

Transforming the Narrative: Freeform Meta-Techniques

Sigma Play Conference, May 2014

Role playing games use character and situation as tools for players to collaboratively tell stories. Freeform meta-techniques are procedures which interrupt into the flow of the narrative, but which give players access to additional layers of storytelling and embodiment of character. This collection is taken from the game framework *Play With Intent*. After creating a basic premise for the story, players choose 3 techniques (*i.e.* rules and themes) to structure and inspire play. Story is played out live, with players collaborating to provide direction, framing of scenes, escalation and closure.

Playset: LOW-KEY AND PERSONAL

It's about the people, their subtle emotions, relationships. It's about taking time to let things grow slowly. It's about real humans, fictional or not.

Premise

Normal life setting

Game is set in contemporary, real world. No magic, supernatural, or superheroic powers. Dramas are about troubles that face us all: love, illness, career ambitions, financial despair, etc. About normal people, not the rich, powerful or famous.

Situation creation (Choose 4)

Pick what the story will be about, or the setting in which play will take place. Choose four elements players explore in play. Examples: "Gambling", "New York City", "Homelessness", "Actors".

Roles (2-4 or 1 per player)

Create characters in a related situation.

Warm-ups (Pick 1)

- Sharing circle: Tell a story of your best friend when you were younger.
- Bus stop: Going around, assume a character waiting for bus. Ask next a question that prompts their character.
- Tidy brigade: Mime cleaning up the place together, make it roomy and airy.

Techniques (Pick 3)

Bird-in-ear

Give each other instructions—actions to perform, memories, emotions your characters have.

Close to home

Allow parallels between your life and events of play. Opportunity for everyone to use real events to deepen the story. Reflect internally.

BE ATTENTIVE!

STAY WITH IT!

BE IN IT!

TAKE ACTION!

CHALLENGE!

SEE THE REAL PEOPLE!

SENSE THE SPOTLIGHT!

NO PLANNING!

Doubling

Mirror a character thematically or physically by introducing someone similar. Or may be another version of the same character: their older or younger self; who they could have been if they'd made different choices in life.

Endowment

Players gift each other's characters with problems/aspects. Accept what other say about you in play and bring it into the game.

Flashbacks

Play a scene from a character's past, or that lead to the present events.

Hotseat

Player answers questions asked by the others. Give them room to answer, uninterrupted and without suggestions.

Internal monologue

The characters don't know what the others are thinking - but the players can. Speak character's thoughts out loud, or ask another to do so.

Remapping

A player calls a scene, framing its location and characters that attempts to recreate the dynamics found in an earlier scene - probably the one just completed. Lifting elements wholesale is encouraged - slices of dialogue, activities, pace of the scene.

Re-play scenes

Do it again! Differently this time. Or maybe just the same.

Silent play

Find ways to respond without words, or to use body language, movement and action, rather than dialogue, to communicate.

"Stay with it!"

In moments of boredom, discomfort or loss of the way, everyone is asked to keep going, to allow play to either express something through the uneasiness, or to move into something more when moment is past.

Safety

Cut and Brake

If someone does something that pushes your boundaries a little too much, say "Brake". Tone down the intensity, but play still goes on. If you feel like things have gotten out of hand, or you feel scared or very confused, say "Cut". Other players repeat the word "Cut" when they hear it and all play stops immediately. Take a break, and listen to the person who called Cut if they want to share. Don't continue unless everyone feels safe and wants to go on.

PLAY WITH INTENT, by Matthijs Holter and Emily Care Boss with contributions by Alex Fradera. Text is open for use by others.