

INTRODUCTION TO UNSUNG ROLE-PLAYING

Candy lined up her shot, secure in her sniper's nest. She had a clear shot at the perpetrator's hand, and the gun in it. But just as she squeezed the trigger, he moved. As Candy's shot rang out, the perpetrator fired at the hostage he was pointing at, and she went down.

"GODDAMN IT," shouted Candy over her radio, to the rest of her SWAT team. "YOU LITTLE... STAY STILL!"

"Civilian down," said the squad leader, over the radio.

Candy aimed for the hand again, but one of the hostages -- one of the bank's tellers -- kept getting in the way. She was tempted to shoot through the teller to get to the perp. The perp kept running around, shooting randomly.

A wonderful headshot opened up.

She didn't have permission to take it, and the way the guy was moving, it wouldn't last long. She took a deep breath.

This isn't appropriate behavior, she thought, because she knew she was going to take the headshot anyway.

The squad leader moved in closer to the bank, along with the rookie, Billy. "You ready, kid? Candy, what are you doing up there?"

Candy muttered something obscene under her breath and then audibly: "I'm taking him down. Dead."

The man in the bank looked up, mouthed "oh no" and then his head exploded like an overripe tomato.



First Principles

Unsung is more like the sort of game played with action figures, models, or toy guns than with chess sets or sporting equipment. It is a game of creativity that takes place in the imagination. Overall, the rules of *Unsung* are for playing out a story about personal responsibility in moments of great stress. The object of the game is to tell a story of this nature with your friends that is interesting and compelling. Like improvisational theatre, the rules of the game don't determine winners and losers so much as help channel and spark creativity. It's co-operative, not competitive.

It's easier than it sounds. If any one player runs out of ideas, the other players in the game can take up the slack. Also, each player is not only an author/actor in the game, but part of the audience for the other players. If the story the players come up with doesn't reach the level of Shakespeare (or even prime-time TV), if it rambles, if it takes several sessions to tell, or if it's finished in a half-hour -- that's okay as long as everyone has fun playing and is satisfied with the story thus told.

While this book is longer than the rules for checkers, chess, or most boardgames, it's more a guidebook than a rulebook. The basic rules

Experienced Gamers

If you've played a role-playing game before, there's a chance you're rolling your eyes and about to skip this section.

Don't. Seriously.

Unsung encodes some assumptions in this section that are different from a lot of role-playing games, particularly some of the more popular games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Vampire: the Masquerade*. Yes, I know you've heard that claim before, but this isn't a matter of just genre or some tweaks to the skill system.

On the other hand, if you've played something like *OctaNe* or *Sorcerer* or *My Life With Master*, some of this is probably old hat.

Regardless, if you do skip this section, pay close attention to the Gift and Lapse system, and the Retirement system. Those aspects of the game are highlighted by sub-systems for reason, and unlike a more traditional RPG, your primary interface to the game is not your character, but the Gift system.





most of the time, using the character to shape the story and keep the tale fun for everyone. There is no one "main" character, but a handful of protagonists, more like *Law & Order* or *Homicide: Life on the Streets* than *T.J. Hooker*.

One participant is the game moderator. The moderator does not usually control a protagonist, but controls all other characters most of the time. The game moderator helps interpret rules, set scenes, and adjudicate disputes. To borrow a metaphor from Ron Edwards (author of the *Sorcerer* role-playing game), the game moderator is like the bassist in a rock band, providing structure and pacing.

It is generally assumed in these rules, for simplicity, there is only one game moderator at a time, though you are always welcome to experiment.

Below is a brief and fragmentary transcript of what one might hear during a session of *Unsung*. Don't worry about understanding exactly what is going on (particularly the jargon, which will be explained in detail later). Just understand that the participants are using verbal description, rules, and dice to create a shared imagined space where the story takes place, and that this fragmentary transcript is just a faded reflection of that. In brackets is some short explanatory text, but again, don't worry too much if you don't understand all of it; if it doesn't make sense right now, just ignore the stuff in brackets.

The basic situation is this: Anne is the moderator. Bob, Cindy, and Dan are all controlling protagonists, which, in the game, are part of the same SWAT team, dealing with a hostage situation at a bank.

Anne: Candy's shot lands next to the perp in the bank, who then shoots the woman, who is trying to flee from him. She falls down.

Cindy: Candy shouts over the radio: "GODAMMIT! YOU LITTLE... STAY STILL!"

Dan: "Civilian down," Donald shouts over the radio.

Anne: The perp starts firing wildly around the bank. Okay, so Candy is still aiming for the perp's hand, right, Cindy?

Cindy: Well, Candy would rather go for a headshot, but orders are orders...

Anne: Heh, the sniper is begging to do a headshot, go figure...

of the game are pretty straightforward, so the remainder of the text covers situations that might not come up, advice on how to play a game, and optional ideas for different and interesting ways to play. This book is your ally. The rules were designed to support a story in the *Unsung* mode of personal responsibility.

Details

A game of *Unsung* takes the form of one or more evenings with your friends -- however long it takes to tell a communal story.

In practice, a given evening's entertainment is sort of like a cross between an improvisational radio play and a sort of gambling game -- but different. Unlike a radio play, the actors and audience are the same people, always participating. The rules may resemble a dice game in some areas, but even where there is a competitive edge or a game-based challenge, the ultimate goal is the production of a story.

In essence, all of these techniques are used to create a shared imagined space where the story takes place.

Roles

If the goal is to create a group story, why have rules at all? Well, first of all, a certain amount of pleasure comes from surmounting challenges created through the rules system, not to mention that the random elements in the rules can spark creativity. More importantly, the rules are designed to provide structure. The rules facilitate the types of stories *Unsung* is meant to tell: gritty tales of personal responsibility.

To this end, each player takes on a certain role. The majority of players will each create a persona -- a protagonist. Each player will control that character



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Bob: Oh, I have a Gift for Candy! [Bob has an idea for an addition to the scene that forces a moral choice on Cindy's protagonist, the sniper Candy Tyloni. In *Unsung*, this is called a Gift.]

Anne: Go ahead, Bob.

Bob: As the perp is flailing about, his hand is eclipsed by one of the bank tellers, in order to shoot the gun out of the hand, Candy will have to shoot through the teller...

Cindy: That is so evil...

Bob: Your call if you want it...

Dan: The proper response to that is: "Thank you, I am evil."

Bob: Thank you, I am evil.

Anne: So, Cindy, do you accept the Gift? You can always veto. [Both the moderator and Cindy have to accept the Gift before it becomes "reality" for the purposes of the story.]

Cindy: I accept. That sounds interesting and realistic.

Anne: 1 Gift Point for Bob. [When a player accepts a Gift, the player offering the Gift gets a Gift Point, the uses for which are outlined later in these rules.]

Anne: So, okay, Cindy, give me a Responsibility check. [Cindy must roll lower than or equal to her character's Responsibility score, which is a numerical rating that represents how morally responsible Candy is, and how much control Cindy has over the character during times of stress.]

Cindy rolls dice, gets a 20 [A 20 is always a failure in *Unsung*. Regardless, Candy's Responsibility is much lower than 20, so Cindy rolled too high.]

Anne: LAPSE. And you can add one Retirement Point to Candy's total. [When one fails the Responsibility check after a Gift, the character Lapses, and makes a morally bad choice, determined by the vote of the other participants.]

Cindy: ...DAGUH!

Anne: Or you can re-roll for one Gift Point... [This is one use for Gift Points.]

Cindy: I'm out of Gift Points. This involves the Instinct modifier, right? [Cindy is a little unclear on the rules.]

Dan: This involves us getting to say exactly what Candy does, when she takes the "easy" way out...

Bob: Head shot.

Dan: Head shot, oh yes.

Anne: I'll vote for the headshot -- there's even a twisted justification: it saves the civilian, who she had to shoot through for the hand shot...

Dan: Exactly.

Anne: I'll narrate the headshot itself, unless anyone objects. Keep going with the story, though.

Cindy: Candy takes a deep breath, thinking: This isn't appropriate

Text Conventions

Generally speaking, large swaths of text in *italics* represent an example. You don't need to read it to understand the text, but it helps.

If a word that isn't normally capitalized turns up in Capital Letters, that means it's being used as a game term with a specific meaning within the rules. All the Game Terms should be self-explanatory from their use, but there's a glossary in the back in case you need help or a reminder.

Anything in a sidebar, like this, is either commentary or optional rules. Both can be quite safely ignored, particularly optional rules. It is suggested that you at least try playing with the "base" rule sets before you start introducing variants. The point of the optional rules is to introduce variants that might enhance a certain style of play, which might or might not be to your group's liking.

Keep in mind that sidebars aren't part of the main text, so don't let them distract you from the flow of text.

The Example

As you read the book, be sure to come back to the example to the left and on the previous page. Things that go on in this example make more sense the more you understand the rules.



behavior. She hunkers back down and -- Ahh hell. Screw it. She aims for a headshot.

Bob: Billy waits for a signal from Donald to head in.

Dan: Donald moves in close, taking Bob with him. "You ready, kid? Candy, what are you doing up there?"

Cindy: Candy mutters something obscene under her breath and then audibly: "I'm taking him down. Dead."

Bob: As a shot rings out from above, a drop of sweat flies lazily from Billy's brow as he turns to see the target.

Anne: The man in the bank looks up, mouths "oh no" and then his head explodes like an overripe tomato. Brains everywhere.

Bob: Billy blinks in amazement.

Anne: Erik says, over the radio, "What the hell?"



Getting Started

To play *Unsung*, first you will need at least three friends that you want to creatively explore the theme of moral responsibility with, so there are at least three protagonists and one game moderator.

You will need something to take notes on (so you don't forget an important detail, to the detriment of the story) and a twenty-sided die, also known as a d20, available at most hobby stores.

The group will need to decide what kind of game to play (cops or soldiers), create protagonists, and begin, with the game moderator setting the first scene. (Details on creating protagonists, and using them in a scene, are in the following chapters.)

Can't Find a Twenty-Sided Die?

If you cannot acquire a d20, you can simulate one with a normal pack of cards.

First remove all the Jokers, Jacks, Queens, and Kings. Shuffle and use this shortened deck.

Black cards are worth face value (Aces low) and red cards are worth ten over face value. So if you draw a Three of Spades, you "rolled" a 3, while an Ace of Hearts means you rolled an 11. Be sure to reshuffle (including the card you just drew) after each draw.



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