

INSTAR INC.

By Ron Edwards

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I wrote the first draft of this game to participate in a fun role-playing design contest held in the Endeavor forum at the Forge by M. K. Adams in March, 2008. His requirements were to use Double Dice in a goals-consistent way, to keep the rules down to two-pages, to make the game “metal,” and to make him throw the horns.

Seth Ben-Ezra won the contest with his contribution *Wuxia Melodrama*, barely edging out Eero Tuovinen’s truly metal *Missä miehet ratsastaa*. My draft was too lengthy and not metal in the slightest, mainly because I saw the Double Dice, got all excited, and failed to notice any of the other parameters. Therefore, rightly, I didn’t have much chance to win the contest, although M. K. did throw the horns.

I was intrigued enough by what I’d done to brush it up a little. It’s a role-playing game which utilizes a Game Master and preferably at least three other players, each of whom creates and plays a single character. Creatively, it was inspired by my frustration with a life-style pattern I’ve observed over the years among members of my favorite hobby.

Playtesting questions

How hard is it to establish and keep to the adversity rules?

Should a GM have lists of components and events to work from, or is the current *laissez-faire* method sufficient?

Is working out who rolls vs. whom easy or stalling-out?

Is the imagined fiction nice and strong throughout play?

Are both instar and person outcomes reasonably likely?

Is the whole thing re-playable at all?

Are the numbers for powers and skills too fiddly to track?*

*** In fact, if you want, try this alternative: jettison the target numbers and only use the greater/lesser concept for success or failure. Keep track of how many times an Instar beats a skill (within a character) and vice versa. A skill is canceled by a single Instar defeat; an Instar is canceled by three skill defeats (doesn’t have to be the same skill).**

The GM needs nothing but a page for keeping notes. Everyone else each needs a Double Die, and a few ordinary six-sided and eight-sided dice will also be useful.

Concept

Each player-character works for the same corporation, which is called Instar Incorporated. It's a big bland corporation with many subdivisions and a vague function, some sort of consultancy + partnership + planning or whatever. The characters are in their mid-twenties, unmarried, with no children. Their positions may vary depending on what they were hired for, but they have not moved up significantly in their positions since then; basically, they're not very successful people although not in danger of being fired. Each has agreed to participate in a program offered by some subcommittee from Human Resources, to become a New You.

The New You will be competent, successful, exciting, and fulfilling. The character even got to choose what it will be like. They achieve their dreams and the corporation improves its personnel assets – what could be wrong with that?

Among other things, the way the New You works is a bit different from advertised. The character has been implanted with an instar, the larval form of a mysterious creature that will literally develop into a new version of its host from the inside, taking over his or her life entirely.

An instar is the term for each stage of arthropod larval development. Technically, the creature in the character is a parasitoid, i.e., it develops within a host and consumes the host to mature. To be clear, in this game, the character is not killed and the creature does not emerge from his or her body. Instead, if the process is completed, the instar (or rather adult) will now be this body's only volitional force and abilities; the original character will only exist as a helpless "rider" from that point forward.

Character creation

1. I used the [Portrait Illustration Maker](#) to illustrate the following characters. Pick one!



Mortimer



Sigourney



Kevin



Marianne (Soojin)



Katrina



R. J.



Jessi



Benjamin



Cordelia

Use the website yourself for a new illustration if you'd like. It is slightly biased toward anime designs, so aim toward more naturalistic options.

2. The character is expressed in game terms by a list of trivial skills. Make up twenty of them, with the only constraints being that they serve no immediately-obvious professional or status-based purpose. However, they should indeed be real things to accomplish, not nose-picking or something like that. Given that there are twenty skills to make, treat these parameters a bit kindly and don't get hung up on perfecting every skill within them.

All skills created during character creation are rated at 4-5-6. The character is quite good at the skill and a successful attempt is always clearly due to that competence.

The character is presumed to be only marginally competent at absolutely any other imaginable skill. He or she can get by at the job or socially, but often does so by avoiding conflicts and ignoring opportunities.

3. Refine and add content to these two statements, which at the beginning of play have become strong elements of the character's self-image.

- "That kind of stuff never happens to me."
- "I guess I'll never get to do that."

4. The New You has four attributes, each of which is a broadly applicable quality that looks very spiffy in use. It has no true expertise in anything.

In his or her consultation with the New You specialist, the character has chosen four of the following abilities, which represent his or her idealized notions of the persona that cruel fate has denied them:

Good-looking, Calm and Confident, Powerhouse, Athletic Whiz, Great Sense of Humor, Great Spin, Moral Gravitas, Everyone's Pal, Natural Leader, Insider Knowledge, Sexual Dynamo, Comforting Counselor, Endearingly Kooky, Impeccable Taste, Touch of Menace, Quick Mind, Artistic Talent, Cutting Comeback, Organized Time Manager

Assign values to the four abilities. Distribute them as 6, 6, 5-6, and 5-6, as you see fit.

Here's an example: **Benjamin**



Benjamin's skills (all at 4-5-6)

Open cans with army-knife style opener
Burp a baby
Gut a trout
Chop wood
Alphabetize and organize books
Sing all of Jesus Christ Superstar
Build a fire from scratch
Organize a fun date
Discuss thematic of Marvel superheroes
Read a topographic map

Ride a horse
Make origami critters
Clean an apartment top to bottom
Pack stuff for a move
Ignore loud distracting sounds
Whip up an omelette
Explain Deuteronomy
Adjust the bass setting
Fix a busted dryer
Drum on tabletop with hands

The skills are not utterly trivial; they are in fact skills that require experience and practice. However, note that riding a horse is not racing a horse, and that there's nothing on there about fixing a copy machine or doing stuff like sports or martial arts. The trivia knowledge isn't hip, not even for geeks.

I didn't really strategize or unify my skill-making. Some of them are from my real life, and others occurred to me in an unconsidered way. One of them, the drumming, I chose because it's something I definitely cannot do. Only after looking them over do I realize that Benjamin seems to have done his share of summers at Bible camp (unlike me), is a bit musical (like me), and clearly lives in a lower-end apartment in the city (like I used to).

Benjamin's statements

"Girls never just come up to me and be already interested."
"I'll never get to do an authentic survival hike."

These arose out of my impressions from the previous steps, that Benjamin suffers from the nice-guy syndrome with women, and that serious camping was a big part of his teens.

Benjamin's New You

Good-looking (5-6), has a Great Sense of Humor (5-6), is Endearingly Kooky (6), and harbors Cutting Comeback (6) for emergencies.

Once you've done #1-3 in whatever order, coming up with the New You that would most appeal to this person, at this time, is quite easy. I picked these for Benjamin without having to think about them much. On reflection, though, he seems to be focusing on his "never happens to me" statement, probably because if he ever does go camping again, he has lots of skills for it already.

I like making up these characters so much, I'll do another: **Cordelia**



Skills (all at 4-5-6)

Understand punch lines in French movies
Make ice cream the old-fashioned way
Lace up skates
Do a plié
Drink a whole beer at once
Make a collage from magazine photos
Re-tell any Pooh story
Dance all of YMCA
Apply Band-aid or gauze
Find fruit without bruises

Receive excellent wait-service
Remember classmates' names
Whistle through cupped hands and teeth
Choose hats
Recognize the oboe line in orchestral music
Read quickly
Parallel-park
Play Pick-Up-Sticks
Blow bubbles
Find car keys

Statements

“No one ever thinks of me as special, not for real and not just because they want something.”
“I'll never get to take a long and stimulating journey to all kinds of exotic places.”

Cordelia's New You

Calm and Confident (6), Sexual Dynamo (5-6), Natural Leader (6), Impeccable Taste (5-6)

Anyway, you shouldn't follow my designs. These were merely examples. Pick a picture and do it all yourself.

Scope and constraints of play

The story takes place in the context of work and working life. Locations do not all have to be at work itself, but they shouldn't skip off to Tahiti either. Details of characters' work space, daily schedule, living situations, and general life-style are left to play itself, as each player essentially offers or vets any necessary information as it comes up.

Such details do need to be added, though, as an ongoing fabric of input – things like the kitsch on a character's desk, his or her favorite gossip nook, inspirational posters in the elevator lobby, or an organizational chart on a whiteboard in the conference room.

Neither the New You program specialist nor any indication of the program's existence is ever seen again after character creation. There are no New You NPCs or other instars in play beyond those of the player-characters. And as an important side point, characters cannot spot the presence of the instar in anyone else.

The instar never acts against company interests, nor does it ever violate its basic hierarchy (ousting and sabotaging competitors and immediate superiors isn't the same thing). Also, the instar's intellectual and social abilities are ultimately not substantive. It cannot innovate, develop insight, or improve things; when it uses (for example) Great Sense of Humor, or Insider Knowledge, it *seems* to work great in the moment, but the actual content turns out to be nil upon reflection. Successful instar ability use pretty much gives everyone the right impression, that's all. Its physical abilities are legitimate, but again, they tend to be stronger on visual style compared to actual long-term impact.

The instar-inhabited character cannot leave the company or act against company interests, period. Nor can he or she describe, explain, or even mention the thing inside. Those actions are overridden at a very basic neural level by the instar.

A cast list for the rules examples

I tried to write the resolution section four times and it only became more confusing, until I started with this list.

- Sam is playing a character named Sigourney
- Bob is playing a character named Benjamin
- Cass is playing a character named Cordelia
- Matt is playing a character named Mortimer
- Ron (me) is the GM; I'll use "I" in the examples

The fabric of play: events

It's good to begin with a quick mental, perhaps spoken review of what we should all know. The players are employees working day by day. Their instars, in their abstract and rather raw way, are corporate achievers. Like all modern corporations of a certain size and subculture, the company is forever in a state of re-defining, developmental ferment.

Play is composed of a series of corporate events or situations, typically one of the following: a project (i.e., actual work; this is rare), a retreat to build morale or policy, a reorganization, a public-relations face-lift, a seminar or other educational sequence, or a review, whether internal or external. The GM merely picks one to use next in whatever way he or she wants, including at random.

This event or situation is the game master's touchpoint for play. It is up to him or her to decide what event is under way, and when the situation has come to a conclusion through the smaller occurrences of play, and how well or badly it turns out for the company itself. There is no reason to stick to a set amount of time or played material for each event, nor any reason to let the outcome rely on actions of the characters. These events arrive, provide an environment for the real drama of play, eventually conclude or subside, and are replaced by the next.

In “playing the company,” which is more-or-less what the GM is doing when providing these backdrops and developing them, the company itself is not adversarial toward the characters. Granted, the corporate culture is weird and tacitly pointless, but this isn’t about workplace dystopia. So the company itself does not provide threats or outright conflicts toward the characters.

To begin, the GM says “what’s up” – stating what sort of event is beginning to occur, naming some relevant locations in and around the workplace, identifying some of the obvious tasks and functions of the event, and introducing at least one new key character who is important in it. No particular strategizing is necessary and I encourage simply saying whatever comes into your head.

I keep it quick and easy: the plaza in front of the office building is getting re-done, as well as the façade of the building itself. Lots of designs and small-scale models and contracts with builders and artists are under way. I also introduce the main design consultant, Stan, by describing him seeming to be everywhere, choosing his “teams” and otherwise acting like he owns the joint.

Again, company events will arise, develop, and eventually end, giving way to new events. These transitions are not signaled by game mechanics, nor is anything about the mechanics affected by, for instance, whether play is at the beginning or end of an event. All such progress and transitions are simply narrated by the GM.

I recommend that with the end of each event, or rather the end of our attention to it as a context for our fiction, each player write a very brief summary of what happened to his or her character, from that character’s point of view.

The fabric of play: action within an event

The next part is composed solely of stated depictions and dialogues regarding the player-characters. It arises through organic dialogue between each player and the GM, establishing what the character is doing, whom he or she meets (typically inventing new NPCs for this purpose), what is said, what is immediately happening at the moment, and anything else related. It should be experienced “in the moment,” rather than narrated from afar, composed not of negotiations but rather of continuing and enriching what the other person just said, back and forth.

Each such GM-player exchange should be fast – between one and two minutes, at most. Its main job is to establish and enrich a shared imagined stage set among every person at the table, with a certain “something’s about to happen” quality to it.

I begin a scene, creating the shared understanding that various characters are attending a conference meeting about the plaza. The room has one of those long shared tables with pitchers of water on it, and its window overlooks the actual plaza in question. Stan’s there, of course, and the table also has some expensive-looking models on it.

We all talk: Bob, Matt, and Cass all want their characters to be at the table. Sam says Sigourney is just outside doing something, say, working on the holiday decorations. People color it up! I have Stan say, “Hello team!” “I’m poking at the models,” says Bob (speaking for Benjamin). “What, no coffee?” asks Cass, miming Cordelia’s expression which connotes an intense need for coffee.

The real responsibility now lies with the GM, whose job is to provide unexpected opportunities for each character, specifically those which might directly lead to fulfilling those wistful statements on his or her character sheet. More than one exchange per character may be necessary, but within a very short time, each one should be confronted with “the chance of a lifetime,” at least relative to those statements.

As we play, Stan makes it clear that someone has to take responsibility for developing and overseeing the production of the new lobby statue, which at the moment is conceived to look like a pile of weird sticks or maybe French fries, although Stan keeps referring to it as the company’s

“vision made real.” He also says the project needs someone really special to head the subcommittee ...

Someone bites. Cass says that Cordelia perks up and gets interested, drawing upon her skill of Play Pick-Up-Sticks. Good opportunities tap into key words in the characters’ statements, such as “special” in this case, and the best ones do so for multiple characters. For instance, Mortimer may have a frustrated interest in visual arts. It’s also good for a scene to provide multiple opportunities if possible.

Don’t out-and-out satisfy the desires by dropping their objects straight into characters’ laps. They have to do something to make the opportunity theirs.

This stage now segues into much more measured, slow play, defined mainly by stated character actions of any kind. Everyone’s job is to make sure such actions are suitably placed in the ongoing fabric of the event, such that everyone knows where and how each character is doing things. Often more than one character may be active at the same time, either because the GM says so, or because a given player has stated actions which necessarily involve the other character.

My job as GM is mainly completed, and in terms of the fiction, all I do is keep playing Stan without making him a major factor in the scene. Socially, though, I make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak in roughly equal proportion, asking “What do you do?” and similar questions. Everyone should get a chance to weigh in before decisive actions move into the resolution arena.

We aren’t negotiating what might happen. If anyone says, “What if I ...,” or “If you do that, then I ...,” then my job is to ask “What do you actually say?” or “What do you actually do?” immediately.

Any scene may shift locales, include the passage of time, or give rise to a logically necessary new scene. Do so at perceived break points, as suggested by anyone but subject to “final cut” authority by the GM.

During this part of play, speaking when playing automatically means that fictional time is passing. Everyone should focus literally on his or her character’s actions, enriching and to some extent “zooming in” on characters’ circumstances. Do not narrate future outcomes as if storyboarding; the events of play are not negotiated. However, each person should also consider what has already been said and use those fictional elements in what is said next. New characters may be introduced as needed, although the GM has final authority over their actions or movements.

Adversity within an event

The interesting part of this stage is that each character may provide adversity against the immediate actions and apparent goals of at least one other character. This adversity is not the GM’s responsibility at all. As long as a character is hosting an instar, then that player is constrained to pose adversity as frequently as seems fun and reasonable in a given scene.

Each player directs his or her character to do things, and in the forward-moving flow of dialogue and stated actions, those things get in the way of other characters doing theirs. What should arise quite organically are immediate conflicts in which a character may not get his or her way or even a chance to strive for it.

Most of these actions and goals will be about company power and status: promotions, commendations, temporary leadership or positions of responsibility, and similar. In creating such situations, everyone should focus on small things – what happens in the very next moment of fictional time: who sits next to whom at a meeting, whether someone can get a box into an elevator without jostling the vice-president who’s already in it, what combination of meals will be chosen to order from a catering service, who is going to have to take home and proofread the report that is due the following morning. They must be concrete and, again, arise directly from stated actions or effects of actions.

So Cordelia had begun to speak up about leading the statue subcommittee. “Ha,” says Sam, and describes how Sigourney inadvertently chooses that moment to stick her head in the door and to ask Cordelia for help with the office decorations, interrupting the discussion about the subcommittee. Sigourney’s action, unintentional as it may be, does create adversity for Cordelia. Laying claim to leadership is hard when you’re being publicly cast as a good little helper. This action undercuts Cordelia’s effort.

“Ha too,” says Matt, and describes how Mortimer tries to grab the subcommittee leadership for himself by drawing general attention to himself throughout the meeting. This is outright competing with Cordelia.

“H’m,” says Bob, and points out that Benjamin is suddenly facing adversity due to Sigourney as well. For sake of the example, let’s say that he was in trouble with her about something that happened earlier and has been avoiding her. Now she’s looking at everyone in the room and he tries his best to be inconspicuous, edging behind someone to break her line of sight to him. Note that here the player has posed adversity for his own character, which is fine as long as it riffs off of what some other character is already announced to be doing. Benjamin’s action is technically being undercut by Sigourney, but he is neither undercutting nor competing with Cordelia.

If play seems to wander without producing such adverse events and recognizable moments of action, then someone should speak up and re-direct the group’s attention toward this issue.

A note on skill use

Using skills by definition requires some finesse, as a character’s skills typically aren’t well-suited to the rigors of the situations afforded by a given opportunity. If a player wants the character to use a skill, though, he or she will have to use some imagination to see how one of the many skills might be tweaked or kitbashed into an action that actually applies after all. The GM does have final authority over whether a skill’s use is legitimate, but he or she should rely on social cues as much as on personal judgment. If one or more people cry out “Oh come on!” as a snap reaction, that’s probably enough indication to pick another skill.

Resolving adversity: who rolls dice, and when?

If a player-character tries to do something in an adverse situation, then the player must roll dice. The next question is who else is rolling and for what.

Cordelia is undercut by Sigourney: Cass rolls, obviously, trying to be assigned the leadership of the subcommittee. Sam, too, must roll dice, solely for the purposes of providing thresholds for Cordelia’s roll.

Cordelia and Mortimer are competing: Both Cass and Matt must roll. The difference from undercutting is that if Mortimer fails, he won’t get something specific he wants, as opposed to merely messing with Cordelia like Sigourney did.

Benjamin is undercut by Sigourney: Bob must roll and Sigourney must too. This is effectively identical to Cordelia and Sigourney. The points I’m making by including Benjamin are that (a) Sigourney is only rolling once, but her results are used by both Cordelia and Benjamin, and (b) Benjamin’s crisis has nothing to do with Cordelia’s, or with Mortimer’s for that matter, so those particular pairs are not compared.

Under all circumstances, everyone rolls at the same time.

Cordelia’s roll is compared with Sigourney’s. Cordelia’s roll is compared with Benjamin’s as well. Mortimer’s roll is compared with Cordelia’s. Benjamin’s roll is only compared with Sigourney’s.

All clear? Great! Now for the dice mechanics.

Resolution mechanics

Each player uses one Double Die to resolve actions when a character is faced with adversity.. The outer die is the character's skill roll, and the inner die is the instar's ability roll.

In all cases, success means falling into the skill or ability's designated range, and rolling higher is better.

The player determines which of the three following resolution mechanics the character will use, and signals it with the appropriate signal phrase.

- *You do it!* The character gives himself or herself entirely up to the instar to save the day.
- *Help me out here!* The character tries to deal with the situation but wants a little insurance by relying on the instar.
- *I'll do it myself!* The character rejects the instar's influence and tries to handle it only with his or her skills.

Each method has its own specific resolution standards and its own implications for how the character may change.

A roll's outcome may be narrated by anyone at the table, which is usually the player in question or the GM. Others' input is freely encouraged. Typically, group consensus arises about a given narration almost instantly. If a final judgment or gavel-thwack is necessary regarding what the outcome is, then the GM provides it.

You do it!

The character is basically giving over the reins to the instar. However, he or she must bring some skill to bear in the situation, chosen by the player, as the instar cannot act without some kind of initiatory action on the host's part. Once begun, the instar will abandon that action and bring its considerable talents to bear using one of its abilities as chosen by the GM. The action proceeds at the *general* goal of the original action, in its own way without regard to the originally-chosen skill.

Compare the instar die's value to the opposing characters' instar die value. Even if an instar's action is defeated by opposition, the action is still observably competent and impressive. Note that even if the instar value falls out of its listed success range, it will succeed as long as it beats the opposing value.

All the examples concern Cordelia trying to head that subcommittee. In this case, she uses "You do it!", beginning with Cordelia messing with the Pick-Up-Sticks type model. As GM, I choose her instar ability Natural Leader. The rolls go as follows: Cordelia's instar die = 4, her skill die = 3, Sigourney's instar die = 2, her skill die = 3, Mortimer's instar die = 2, his skill die = 1.

We ignore the skill dice entirely in this case. Cordelia's instar 4 beats both Sigourney's instar 3 and Mortimer's instar 2. Yay! I narrate as GM, stating how her New You speaks with clear and direct leader-style planning, as she simply takes over the subcommittee by "having done it already," cavalierly assigning Mortimer a task, not to mention ignoring Sigourney entirely.

Help me out here!

The character would like to keep the reins of control, to use a skill of the player's choice, and to utilize a specific ability of the instar as a boost in using a particular skill.

Use the highest roll of the two dice, comparing that value with the skill's success range (typically 4-5-6 or 5-6). Success means the character uses the skill with uncommon verve or whatever is implied by the instar ability in question, which is also in evidence. The result is narrated by the player, not the GM.

If successful in its range, the high value must also beat the opposing character's roll. The value of that roll is determined by whether the other character is using *Help me out here* (high die of the two), *You do it* (instar roll), or *I'll do it myself* (skill roll).

In this case, Cordelia's best value is 4, which falls into the skill's success range of 4-5-6. The instar's help has made her Pick-Up-Sticks look great! Let's assume that Mortimer and Sigourney are both using You Do It! to keep things simple, so their opposing values are 1 and 2 respectively. Cordelia succeeds in heading the subcommittee.

I'll do it myself!

The character deliberately shuts out the influence of the instar, using a skill of his or her choice. The GM chooses an instar ability that it would like to bring to bear on the situation.

To succeed, the skill roll must fall within its success range as well as beat the character's own instar ability roll. If it does so, the character successfully utilizes his or her skill without interference or augmenting.

If the skill roll is in its success range but does not beat the instar, then effectively, what occurs resembles a successful *Help me out here*. If the skill fails, no matter what the instar roll is, then the character makes a good effort but is defeated by a bad circumstance.

The player narrates the outcome.

Note that the skill roll must also tie or beat the opposing characters too. Note that two opposing, individually successful *I'll do it myself*'s may result in a mutually advantageous compromise, if that's how the players narrate it, which cannot happen in either of the other two methods.

Cordelia's instar is irked at being shut out, so it opposes with Natural Leader (6). Her skill die value of 3 has not fallen into the success range of 4-5-6, nor has it beaten the instar die's value of 4, so Cass narrates how her demonstration of Pick-Up-Sticks acumen falls into the "no one cares" zone of the discussion. The undercutting by Sigourney and the competition by Mortimer aren't immediately relevant, but Cass uses them in her narration to round things out.

The above examples focused on Cordelia, but remember, three people rolled. Depending on what happens, any number of them participate in the narration. The GM narrates all New You actions and *You do it* outcomes, and the players narrate character actions and outcomes for *Help me out here* and *I'll do it myself*. For instance, if everyone used *You do it*, then I'd be the only narrator.

Play returns to the scene-fabric following such events; the scene definitely does not have to be over yet.

Make sure to see how skills and abilities may change depending on which option is used and depending on what happens.

Character and instar development

As the instar grows and develops into the full New You, its span of success values increases, and its host's skills begin to disappear. The character may embrace this process or try to delay or stop it. The following three mechanics show how the game numbers change with ability and skill use.

You do it!: If the ability roll is equal to or higher than the skill roll, then two things happen. The instar success range increases, e.g., it becomes 5-6 from 6, or 4-5-6 from 5-6, and so on. The skill success range is diminished, e.g., it becomes 5-6 from 4-5-6, or 6 from 5-6. (Successful or unsuccessful usage, in the case of opposition, is irrelevant.)

Remember how Cordelia steamrolled everyone, by letting her New You do the work? Now we look at her skill die's value after all, which happened to be a 3, less than the instar die's 4. Uh-oh. The

ability Natural Leader is extended to 5-6 from 6, and the skill Pickup Sticks is shrunk from 4-5-6 to 5-6. (Note: if Mortimer had also been using “You do it!”, then he too would have the same result because his instar 2 exceeded his skill 1. This happens regardless of whether you win.)

Help me out here!: If the ability roll was higher than the skill roll, then the skill success range is diminished, e.g., it becomes 5-6 from 4-5-6, but the instar success range stays the same. If the skill roll was higher, then no values change. (Again, successful or unsuccessful usage is irrelevant.)

This time, Cordelia’s instar saved her bacon because the skill die value had not fallen into its success range. The instar 4 is higher than her skill 3, so the skill success range shrinks from 4-5-6 to 5-6. The instar value stays the same.

I’ll do it myself!: Upon a successful roll, the skill success range increases and the instar ability stays the same. If the skill fails, both skill and ability values stay the same. However, see the following section for what happens when this option is used repeatedly for a given skill. (Unlike the above two cases, the relative values of the two rolls are irrelevant; the key is success or failure of the skill.)

Since Cordelia’s skill roll was not successful, no scores change.

Story and character outcomes

A given character's story is composed of opportunities which arise and are resolved through a series of immediate and consequential goals, with many conflicts faced within them. By definition, they will result in many changes in the character's life as it proceeds. There's a “resolve and evolve” cycle for each character, and in many cases it intersects and interferes with the events in the other characters' stories.

There are two kinds of changes within this cycle: fictional consequences and mechanical consequences.

The fictional ones are basically an organic outcome of all the narrations, whether of scene setups, of character dialogue, or of dice rolls. A few conflicts down the road, the character may have changed positions in the company, be living in different circumstances, be involved in a romantic mini-drama, and otherwise simply be seeing and doing stuff he or she wasn't before. This also means that later company events in the story are much more nuanced than the first one or two.

The mechanical ones all concern the relationship between character and instar. They include eliminating skills, adding new skills, or eliminating instar abilities.

A skill may be fully eliminated if its value is 6 and is then diminished once more. If this happens to five skills, then the New You process is completed and the instar develops to maturity. The character is, for all intents and purposes, gone. He or she is now merely an internal, nonvolitional witness to the life of the New You. The player continues to play, acting only to oppose other characters. Specifically, his or her character must undercut the actions of any other character hosting the currently most-effective instar. The abilities are now fixed at their current numerical values. The New You does not use Double Dice, but rather a traditional six-sided die, using abilities only; the skills on the sheet may be ignored or played as minor, non-consequential quirks.

A character may add new skills. Define the new skill, which is not constrained in concept (i.e. it does not have to be trivial). Use it in a conflict with *I’ll do it myself*. The attempt will automatically fail, but if the skill roll beats the ability roll, then it may be entered onto the character sheet with a success range of 6.

During later scenes, Cass decides that Cordelia learns to design and manage an artistic team, so defines a new skill as “Organize a team project.” Or perhaps, it could be a purely social skill, such as “Talk with artists.”

The character may reduce and even eliminate the instar's abilities by using *I’ll do it myself* repeatedly against them. A given ability is checked each time it tries to oppose *I’ll do it myself* and fails (i.e. the skill

works on its own). It doesn't matter whether the skill is the same or different. Three times knocks the ability out of existence forever.

The dice worked against us in the previous example, but let's say Cordelia's skill die value was 5 (in the skill's success range) and her Natural Leader roll was 2 (less than 5). If she persisted in using I'll do it myself and Natural Leader failed three times as the opposition, then Natural Leader vanishes.

If all four instar abilities are eliminated in this way, then it dies and the character continues in play as a free person. The player is no longer constrained to oppose other player-characters from this point onwards. The player now uses a solid d8 for skill resolution only. The existing success range is extended into the higher values; for instance, if the skill was at 5-6, it is now at 5-8. The skill improvement rules still apply (increasing with successful use), hitting maximum value at 2-8 per skill.

Unless the character tries to suppress and eliminate the instar, the eventual outcome will be the victory of the New You.

Play ends when all player-characters have individually either become their New You or defeated their instar. At that point, finish playing out the final scene and then stop. It is perfectly all right for whatever chain of events occurring at the moment to remain unresolved.

The GM briefly states what happens to the company, whether major or minor, or for good or ill. This statement should not be a story in itself, but a mere snapshot, like a closing cinematic moment of a crane or helicopter shot looking down while receding upwards and away.

The players of instar-free characters may provide epilogues for them. Again, these are not new stories, but a brief statement about some aspect of their lives that serves as a final, visual conclusion.

Influences and acknowledgments

Obviously, *The Shab al-Hiri Roach* by Jason Morningstar of Bully Pulpit Games. I hope I haven't stolen too much. This one differs in that in the Roach, the people are obsessed with academic status and the Roach is disruptive, whereas here the instar is obsessed with corporate success and the people are more poignant as individuals. Furthermore, I'm not offering satire on corporate life as such, in the way the Roach skewers academia.

Years and years ago, I was thinking about developing little stapled supplements for *Sorcerer*, each one based on a single colorful concept. One was to be called Myrmidon, about insect-human warriors; another, Rat, was only a vague concept about rats and cities; and yet another was to be called Instar, extending some ideas in *The Sorcerer's Soul* about possessor demons and the dance between being dominated and willingly relinquishing volition.

You can probably see where most of these ideas wound up eventually: Azk'Arn in *Sex & Sorcery, It Was a Mutual Decision*, and now here.

Thanks again to M. K. Adams for his fun contest.

INSTAR DYNAMITE original notes: the following was transcribed directly from the notebook pages that I brainstormed the game onto. You might be amused by walking through the hops and skips my mind does during that process. It's also instructive to see which original notions were preserved and which were abandoned or radically altered during later development.

funny dice RPG contest

inner die = larva's influence or action - can be oppositional, or ~~additive~~ take better roll if helping

character has agreed to become a New You (a corporate offer), and he will! even gets to shape the NY-to-be somehow, perhaps at setup

trouble is, now things begin to go right after all (opening situation) ...

lotta Sorcerer and Roach in there - too much? what to do about that?

also, can PCs be instar-free? like the idea of trading in one's normal die for the weird one, but that's really Roach

character = long list of trivial skills! (sucks at all else) all of which will be nibbled away as the instar becomes the New You. The New You has attributes only, Amber style: immensely applicable but no specialized knowledge or true expertise

if instar overrides then ultimate goal of skill use is achieved without the skill

as instar grows, it's span of success values increases, and skills begin to disappear. One can add new skills with major effort & that suppresses the instar; can also try to save existing skills

** PCs have new, exciting opportunities, the very things they would have sworn "never happens to me"*

** PCs are in serious conflict with one another: generate huge adversity during play*

high is good: skills start at 4-6, instar starts at 6 only

options

I'll do it myself! must beat instar roll, failure = total failure but no skill loss

Help me out here! use highest roll; skill is diminished but instar stays

You do it! instar must beat skill, failure = no big deal (skill stays), success = instar increases, skill is diminished

note: in this case, the action is automatically successful unless another instar is opposing it

preserve skill when threatened = using it "armors" vs. later, draw a box around it

add new skills (key point: they do not have to be trivial) = start it with "Do it myself" & accept automatic failure the first time

some visuals or possibly parameters

wait!

if New You completes the process, instar # is now fixed (nb can't go up too easily)
and crucially, must be framed into direct conflict with toughest other instar, always

if the PC decides to destroy instar, must stay with Do It Myself: nb failure is OK. After 2
consecutive successes, instar gets nervous & tries to help - must be told no. (probably more here)

instar profile: pick 4 (these are what PC chose)
distribute 6 points, meaning assigning success range from 6 on down
e.g. 6, 6, 5, 5, or 6, 6, 6, 4, et cetera (are those the only options? maybe range of options will help
with that)

Good-looking, Confident, Powerhouse, Athletic Whiz at (sport), Great Sense of Humor, Natural
Leader, Insider (fake professional knowledge of anything), Sexual Dynamo, Endearingly Kooky,
Impeccable Taste, Fearsome Physical Opponent, Touch of Menace, Fast Mind (e.g. math,
memory), Artistic Knockout at (medium), Comeback (verbal version of Fearsome Opponent),
Organized Time Manager

the starting PC: make up 20 skills, all of which have little if any professional or social
application (at least obviously) (not nose-picking either, they're real things to do)

"stuff that never happens to me"
"I'll never get to do that"

get all NY to 6 (this is the "more")
when instar tries to help and is told no, PC has option to try to reduce it (~~if it's 5-6 or better~~)
if successful with skill, it does reduce (i.e. range diminishes, from 4-6 to 5-6 to 6)
do it again at 6 & that NY is gone, then use normal die from then on (d8!)

GM is actually the nice guy! keep providing & enriching opportunities

keep putting instars into conflict: PLAYERS

NB when 2 instars are in conflict, whether helping or doing, their rolls are compared too