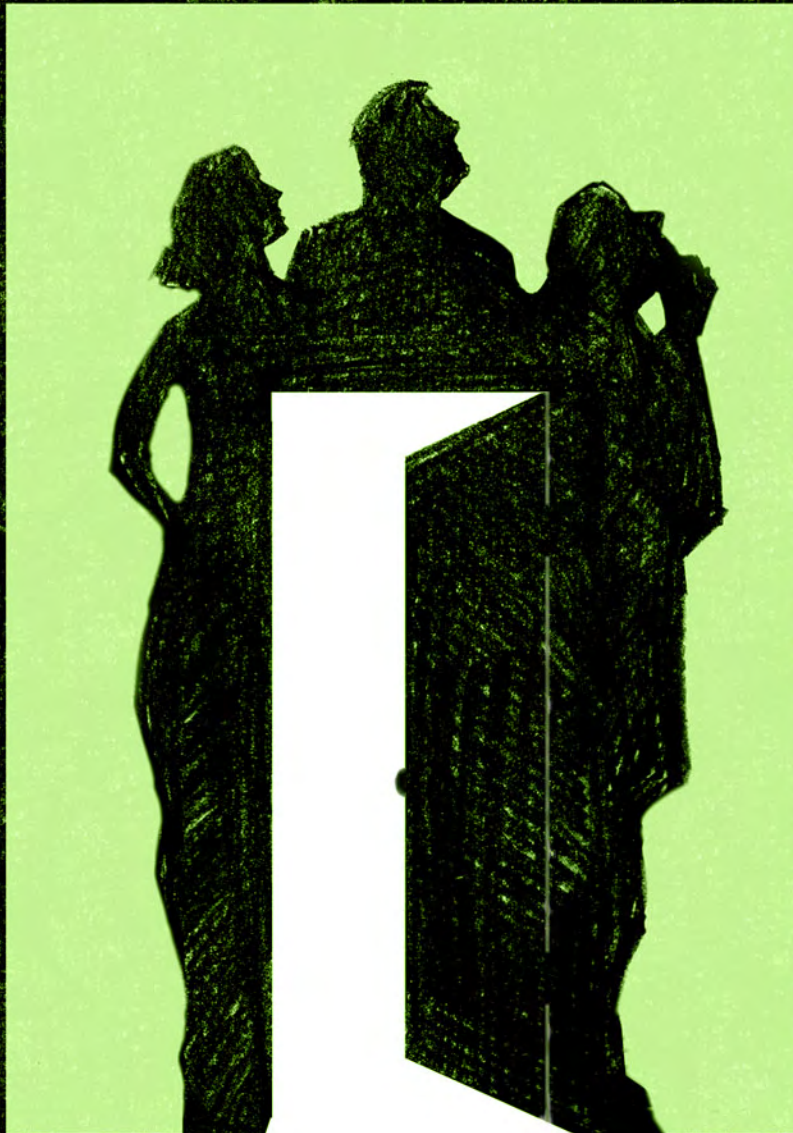


OUT THERE

a roleplaying game



Out There

A roleplaying game about solving mysteries,
in the style of a television show.



Development: David Berg

System Design: Alexander Cherry

Writing & Layout: Jason Petrasko

Artwork: Guerruntz

Playtesters: Andy Adelewitz, Michelle Adelewitz

Font Faces: Moony Cat, Lacuna, Pigiarniq, Kimberley

Software: Wordperfect, Adobe Acrobat

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Introduction

MULDER: You saw exactly what I saw in the sky tonight. What do you think they were?
SCULLY: Just because I can't explain it, doesn't mean I'm gonna believe they were UFOs.
MULDER: Unidentified Flying Objects, I think that fits the description pretty well. Tell me I'm crazy.
SCULLY: Mulder, you're crazy.
- X-Files TV Show

Out There is a game for two to six players about solving mysteries in the mold of common television drama. Each player takes on the role of a character in this drama. Together they use their creativity as directed by a set of rules to weave the tale of these characters as they endeavor to solve one or mysteries. Here are some examples of tv shows that could be played out using **Out There**:

X-Files, Monk, CSI, even House, and possibly Veronica Mars.

You will need to approach this game with the right mindset in order to pull it off. In specific the game needs each player to embrace both their creativity and spirit of cooperation. **Out There** is a collaborative game, not a competitive one. The rules provided offer a lot of direction, but only in the general sense. They provide timing and work with the players to direct their creativity during play. This is not a game about winning or losing, if you want your character to fail they fail. If you want them to succeed they succeed. You shape the fiction that surrounds your character as you envision it, with no system to constrain or limit your freedom, only direct it. Beginning the game armed with both cooperation and creativity is the only requisite.

Getting Started

MULDER: Why is it that every time I think I know the answers, someone goes and changes the questions?
- X-Files TV Show

Once you have some players, you'll need to gather up some moving parts for the game. You are going to need:

- some index cards, possibly a pack or two
- some kind of token to act as story tokens, possibly loose change or glass beads
- one or more six-sided dice (those cubes from game boxes) for each player

After all that has been gathered, you will need to sit down with everyone and determine what kind of game you are playing. Are you going to take on a sci-fi spin like *X-Files*? Or maybe more mundane criminal investigation a la *Monk*? Regardless, there needs to be a clearly defined game premise so that all the players can envision the fiction. Spend some time discussing all the ramifications of the premise as a group. The more you define the premise here, the easier it will be to focus creativity later during play.

Many issues may arise here, and you will need to deal with them as a group. The premise has to be clearly accepted by all of the players. Since the rules focus heavily on only directing the investigation and its results, there is a large amount of freedom in the kind of game that can be played. Players should ask questions and decide on answers as a group until everyone feels solid about the premise. How close is the fictional world to mundane reality? Are the characters average people or do they have supernatural abilities? Will the story focus on action, dialog, or observation? These are the kinds of questions that need an answer before you proceed and create a cast of characters.

Creating the Cast

SHARONA: So you remember how many empty boxes you saw?

MONK: Yes. It's a blessing, and a curse.

- *Monk TV Show*

Hand each player an index card and make sure they have something to write with - pencil or pen. All the information about their character will be recorded on this card. Here are the things that need to be defined for each character:

- **A name.** Each character needs a name or an alias that they are known by, assume this is their most common (or popular) name. For example, in *House* there is a character whose name is just Thirteen; in *Monk* the main character is just called Monk, rarely Adrian.
- **A reason.** This is the reason why the character is involved in solving the mystery (or mysteries). You probably want to make this either compelling or interesting, possibly both. There is no reason why it can't define a relationship with another character. For example, in the *X-Files* Mulder is looking for his missing sister and Scully is sent to keep Mulder in line.
- **A talent.** This is some quality that sets them apart from the common masses, some asset they can call upon during the investigation. If you question if something would count as a talent or not, talk it out as a group. For the *X-Files*, Mulder would have "open-minded" and Scully "medical doctor".
- **A background.** This is always a short one line definition that gives a vague description of the character's life before investigating took center stage. Think of it as a tag line meant to be explored during play, and if it raises questions all the better. House's background would be: "betrayal left him with a crippled leg & bitter".

In the game there are six **Character Action Numbers (CAN)**, each potentially linking the roll of a die to a specific character. Each character gets one or more of these CANs, making sure that there are no duplicates. The numbers from one to six are available, and you should give the lowest to the eldest player and hand them out in order around the group clockwise from that point. It is possible that a character can have more than one CAN, and having more than one gives the player of that character more power over the story told by the game. Write down these CANs on your index card for future reference.

During the process of creating characters, you can nominate any other character for an additional CAN (if there are additional numbers still available). If the group agrees, that character gets another CAN which is added to their index card. You can do this for a variety of reasons. Maybe you feel that player can bring more to the table in the department of creativity. Maybe you just think that the character sounds really damn cool. Regardless, keep in mind this is a powerful award of confidence in that player.



Organization & Central Connection

MULDER: Sorry, nobody down here but the FBI's most unwanted.
- *X-Files TV Show*

As the cast is created, it is important to define something that brings the characters together within the fiction. This could be a common ground organization, a shared personal history, a dark secret, or even possibly just some manner of geography (they all live in the same neighborhood). Independent of means, this central connection will help define the way the characters all relate to each other. You have two choices at this point: **You either spend some time and nail down specifics regarding the central connection, or you can introduce ideas as you get them during play.** For some players the latter may be better than the former, and if that is the case just ignore the rest of this section.

The more meaning and detail that you give their connections, the more you will have to pull from during play. You can view this as pre-loading the creative process, lessening what is needed on demand during play by providing more right off the bat. For *X-Files*, you would say that the central connection for Scully and Mulder is the FBI. You can enhance that by offering more details about the character's relationship to and through the central connection. For example, Mulder is on the outs and Scully is seen as safe and sensible, together making a dynamic team. If you then define Skinner as their primary connection to the FBI, and establish his relationship with the two agents, you get even more to draw from during play.

Collaborative Background Authoring

SHARONA: We're never going to get away with this! They're never going to believe we're really married.
MONK: We have nothing in common. I annoy you all the time. Why wouldn't they believe it?
- *Monk TV Show*

Each character begins with a compelling tag line for their character. This is important because **all** players are allowed to contribute to **any** character's background over the course of the game. Simply put, this means that you must respect another player's input on your character's background. On the other hand the player accepting the statement has a lot of leeway on how to apply it. They may expand on, reinterpret, or otherwise play with anything that's been said about them, and may always answer direct questions. Players should accept anything another player says about their character in some fashion of their choosing. You should also note that acceptance is not always an acknowledgment of truth. You can accept what another player says as simply what is commonly believed, or what some people think about your character, though at the root of all that has to be something true.

Starting Situations & Hooks

WILSON: Did your pager really just go off, or are you ditching the conversation?
HOUSE: Why can't both be true?
- House MD TV Show

Now that we have a cast for the story, we need to get things started and introduce the mystery. **Every player takes one die for each CAN of their character, and everyone rolls them together.** Looking over all the dice, compare them to the CANs of all the characters. Each match, regardless of who rolled it, means the mystery will hook that character in some way. These are called Character Hooks.

Bobby, Susan, and Tom all have characters with a single CAN. Their numbers are 2, 3, and 1 respectively. Picking up one die each (one die for one CAN) they roll together. The results are: 3, 4, and 1. This roll has two Character Hooks; the 3 and 1 match the CANs of characters, Susan's & Tom's in this case. This means their characters will have a meaningful connection to the unfolding mystery, a hook that makes it matter to them in some way. The 4 does not connect to any character, so it does not generate a Character Hook.

Its possible that some or all dice won't match any of the characters' CANs (unless you have six players and all possible CANs are used). These dice aren't without meaning however, instead they become Story Hooks. You need to make each of these an interesting fact or element of the mystery that engages the imagination. For example, if you are playing a game of criminal investigation, perhaps the Story Hook was some peculiar way in which a millionaire was murdered or how the shop's cash box was stolen. Any player can decide how these story hooks manifest before this step is complete, but for good form let the players without a hooked character choose to do so before those player's with Character Hooks.

Bobby is lacking a hooked character and decides to define the story hook rolled above. He decides that part of the mystery involves a dead man getting up and walking out of a morgue.

When the dice match and a character hook is created, it connects either the character's Talent, Reason, or Background to the budding mystery. Players choose which aspect of their character that is hooked. Background hooks can be expressed in the story as family members, former friends, or old "cases" from before they started investigating. Talent hooks express some situation that requires the character's talent, or even a situation revealed by it. Reason hooks are pretty self-explanatory: the situation ties directly into the character's reason for investigating in the first place.

Continuing the above example, Susan has to create a hook for her character. They are playing a supernatural investigations game where all the characters are members of a crack team in the private sector. Here is what her character looks like: *Eve, obsessed with the occult, extensive book knowledge, a professor at Stanford for some years.* She decides to hook Eve's talent, extensive book knowledge. Susan decides that part of the mystery involves a missing legendary sword known to give the bearer immortality. In this case, a sword she knows quite a bit of history about from all her book knowledge and finds interesting. This could tie into the story hook that Bobby created above too, with the dead man getting up and walking out of the morgue.



The Story So Far & Story Tokens

HOUSE: You mentioned two obscure diseases to Dr. Chase. How'd you know about them?

PATIENT: I read about them on the internet.

HOUSE: So, what'd you search for? Diseases from Asia that don't match my son's symptoms?

- *House MD TV Show*

At this point, you need to work together as a group to decide on how the mystery will be presented to the characters. You also need to decide on a total amount of story tokens, which will act as a timer for the story. The more tokens, the longer the story should take to play out. Until you get a feel for this, just go with three tokens for each player.

You do not need to fully flesh out the nature of the mystery here, only provide enough substance to start the investigation. In fact, the more that is left undefined the more freedom you will enjoy later during the game itself. The important thing to remember is that you want to start off with an interesting situation that makes the players think.

Bobby, Susan, and Tom are still playing the supernatural investigations game from above, where their characters comprise a team of investigators in the private sector. They decide that they are approached by a well-to-do citizen with some interest in discovering what happened to his friend, who suddenly became less dead and walked out of the local morgue one day ago.

Scene by Scene, Clue by Clue

WADSWORTH: Communism was just a red herring.

- *Clue the Movie*

Out There is played out in a sequence of units called scenes. Each scene is a period of story which reaches a climax where a Clue is discovered that answers or presents a question regarding the main mystery. **Scenes, at the very core, are about one thing: building up Clue fodder.** Players need to introduce information that could become a significant Clue related to the main mystery. Good Clue fodder raises questions connected to the main mystery. Early scenes never actually create any answers for the main mystery, even if they initially appear to. Until you run out of Story Tokens, every "answer" you find will only lead you to more Clues and questions (or be a complete red herring).

Each player begins each scene with one die for every CAN of their character. During the course of the scene, they can give their die to another player to reward them for an excellent contribution. This is a powerful way to encourage the kind of play you are enjoying.

Once a scene has reached a natural tipping point by consensus, it's about time for a Clue to be discovered. What triggers this tipping point? Enough information is offered in the scene such that players have ideas for several potential Clues. These Clues are presented in the format of a question that asks something related to the main mystery, a question that, when answered, fills in part of the main mystery. If no clear question comes into your mind, then you can call back on the basic one: *What is the significance of (element in the scene)?*

Continuing the example introduced on page six featuring supernatural investigators played by Bob, Susan, and Tom, they are playing out their first scene. Susan and Tom both rolled Character Hooks, and their characters are present in the scene. Susan is playing occult obsessed Eve (character was introduced on page 7), and Tom is playing Duncan who possesses a quirky sixth sense that only works occasionally. Susan and Tom decide to start the scene as an interview of the attendant at the morgue where the body got up and walked away. Bob chimes in and says he wants to play Charlie the morgue attendant, so they all agree and the scene is on.

In the scene Eve and Duncan talk to Charlie about what happened, learning details of the mysterious event. Once they have learned these three things: There was a strange sound almost like something electronic right around that same time; The lights flickered across much of this floor of the building at that time; A strange man was seen leaving the premises shortly after the event; they decide that its time to discover a Clue.

When you introduce a Clue, you want to make sure it's evocative. It needs to grab the attention of the player's imagination, to really make them step back and think. Remember we are trying to emulate the investigations of a TV show here, not the real deal. It's commonplace to throw out the most evocative Clues one could dream up and see what sticks in the end. While I don't have much advice to give, Law & Order is a show that does this well and with style.

Only one Clue is created from any given scene, only one thing is marked as significant. In order to determine what is made into a Clue, everyone involved in the scene (who feels they have an idea for the Clue) may either roll their dice, or give them to another player they feel might provide a good Clue. At this point, everyone with dice rolls them. The player who rolled the highest die gets to decide which of the elements in the scene is a vital Clue. Write this Clue question down on an index card, and place it in the middle of the table. If players tie for the highest die the player whose character has the lowest CAN decides which of them creates the Clue.

Once the Clue is on the table, place one story token from the pool onto it. Now each player may opt to either move an additional story token onto any one Clue if they wish. This is reinforcing the Clue, so decide to award another token based on how you feel about the Clue. If you find it interesting or cool, then choose to award another story token to it. Note the wording here - each player can move one token onto **any** Clue at this time, not only the one just introduced.

(Continued from above) Bob awarded Tom his die for a particularly funny comment by Duncan, giving Tom two dice and Susan one. They both have ideas for the Clue, and roll their dice. Tom gets a 5 and a 3, while Susan gets a 5. They are tied, but Tom has the lowest CAN and wins out. Tom decides to add the Clue: "How does the strange man relate to the walking dead guy?" and writes it on an index card putting it in the middle of the table with a story token on it. Both Susan and Bob think its an interesting question and each add one more story token to it, for a total of three tokens.

After the Clue is introduced, the scene should either end right there or shortly thereafter. You may want to let the characters comment or be witty or show off a little more or so on, but don't idle long at this point.



Who is in this Scene?

DR. RICHARD KIMBLE: I didn't kill my wife.

DEPUTY MARSHAL SAMUEL GERARD: I don't care.

- *The Fugitive Movie*

Which characters are present in any scene is up to the roll of the dice, **with the exception of the first scene. This scene is special and requires that all the characters with hooks be present.** The initial scene has to connect the evolving mystery to the barely defined characters, so it is critical that the players of those characters contribute within it.

After the initial scene, each player rolls their dice before the scene begins. Any CAN matches that come up here mean that character is present in the scene. It is possible that no characters are in a scene if no matches are rolled on the dice. Players whose characters are not in a scene can elect to play other characters as they are needed within the scene. They may take on the role of a recurring police officer, cute nurse, or perhaps just someone who the players have to pull information from for this one investigation. They can also choose to simply contribute to the description of things and events in the scene, without playing any characters. You can also just sit back and watch, if everyone agrees that won't hamper the fun. Regardless of character presence, each player always begins each scene with a number of dice equal to their character's number of CANS. No matter who is in a scene they all play out the same: all of them reveal Clues (or resolve them once the story token pool is empty - see [below](#)).

Playing in Scenes & Dice Awards

WEEVIL: Wait a minute.

WEEVIL: You went to a pet store and took a picture of yourself with a parrot so people would think you were cool?

WILSON: Yeah. All right?

WEEVIL: That's this close [uses thumb & finger to illustrate] to taking a hot cousin to your prom. Go home.

- *Veronica Mars TV Show*

Scenes should be played out organically. Players with characters in the scene should seize the opportunities that arise to narrate in aspects of their character (like their Reason, Background, or Talent). Narrating these aspects into the story is a major way to show off the character. The more characterization embraced by the player the better the game will get. When the time is right, "gift" your fellow players with additional facts about their background and their character (see [collaborative background authoring](#), pg. 4).

Remember, when you think something a player contributes enriches the game, or when they add something that you enjoy, you should award them a die. Don't look at this as weakening your stakes in a scene, look at it as encouraging them to provide the kind of input you are enjoying. Remember that you too should be on the receiving end of a die award, and you won't be able to get if you don't give.

We've Run Out of Story Tokens!

This is going to happen. At some point the pool of story tokens will run dry. This triggers a change in the game, and acts as a crescendo in the story. At this point all the Clues have been uncovered and now they will either crash down or be solved. Regardless each Clue will be resolved in some way over the course of the coming scenes. Once this point is reached you have entered the end game, the solutions arc of the story. To start this phase of the game, take all Clues with only one story token on them and discard them, returning their story tokens to the pool.

The end game plays out in scenes just like the earlier ones, with only one major change. Instead of creating Clues, you will be resolving them. You will be moving tokens from the Clues back into the story token pool, refilling it. Once all the tokens are refilled, the game is over - any final issues left hanging need to be resolved in a final scene(s) (see [here](#)).

In these scenes, the winner of the roll will choose to resolve a Clue of their choice instead of introducing a new one. Players can still opt to move a story token onto other Clues (one per player) as normal, reinforcing remaining Clues they find interesting while one is resolved.

It is also possible to resolve more than one Clue at once; just keep in mind the pacing. If all the Clues are resolved in a single scene, the game ends very quickly. Make sure that is what you are all going for if you do something like that. Otherwise, you can create a slower pace by introducing new Clues to replace all but one of the Clues you solve. So, if you resolved 3 Clues in one scene, you'd need to introduce 2 new Clues before ending the scene.

Resolving Clues, Solving the Main Mystery

Once you are few scenes into the game, the main mystery should be at least somewhat defined. It is kind of a flowing concept in the game, as it never really becomes concrete unless the players decide that it should become so. This is not unlike exploring a dark room with a only a flashlight. As you look around you will discover small clues related to the purpose of the room, but not until the lights are turned on will you get the big picture. Each Clue in the game has the same function as the flashlight in the dark room; each will provide a little more insight into the main mystery of the game, a small revelation of something important.

When you resolve a Clue you take the question it raised and answer it in a way that illuminates the main mystery. There are many ways to do this, but one of the most accessible is to simply take an element from the story and use it as the bulk of the answer to the question. Pick an element that excites you and captures your attention, that engages you in some way and then find a way that it answers the Clue's question such that it will shed light onto the main mystery. If you look at the element in the answer as A and the element at the center of the Clue's question as B, some of the possible ways they can connect look like this:

*A can find B, A can use B, A can access B, A can activate B
A can make sense of B, A reveals that B is (ir)relevant, A wants B*

During the resolution phase of the game Bob, Susan, and Tom are playing, Bob gets stuck resolving the Clue: "How does the strange man relate to the walking dead guy?" He doesn't have any particular ideas in mind, but was really enjoying his NPC Charlie in the first scene. So he decides that Charlie is part of the answer to this clue. He chooses the 'A reveals that B is irrelevant' above, which means that: **Charlie reveals that the strange man is irrelevant.** Thinking for few seconds, he decides that Charlie invented the story of the strange man to steer the investigators away from the truth.

The way in which the answer illuminates the main mystery is important too. While this can happen in a wide variety of ways, there are several common ones. Here are a few to fall back on if you draw a blank:

It willfully caused the Main Mystery for some purpose

It caused the Main Mystery as a side effect of some other process

It tried to solve the Main Mystery

It explains how the Main Mystery was born

It explains how the Main Mystery can be solved

It solves the Main Mystery (game over!)

It isn't related to the Main Mystery, but tells you that another Clue is

It's a cover-up for the truth of the Main Mystery

Continuing the previous example, Bob still hasn't decided how this resolution relates to the main mystery. Thinking about the answer: Charlie invented the story of the strange man to steer the investigators away from the truth, his first impulse is to introduce another clue, but that won't really resolve anything. So instead he decides that it just counts as a cover-up for the truth of the main mystery. There are still more clues to resolve, and he doesn't want to tie too much up right now. He could just have resolved it as introducing a new clue, "What is Charlie's interest in this mess?" but he wanted some resolution now instead of later.

Wrapping It All Up, Final Scenes

This isn't always needed, but on occasion issues and questions raised over the course of the game have a need to be answered. If the players really feel strongly about this, then they have one or more final scenes in which to handle that. This is just like any other scene, except any or all of the players' characters can be present as the group decides, along with any other needed characters.