Three Guys Walk Into A Movie...

Create Your Own Frankenstein of Films

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This game is designed for 3 or 4 total players. It requires these instructions, a lot of notecards (or small scraps of paper), a pen or pencil per player, and a flat surface large enough to make 9 piles of the notecards.

The point of the game is to juxtapose characters with film genres in an entertaining way. Whether this means comedic absurdity ("Let's see Yoda in a Romantic Comedy!") or subtle probing ("What would Jack Bauer do in a Western?") is up to you!

Step 1: Pick a Movie Genre

As a group, discuss what you're generally in the mood for along the Silly -> Serious spectrum. Then, agree on a movie genre that you'd enjoy using to that end.

You can pick a broad genre ("adventure") or a very specific one ("blaxploitation detective"). All you really need is that everyone playing be familiar with that genre's conventions and cliches, basically "what it looks like".

Step 2: Create Play Elements

Each player secretly fills out 12 notecards and puts them face down in the appropriate piles. Try to create play elements that you'd enjoy seeing (and lampooning, or simply exploring, or whatever your group's in the mood for) in play. First and foremost, though, create play elements that are genre-appropriate! If you are uninspired, relying on cliches is fine.

DO NOT ASSIGN PROPER NAMES to any Play Elements yet.

Pile 3: A Scene Location

Where do your favorite scenes in the chosen genre take place?

Pile 4: Something to be Threatened

What do the protagonists in this genre value? What will they act to defend or protect? This can be an object, person, system, concept, or anything that can be won or lost.

Pile 5: A Threat

Who or what threatens the things that protagonists in this genre value? Ideally, this should match with your Threatened Something in a way that you'd find interesting or challenging, rather than obvious and boring.

Pile 6: An Action Verb

What do people in this genre do that represents the genre well to you?

Pile 7: A Tool

What objects do characters in this genre use to pursue their goals or express their identities?

Pile 8: Any Individual or Group

This is anyone in the genre who's primed to be active and complicate things. People tied to certain elements of the setting often work well (cops in many genres).

Pile 9: Six Character Changes

These describe the POINT of each scene you'll play, in terms of the personal arcs of the protagonists. As such, when you're writing out the ways they could change, don't require any starting points that are too specific! "Deformed mutant -> beauty queen" won't work if none of the characters is a deformed mutant. Focus more on end states. "Normal -> beauty queen" is fine (if normal people become beauty queens in your genre, that is).

The Changes are 50% negative and 50% positive. Any can serve as an ending, so don't shy away from death, or from ultimate triumph.

Grab six notecards, and provide the following:

a) A relationship improves. You can write this as a verb phrase ("friendship blossoms") or as one state to another ("strangers -> friends").

b) A relationship worsens.

c) Station in life changes / break with the past for the better. ("New job", "Wins the war", "Moves to a better town", "Gets over lover's death", etc.)

d) Station in life changes / break with past for the worse. ("Imprisoned", "Outlaw", etc.)

e) A positive, imperative, life-changing lesson is learned. ("To thine own self be true", "Rely on your friends", etc.) Need not be overly optimistic to qualify as "positive", merely useful.

f) A negative, imperative, life-changing lesson is learned. ("Don't trust anyone", etc.) Need not be a proper "lesson" -- any miserable or destructive attitude will do.

Step 3: Picking Characters

Now that you've got 7 of the 9 piles filled with face-down notecards, it's time to pick the protagonists for your film.

Each player will be responsible for portraying the character they contribute, so keep that in mind.

All players must be familiar with any character. Characters from movies or TV series are ideal. Use books, comics, or real life only if you have a particularly good idea.

This is open discussion. Talk until you have characters you're really happy with.

Once the characters are chosen, put a notecard with each character's name on it face down in Pile 1. Then do the same for Pile 2.

Step 4: Play a Scene

A Scene consists of 5 turns plus a cooperative finale.

Turn 1: Once the cards in each pile have been shuffled, one player picks a Starting Character (Pile 1), a Responding Character (Pile 2), and a Location (Pile 3). These picks are shown to all players.

Whoever contributed the two characters will portray those characters in this scene. The other player(s) will portray everything else that exists and happens in the scene, including supporting characters. I'll refer to these roles as SCP (starting character player), RCP (responding character player), and DIR (director(s)).

Turn 2: DIR describes location. This may include what's going on as long as it's nothing demanding action.

Turn 3: SCP picks a Threat (Pile 5) and Threatened (Pile 4), without showing the other players. SCP then describes what their character is doing when RCP's character arrives.

At this point, RCP may contribute some portrayal, but that is not required.

SCP then portrays their character, describing to the new arrival what the current problem is (based on the Threat and Threatened cards).

Turn 4: RCP picks a Verb (Pile 6) and Tool (Pile 7), without showing the other players. RCP then portrays their character, suggesting a plan (based on the Tool and Verb cards) to the other character.

This is the plan the characters pursue. There is no negotiation of the plan, although portrayal of how the characters prepare to get started is fine.

Turn 5: DIR draws an Obstacle (Pile 8). DIR decides at what point in the plan this obstacle will present itself, and how the chosen card will manifest as an obstacle.

If there are two DIRs, they can discuss this in secret.

DIR then describes in brief how the characters' plan has succeeded up until that point, and then introduces the obstacle.

The characters should not respond yet!

Cooperative finale: SCP and RCP each pick a Character Change (Pile 9), without showing the other players.

SCP and RCP now must narrate how, in the attempt to overcome the Obstacle and save the Threatened from the Threat, their characters change.

How long this takes is up to each character's player. If you want to say, "Upon seeing the Obstacle, I have a heart attack and die," you can do that. If you want to say, "Here's how I overcome the obstacle, here's how I defeat the Threat, here's how I save the Threatened, and at the very end I have a heart attack and die," you can do that too.

However, here's what I recommend: tie your character's Change to the Threat situation as much as possible. Maybe the Change causes you to resolve the Threat, or succumb to it. Maybe you resolve the threat, or succumb, first, and that's what Changes you.

SCP and RCP have total control over what happens. DIR has none, but can contribute description and portrayal. A good balance might look like:

> SCP: "Villainous Tom is too busy gloating to notice me sneak up behind him. I hit him with the shovel and he falls off the roof."

> DIR: "Tom's arms flail as he falls. 'Curse you!' he screams. 'Curse y-' Boom. He hits and is still."

Step 5: Play through all Scenes

When you've used up the notecards in Piles 1-8, the game is over.

Don't try too hard to turn the sequence of Scenes into a chronology. As the characters cross paths, change, and maybe die, it may make most sense to jump around in time.

You can decide whether the current scene comes before or after previously-played scenes at any time, but I recommend doing it before any actual portrayal. So, right after the characters and location are picked.