you both know what the main focus of the show is. Is it more about solving crimes or is it about helping people in trouble? Are those crimes cleverly planned murders in the houses of the mighty or are they grim tales of the underclass acting against terrible forces of deprivation?

Try to make it short and punchy. Less than twenty five words is good. It needs to be something that fits in a TV guide. This not only helps it be

clear and memorable, it also gives you space to go off script when you need to. If you take a hundred words to specify things, you might end up with a lot less freedom.

*Example: Sarah and Kate decide they want to use lots of police tropes but not actually be cops so they decide that the show is about something they call “space law”. The idea that they are doing a*

show with lawyers means they need to sometimes do technobabble about legal issues, but because the laws are all new on the moon, they don't have to be experts! They decide their show is about an ex-cop and an ex- high paid attorney trying to bring justice to a corrupt system they unfortunately participated in for many years – on the moon. They decide the name “Moonrise” has a nice sense of redemption in its name. Their first draft of the blurb is “An ex-cop and an attorney try to bring justice to the corporate controlled lunar colony of the future”. But that might be too specific about the nature of their enemy and sometimes it might not be about being an ex-cop or a lawyer. So they just bring it back to “Two driven women try to bring justice to the lunar colony of 2079”.

## 2. Episode Hooks

Mysteries need to arrive at the door (metaphorically or otherwise) of the Partners. This will help you decide how your episodes usually begin. Broadly this happens in one of four different ways. Choose, draw a card or come up with your own idea. Note that some shows use lots of these combined, you could draw at the start of each episode!

Suit	Hook
Clubs	We're Assigned Cases
Diamonds	Clients Come to Us
Hearts	Something Bad Happened
Spades	A Friend In Need

Assigned Cases is the standard format for cop shows and is very well known. However, you can mix it up a bit by how and when the cops arrive. The Detectives of *Cold Case* are assigned cases long in the past, and Inspector Columbo rarely shows up at the scene of the crime. A client showing up involves someone coming through the door and asking for help for most private eyes or lawyers, but clients “arriving” for doctors or coroners present problems in a less direct way. All of these folks may also discover trouble themselves when they stumble onto a situation where something seems awry, whether through their own professional dealings or in the media. That's the third option: Something Bad Happened. There is no particular client per se, but a need for justice to be done. If there is a personal connection, then we have the last option. It is a lot like the Client option but the connection is emotional not professional. This doesn't mean the friend has to be someone known very well. For wandering heroes like The Littlest Hobo, David Banner in the *Incredible Hulk TV show* or Richard Kimble in *The Fugitive*, the friend is often someone they just met. Likewise for tough guys like The A-Team or Spenser for Hire:

something bad has happened, but there's always a victim they meet first.

### Write Around It...

Matthew Nix who wrote *Burn Notice* famously hated having to write each episode's hook, explaining how the lone wolf ex-spy Michael Weston would get involved in the mystery of the week. He cursed out John Rogers when he watched Rogers' show *Leverage* because Rogers cleverly never explains the hook at all: the client simply turns up at Nate's bar with their problem, and the series never once explains how they find each other. The term “veil” is often used in RPG rules to discuss things that we agree happen but we don't “show” in play, it happens “off screen”. You don't have to just use this to keep people safe though. You can use it to just make your games run more smoothly. If you can't think of how something happens in game, just say it happens off screen.

In many cases the difference between these are minor, especially structurally. Hercule Poirot typically starts with a client, but becomes friends with them often. But that still feels very different to Miss Marple, who always assists friends. Indeed, Christie invented Marple because it was often extremely difficult to think of why someone would involve a detective in the situation at hand, and it became increasingly unlikely he would simply be there at the time. Whereas dear old Miss Marple just always had a Friend In Need.

*Example: Sarah and Kate are running a law firm but don't want clients coming in, as that seems hard to write. They want to start their stories right at the crunch, showing up where people don't want them to. They decide their most common hook is Something Bad Happened – usually, some element of justice has been missed by the sloppy moon cops and the Governor wanting quick solutions.*

### 3. Justice Provided

As mentioned, police stories have it easy. The hooks are assigned automatically, and just as simply, the episode ends with the suspect hauled away in handcuffs, usually with a confession and/or incontrovertible evidence. For extra points, there's a chase scene or an altercation. But just as with hooks, there are variations on the theme even in the familiar options. *The Closer* always ends with a confession. Columbo almost always gets a confession, and so does Perry Mason but both in very different ways. *Monk* always ends with a gathering of the suspects and a flashback through the method and how it was solved. At time isn't any confession or evidence if Monk is clearly right! Justice is served by Monk solving the problem. Whereas *Dragnet* ended by announcing the sentence received, *Lucifer* almost always with a chase, and *Law and Order* with a verdict and a pithy and plaintive reaction to it and the case in general.

Each option creates its own tempo and shapes the nature of the investigation. If the show doesn't care much about the law, then an arrest is usually an end to it, but *Law and Order* needs to get all the way to a conviction which means the evidence must be much more rock solid. While at the other end, detectives like Marple often don't even need the police to show up, and is never about scientific analysis, only who saw whom saying what. Having a sense of where and how your episode needs to end thus shapes the kind of evidence to be gathered along the way. In some rare cases, knowing the guilty party doesn't matter at all unless they can be trapped into confession or self-implication. There's even a small part of the genre where there has to be revenge or vigilante justice: folks like the A-Team or The Equalizer don't care so much about finding the guilty as ensuring they are taken down or stopped. That can involve leaving them tied up next to evidence for the cops to find, surrendering to superior gunplay, or even a bullet to the head.

Come up with your preferred option (which again, can change between episodes) or draw randomly.

Suit	Justice
Clubs	The Guilty Part is Spooked
Diamonds	Here's What Really Happened
Hearts	Self-Implication Required
Spades	The Tides Turn

The Guilty Party is spooked is the situation where the detectives don't have to do anything at all. As soon as they solve the mystery, the correct guilty party somehow knows they have and attacks them or runs for it. Just getting to the end of the episode makes it happen as a fait accompli. Here's What Really Happens is slightly easier, where all it takes is running through the flashback with everyone gathered together. If that doesn't provoke a confession, then Self-Implication is Required, either through some sort of trick or confrontation with undeniable evidence.

The Tides Turn is where evidence alone isn't enough. The detectives must provide a great body of evidence, a water-tight legal case or otherwise convince the perpetrator that their number is up. That might involve chasing them down and using violence to expose the truth (which doesn't have to be dark, this is actually how every Scooby Doo episode ends!) or something more elaborate where they lose whatever power or edge they have, or the protection of their enemies, or decide it is no longer worth arguing with cops, and will call their lawyer as they go quietly.

#### 4. Easy and Difficult Actions

Every detective – or pair of detectives - have their own style of how they solve crimes. Some things come naturally to them, some not so much. Some will use their training as a Canadian Mountie while others will rough up some punks to get to the truth. By specifying what comes easily, the players get a sense of what methods will come up most often in procedural scenes.

However just because a detective has a signature style doesn't mean they don't think outside the box – it's just less common, and more dramatic. It often comes with consequences and thus has more spotlight time. That means you can't do it too often. **Each time you use a difficult action in a scene, you must wait three more procedural scenes before using another difficult action.** This means there is a limit of only four difficult actions per episode (as there are twelve procedural scenes), one per act.

Choose or draw randomly to get three easy and three difficult actions from the table below. Note that you can't have duplicates anywhere so draw until you get six different results. Also note that the ones with the \* should be used sparingly – only one of those should be easy for any show, or the detectives start to feel magical. Which is fine as long as you're okay with that kind of show! Even so, try to stop at two. Monk for example can see the smallest details and make great leaps of logic; Columbo can see the smallest details and deduce intimate truths. Patrick Jayne can make great leaps of logic and deduce intimate truths. Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock can do all three and it gets tiresome...

Of course, detectives can do many things that aren't on these lists. The easy list is simply to give a list of ideas. It can be assumed that things that are neither easy or difficult happen all the time. Nor is this set in stone: it can be fun to make a scene where something that should be easy or normal is suddenly difficult. Like everything in this chapter, this is designed to give ideas not make it harder to think of them. Likewise, difficult actions can provide great character ideas: so much of what makes a great character is the things they believe don't work or dislike using.

There will also be things that your detectives will never do, because they are simply outside the genre, or because players do not want to see them in the game. For more on this, see Lines and Veils, below. Difficult things happen; they are difficult, not impossible.

Card	Action
A	Interviewing people
2	Appeal to the public
3	Search people and places
4	Get physical evidence
5	Get medical or financial evidence
6	Use force or intimidation
7	Get criminal records
8	Follow or find people
9	Have countless contacts
10	Expert academic knowledge
J	Deduce intimate truths*
Q	See the smallest details*
K	Make great leaps of logic*

*Example: For easy actions, Sarah and Kate draw an Ace, a five and a nine. Countless contacts fits with their Oddball character of the old moon prospector and with Sally's years dealing with the criminal element. Interview*

*suspects makes sense too: Amy is a famous space hero and people want to talk to her. They decide that they or their Subordinate has a relationship with someone at the coroner's office and that might be an interesting sub-plot to develop.*

*For difficult actions they get a three, a seven and a Jack. Three and seven make sense for lawyers who are disliked by cops: they are blocked from getting records at the station and at every crime scene there are beat cops telling them they can't come in. They'll have to think around those limitations. It seems they have trouble with psychology, of spotting the deeper meaning behind what their suspects say. Sarah suggests that Sally just assumes everyone is lying, so she trusts in the law instead. "Everybody lies;" she says. "You go crazy trying to untangle them all. It's easier just to assume they're lying and figure out the truth yourself."*

Here are some examples of Easy and Difficult lists for different professions. Note that just because you use these professions doesn't mean you have to use these lists – your cops might be disarming types like Columbo who always gets people talking or bad at noticing details like Inspector Morse. Your private eye might be great on small details (Batman in the Silver Age) or great at force and intimidation (Batman in the Bronze Age). And so on.

## ...Or Hang A Lampshade On It

"Hanging a lampshade on something" is a slang term for a screenwriting tradition where the writer needs to use a well-worn and tired cliché (or a trope that for some other reason is unappealing) so when they use it instead of making it invisible they highlight how stupid the cliché is. This lets them still use the idea but the audience feels included in a joke about how genre-savvy they all are. A great example is at the end of the recent Jennifer Aniston film *Murder Mystery* where the detectives solve the case in front of the four suspects as in a drawing room mystery and then the culprit does NOT simply confess, much to the surprise of audience and detectives alike. Sometimes a great way to think of new and exciting scenes is to take away a trope. Instead of assuming "it just happens", try to justify what normally happens! Or instead of justifying how it happens, make up a scene where it doesn't happen. Make the easy suddenly difficult and the expected suddenly strange. Brainstorming new solutions can create amazing creative scenes unlike any other.

<b>Profession</b>	<b>It Is Easy To...</b>	<b>It is Difficult To...</b>
Cops	Get physical evidence Use force or intimidation Get criminal records	Interview people (nobody talks to cops!) Appeals to the public (see above) Search people and places (get a warrant)
Lawyers	Get financial information Use intimidation Interview people	Get medical information Search people or places Get physical evidence
FBI	Get criminal records Appeals to the public Find and follow people	Get physical evidence Interview people (local authorities distrust them) Have countless contacts
CSI	Get physical evidence Search people and places Expert academic knowledge	Use force or intimidation Interview people Follow or find people
Private Detectives	Follow or find people Have countless contacts Deduce intimate truths	Get physical evidence Get medical information Appeal to the public
Thugs	Use force or intimidation Search people or places Follow or find people	Interview people Appeal to the public See the smallest details
Coroners	Get physical evidence Get medical information Get criminal records	Interview people Search people or places Appeals to the public
Doctors	Interview people Get medical information Expert academic knowledge	Get criminal records Search people or places Follow or find people
Psychiatrists	Interview people Deduce intimate truths Get medical information	Get financial information Search people or places Get physical evidence
Mentalists/Cold Readers	Interview people Deduce intimate truths See the smallest details	Get criminal records Get medical information Get financial information
Priests	Interview people Appeal to the public Have countless contacts	Get criminal records Get physical evidence Use force or intimidation
Journalists	Appeal to the public Follow or find people Have countless contacts	Get criminal records Get medical information Get physical evidence
Mystery Writers	Appeal to the public See the smallest details Make great leaps of logic	Get physical evidence Get criminal records Search people and places
True Crime Writers	Get physical evidence Deduce intimate truths Appeal to the public	Get criminal records Make great leaps of logic Use force or intimidation
Celebrities	Interview people Search people and places Have many contacts	Get criminal records Get medical information Follow or find people

## 5. The Long Term

Like everything else in this section, this is optional, and this is *even more optional*. **Partners** works just fine as a one-off game; its loose definitions and emphasis on “mad-lib” design makes it great to try out whatever random idea you can come up with. And its iterative episode core means it can grow repetitive if you play it dozens of times. But if you do want to think about playing a series of episodes, this is where you can make notes towards that. You’ll want to check out the chapter on long-term play for more.

Historically, TV episodes and especially the mystery shows were designed to stand alone, as it not be expected that the audience would loyally follow the show. Nowadays, bingeing entire runs is *de rigeur* and as a result shows more and more have series long plot arcs to tease out, even in the mystery of the week format. Of course, plot arcs were there in a small way in the old shows: Richard Kimble was always on the run in *The Fugitive* and Gilligan was always trying to get off the island...and you can have your plot arcs be just as unlikely to progress as those, too. It can still give a flavour to your show even if there’s unlikely to be any closure.

Come up with an idea or draw from the table.

Suit	Plot Arcs
Clubs	Catch the Big Bad
Diamonds	Discover the Truth
Hearts	Get Back To Freedom
Spades	Growth and Insight

Catching the Big Bad is a lot like Discovering the Truth, since the truth is often who killed whom or who framed whom. But a Big Bad is an actual presence that looms over the show and can take direct action, like Red John in *The Mentalist*, Moriarty in *Sherlock* or Doug Judy in *Brooklyn 99*. Likewise, finding your way back to Freedom is also often based on unravelling the truth, because the accused is on the run for a crime they didn’t commit, like Grizzly Adams or the titular Renegade. However where the seeker of the truth can be discouraged from poking around the edges, the finder of freedom can never give up, because they want to go back to their old life. Sometimes they may be physically cursed like The Hulk and are seeking a cure; in other words it has a personal edge to it that the mystery never quite acquires.

Growth and Insight is probably the most common choice, especially since it includes the power of URST – UnResolved Sexual Tension. From David and Maddy in *Moonlighting* to Chole and Lucifer in *Lucifer*, URST is an excellent steam engine to keep a show moving forward. But Growth and Insight has many other forms. Daddy issues are common – see *Lucifer* again or *Brooklyn 99*. It can be a single parent learning how their child is growing up, or a person dealing with the trauma and ghosts of their past, or simply becoming better at living their life and solving crimes.

If none of those appeal, consider the arc that just happens, as the days of lives pass like sands through the hourglass. This is where the arc is not an external threat or an internal struggle but just the ongoing saga of the lives and loves of all the cast. Kids grow, crushes fade, romances bloom, and we get to know everyone. Shows with a repeating cast work best for these – it won’t typically work if the heroes keep moving from town to town, unless there’s a lot going on between the main six leads.

With or without an arc, shows often also have a theme or at least a general moral centre. This is definitely something you might discover during your first episode but it might also be important to

pin down early on, especially since the moral dimension plays a big role in what is and isn't acceptable content and what kind of endings arrive. This leads into our next section, discussing content and expectations. Before that, have a look at these broad options:

Suit	Theme
Clubs	Count On Justice
Diamonds	The Thin Detecting Line
Hearts	Rough Justice
Spades	Society Lies Bleeding

Count On Justice is the popular form of most drawing room mysteries. At times the murderer is somewhat justified, striking out in search of vengeance or out of jealous love perhaps, but they still have a great sin (pride is common) as well as murderous blood on their hands. In these stories the mystery solver is a kind of divine figure of justice, punishing the wicked for their hubris and rescuing the innocent from condemnation.

The Thin Detecting Line is similar but there are more shades of grey. There are innocents to protect and there are the scum of the universe, and between them all that stands is you, on that thin line. The difference is that in the prior mode, there are more good people than bad, evil is rare and always fails. In the Thin Detecting Line, evil is ubiquitous and corrupting; it reaches out to taint the good and those walking the line. Sometimes, the line barely holds. The morality is the same, but in a minor key.

Rough Justice takes it one step further. Now, what makes things hard for those seeking justice is that the law gets in their way. Meantime, many so-called agents of the law are just as evil as the criminals. That thin line is thoroughly tainted and few can tell the good from the bad. This is where you find the good cops of *Homicide* and the bad cops of *The Shield* but if you poke around the edges there are lots of really dodgy cops out there. *The Closer* uses fear and intimidation all the time and *Bones* rarely uses due process, just to name two.

A step even further along the line of moral grays and dark endings is Society Lies Bleeding. Here it's not really about good and evil blurring because those things no longer exist. There's just trouble and desire, truth and consequences, tragedy and death. Even those with good intentions rarely bring about any lasting good, because the world or the system works against them. In *The Wire* the deck is stacked by the racism inherent in America's drug laws and generational poverty; in *SVU* it's the perversion of sick-minded sex fiends. Something is bleeding, and no amount of solving mysteries can stop it – but the work still goes on.

*Example: Sarah and Kate don't really have any long term plans but want to know more about the two leading ladies and their pasts – and how they might have been guilty of causing or enabling injustice. They put down Growth and Understanding. For the theme, they want a show that is mostly lighthearted, like Castle, but exploring how injustice follows us even into a technological future. They're wavering between The Thin Detecting Line and Count on Justice. They decide to just list both as a good guideline for what they want.*

## 6. Safety Tools: Ratings, Lines and Veils



Shared storytelling games involve improvisation. In a moment, in the moment, we share our exciting new ideas, and let them carry us ahead. We are told to never say no, but say Yes, And. Establishing and maintaining full consent in that kind of environment is almost impossible. But we can take steps to try to keep everyone feeling safe. Some might say just adding an element to a story isn't really a threat, but anything that makes things unfun, let alone uncomfortable, are not what we want. A powerful tool to help avoid this as much as we can is by setting our limits up front.

Luckily we have a model already in our culture that tightly summarizes such things: ratings for TVs and movies. Although we might not know specifically what qualifies things to be PG, M and R our regular exposure to these ideas give us strong instinctive understanding of them. Also, nowadays in Australia they even often specify the elements that cause the rating, which can help you get those specifics: is the rated M for drug use, coarse language, violence, gore, horror, nudity, and sex scenes, and these can be qualified as mild or strong, stylized or realistic, some or frequent and so forth. The US has a similar system that also breaks things down by age lines such as TV-12 and TV-14. Use whatever works for your table. As mentioned, it's not a precise tool, but that's what comes next.

Lines and Veils are terms used in roleplaying games to talk about elements that players don't want to see in their game. Anything that is categorized as a *line* should never be introduced at the table, in any context. Whereas those things that can be *veiled* can be included in the story but in a muted way, such as off screen or through allusion or discussion. Note that veils can be delicate, as the name implies. Something that is just a little off-screen might not be veiled enough for comfort. Veiled elements should therefore not be included recklessly: you can think of lines as "red lights" meaning stop, and veils as "amber lights" meaning take care.

For instance: while the show Law and Order: SVU frequently turns on the plot of hunting down and prosecuting rapists, it does not show any rape scenes. In some case it will depict the beginning and end of rape attacks but only barely enough to establish what is happening. However those elements might still be highly triggering or disturbing to an audience.

This is extremely important: these tools aren't just about getting both players to agree on the tone on the show. They are also more than just making sure everyone is comfortable and having fun. They are about actual *safety*. People encountering these elements may suffer mental and physical trauma reactions and injury. They should be taken seriously. They should also be combined with other safety tools such as the X-Card and the Time-Out Gesture, which you can find discussed further online.

Below is a list of some things that players may want to be forbidden or veiled. Note however that it could be something very mundane or trivial or unexpected, because fears and triggers can be linked to such things. Nobody gets to question or argue the validity of a line or veil; it takes a lot of courage to even name our fears and they must never, ever be dismissed. However, it is okay to carefully ask for specifics if things feel unclear.

- Harm to children or animals
- Harm to women, especially sexual harm or serious harm
- Domestic violence
- Rape, incest or sexual assault

- Pedophilia, zoophilia or other aberrant sexualities
- Torture or sustained pain
- Kidnapping or trafficking
- People being bound, tied or imprisoned or otherwise powerless
- Gore or extreme violence or casual violence
- Harm or prejudice towards sex workers
- Harm or prejudice to minorities or the disabled
- Depictions of racism or sexism
- Specific kinds of injury, suffering or death (eg drowning, cuts etc)
- Medical details or scenes
- Other locations or occupations such as graveyards or schools or churches
- Faith used as a motive or character flaw
- Othering of certain cultures, traits or subcultures

## You Do Want Fries With That

Consent in gaming works just like consent in every other arena, and the FRIES acronym applies. Consent must be

- Freely Given, not coerced, or pressured
- Reversible, at any time, for any reason
- Informed, based on a clear understanding of the terms
- Enthusiastic, never grudging
- Specific, not general

Note that Lines and Veils describe what cannot be done so aren't specific. That means its up to the players to keep doing regular check-ins to make sure that everyone is enthusiastically enjoying the content. Stories can gain momentum and the social contract of play suggests people keep the show on the road: both of these things contribute to consent being forgotten or ignored. Only by regularly checking in during sessions can everyone be kept safe.

Remember also that things may come up in an episode that will need to be added to these lists, and you should regularly check in on this. It is also worth coming back to the list at the end of every session and seeing if anything featured should be added. There may also be times where things will be removed! Humans are not set in stone and neither should we expect our preferences and limits to be.

*Example: Amy and Sarah agree that their show is serious enough to be rated M in Australia, with some drug use,*

*occasional violence and adult themes. Sarah doesn't want to see any animals hurt in the series, even off screen, so she adds that as a Line. They both agree that they don't want gore or overt violence in their show. It's about the law and justice not shoot 'em up action or fistfights, and the crimes will be over when the heroes show up. They put down violence under the list of Veils. To be clear Amy adds "but dead bodies etc are okay". The actual killing is off-screen but the impact can be shown. Feeling safe, they are ready to proceed.*

# The Docket: Setting Up An Episode

*“A nice murder, that’ll cheer you up”*

- Mrs Hudson, *Sherlock*

Now we have the core characters of our series, it’s time to build an episode. You can run your cast through multiple episodes or just one, it’s up to you, but an episode has a key structure designed to be run from start to finish in a single session. This involves two stages: first, setting up the details of the crime and then running through seventeen short scenes.

Setting up determines the dramatis personae of your episode. You will draw a series of cards to determine each of these, and write them down. All the information goes onto the form labelled “The Docket”. Note: do not fill in the sections labelled Branches, Roots, Poison and Fruit. Those will be filled out as the episode progresses.

First of all, draw a card and note its number and colour to determine the apparent gender and profession of the corpse.

Card	Professional Field
A	Cop or Security Guard
2	Medical
3	Business or Finance
4	Sports or Leisure
5	Blue Collar Work
6	The Service Industries
7	Public Service or Military
8	Retail
9	Entertainment
10	Sex Work
J	Crime
Q	Politics
K	Celebrity

Next create four suspects. There may be other suspects in the story, but the murderer will always be one of these four. Assign them one by one to the sheet, next to clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades. That suit listed on the sheet is for later purposes, it is not to do with the suit of the card drawn here.

## Always Reshuffle

Whenever you draw a card in the game of **Partners**, return it to the deck and reshuffle before drawing the next card. There’s always the possibility of the getting the same result again – that can lead to some very interesting outcomes!

Red – appeared as male, Black – as female. This is of course a reductive view of gender. We encourage you to explore other options here but also be careful about using trans and non-binary bodies as victims. Alternatively just ignore gender in your suspects.

Clubs or Diamonds they are (relatively) poor or struggling, for their profession. Hearts or Spades they are successful and/or wealthy.



Card	Suspect
A	Spouse
2	Lover
3	Parent
4	Child
5	Business Partner
6	Long time friend
7	Boss
8	Employee or Client
9	Rival
10	Sibling
J	A Cop or Fellow Detective*
Q	A Known Criminal*
K	A Love Interest*

Again, use colour to determine gender if you're using it. On clubs or diamonds the relationship with the deceased is a negative one (at least at first appearances). On hearts or spades, it is a positive one.

The entries with an \* need clarification. In the case of drawing a Jack, Queen or King, one of the suspects should be someone close to the two Partners: a major or recurring character, or Special Guest Star, in TV language. A Jack indicates that it is someone on the force, and not just any cop anywhere but someone relatively close to them. (If the detectives aren't cops then it is a close ally in whatever detecting they do.)

Someone they will face conflict investigating. Everyone knows the Known Criminal is a criminal, but conflict also occurs there because he is powerful and can strike back at one or both of the Partners, or their associates. Likewise, the Love Interest shifts the balance as they are intimate with someone on the Roster. Any of these options make the investigation more difficult, more personal and more dramatic, as loyalties must be tested and the one thing that normally remains constant – the safe base from which external elements are investigated – is now being threatened by internal elements.

You should only ever draw ONE face card suspect per crime (unless perhaps it a series finale or similar). Any subsequent face cards should be ignored and a different card drawn.

Once you have your four suspects, you can give them occupations (drawing from the first table if you wish) and most importantly, what their key motive is. We don't know how this motive will be expressed just yet, but we will find out in the episode. For now just make a note of it.

Card	Motive for Murder
A	Revenge
2	Jealousy
3	Desire
4	Ambition
5	Rage
6	Protection
7	Escape
8	Cover Up
9	Loyalty
10	Conspiracy
J	Accident*
Q	Mistake*
K	Insanity*

The motives with an \* may also be confusing. Accident means random happenstance, whereas Mistake means there was intent to kill or damage but either the attack went further than they meant, or they meant to murder someone else. These strange confluences of coincidences make for amazing mysteries, but if you overuse them, they become frustrating and trite: nobody likes a story where five people stabbed the guy and all missed the heart, or he died from falling down the stairs then out the window and onto the highway. So as with suspect occupations, once you draw one \* motive, ignore any subsequent such draws.

## Psycho Killers

Mental illness can be a great plot hook for murder mysteries, but in reality, the mentally ill are several times more likely to suffer from violence than perpetrate it. Be careful with stereotypes that you use, and check with your Partner to see if everyone is comfortable with these elements.

Likewise, sex workers are often corpses in this genre, which makes them seem disposable. You can be better than this.

Likewise insanity doesn't necessarily mean an insane rage or delusion, but could also be a moment of panic, a lifelong battle with stress or illness or some strange happenstance. See also the note about the use of the mentally ill. Consider the tropes of the genre but more importantly consider your fellow player and the story you want to tell.

Note that although all four suspects had a motive only one of them actually did the deed and you will only find out which during the episode. If there is a motive of Accident or Mistake and they are innocent perhaps they almost killed the person or thought they did, or contributed in some way. Sometimes they may have accidentally stopped the real murderer, forcing the murderer to rethink their plans.

In later games, you might like to fill out the suspects after the opening scene, or even later, as each scene adds a new suspect. It doesn't matter when you do it as long as the deceased is determined before you begin.



# Hit the Streets: Playing an Episode

*“Home alone is a movie, not an alibi”*

- Lennie Brisco, *Law and Order*

You now have a dead body and four likely suspects. But how those suspects will be introduced and who in fact did the crime will not become clear until the episode plays out. A game of **Partners** involves playing out seventeen scenes, each as instructed, one by one.

There are two types of scenes in every episode: Staging Scenes and Procedural Scenes. Staging scenes provide structure to the episode and break up the procedural action with dramatic character moments. Staging scenes are marked on the Episode sheet by being indented. Procedural Scenes focus on solving the crime. Staging Scenes and Procedural Scenes have different rules. Procedural Scenes all work the same way, with Staging Scenes changing as the episode moves forward.

The form at the end of the book labelled The Rundown is where these episodes are recorded. Get it ready and keep all the other sheets handy to refer to, and in the case of Suspects, add to as their stories get developed. You can name your episode any time you like – as soon as a title suggests itself!



## What's a Scene?

In some roleplaying games, there are no formal scene breaks. Play is an ongoing conversation between the players and the GM, occasionally broken up by “stage directions” that skip over or past unimportant elements. **Partners** instead uses structured scenes. The content of these scenes is determined by when they occur in each episode and the random draw of cards. However, how those scenes play out is not formalised.

Each scene begins with determining the content as described below. In **procedural scenes** one player will be the *primary* and one the *secondary*. The primary begins the scene by describing what they are doing and saying and introducing the elements they have been given, and then the secondary will conclude the scene by reacting to that information and adding their elements. In **staging scenes** players generate the elements of the scene together and then discuss what that content will be until they agree.

## Write It Out

The scene prompts in **Partners** also make excellent writing prompts. Players could take the prompts and write a scene, contributing one half each in procedural scenes, and swapping writing duties back and forth between staging scenes. This is perfect for games played via email or text chat but you can also talk face to face about one or more scenes and then break to go write them up. They could also be written up as scripts (and then filmed!) or drawn as comics, or anything you like.

At its most basic, each scene can simply be this process of listing elements and discussing them. As soon as those elements are determined, the scene can end and move on to the next one. The core of **Partners** is brainstorming the story from the random elements and from joint creation. Whenever they feel like you've established enough of the story, players can move on to the next scene. On the other hand, players can also dive in and roleplay these scenes. Having established the basic contents and ideas, those can be used to springboard an improvised dialogue of character roleplay. Or you

could do somewhere in between both extremes. Figure out what works best for you both.

Remember that short punchy scenes work better than scenes that slowly peter out or lose energy. Set up a conflict, have a quick discussion, and then move on. Players can suggest “end scene?” to suggest everything is done, instead of wondering if things have reached a natural end point. Likewise, players can discuss when they want to start a scene, cutting to the most important moment to begin.

*Example: Kate and Sarah decide to do a staging scene where Amy and Sally have a fight in a bar. Kate says they should start at the moment Amy overhears Sally saying bad things about her, but Sarah points out that maybe Amy would run away when she hears those things? Kate agrees so they decide to roleplay out the scene afterwards where Amy is hiding in the bathroom and Sally comes in to apologise. They drop into character as Sarah, as Sally says “Amy? I know you’re in here. Nobody else washes their hands before they use the toilet.” Kate as Amy says “Germ control is no joke, Sally.” And the roleplay continues.*

## The Teaser – Scene of the Crime

Now we come to the content of the seventeen scenes. First: The Teaser. In TV jargon, the teaser is the bit of the episode before the credits roll. In **Partners**, this scene is used to set up the crime being solved. The scene is set as described above, determining who has died and the four suspects. One more element remains: the nature of the death. Draw a card to determine the (apparent) cause of death:

Card	Apparent Method
A	Shot once
2	Shot multiple times
3	Stabbed
4	Blunt Force Trauma
5	Assaulted
6	Choked
7	Poisoned
8	A Fall/Collision
9	Drowning
10	“Accident”
J	“Suicide”
Q	Bizarre
K	Unknown



Obviously, the accident and suicide will turn out to be otherwise...or will they? Perhaps there are more twists and turns.



Now that we have our mode of death we need one more thing to set the scene: a random word. Each player should get a random word each, either by randomly opening a dictionary or using a random word generator site. Then the players work together to decide how those two elements are key to the crime scene. Adding a pun at the end is optional, but encouraged.

*Example: Sarah and Kate have drawn the King of Diamonds for their suspect. That makes him a male celebrity of some sort, but an unsuccessful one. A two of hearts reveals he was shot several times. The random words they get are “federation” and “ditch”. They decide our corpse was a “redshirt”. He appeared in a show they decide was called Moon Quest, which has become popular again among mooners, for the hopeful view it posted of moon life. In some tragic irony or sick game he’s in his old tv show costume, lying dead in a ditch by the transit station. Lieutenant Ride says “boy that show really dated, huh?”. “Unlike its fans,” says snide Sally Shade. SF fans still get no love even on the moon.*

Note that you can generate your suspects after the crime scene if you like – the mode of death might add new ideas. The rulebook just makes more sense if we explain the suspect generation first. In play it makes sense to fill in both forms as you go. You can even add suspects to the Docket only when they come up in a new scene, letting the plot play out a bit first to suggest each new character.

*For their first suspect they get the Jack of Hearts and the five of spades. That gives a male cop who liked the suspect but has a rage motive. Sarah decides his name is Lieutenant Carter and he loved the star but might have some anger issues buried deep. What might they be will be revealed in the episode.*

## Procedural Scenes

There are twelve Procedural Scenes in every episode and they all work the same way. Only the identity of the Primary and the Secondary changes. On the form, the Primary for the scene is indicated in brackets: S for Straight Shooter, W for the Wild Card. The Primary is the person who sets up the details of the scene, and the Secondary is the person who takes those details and uses them to move the plot and mystery forward.

Each Procedural Scene furthers the mystery by showing us more of the suspects and their motives. Many mystery shows

have very distinct acts and beats to these stories.

In some shows they report back to a supervisor every ten minutes to sum up their progress, and then recap the case at the start of the second half hour. The four ad breaks determine points of climax and reveals. Since **Partners** involves random story elements coming in any order from random card draws, it does not assume this kind of hard structure. However, see the sidebar on the next page for how



### Hamlet's Hitpoints

Breaking stories down into procedural beats is also discussed at length in Robin Laws' book *Hamlet's Hitpoints*, and an example of a system that uses that idea is Robin Laws' *Hillfolk*. *Hamlet's Hitpoints* is the theory and *Hillfolk* is an execution of that theory. These are therefore useful references to support **Partners**. For another game that uses an authorial approach to episode and scene crafting, we recommend *Prime Time Adventues 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*.



the four acts of a mystery show often break down. This can be a guide to getting ideas. Like everything in this game, we want to provide enough tools so you can always get ideas of what happened, with the random words and cards still being in control.

To construct each Procedural Scene, go through the following steps. First identify the type of clue that will occur in the scene by drawing a card. **Note: Ignore the card if the value shown is lower than half that of the number of Procedural Scenes you have done (rounding down).**

For example, if it is your seventh Procedural Scene, ignore any cards of 3 or lower. Entries marked with a \* should only appear once (each) per episode. Discard and draw again. Note that the Confession doesn't mean that person did it. They may be confessing falsely, or confessing to something else. Likewise they can accuse someone of doing it without being right or even having any evidence.

**Use the suit drawn to identify which of the four suspects will be related to this clue.** That tells you which of the four suspects the clue will point to. What information it reveals will depend on how often that suit has come up over the episode (see below for more).

Card	Clue Type
A	Financial details
2	Other Records
3	Fingerprints or DNA
4	Other Physical Evidence
5	Witness Sighting
6	Slip of the Tongue
7	Dirty Laundry/Dark Secret
8	Alibi Fails
9	Stories Don't Match
10	Tip or Informant
J	Another Body*
Q	Accusation*
K	Confession*

Now we know what type of clue and who it will involve, the next step is for the Primary to generate a random word. Now the episode is ready to begin.

## Mystery Structure

Breaking the twelve Procedural Scenes into four acts doesn't have to mean anything, but if you want to use the acts as a guide to structure, here's a sense of how they are structured in mystery shows.

In Act One, the basics of the case are laid out. The corpse is identified, his next of kin contacted and the usual motives examined. Robbery and random chance are eliminated. Any early leads or obvious conclusions here are quickly found to be wrong. In other words, it is clear this is not a simple case.

This drives us into Act Two, which is about exploration. The other less obvious parts of the victim's life come into the spotlight, the less obviously guilty suspects are met, the less transparent motives are examined. Physical evidence returns from the lab, witnesses make reports but all of this leads to a puzzle or a problem. Apparently, nobody could have done it or wanted to – or those that could have are dead.

In Act Three the problem is restated. The suspects have been acting strangely but have alibis or no clear motives. The motives we thought were there were false. Act Three involves digging deeper into both. Eventually, the pressure causes suspects to act strangely. Stories contradict. Rivalries rise. Alibis fail. Now one or two suspects or motives come into focus – but so do threats.

In Act Four, the noose tightens around the remaining few possibilities. Then the penny drops or the curtain parts or the horses bolt. There is always a trigger early in Act Four which brings that focus into laser tightness around one fact. And in that pressure, the stakes rise as the guilty get desperate. Sometimes new crimes are committed. Sometimes a final twist is revealed.

Even if not to this precise schedule, almost every show has this same flow. It starts simple, then widens to more complex options, then digging deeper brings the focus narrower and narrower until it becomes a single spotlight. Spread wide, then contract down. That's the art of the tv mystery.

## If the Wild Card is the Primary

If the Wild Card is the Primary, they begin the scene by using the random word to talk about something entirely unrelated to the case, or entirely unhelpful, or entirely inappropriate. The Wild Card is always frustrating the Straight Shooter by being unhelpful. Yet somehow, they will be helpful.

After they have given their dialogue offering, the Straight Shooter reacts. They must use the strange thing the Wild Card talked about to make a breakthrough in the case. Using that offer, the clue type and the suspect, they will discover a clue of that type that will reveal something about the suspect, thanks to a deductive process spurred on by the strange behavior of the Wild Card. What information this will reveal is discussed below.

*Example: In this scene, the random word is “picture”. The evidence type is Dirty Laundry and the suspect involved is a Long Time Friend with the motive of Escape. Standing in the way of the busy police station, Sally Shade is posing for a selfie instead of helping. Sally explains that she’s trying to get a cool picture for her new social media avatar, because people only trust lawyers who look sexy and dangerous. Something about this strikes Amy as familiar. She looks on her own social media feeds and there it is: a picture of the victim with his Long Time Friend and co-star, which went viral when they reunited on a talk show. The clip shows the victim embarrassing their friend with talk of bad acting and bad behavior on set, and the friend grinning and taking it. Might have been a motive for murder...*

## Call and Response

The reason we give each player a turn at being the Primary is to stop one player doing all the work of coming up with the resolution to the scene. That formality stops one player hogging all the ideas too. However, like any formal rule in a game it only exists to make the game more fun. If you can share equally with your partner, and want something more organic, just create scenes together.

## If the Straight Shooter is the Primary

If the Straight Shooter is the Primary their offer is also based around the random word but they use it to create something in the case that they cannot solve. They are trying to focus on it and be a good detective but it doesn't make sense or they cannot see why it exists or figure out what it means. They then pass this offer to the Wild Card. They then use their wild and inappropriate brains to make a connection that the Straight Shooter cannot see. The Secondary always solves the mystery and adds the new information, because the Wild Card is not entirely useless. Once again, they do this with the offer made, the clue type and the suspect in question.

*Example: In this scene, the random word is nun. The clue type is Other Physical Evidence and the suspect involved is an Employee or Client out for Revenge. Lieutenant Amy Ride decides that in the deceased bedroom they discover he was catholic and had taken to doing odd jobs at the local church. But when they arrive the strict nun won't let the police in to ask questions. Sally realizes she knows the nun from grade school when the two of them used to do “favours” for boys in exchange for jetbike rides. The embarrassed nun waves them through and Sally finds a work sheet showing that the victim had been teaching kids how to act at the church’s after school sessions. Until all of a sudden the sessions were cancelled...*

## Branches, Roots, Poison, Fruit

Now that we've established *how* the information is revealed we need to know what that information is. This depends on how many times that suspect has featured in the episode. This is what the Stage column is for on the episode sheet.

The **first** time a suspect is the subject of a scene in the episode, we learn their **Branches**. This means how they are connected to the murder victim and the other suspects. We learn their general role in the life of the victim, the nature of their relationship, who else they have connections to and what those connections are like. This usually reveals the surface nature of the relationship between the two parties, positive or negative. It might broadly speak to a motive but not strongly. It fills in the details around the relationship itself: if they are a spouse, for example, it might explain when they were married, how long they've been married, if it was solid or in trouble, if there were ex-wives, jealous mistresses, angry in-laws: the Branches are all about connections. What is the connection between the victim and the suspect, and what connections connect to that.

The **second** time the suspect is the focus of a scene, we discover the **Roots**. This is the true core of the relationship. Perhaps it goes back to the very beginning or origins of the connection, or it reveals the foundations upon which it lies. Those foundations might not match the image we got in the Branches. This might be closer to the real truth behind a façade, or just the next level of intimacy. People rarely tell others everything at a first meeting, least of all the police. Branches explained the nature of a marriage, the Roots explain the emotions at the core of that: maybe it is rocky now but it was built on love, yet it was young love, impulsive and disapproved of. Or the rockiness on the surface is explained by an inherent jealousy or competition. Roots give context to the Branches, and explanation and deeper intrigue – things that usually require more examination. They also give depth and meaning to those connected by the Branches, fleshing out the whole story.

**THE DOCKET**

Victim Name: KATHERINE KANE  
Suspect Name: JANET BUCKLEY and he worked as a SHERIFF  
Found Dead at: PAWTUCKET on WED MORNING by STAFF

Name: JANET BUCKLEY Relation to Victim: COP Occupation: COP Motive: CONSPIRACY  
Branches: SHE LIES ABOUT HER SHIFTS Roots: \_\_\_\_\_ Fruit: \_\_\_\_\_  
Poison: \_\_\_\_\_ Relation to Victim: \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation: COP Motive: CONSPIRACY

The **third** time the suspect turns up, we discover the **Poison**. This is the canker at the centre of it all, the one unforgivable sin, the thorn in the side that never stops tearing, the wound that will not close but only festers. The inherent dysfunction in the relationship between the victim and the suspect is now specific, it has a name and a shape. It is, certainly, a motive for murder. The relationship explored down to the Roots now has come to a head, some trigger event occurred or an edge has been worn down as thin as it can go, and things cannot do anything else but bear bitter fruit. If it was a marriage, this is the affair, or the betrayal, the argument over money, the moment when someone else intervened, or failed to do so. Plans were dashed, truths were out, and each party stood revealed to the others eyes. A murder plan might not have been concocted but the idea and the passion were born – and if not for murder, for something else. Wills were altered. Tickets were booked to run away and leave the country. And of course, knowing these things could be misconstrued, steps were taken to hide these poisons.

The **fourth** time the suspect turns up, that bitter **Fruit** is born out. The changed will is found, stolen, torn up, hidden. The trip away is taken, fleeing from the crime – or being away when an alibi was needed. The poisonous truth revealed was spoken out loud to others, to the media perhaps. Plans were finally made and began to be carried out. People drove to the victims house to convince them otherwise, to argue the point, to try to change their mind. Blows were exchanged. Evidence of a crime was removed. Note that the Fruit may fall before the murder occurred and is now revealed or may occur in the very scene. The latter is especially the case if the Fruit is NOT the murder itself. Note that the Fruit isn't necessarily the actual murder: in any good mystery everyone went to the scene of the crime with a heart full of rage and a blunt object close to hand. Who delivered the final blow is revealed only in the final scene...

**Note: If you draw that same suspect again, after completing their Fruit, draw again until your draw a different suit. Each suspect only gets four acts.**

## Whodunit?

Who then is the murderer? After generating the suspect for the last scene, find the suspect who had their Fruit be born out LAST in the episode. They are the murderer.

Set up a final scene where neither party is the primary or the secondary. Here, the two partners confront the murderer (and the other suspects if they are present). Based on the evidence from the final few scenes and the Branches, Roots, Poison and Fruit of the guilty partner, the partners reconstruct the murder and explain how it was done and how it was covered up. Check your Show Bible for how justice is done and whether this will involve a chase scene or something similar. If you need evidence, assume it arrives as needed. The thrill of solution always overcomes any plot niggles.

Note that it is possible that you will draw exactly three of each suit. In this case the murderer will get away and the crime will go unsolved. That is a great way to set up a follow-up episode where you track them down and get them next time, for a whole new crime.

## The Other Four Staging Scenes

A good mystery TV show episode doesn't just have a mystery to solve, but a strong "B-plot". This is TV jargon for the secondary story running through the episode. Switching back and forth between the A and B plots keep the story moving at a strong pace and the audience interested. It also allows for the stories to reflect each other in metaphor, and develop and explore the characters of the story, and provide a larger context to the story.

Not all shows in this genre use B-plots. For example, *Law and Order* almost never does, and *Monk* only does so very rarely. But both shows use what we call Staging Scenes. Although there isn't a plot unfolding, the investigation takes a break from going from clue to clue and adopts a different tempo. Things slow down or stop to allow for character beats to occur, and for the audience to catch a breath. Sometimes comedy relief will occur, or human moments to leaven out the intensity of the crime plot. Other times it is for character tropes like authority figures to complain about the wild card's methods, or the partners to engage in URST (Un-Resolved Sexual Tension). In *Law and Order* it is

### Just the Facts

Don't want to bog your story down with side plots when there's a murder to solve? Or just want a shorter fame? Skip the staging scenes! They're totally optional, and the murder and the episode will work fine without them!



## Fast and Furious

Don't have a lot of time and want a faster game? Only set up three suspects and only play out to the Poison element of their stories, and run a total of seven scenes. The last character to reach Poison is your killer. Still not fast enough? Try the Brooklyn-99 Special: two suspects, five scenes! In these cases, if you are using Easy and Difficult actions, you can do a Difficult action every three scenes, or every two, respectively.

sometimes a way to deliver clues in a different style, with the cops or lawyers returning to their supervisor for advice or correction or larger context.

The third option is to link the B-plot to the overall plot-arc, if there is one. This is pretty rare as the plot arc rarely features that strongly except when it is driving the entire plot; in either case see the next section on long term play for more on this.

If you don't want a strongly threaded B-plot then simply draw cards to determine which two characters are in each of the four Stagings Scene and use them to comment on the story and the relationships involved.

See the table and the suit symbols on the character sheets. (Note that as with any scene other characters can be present but will not be primary actors in it. For example, the Superior and the Subordinate might be watching the Straight Shooter and the Wild Card argue and talking about when they will finally realise they should kiss.)

Suit	Straight Shooter Player Plays	Wild Card Player Plays
Clubs	Straight Shooter	Wild Card
Diamonds	Straight Shooter	Wild Card
Hearts	Subordinate	Superior
Spades	Touchstone	Oddball

If you want to develop a B-Plot then the scenes follow the same development as the reveals for the suspects. First, determine which character has a problem – either the Straight Shooter or the Wild Card. They will be the central character of the B-plot – we will call them the main character. Take turns between episodes, or if you can't decide draw a card. Red is the Straight Shooter, black is the Wild Card.

Next, draw a card to see with whom this Main Character has a problem. Draw a card again.

Card	My Problem Is With
A	The Straight Shooter
2	The Straight Shooter
3	The Wild Card
4	The Wild Card
5	The Touchstone
6	The Superior
7	The Subordinate
8	The Oddball
9	A close friend
10	A family member
J	A lover
Q	An ex lover
K	My existence or purpose



Note that this means some of the time the Main Character will have an issue with themselves. Struggling with one's own issues is a big part of drama.

Then, for each scene, refer back to the previous table to determine which characters appear, and use the stage of the scene to determine the content. In the first staging scene, we establish the **Branches**. Here the Main Character establishes their key conflict, or at least the surface problem. However, the problem is not seen clearly. Instead it is seen through its connections to other characters or people in the scene. That could be one of the six player characters or a suspect, or any other characters around. Unable to directly approach the problem, the problem is instead directed outwards. Or possibly the other characters make the problem more exigent or more critical.

In the **Roots** we discover more about the problem and the real causes behind it. It's not the case, the other characters around or the current events going on but in truth something deeper, that goes to the core of the relationship between the Main Character and what troubles them. The Main Character likely creates some sort of solution that is wrong-headed, based on panic and gut choices. The other character in this scene may offer counsel or may provide the terrible solution. If it is good counsel, it will be ignored and be reacted to with irrationality and anger. This causes things to escalate.

In the **Poison** the plan or decisions made in the previous scene come to a head. The badness of those plans and decisions become obvious and the other character in the scene is witness to this or expresses the wrongness. However, in this confronting moment, at this lowest point, the Main Character realizes they have done wrong and begins a path to enlightenment. They now know that their plan was dumb and how to fix it.

The **Fruit** scene is the final scene of the episode and explains the epiphany of the Main Character and their solution to the problem. Unlike with the crime, this solution is not towards violence or unhappiness but self-understanding, reconciliation and resolution. The problem is defused at least somewhat, the angst passed and a plan for the future is made. It may be only temporary but, for now, peace again rests in the heart of the Main Character and their relationship with the Trouble is repaired – or built anew.

*Example: Sally Shade is the Main Character of the current episode, and her problem is with the Straight Shooter. Sarah decides that Sally is worried that being with Amy and doing good is changing her too much. In the Branches scene, Sally is with the Touchstone, her old mobster friend. He tells her that Amy has made her boring. Sally says she'll prove she isn't boring and drinks with them heavily into the night. This allows her next few Procedural Scenes to be all about how she has a terrible hangover, infuriating Amy. In the Roots scene, Sally is with the Subordinate. She complains about how Amy is mad at her for being hungover. The Subordinate says that Amy is always trying to ruin everyone's fun. Sally decides this is the problem: Amy doesn't know how to have any fun at all. The solution: force Amy to go out with them and get drunk. The Subordinate invites Amy out for a drink after work, something to which she is rarely invited.*

## Double Meanings

A classic trope of the TV shows is when the A plot and the B plot reflect each other. They may deal with parallel issues or themes, or one may be a direct metaphor for the other. The rivalry between the two partners is reflected in how the murder victim was killed by his long-time rival. If the B-plot is about getting too bogged down in details, the A-plot might involve a scene in stuck in an actual bog. Metaphors like this are a gift to storytellers and a great way to get ideas for your next scene, while also giving depth and texture to a story. Sometimes your detectives will even do this for you by dragging their personal feelings about the B-plot directly into the A-plot. Lucifer in *Lucifer* does this almost constantly. Whatever emotion he feels he decides to approach the murder mystery with that at the forefront of his mind.

*The three end up in a club where they get roaringly drunk on Space Juice, a new boutique liqueur. With their inhibitions down, Sally calls Amy a “stupid strict-ass bitch with a stick up her ass” and adds that even the Subordinate hates how boring she is, and nobody really likes her. Amy is embarrassed and chagrined and leaves in tears (Poison). In the final scene, Sally apologizes to Amy and says Amy is her best friend, maybe her only friend, because she never tries to change her, whereas the old Mobster wants her to be who she used to be. Amy says she will try to lighten up a little – but no promises. Sally says she likes her how she is.*



# Example of Play

“Scully, this is a classic case of demon foetal harvest”

- Mulder, *The X-Files*

To help you understand how to run **Partners**, this chapter runs through the early stages of play, including generating the Partners and the show.

Steve and Gareth decide to make a show and play an episode. Steve decides to be the Straight Shooter, and Gareth takes the Wild Card. They grab their sheets and split up. On a whim, Steve decides that before he was a detective he was a dog! He's thinking of the Sarge in Top Ten, but isn't sure what it will play out as. Gareth decides before he was a detective he was a racecar driver because it's the first thing that pops into his head. Also he's a huge fan of *Hardcastle and McCormick*. Reuniting, they throw ideas around until they decide their show is about an ex-race-car driver who now drives a big rig around the US. In the first episode he picked up a superintelligent cybernetic dog that escaped from a secret government lab and now they are on the run from the government while also solving crimes at each new stop. It's *The Littlest Hobo* meets *Pretender* meets *BJ and the Bear*. Often it is the “supernatural” character that is the Wild Card (such as in *Sleepy Hollow* or *iZombie*) but in this case they decide that Steel (the dog) is laser-focused (sometimes literally) on ending crime while Gary the truckdriver is a bit of a wayward alcoholic who lost meaning in his life when he lost access to his kids. Steve adds “Gary's Kids” as the Touchstone and Gareth puts down “CIA Agent Hunting Us Down” as the Superior. Swapping sheets, Steve writes down “Conspiracy Theory Nut Who Repairs The Dog” as the Oddball. Gareth writes down “Friendly Truck Driver Gary Knows” as the Subordinate. The two think that maybe the other truck drivers won't know that Steel is a cyberdog and there will be continual shenanigans to cover this up, like in *Mr Ed*. They decide their show is

called BIG DOGS. They suggest it will be PG, fairly family friendly, and decide to leave their Bible otherwise blank because they know each other well and already have a sense of this show's feel. They also want to figure out what the characters can do as they go along, taking things as they come - just like the two friends do with life as they ride the roads of America.

On to the Docket: for this episode, our victim turns out to be a successful female cop. She's found dead of blunt force trauma and our words are “air” and “series”. The players decide that she was dealt a series of blows from an airgun – shot dead on a paintball course where she was inexplicably out without a faceguard. Our suspects include two separate rivals (one female, one male) both with the motive of conspiracy - clearly there's some grand cover-up in the police department! The other two suspects are her lover with a motive of protection, and a business partner out for revenge.

They decide that the policewoman – now known as Sheriff Kat Kane - begins the episode by pulling them over. The CIA have put an alert out urging local cops to



be on the lookout for a big black dog, so we begin with a comic scene where Steel is being painted yellow and given fake floppy ears. “You need to act like a big old silly dog” says Gary. “Like a Labrador”. “Bark bark,” says Steel. “I am cordial and garrulous. Rub my belly in a festive manner.” They get stopped coming into town but Steel passes through unnoticed. The cop is still tough though and gives them a ticket. Then later that night she is on the paintball course doing a training exercise. A figure appears in a paintball mask. She turns and acts surprised. Then the hail of bullets begins – and the final one, clearly not a paintball but a metal slug, cracks her skull. Roll credits! Theme tune is *Further On Up the Road* by Johnny Cash.

Our first Procedural Scene involves the female rival cop, let’s call her Lieutenant Buccleigh, who was also up to be sheriff like our corpse, and the evidence is the alibis not matching. Gary, the Wild Card has the keyword “notebook”. Gareth says that after being grilled by the cops for being strangers in town, Gary and Steel are let go. As they walk back to their truck, Gary says he knows something isn’t right here. Steel wonders how he can possibly know that. Gary says because he stole Janet’s notebook while she was distracted. Steel does not approve of stealing! But Steel, speed reading it with his cyber eyes, realises it shows the Buccleigh has recorded that her shift was with Kane all day yesterday, but the Sheriff was alone when she stopped our protagonists. Buccleigh has clearly been doing something off the books. What was she hiding? Was Kane in on it, or had she been killed to stop her finding out?



Our next scene is about the other policeman rival. We’ll call him Deputy Douglas. The clue type is a Tip or an Informant and the random word is “architecture”. Steel kicks off the scene by wondering if there is anything really they need to investigate. The coroner has ruled it an accidental death and funny notebooks aside, there is nothing to suggest foul play – and it isn’t any of their business. Perhaps they should head on down the road to the next town which has lovely neo-gothic architecture, according to Steel’s memory banks, so they should go back to the truck. Gary says that despite all the fancy technology in his brain Steel can’t see a mystery right in front of his nose. Steel says he is able to calculate a thousand potential crimes a second but Gary is proved right when they return to the rig to discover a note left on the windshield saying “Follow the Deputy”. It’s written on police stationery. Something is clearly afoot.

Appropriately our next piece of evidence is about the Deputy as well and involves physical evidence that isn’t DNA or fingerprints – so fibres or a shoeprint or similar. The random word is “gallon”. Gary decides to ask people around town about the Deputy by drinking gallons and gallons of beer. Keen to prove to Steel that personal skills are the key to solving crimes, Gary has hit the local bars to find out more, but in his usual alcoholic ways he ends up in a bar brawl. He ends up being thrown in prison, leaving Steel to try to figure out how to bail his friend out without revealing he can talk. However as the Deputy hauls Gary away, Steel sees paintball residue on the Deputy’s pants. Steel uses his advanced hearing to hear the Deputy on the phone complain that if things had gone right and the Sheriff just kept her nose out of things, none of this would have happened. The Deputy’s *Roots* seem to be buried in a conspiracy that he has been forced to cover up.

For the first Staging Scene, they decide to do a plot arc with Steel being the Main Character and the Trouble being the Superior. The players decide that hearing about Gary’s arrest the CIA agent calls the police station. So Steel has to use his cybernetics to intercept the call. Soon the CIA Agent – let’s call him Special Agent Culp – realizes it is Steel on the line. He tells Steel he built him to follow the

law, not break it. He tells Steel he is breaking down, that his cyberware is malfunctioning, and that as the person who built him, he is the only one who can fix him. Steel faces a dilemma...in his next staging scene he might discuss if he should leave Gary lest he become damaged and not be able to be repaired.

We come back after the ad break to find that our next scene involves Deputy Douglas again, and once again an issue with alibis. The random word is "title" and Steel is the primary. Since all the evidence keeps pointing to Douglas, this will clearly be an early-episode feint. He sneaks into the prison to let Gary out and decides to access the computers to find out everything he can on Deputy Douglas. Steel notices the Deputy has been reprimanded for being a bad shot, but strangely has awards for winning the paintballing championships title for five years straight. It makes no sense to Steel's logical brain but Gary says "bad shot" is code: it means Douglas probably killed someone deliberately and the department covered it up. This is the *Poison* of Douglas' arc: Sherriff Kane knew his secret!

The next draw is Douglas again, and another Tip Off. The word is "win". Steel hides when Gary is brought in to talk to Lieutenant Buccleigh about why he's starting bar fights. He decides to steer the competition to the murder by pretending to be a professional paintball player in town to see how good Douglas is. Gary says he got suspicious about all those wins when he saw how Douglas shot someone by mistake in a bank robbery. Buccleigh has no idea what he's talking about; Gary starts waxing lyrical about how needing to win can be a hard thing for a man with nothing else. Meanwhile, Steel keeps searching Douglas' desk and finds a draw full of engraving equipment. Douglas has never won a paintball competition, he makes those plaques up himself. In fact, he's the worst shot in the department and loses every single time they hit the course. Believing Gary to be an idiot, Buccleigh releases him. Gary complains that Steel could have mentioned that a LITTLE earlier...

The next scene we get the king of clubs: a confession involving Lieutenant Buccleigh. The word is steward. Gary says she runs outside to catch up after he is released. Steel appears and growls but she confesses that he might actually be on to something: the whole town is obsessed with paintball and something weird has been going on that she's been trying to uncover. She was looking into Sheriff Kate who was business partners with the steward of the paintball club: another of our suspects. "That's why you lied about your shifts!" Gary blurts out, then has to explain himself, saying he "found" her logbook.

The two players agree that the Staging Scene involves Gary asking Buccleigh out for a drink. They turn out to both have a nose for trouble and get along. Steve gets to the heart of Steel's uncertainty about his creator's words: if he were not here, Gary could pursue this lady romantically – and have a normal life. He describes watching Gary flirt in a bar, looking sadly in from outside. The soundtrack hits a minor key.

We draw a ten of spades for the next scene. Gary is primary, and that's the business partner himself, also having alibi trouble. The word is "weave". Gary decides to talk to the business partner who they discover has a mismatching toupé. Gary can't stop looking at it and gets nothing useful: Carl Conden says he has been out of town for a few days getting his new hair made and fitted, leaving the place in the hands of the day manager. Gary remarks as they leave that even made out of hair the toupé was easy to spot. Steel realizes something: according to his databases, hairpieces of real hair take at least six weeks to make. Conden was lying.

For our next scene we get Conden again, a dirty secret and the word "telling". Steel says they should follow Conden when he leaves his office. He immediately does so, driving over to have an argument with Buccleigh about people asking questions. Steel's super hearing hardware hears him telling Buccleigh not to go "telling anyone" about "him and Kat". Steel concludes that Kane and Buccleigh

must have been lovers. Gary shakes his head. “Steel, a man with a hairpiece like that has not been with a woman for a long time.” It must be something else – a dirty secret that one kept for the other.

For scene nine we get Conden once more, tapping into the Poison. It’s a Queen which means an accusation, and the word is actually “poison”. Gary decides to confront Buccleigh about Conden, and she accuses him straight away. “The sheriff was investigating the paintball business when she died. Conden was just furious at me. I’m sure he killed her when he knew she had found something.” Gary nods. “A guy who hides his bald spot will go to great lengths to prevent being exposed. Ego is a poison. Or in some cases, glue is a poison. I knew a guy once who wore a toupe, the glue ate into his skull and his brains started leaking out his ears. True story!” Buccleigh is confused again by Gary’s manner. Steel shakes his head. Gary has no moves at all. “I think your brain is leaking out your ears, Gary” he says quietly. “But you’re right, we should look at the security tapes and see if Conden was at the paintball feeds that day”. And indeed it’s there: he entered late that night.



In the staging scene, Steel tells Gary that he can tell he is attracted to Buccleigh, and that’s why he’s such a goofball. He says he intends to leave Gary so he can have a real life and not have to keep moving on. Gary denies his attraction and says Steel is just making things up because maybe he IS malfunctioning. Steel is frightened: could this be true? He goes off and calls their technical friend The Oddball who promises to do a full diagnostic.

Current State of the Mystery:

**Buccleigh:** Branches (Lied about alibi), Roots (Is investigating the paintball business off the books)

**Douglas:** Branches (Note left on windscreen), Roots (Paint on pants, angry at sheriff), Poison (Obsessed with winning paintball title, is he cheating?), Fruit (A bad shot who wishes he could win title)

**Conden:** Branches (Lied about alibi), Roots (He and the sheriff share a secret), Poison (Buccleigh is sure he would kill to cover it up)

No scenes yet have brought up the lover, and that’s okay!

We come back after the break to find Gary drinking with Buccleigh. The two share an unguarded moment. Gary manages to be charming and the two almost kiss before Gary’s phone rings. The card was Buccleigh again, with a slip of the tongue with the word “nut”. Steel apologizes but says he’s been going over everything and wondering if he made a mistake and wants Gary to check the police records again. Gary goes to find Steel who has scanned the documents into Gary’s phone. Gary notices that it says Buccleigh has a severe nut allergy. In the bar, her breath smelled of peanuts. “How did you notice that?” asks Steel. Gary looks away. “What if that’s not Lieutenant Buccleigh?” he says.

The next card is an Ace (Financial details) but since we’re at scene eleven that’s too small a detail. We draw again and get Buccleigh with an accusation, and the word is “destruction”. Conden finds Gary and Steel by their truck. “I need your help uncovering a murder,” he says. He explains that for

years the police of the town have been using his business to hide corruption and drug running. When he threatened to tell others, Buccleigh and Kane told him they would destroy him, his business and his good name. Gary says “right so you went to the paintball to kill them both”. Conden panics and flees. Steel glares at Gary. “You didn’t have to do that, you know. Maybe you should check YOUR programming.” Gary smiles; that’s the first time Steel has ever been snide.

For the final scene, the card is a six of spades: at the last moment, Kane’s lover shows up with a Slip of the Tongue. Now the players know that Buccleigh is the killer, since she was the last Fruit to be born. The word is “numerous”. Steve decides that Deputy Douglas calls them to come to the morgue. Apparently Kane’s husband liked to talk while drunk about his wife’s numerous lurid tattoos “below the belt”. Steel is confused. “What does he mean, Gary? On her ankles?” Gary whispers in his dog’s ear. The body has no ink.

Gary, Steel and Deputy Douglas find Buccleigh and Conden arguing at the paintball range with a briefcase full of cash. Except it’s not Buccleigh at all. Gary explains. “In a paintball helmet and goggles and a bullet to the face, it would be easy to mistake one blonde woman for another, if they changed clothes and badges. You two had a good thing going here, but Buccleigh found out about it and was snooping around. Next thing you know you had a dead body. You needed a day or two to cover it up before you could clear out the cash from the bank and get away, so you decided to play the old switcheroo. And it would have worked if you hadn’t panicked and started accusing each other.”

Steel says he has checked his operating software and he doesn’t seem to have any errors he can detect. Gary apologizes, saying he’s the idiot: he met the same woman with a different name but because she changed her hair and took off her sunglasses he didn’t even recognize her. Steel says maybe it is because Gary is lonely and he deserves to not have to stay on the road all the time. Gary says he does get lonely, but he knows there are times in life where you make a choice to look after the people who matter – or the dogs that matter. Steel remembers something Gary said about golden retrievers. “Would you like to rub my belly on occasion and say I am a, what was it, smoochy poochy?” he asks. Gary smiles and rubs Steel’s ears affectionately as they go back to their truck.

# Tune In Next Week

“Next time, Gadget. Next time...”

- Dr Claw, *Inspector Gadget*

Creating an entire TV episode out of nothing is an exhausting experience, and different from most roleplaying games. You may want to stop after one, if only to catch your breath. You might want to always make different TV shows, with all new casts. On the other hand, if you really like your show you might want to keep going with the one you invented, over a long period. Thus we come to the final sheet in the book, where the series of episodes are tracked.

## No Plot Arc

If your series is primarily episodic in nature, then filling this out is easier. Ignore the Plot Arc suspects at the top and the Plot Arc Character entries for each episode. Write down the name and number of the episode. Then each player should think of a cool thing that was added by the other player. This will not only help you remember the best moments, it will help you support your fellow player and show them how much you appreciate them. Hugs are optional but recommended. Next, make a list of at least one thing each that you'd like to see come up again in future episodes. It can be allies, villains, topics, moments, types of scenes, character interplay, whatever you think the viewers like seeing and want to see more of. Slowly you'll build from these a list of ideas to draw on for future episodes. They might not come back straight away: don't think of them as necessary. Think of them ideas for if you get stuck.

Finally, note down any new facts that were established about continuity. Don't worry about details too much here: as the writers of Doctor Who say, continuity is what exists until you break it.

## With A Plot Arc: Determining the Mystery

As with a single episode, it's important to determine the core elements of your mystery before you begin play. Note that the assumption here is your plot arc is about catching the big bad, getting your freedom or solving the mystery. You'll need to figure out who the bad guy is or the answer to the mystery or secret to paradise regained: we can't help you with that as it depends greatly on your series set up and the nature of your characters. Don't be afraid to be vague: the

## Aftercare

Even if you don't want to keep telling this story, every session of creative play (and any kind of play) benefits from aftercare. Take a moment at the end of the game to talk about what you liked, particularly what you liked that other people did. Celebrate each other. Saying “GG” is a good start as a ritual, but can easily become glib. Remember that people do what gets rewarded. If you praise what you liked in the game, chances are they'll do it again next time.

## Keep It Short, Stupid

Studies show that the average D&D game is nine sessions long, and that's a game that takes a lot less creative work than **Partners**. Plan for your game to be nine episodes or fewer, with the emphasis on fewer, because a series that ends satisfyingly is always better than one that simply peters out. If you've still got things to make episodes about, that's fine: it can be next season.d

reveal can be worked out as the episodes come. It's enough to know something is up, but not what.

Once you have chosen your arc, you'll need three suspects. One or more of these people know the answer to the mystery or are secretly working for the big bad. Perhaps they don't know they know or don't know who they are working for. Such things will be revealed. Draw three unique suspects. As usual, for the entries with asterisks, only use one of them per show. Yes, the heroes and main characters can be involved. However that may greatly change the tone of your show, so you can always veto any of these choices if they don't fit your bible.

Card	Mysterious Figures
A	The Straight Shooter or Wild Card
2	The Touchstone or Oddball
3	The Superior
4	The Subordinate
5	A Lover
6	A Close Blood Relative
7	A Close Colleague
8	A Well Known Enemy
9	A Shadowy Enigma
10	A Long Lost Connection
J	The Highest Powers*
Q	Someone Who is Believed Dead*
K	The Inexplicable or Supernatural*

Copy each of these into the three open spots at the top of the Episode Guide sheet. Clubs is reserved for episodes not about the overarching plot. This helps break things up nicely to keep an even flow and also prevents the plots from becoming overcomplicated – three suspects is enough! You can also use this to flesh out your mystery a little more, but don't solve it! As usual, let the cards do that.

*Example: Steve and Gareth decided that in "Big Dogs", their Superior was chasing them down in a Get Back to Freedom scenario but originally thought there would be no real plot to that, just them always needing to keep moving. After the pilot though, they decided there was definitely a secret locked away in Steel's memory. They draw a 2, a 5 and an 8. They decide the 2 and 5 represents the Touchstone: the CIA have recruited Gary's children and his ex-wife to bring in Steel and one of them may be tempted to betray their own father. We'll keep cutting back to that life to learn more. The well known enemy is of course the CIA itself. They decide there's something above the Superior's pay grade going on and Steel has information that implicates high-level political figures in a vast conspiracy. Culp thinks he's just chasing expensive lost property...but every now he gets a hint that there's something much larger at stake.*

Now, at the start of each episode, draw a card and note the suit. In this episode, that figure will be shown doing something shady during one or more of the Staging Scenes. You can make them one of the two main characters in the B-Plot, or just use this idea as to generate the four scenes no matter which characters appear. What kind of things they do depends whether it is the first, second or third draw of that suit.

As usual, we start with the **Branches**. The seemingly innocent or unrelated characters are revealed to have much more going on in their lives than first appeared. They extend far beyond the small limitations into which they were painted, slipping out of those colours into shades both different and darker. They move in circles others would not expect and through this contact figures dark and



dangerous. These disparate elements must be kept apart and secret which demands deception, drawing in the possibility of further sins. A web is weaved from these extended branches, if we may mix our metaphors. Branch episodes rarely move the mystery towards a solution so much as establish why this person is key to it: how they may be able to bring the detectives back to freedom or help them bring down the big bad.

An episode with the second draw for that character examines the **Roots**. Branches presented us with a contradiction: here were the two faces of Eve (or Adam), and we now examine perhaps how that connection was established by uncovering the backstory. We may even show flashbacks to when these relationships began, or perhaps further back to illustrate the beginning of the conspiracy or even to the characters childhood or distant past. Going that far back can reveal the nature of the character that resolves how the two sides of their character can co-exist. Roots episodes answer the questions raised by the Branches episodes and show that those issues are more heartfelt and more critical to the character than just a temporary or accidental alliance. This is no mere red herring or coincidence: the things we saw in the Branches episodes are dyed-in-the-wool and doubled-down and cannot be shrugged off or forgotten. Bridges have been burned and chips bet. If a mystery is being solved, we now know this character has a key piece; if a big bad or freedom is sought, these characters are actively involved in protecting the former or withholding the latter.

The **Poison** episode reveals that exact role. We found the connection through the Branches, explained the reason for that connection in the Roots, the Poison shows us exactly how, when, where and why that character is working against the detectives. It may still be unknowingly in some regard, to some of those involved, but the effect is clear to the audience. If they hold a key part of the mystery, they take pains to destroy or bury it; likewise they may take steps to deny the detectives from ever reaching the big bad or finding freedom. This might even take the form of violently or directly attacking the main characters, or revealing that they are so intent on doing so that they are either effectively or literally the big bad. This could come as a shocking twist if the first two parts were relatively benign scenes that simply establish back story, or it could be something long expected.

Note that there is no **Fruit** in this system. Why? Because if things came to fruition then the mystery would be solved, or the suspect permanently removed. TV rarely wants loose ends tied up so simply and neatly: that might encourage viewers to turn off. Also, the Fruit needs to be something that involves the main characters, discovering all this and taking agency to interrupt it or change how it plays out. This is especially true if the Poison reveals a plan to kill main characters. That rarely succeeds, although it is a common Poison moment.

## The After-Credits Surprise

Sometimes, you might get to the end of an episode and realise that in your Staging Scenes you forgot to further the plot arc. There's a simple solution here: add one final scene after the seventeen of the main game. TV does this all the time: the script was perfect and on time, with no need to pad it out, so space is found after the credits for the little teaser element that keeps things interesting.

*Example: In Series 2 of Lucifer, Lucifer's Mother is an important suspect. In her first key episode, we establish that she is a loving mother but also that she fears her son has become lost to her. We explore that relationship to establish why she thinks that. In her Roots episode, she explores possible causes for Lucifer's change and discovers he has a deep love for Chloe, his partner. In her Poison episode, she decides the solution is to kill Chloe, and the episode ends with her planting a bomb in Chloe's car, and Chloe getting into it. Cue credits! No Fruit for you. Of course, next episode Amenadiel talks her out of detonating the bomb – and again nothing comes to bear on this dilemma.*

*A new dilemma emerges again as Amenadiel shares a secret he has discovered about Chloe's roots...*

As with the flow of episodes, it's perfectly fine if a suspect's arc plays out before you finish what you feel should be a series. This happens all the time in TV shows: it keeps the audience guessing and allows things to be more natural. Some shows are structured entirely around moving through each of three elements bit by bit: the first series of *Daredevil* is in fact three sets of three episodes, each depicting one specific enemy, first the Russians, then the Yakuza and finally, onto Fisk. And one episode in the middle with no plot arc element, to provide that nice palette cleanser.

How long should a series be? We estimated between seven and nine episodes. By that point, the odds are likely that second character should be reaching its Poison stage or all three have covered their Roots. Like with an episode, if you are building a finale simply choose the most recent Poison moment and make that character and that Poison be the answer to the problem, the key path to victory, freedom or solution. You can then make the next episode deal with that Fruit actually or almost actually coming about, or leave that as the cliffhanger moment for the first episode of the next series.

It's possible that after even ten episodes, there have been so many Clubs episodes nothing has reached its Poison. In this case, the mystery is simply taking a long time to play out. Let it slow boil, don't force it. Save it for the next series. Don't force things into a conclusion that isn't earned, and don't try to squeeze a lot of plot and character development into too tight a window.

This isn't real TV, you have the budget and the audience to do whatever you want. Game of Thrones tried to force their ending, and it cost them eight series of good will.

## They Never Found the Body

Endings are good. Closure is good. One thing people like about television is things do get wrapped up and ended. But TV also features soap opera where things absolutely never wrap up and nothing is ever resolved. Both extremes have their fans; generally the bad episodes happen when things swerve dramatically towards the other pole without warning and more importantly, without earning it. Keeping the villain alive when he absolutely 100% should have died just feels cheap. On the other hand, starting a new series with no carry over feels disorienting. If the world is safe forever, why keep watching?

A clever writer can actually have their cake and eat it too here. A villain sent to jail is extremely cathartic closure, but also provides ample opportunity for them to escape. A poor writer has to explain Tommy Five-Tone being suddenly not dead at the end of *Hudson Hawk*.

# TV Guide

“She’s fact. He’s fiction.”

- Advertisement for *Castle*

Low on time? Out of answers? Up against a deadline before the chief pulls you off the case, the mayor takes your badge and the criminal goes free? We got your back. Below are a bundle of TV show ideas ready for play. You can use them wholecloth or pick out the characters you like to slot into your shows.

## The Outside

Twenty years ago as a rookie cop, Doug Jemisin put away Ted Mulrooney for multiple murder, sure the man was guilty. Now he knows he was wrong and the two are trying to find out who framed Ted, and who really pulled that trigger.

**Straight Shooter:** Doug Jemisin. Before I was a detective I was a dumb rookie, suckered in by bad cops. You can tell I’m the straight shooter because now I second guess everything. Deep down I respect the wild card because he should hate me, and I don’t know why he doesn’t.

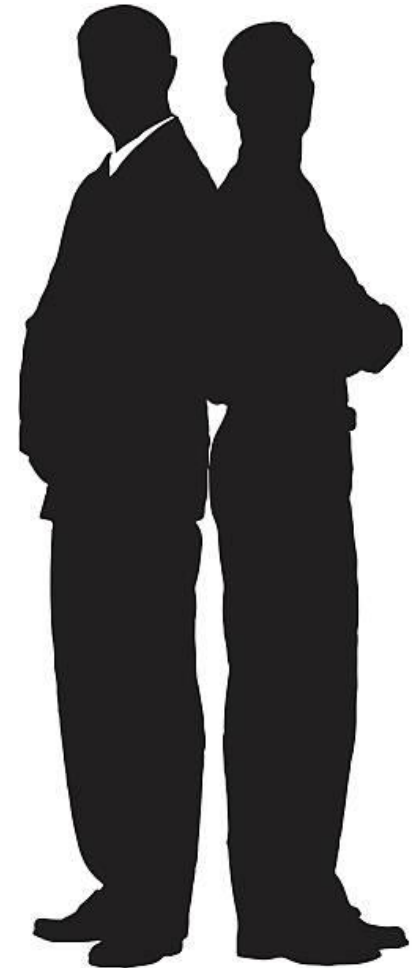
**The Subordinate:** Bobby Delrey. The Wild Card mocks me because my whole time at the academy I wanted to be just like Doug Jemisin, the coolest cop ever, and now my hero has feet of clay. But deep down I’m good at seeing the best in people.

**The Touchstone:** Holly Mulrooney, Ted’s wife. All that time I never gave up, never stopped believing Ted was innocent. Well, sometimes. I’m not a cop because look what it did to my Teddy. I get into danger when I tell the bad cops to get screwed.

**Wild Card:** Ted Mulrooney. Before I was a detective I spent twenty years in prison for a crime I didn’t commit. You can tell I’m the wild card because I don’t know any pop culture and live in a shiv-or-be-shivved reality. Deep down I respect the straight shooter because he owned up to his mistake.

**The Superior:** Jack Colvin. The straight shooter resents me because I’m the reporter who broke the story that Mulrooney was innocent and thinks Jemisin can’t put things right. The cops in this town won’t let him. I’m actually good at finding the truth, not just scandal though.

**The Oddball:** Ratman Joe. I’m an outcast because I’ve been in prison so long I think my rats can talk to me. But that way everyone pretended I didn’t exist so I know all the secrets and I helped Ted survive. I get into danger when I tell Ted what I hear.



## Kate and Leopold

*Kate and Leopold* was a romantic comedy that told the story of a modern woman falling for the time-marooned third Duke of Albany and joining him back in 1870s New York. But soon their son, Leopold

II, the fourth Duke of Albany wants to meet his grandparents on his mothers' side. He travels through the time portal to ends up solving crime with Kate's ex-roommate's daughter, also called Kate, who is now a private detective. But she can't be allowed to uncover the Duke's real origins...

**Straight Shooter:** I'm Kate Anderson, New York private eye. Before I was a detective I worked in advertising like my mother. Believe me, you see the worst of people and you learn what makes them tick. You can tell I'm the straight shooter because I have no time for anything, come on, come on, just do it already and let's go. Deep down I respect the Wild Card because he treats people like they matter because of that nobles oblige thing he's got going.

**The Subordinate:** Doctor Stuart Besser. The Wild Card mocks me because my theories on time travel are extremely amazing but apparently nobody cares and I'm supposed to just pretend like Leopold is from the present. I'm actually very good on physics and the history of New York City.

**The Touchstone:** Hiya I'm Darci Anderson, I'm Kate's mother, hopefully grandmother one day but I kid, I kid, with her hips? The child would be thin like an iphone. I don't approve of poking into other people's lives, but I get into danger when people get angry at Kate and come to the house we share.

**Wild Card:** I'm Leopold, fourth Duke of Albany, named for my father of course. Before I was a detective I was studying to be an accountant in 1890s New York, dreadfully dull you know, I wanted to see the world and when I'd done that I wanted to see the future. You can tell I'm the Wild Card because I never take no for an answer. Deep down I respect the Straight Shooter because somehow it seems almost worse for women now then it was 130 years ago.

**The Superior:** I'm Detective Isaacs. Kate resents me because we dated once and she never really got over me and now she runs around playing detective trying to prove that she's not in love with me, and she's going to get herself killed. I'm actually good at giving her the benefit of the doubt at crime scenes though, as long as I get the collars.

**The Oddball:** I'm Lieutenant McGivens. I'm an outcast because I think Kate is good at her job and should be allowed to make us cops look like idiots from time to time. Also I like pudding pops. I get into danger when I lose my gun because I took it out to get the powdered donut dust off my holster.

## Pursued By A Bear

In 1593 all the theatres in London were closed due to the spread of plague. Actors looked for other means of support. So it was that Charles "Bottom" Harrington, noted clown, acrobat, tumbler and fool, found himself working for The Bear, a fierce bounty hunter, repoman and hired muscle for Black Luce, the richest and sauciest madam in the borough.

**Straight Shooter:** They call me the Bear because I rip people's arms off, but at least I get the job done. Before I was a detective I was an enforcer and outrider. You can tell I'm the straight shooter because I just want to get it done and go back to drinking. I do respect that ponce Bottom though because he has what I never will: the ability to actually talk to people.

**Wild Card:** I may be an arrogant self-aggrandizing fool but it's the price of fame – before I was a detective I was an actor and a GREAT one, thank you. You can tell I'm the Wild Card because I'm always talking about how great I am. But deep down I respect that smelly beast I'm



following around and not just because he's my meal ticket and I'm writing a play about him but because he has conviction. He actually does what he says he will.

**The Subordinate:** I'm Joysters, Master of the Privies in charge with keeping London clean both literally and morally. The Wild Card mocks me because I think actors, whores and mercenaries are the worst kind of people and I will put them in the pillory the moment I can catch them committing actual crimes. I'm actually good at knowing what's going on though.

**The Touchstone:** My old company members and its playwright are why I do this work – to earn enough for the next season when the theatre opens again. They should be protected from the grimmer side of London. But they get into danger when they can't pay their bills.

**The Superior:** Black Luce they call me – but just Lucy will do. I run a tight ship full of respectable ladies who keep their mouths shut and their legs open. To do that I have to make some deals and bust some heads and it pains me when The Bear tries to get justice instead of safety, and he resents that I have to pay him less for those pains he causes me. But I'm actually good at keeping people safe when it is needed.

**The Oddball:** There's a weird playwright running around town called William. Keeps writing down our adventures as ideas for his plays. He's a weird little nerdy type, but he gets into danger when his plays cut too close to reality and we have to clean up the mess.

## **Thick and Thin**

They were best friends in high school and stars of their soccer team. Then Becca went off to play for Bristol and then England, while Lacey stayed in the same tiny town and had four kids. Now Becca is back and has demanded a part in Lacey's new cake business because as always she knows best. Friendships will be tested, especially as there's mysteries everywhere in this strange little town...

**Straight Shooter:** I'm Rebecca Ardenne. You can tell I'm the Straight Shooter because I take everything as seriously and as competitively as my football career, and I do not tolerate anyone having flaws or falling short. Deep down I respect the Wild Card because she had things I never allowed myself to have.

**Wild Card:** I'm Lacey Button. You can tell I'm the Wild Card because I am always inappropriately thinking about and talking about food or other delights of the flesh. Deep down I respect the Straight Shooter because she had the guts to leave and I never did anything at all except start my own cake business.

**The Subordinate:** Lacey's oldest son Darryl. The large, ungainly silent type who runs errands and minds the shop whenever she has to solve a murder. The Wild Card mocks me because she's my mum and I'm a bit ungainly. But actually I'm really good at selling and running a business.

**The Touchstone:** Old friendship. Instead of a person, the touchstone here is old friends and the memory of shared experiences. When murders get bleak and the friends fall out, scenes reflecting on the past are what keep them together and tolerate each other's differences.

**The Superior:** The small town is full of judgemental people, old nemeses, nosy women and pushy men, especially from the health department or small business bureau. Lacey laughs in their faces but Rebecca still wants to be approved of, and that will actually help the business get running.

**The Oddball:** Similarly the town is full of a large and revolving cast of oddballs. They aren't the main characters so rarely get involved in murders directly and yet they are often witnesses, victims and even suspects every now and then...

## Bread Reckoning

*This is an example of Partners being used for something more like a movie than a TV show, so the supporting cast are all specific to the murder. This is an excellent way to turn the game into a movie generating system, although in this case consider making the supporting cast suspects! For example in Knives Out, Linda acts like the Superior, Marta the Touchstone, Walt the Subordinate and Ransom the Oddball. This setting provided by Aerin Bee.*



Rising Baker is a reality show featuring amateur bakers competing for the accolade of Rising Baker Of The Year in the grounds of an old manor house in the bucolic countryside. Imagine the shock when halfway through the competition (4 bakers remaining), the body of the head producer is found dead in the sparkling rivulet right underneath the picturesque little bridge used to frame all the episode introductions and the sidebar talks. Two local detectives are immediately called in.

**Straight Shooter:** Larissa Omar. Before I was a detective I was diligently working my way up through the ranks. You can tell I'm the Straight Shooter because I like getting the Bad Guys for breaking the rules even if it's just for traffic violations. Deep down I respect the Wild Card because she is a really good driver which helps with the traffic stops.

**Wild Card:** Nat D'Angelo. Before I was a detective I was a limo driver. You can tell I'm the Wild Card because I am constantly poking my nose into other people's lives, which is why I was fired from the limo job. Deep down I respect the Straight Shooter because when I was in a crash that wasn't my fault she helped me deal with the whole police and court stuff, because she's good with rules.

**The Subordinate:** Jane Currantbin, the caretaker for the estate where the show is filmed. A nonsense woman who can tell you everything about the architectural and landscaping history of the area from 1600 through now. The Wild Card mocks me because I make sure everything is perfect and am faithful to my home with a love rarely seen these days. I care about my job, in other words.

**The Touchstone:** Freddie Cornflower, the much-beloved host, a cultural icon, an elderly genderfluid comedian who exudes friendliness and warm charm. A national symbol of goodness and warm humour, they could not have done it because Freddie would not harm a fly. They get into danger when they stumble onto things or people assume Freddie can't hear them.

**The Superior:** Todd Shanks, Head of PR for the show and its parent company. I frustrate the Straight Shooter because I want the cops gone and out of my life which is way too important to spend here. I'm good at getting people to do things though, because I'm terrifying.

**The Oddball:** Dr. Tati Taylor. You know I'm the Oddball because I don't care about this twee show, or cooking, or old houses, but I get paid big bucks to sew up minor knife wounds. I have no stake in anything so I'm not in danger, except that I know if anyone has a cut, and my little surgery area is full of things to hurt people with.

# The Archives

“She’s the tough lady lawyer who goes to the limit. He’s her partner that goes beyond the limit. Together, they are: T and T”

- Narrator, *T and T*

The author of this game spent pretty much every night of his teenage years staying up too late watching shows about double acts solving mysteries and fighting crime. Here are some memorable highlights of those and other years. Some fit the Partners system more than others, but all are worth studying for ideas. Well, not Nightman. Nightman is awful.

**Airwolf**

**Alias Smith and Jones**

**Almost Human**

**Avengers, The**

**Automan**

**Baywatch Nights**

**Blacklist, The**

**BJ and the Bear**

**Bones**

**Cagney and Lacey**

**Castle**

**Cobra**

**Deception**

**Doctor Who**

**Dragnet**

**Due South**

**Dukes of Hazard, The**

**Early Edition**

**Elementary**

**Fall Guy, The**

**Forever Knight**

**Good Omens**

**Greatest American Hero, The**



**Hardcastle and McCormick**  
**Hardy Boys, The**  
**Hart to Hart**  
**Hawaii 5-0 (both versions)**  
**Hercules: The Legendary Journeys**  
**Highlander (various)**  
**Highwayman, The**  
**Highway to Heaven**  
**Hunter**  
**It Takes a Thief**  
**Jake and the Fatman**  
**Knight Rider**  
**Kung Fu: The Legend Continues**  
**Law and Order (various)**  
**Legwork**  
**Life**  
**Lois and Clark (and other superhero shows)**  
**Lucifer**  
**Macmillan and Wife**  
**Magnum, PI (both versions)**  
**Man from UNCLE, The**  
**MacGuyver (both versions)**  
**Manimal**  
**Mann and Machine**  
**Martial Law**  
**Master, The**  
**Mentalist, The**  
**Miami Vice**  
**Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries**  
**Monk**  
**Moonlighting**

**Mr Merlin**  
**Mrs Bradley Mysteries, The**  
**Nero Wolfe**  
**Night Man**  
**Person of Interest**  
**Professionals, The**  
**Psych**  
**Pushing Daisies**  
**Quantum Leap**  
**Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)**  
**Raven**  
**Remington Steele**  
**Renegade**  
**Rockford Files, The**  
**Rosehaven**  
**Rosemary and Thyme**  
**Sapphire and Steel**  
**Scarecrow and Mrs King**  
**Shakespeare and Hathaway**  
**Sherlock**  
**Sherlock Holmes (various)**  
**Sidekicks**  
**Silk Stalkings**  
**Simon and Simon**  
**Sledgehammer**  
**Sleepy Hollow**  
**Spenser for Hire**  
**Starsky and Hutch**  
**Streethawk**  
**Supernatural**  
**Sweating Bullets**

**Sweeney, The**

**Sword of Justice**

**Suits**

**T and T**

**Tenspeed and Brown Shoe**

**Thunder in Paradise**

**Timeless**

**True Detective**

**Voyagers**

**Wild Wild West**

**Wiseguy**

**Wizard, The**

**Xena: Warrior Princess**

**X-Files, The**

# I'M THE STRAIGHT SHOOTER



**My Name Is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Before I Was A Detective I:** \_\_\_\_\_

**You Can Tell I'm the Straight Shooter Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Deep Down I Respect the Wild Card Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## THE SUBORDINATE: I DO WHAT EVERYONE TELLS ME

**My Name Is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The Wild Cards Mocks Me Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

**But I'm Actually Good At:** \_\_\_\_\_



## THE TOUCHSTONE: I REMIND PEOPLE WHAT MATTERS

**My Name Is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I'm Not A Detective Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

**But I Get Into Danger When:** \_\_\_\_\_

# I'M THE WILD CARD



**My Name Is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Before I Was A Detective I:** \_\_\_\_\_

**You Can Tell I'm the Wild Card Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Deep Down I Respect the Straight Shooter Because:** \_\_\_\_\_



## **THE SUPERIOR: I TELL EVERYONE WHAT TO DO**

**My Name Is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**The Straight Shooter Resents Me Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

**But I'm Actually Good At:** \_\_\_\_\_



## **THE ODDBALL: I REMIND PEOPLE TO HAVE FUN**

**My Name Is:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I'm Not A Detective Because:** \_\_\_\_\_

**But I Get Into Danger When:** \_\_\_\_\_

# SHOW BIBLE

**Our Show is Called:** \_\_\_\_\_

**It's About:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Hooks Come From:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Justice is Served By:** \_\_\_\_\_

**It is Easy for us to:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**It is Difficult for us to:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Plot Arcs and Ongoing Themes:**

**Our Show is Rated** \_\_\_\_\_ **for** \_\_\_\_\_

**Veils:**

**Lines:**



# THE DOCKET

Our Stiff Is Named: \_\_\_\_\_ and they worked as a \_\_\_\_\_

Found Dead at: \_\_\_\_\_ Cause of Death was: \_\_\_\_\_

Suspects:

Name:

Relation to Victim:

Occupation:

Motive:



\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Branches: \_\_\_\_\_

Roots: \_\_\_\_\_

Poison: \_\_\_\_\_

Fruit: \_\_\_\_\_

Name:

Relation to Victim:

Occupation:

Motive:



\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Branches: \_\_\_\_\_

Roots: \_\_\_\_\_

Poison: \_\_\_\_\_

Fruit: \_\_\_\_\_

Name:

Relation to Victim:

Occupation:

Motive:



\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Branches: \_\_\_\_\_

Roots: \_\_\_\_\_

Poison: \_\_\_\_\_

Fruit: \_\_\_\_\_

Name:

Relation to Victim:

Occupation:

Motive:



\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Branches: \_\_\_\_\_

Roots: \_\_\_\_\_

Poison: \_\_\_\_\_

Fruit: \_\_\_\_\_

# THE RUNDOWN

This Episode is Called: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Guest Star(s): \_\_\_\_\_

**Scenes:      Primary:      Keyword:      Clue Type:      Suspect:      Stage:**

**The Teaser - Scene of the Crime**

1	W	_____	_____	_____	_____
2	S	_____	_____	_____	_____
3	W	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Interim Scene - Branches**

4	S	_____	_____	_____	_____
5	W	_____	_____	_____	_____
6	S	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Interim Scene - Roots**

7	W	_____	_____	_____	_____
8	S	_____	_____	_____	_____
9	W	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Interim Scene - Poison**

10	S	_____	_____	_____	_____
11	W	_____	_____	_____	_____
12	S	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Whodunnit**

**Clincher - Fruit**

Staging Scenes:	Character	Character	Scene
Branches:	_____	_____	_____
Roots:	_____	_____	_____
Poison:	_____	_____	_____
Fruit:	_____	_____	_____

# EPISODE GUIDE

Plot Arc Characters:



No Plot Arc Development This Episode

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Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

---

I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

Episode Name \_\_\_\_\_ Episode #: \_\_\_\_\_

Cool Moment #1 \_\_\_\_\_ Cool Moment #2 \_\_\_\_\_

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I Hope They Bring Back: \_\_\_\_\_

Plot Arc Character: \_\_\_\_\_ Stage: \_\_\_\_\_

Key New Facts: \_\_\_\_\_

# THE RUNDOWN — SHORT VERSION

This Episode is Called: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Guest Star(s): \_\_\_\_\_

**Scenes:      Primary:      Keyword:      Clue Type:      Suspect:      Stage:**

**The Teaser - Scene of the Crime**

1	W	_____	_____	_____	_____
2	S	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Interim Scene - An Issue Rises**

3	W	_____	_____	_____	_____
4	S	_____	_____	_____	_____
5	W	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Interim Scene - The Issue Reaches A Turning Point**

6	S	_____	_____	_____	_____
7	W	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Whodunnit**

**Clincher - The Issue is Resolved**

Staging Scenes:	Character	Character	Scene
Branches:	_____	_____	_____
Roots:	_____	_____	_____
Poison:	_____	_____	_____
Fruit:	_____	_____	_____

# Designer's Notes

*"Detective Baby Legs, I'm teaming you up with Regular Legs"*

- *Rick and Morty*

Police shows, detective shows, mystery shows are my favourite kind of shows. In my teen years I was addicted to Suchet's Poirot and Thaw's Morse. Of course, a lot of police shows skimp on the mystery but still, the charm of having the A plot being a puzzle to unravel feels like home to me. It also feels more realistic to me than drama shows and soap operas because life is full of doing other stuff. But **Partners** was born originally out of another need.

I was sitting at CanCon, a gaming convention in Canberra, Australia, when a lovely older lady approached me. I am always someone who believes roleplaying can be for everyone, and when she asked what it was all about, I gave her a full tour of the hobby and its many variations. She unfortunately reflected however that it was just her and her husband now and she was particularly looking for two player games. I could only think of *Cthulhu Confidential* by Robin Laws and Ruth Tillman but I then also had to explain what Cthulhu was. There are indie games out there, but they are not easy to find. I set about right then and there to design a game exclusively for couples because so often that's where we are in the world and with an accessible setting at its core.

Since then I've discovered a few more indie games in this vein, and the marvelous anthology *You and I: Roleplaying Games For Two* published by Ginger Goat. It has fifteen two player RPGs in it and can be found on Drivethru RPG. Still, I think we need more. The thing that makes RPGs hard to play is the need for four or so people to meet regularly – a thing becoming more and more rare in these days of terrifying hypercapitalism eating our social lives and then the pandemic made it even more likely to be stuck at home. Gathering in twos is increasingly much more common and has an intimacy just right for roleplaying. I challenge my fellow artists to make more such games



**Partners** uses something like the card-based system (and the Branches, Roots, Poison and Fruit) from my earlier game **The Tin Star** which is designed for one player, which in itself borrowed from some of the games of Talen Lee. Both **Tin Star** and **Partners** take an unusual approach to roleplaying where the players have little control of the protagonist's actions. It's a strange conceit and an unpopular one but I am nothing if not *avant garde*. And what could be more "play to find out what happens" when you relinquish total control over what happens? I love random generation, it's my favourite part of roleplaying and it makes sense to me to take that part of character generation and put it in the whole game. We actually played a lot of *Leverage* like that when we ran it: it's a game that suggests dramatic scenes at an authorial level, and that means you can just describe what happens and we found that just as much fun as "driving" our characters at the avatar level.

I hope you enjoy it, and please check out my other games at [www.tinstargames.com](http://www.tinstargames.com) Thanks to the folks who gave it a once-over and a playtest, especially Aerin Bee for helping me finish it.

# Appendix: Further Reading on Forensic Failure

By Peter Blake

The popular view of forensic science is that it is like any other branch of science, soberly arriving at a better understanding of the world through experimentation and challenge. Believing this makes us much more likely to rely on what forensic investigators say in court. Yet in 2009 the U.S. National Academy of Sciences determined that “the forensic science system, encompassing both research and practice, has serious problems that can only be addressed by a national commitment to overhaul the current structure”, and since 1989, 24% of the criminal exonerations that have been overturned were partly or wholly “(1) caused by errors in forensic testing, (2) based on unreliable or unproven [forensic] methods, (3) [involved forensic results] expressed with exaggerated and misleading confidence, or (4) fraudulent [in terms of forensics],” according to the National Registry of Exonerations. That represents more than six thousand lifetimes lost. And that’s only exonerations, which of course far outweigh the known cases of false convictions.

In his excellent book *Forensic Fraud* (Academic Press, 2013), Brent E. Turvey sets out to discover the factors that contribute to this concerning situation. He examines 100 proven perpetrators of forensic malpractice whose malfeasance was discovered between 2000 and 2010 and finds that “...forensic fraud tends to be the result of cultural, pathological, and systemic causes rather than the narrow motives of single individuals”. In particular, Turvey found that if a laboratory is affiliated with law enforcement, its employees are more likely to invent forensic “results” to incriminate or exonerate a particular suspect. He also found that laboratories without professional accreditation have employees who are more likely to misrepresent forensic findings in reports or in court.

Studies of what leads people to commit forensic fraud more generally point to four contributing factors: motivation or pressure, opportunity, rationalisation, and personal capability - yet law enforcement “furnishes [its] members with the skills, incentives, motivations, and rationalisations for ignoring, protecting, and even publicly defending their unlawful co-workers”. This obviously increases the likelihood that fraud will also be committed, tolerated, concealed, and defended.

The values encouraged in the practice of science include honesty, attention to detail, objectivity, skepticism, and transparency. However, these values are at odds with those encouraged in practice in law enforcement: aggression, mistrust of outsiders, racist stereotyping, a siege mentality, secrecy, and cynicism towards the law. When law enforcement pays for and controls the operation of the majority of forensic laboratories and investigators, it is easy to see which culture’s values will dominate. Turvey concludes that “though fraud exists in the scientific community without the influence of law enforcement culture, the imposition of that culture on the requirements of scientific integrity can only make things worse, and not better.”

Only 48% of the 100 investigators Turkey examines were prosecuted for their fraud. 32% were encouraged to resign but were otherwise free to find employment with another lab or agency. 37% kept their jobs without consequence or change. Meanwhile, their actions caused over 5,443 cases to be overturned, and 9 forensic laboratories to be shut down, all at great human and public cost, and a cost primarily paid not by the cause of the problem.

Ultimately, Turvey’s work and others like it suggest that the law enforcement system corrupts all its personnel over time, including forensic scientists and investigators. Forensic science as it is executed by police is too prone to fraud to be considered science yet is presented as undeniable fact. On a



scientific level, fingerprinting is generally considered useless, about half of DNA evidence is unreliable and profiling has almost no scientific foundation at all.

The good news is, this failure makes for good stories as well. Not only can it help you get out of tight spots in your game of **Partners** where you need to change what a previous clue meant, but you can also tell a story about precisely how unreliable these things really are. Stories have meaning, and you get to choose what that meaning is, and how it affects you in the real world. And in the real world, we advise you to make trouble, and demand change to the system.