

TIMELINES

Timelines is a game for 3-5 players. Each player gets to play a different incarnation of Jamie Titor, the inventor of time travel... in multiple timelines. Unfortunately, most of Jamie's attempts to alter the past have only made things worse.

Inspirations and Points of Reference

"All You Zombies--" the short story by Robert Heinlein.

By His Bootstraps, another short story by Robert Heinlein.

Dr Futurity, a short story by Philip K. Dick.

The Man Who Folded Himself, the novel by David Gerrold.

The Time Traveler's Wife, the novel by Audrey Niffenegger.

Primer, the film by Shane Carruth.

Groundhog Day, the film starring Bill Murray.

Edge of Tomorrow, the film starring Tom Cruise.

All You Need Is Kill, the novella that inspired *Edge of Tomorrow*, by Hiroshi Sakurazaka.

Back to the Future, the film series starring Michael J. Fox.

All the Damn Time, a Fiasco playset by Will Hindmarch.

Microscope, the roleplaying game by Ben Robbins.

Retrocausality, the roleplaying game by Paul Matijevic.

Chrononauts, the card game.

Virtual Play Episode 71, a podcast episode about the Time Watch RPG.

Fastcast Episode 13 and 14, podcast episodes about time travel and time travel games.

You Will Need

- A handful of six-sided dice (d6).
- At least four four-sided dice (d4).
- A stack of index cards, post-its, or other freely re-arrangeable note-taking implements.
- Pens or pencils.
- Scratch paper.
- Minds well-adapted to the rigours of four-dimensional thinking – or perhaps just well-prepared to gloss over the difficult bits in the name of an interesting story.

Who is Jamie Titor?

As a group, collectively figure out who Jamie Titor is. How old is Jamie? What's Jamie's gender? What form does the Time Machine take? How old is Jamie when the Time Machine is invented? Just why does Jamie have the skills to invent a time machine anyway? Answer these questions as a group.

Each player will author a single Regret. A Regret is a point in time where things went wrong, and Jamie wishes that things could have been different. Each Regret is written on an index card as a scene, a date, and a brief description of the events that Jamie regrets.

When it's your turn to create a Regret, you can place yours before, after, or in between Regrets already on the Timeline.

For example: This is the timeline created by four players for their game of *Timelines*.

- Science Fair, 1999. Jamie was expelled from school.
- Dubuque, Iowa, 2005. Jamie's favourite Chinese place burns down and General Tso's Chicken is never quite the same.
- San Francisco, 2010. Jamie blew a crucial interview for a tech startup.
- Under The L Tracks, 2012. Jamie was arrested for possession, prosecuted, and sent to prison.

What is the Timeline?

The Timeline is a listing of events that have happened in Jamie's history, written on index cards or something similar, laid out on the table in chronological order. At the start of the game the Timeline will consist of a few Regrets, but later in the game these may be replaced by positive events! More likely it'll just descend into a longer and more complex chain of Regrets, but that's life when you travel through time.

Scenes and Control

Play is split up into a series of scenes, and for any given scene one player will be in control. The player in control will play Jamie (or *a* Jamie, once the time-travel train gets rolling); frame the scene by describing where it is, what's going on, and who else is there; and they can choose both when the scene ends and (within a few constraints) what the outcome will be.

Let's Start Playing!

Play out the scenes of Regrets, in chronological order. If you created the Regret, you control the scene: you will play Jamie, decide where and when the scene is, what's going on, and who else is there. The scene ends when you say it ends.

You also control the precise outcome of the scene, with the following restrictions:

- It doesn't go well for Jamie. However things work out, Jamie wishes they'd gone some other way.
- It has to hew close to what was written on the Regret card.

As the audience as well as the players, we know in advance how things are going to work out, and it's the responsibility of the group to push for this resolution. Or, if the scene takes a sharp left into life-affirming or relentlessly cheery, to work out after the event just how it all went wrong.

Once the scene is played out, make some notes on the index card. As a bare minimum you'll want to know the following:

- Where the scene happened.
- Which other characters were present.

- Any significant items that were present.
- What went down, in however much detail you can fit onto a 3x5 card.

Let's Add a Time Traveler!

Once all the Regret scenes are played out, pick someone to be the first player. That player will create the first Jamie. To avoid confusion we'll call the first Jamie Jamie-A, the second Jamie-B, and so on down the alphabet. Jamie is a product of all the events that have happened in their life – the list of Regrets currently on the table.

First of all, place a new Regret anywhere you like on the Timeline. Just as with the others note where and when it took place, but the detail is this: Discovered time travel.

For Jamie-A this Regret will always go on the 'latest' end of the Timeline, because we've already established that they regret all of these events. But for later Jamies it might appear anywhere.

Next, write down on a piece of paper:

- Which incarnation this is. The first is Jamie-A, the second Jamie-B, and so on through the alphabet.
- What this Jamie regrets – which is everything before they invented time travel. Write these regrets in the form of "If things had been different, I could have..." or something similar that expresses *why* Jamie wishes things had gone another way.

This is Jamie-A's character sheet, such as it is. Have a think about them. What sort of person would have regrets like these? That's the sort of person you're playing, now. Make notes on the character sheet if you need to.

For example: Aisling creates Jamie-A. She adds

- Prison Library, Upstate NY, 2013. Jamie unlocks the mathematical formula for time travel and vanishes.

to the end of the Timeline. She writes Jamie-A's regrets as

- If I hadn't been expelled from school, I could have jump-started my career with real qualifications.
- If the Golden Palace hadn't burned down, I would never have gotten stuck in that bad relationship with Ying-Wai.
- If I hadn't blown that interview, I wouldn't have needed to get into drug-dealing for money.
- If I'd known it was a sting operation, I'd never have been busted.

Aisling reckons Jamie-A is a basically decent person who's had a few misfortunes, so she scribbles 'basically decent' on the character sheet and will play them like that as the game progresses.

An Important Note

When someone discovers time travel, the Timeline ends. Nothing can happen after that. This is explained in more detail in Advanced Time Travel (below) but for now just know that the discovery

of time travel is a full stop in the Timeline. Nothing after it can be affected, either directly or by ripples – although if a ripple converts a 'discovered time travel' scene into a 'didn't discover time travel' scene, keep rolling your way down the Timeline!

Let's Time Travel!

Jamie-A, having just invented time travel, is going to go back in time and fix one of those Regrets so it never happened. Pick an event on the timeline you want to change, and create a scene that you will control. You'll be playing Jamie-A. Someone else will likely play the original, non-time-traveling Jamie, and people can claim or assign other roles as needed.

Because Jamie-A is a time traveller they remember how things happened, and have the opportunity to rewatch the scene and even to redo it if necessary. Jamie-A has perfect timing when meddling in a scene: you get to declare how the scene is going to end, and choose when it ends, and improvise whatever details you like in order to get there. Note that you can only declare a short term outcome directly related to this scene – you can't declare changes to any events further down the timeline – but you can declare the outcome any time you like, even before playing the scene.

After playing out the scene take out a new index card and rewrite the description of the scene, with a prime mark (!) after the year. Make a note that the scene's Paradox is now 1. If the location of the scene changes, note that. If the people present change, note that. If the time frame or scope changes, note that too. Don't feel like you have to remain tied to the previous scene, if playing it out sends things in a very different direction.

Once that's done, roll a number of d4 equal to the Paradox for the event. If you roll any doubles on the dice then that event becomes *crystallised*, which means it can't be changed any further. Obviously, the first time you're only rolling one die which means that the event won't crystallise, but as meddling builds up the risk increases that this change will be the last.

For example: Aisling decides that the bad relationship has got to go, so she frames and directs a scene in which Jamie-A saves the Golden Palace. She writes a new index card thus:

- Dubuque, Iowa, 2005!. Jamie hailed as a local hero for foiling arsonist. Jamie-A present. Paradox 1.

And puts it on top of the old 2005. She doesn't even bother rolling 1d4 for the Paradox pool, since doubles is impossible on one die.

Ripple Effects

After Jamie alters an event, there's a chance the consequences will ripple out down the timeline. For each event further down the Timeline, roll 1d6, plus a number of d4s equal to the Paradox of the event you've just altered.

- Roll an additional d6 for every element (person, place, or thing) shared by the two scenes.
- Roll an additional d6 if the two events are strongly connected and it seems likely one would influence the other.

Note that the original Jamie doesn't count as a shared element between two scenes, but time-travelling Jamies do.

If none of the dice come up 6 or 1, then the event doesn't change. It'll play out in this new timeline more or less like it did in the previous timeline.

- "I saved that restaurant in 2005, but that startup still didn't hire me in 2010."

If at least one die came up 6, and none came up 1, then the event on the timeline improves measurably. Describe how your interference earlier causes this event to resolve better for you.

- "Becoming a local hero in 2005 gave me the confidence to dominate that interview in 2010!"

If at least one die came up 6 and at least came up 1, then the event on the timeline changes in a way you didn't expect.

If you rolled *more* 1s than 6s, then the event on the timeline is made worse by your interference. The player on your right will tell you what happens.

- "Turns out not only did you blow the interview, the startup owner in 2010 is the brother of the arsonist you put away in 2005 and has given his bro a job in HR. Turns out he's still bearing a grudge, and now he knows where you live."

If you rolled *fewer* 1s than 6s, or an equal amount, then the event improves but not in the way you expected. The player on your right will tell you how your interference causes things to go differently. (Not necessarily better or worse, but certainly different.)

- "The startup hires you, sure, but only as a sort of PR stunt: 'Hero joins team!' You're still not doing anything meaningful there."

If none of the dice come up 6 or 1, that event remains unchanged.

Any events which change get rewritten just like the first one, adding a prime mark to the year. They do *not*, however, increment their Paradox. That only happens as a result of direct time traveller meddling.

For example: Following her amendment in 2005, Aisling checks for ripples. Her Paradox pool is 1d4, for the Paradox on the scene she's just changed.

- There are none in 1999 because that's earlier in the Timeline.
- She rolls 1d6 and 1d4 for the startup scene and gets no 6s or 1s. This event remains the same.
- Because the cop who arrests Jamie in 2012 was also present at the arson in 2005, she rolls 2d6 and 1d4 for the bust scene and gets a 6 and a 1. Deidre, the player to her right, explains that the cop hesitates just long enough for Jamie to make her escape, but now she's wanted.
- She rolls 1d6 and 1d4 for the discovery of time travel and gets two 1s. Without access to the books in the prison library, Jamie doesn't discover time travel.

The new Timeline is this:

- Science Fair, 1999. Jamie was expelled from school.
- Dubuque, Iowa, 2005'. Jamie hailed as a local hero for foiling arsonist. Paradox 1.
- San Francisco, 2010. Jamie blew a crucial interview for a tech startup.
- Under The L Tracks, 2012'. Jamie got away from the sting and is now on the run.
- Prison Library, Upstate NY, 2013'. Jamie isn't here, so cannot discover time travel.

Let's Add More Time Travelers!

The next player is going to create a new Jamie, Jamie-B, just like the last person did. As a product of the new Timeline, they'll have different regrets to Jamie-A. They may discover time travel at the same time, if that event is still on the Timeline, or they may discover it at a different point: you can place the discovery of time travel anywhere in the Timeline.

(Although remember that the discovery of time travel is a hard cap on the Timeline. Nothing can be placed *after* it.)

Just like the last player, write out a character sheet for Jamie-B with their title and all their regrets, phrased as "If only..." statements.

Choose a scene to meddle with, 'fixing' it. Generate ripples just like the last Jamie. When you alter an event directly, increase its Paradox by 1. When an event that has already been altered is altered again, whether directly or by ripple, add another prime to the year.

Then the next player gets to go, just the same.

For example: The player after Aisling is Brad. He says Jamie-B discovered time travel just after saving the restaurant, when a mysterious figure showed up out of nowhere and handed them the formulas. Jamie-B's regrets look like this:

- If I hadn't been expelled from school, I could have hooked up with that hot senior.
- If I'd been faster saving the restaurant, I could have emptied the safe and made out like the money burned up!

Note that Jamie-B's 1999 regret is different from Jamie-A's, despite being about the same event. The Timeline now looks like this:

- Science Fair, 1999. Jamie was expelled from school.
- Dubuque, Iowa, June 2005'. Jamie hailed as a local hero for foiling arsonist. Paradox 1.
- Dubuque, Iowa, August 2005. Jamie receives the secret of time travel from a mysterious stranger.

The other events on the Timeline aren't *gone*. Just... locked away, for now. Eventually a ripple will change the discovery scene into a non-discovery scene, at which point the rest of the Timeline will become accessible again.

Back Around to the Beginning

Once every player has created a Jamie, fixed a scene, and created a load of ripples, the Timeline will stabilise. Any events where Jamie discovered time travel become events where Jamie did *not* discover time travel. There is a Jamie living this timeline – call them Jamie-XX, or Jamie-0, or some other suitable moniker – but that Jamie will never discover time travel. They will never have the chance to go back and fix their lives...

...but you can do it for them.

The goal now is to wrangle Jamie-XX's timeline as best you can before the whole thing crystallises with paradox. Of course, since every Jamie has a different set of events in their past and thus a different set of regrets, disagreements are likely.

You do this by going back and changing events, just like before. This causes ripples, just like before. If you're stuck for ideas, take a look at your regrets – what currently on the Timeline is enough like these to need changing?

There is one key rule to be aware of:

- You can only be present in a scene once.

If you intervene to set fire to Jamie-XX's science fair project, and another Jamie stops you, you can't go back and stop them from stopping you. If the event changes so that you're no longer plausibly present – if earlier events mean that Jamie never even goes to that school, for example – then you're free to intervene again.

A Note For the Jamies

From your point of view, you are the original Jamie from the original timeline, and Jamie-XX is the version of you whose life you're trying to fix (or possibly hijack). All these other Jamies are deviants from broken timelines who are up to no good at all. So play to win! Someone's future is at stake!

The Future

Eventually the game will end. Either all the events will become crystallised, or the time-travelling Jamies will arrive at a life they can all agree on, or two or more of them will continue duking it out with ever-more-oblique approaches to Jamie-XX's life (see Advanced Time Travel, below) and you'll just need to draw a line under it and assume that the minutiae they're arguing over stopped being relevant several timelines back.

At that point, consider Jamie-XX. Jamie Titor. The Jamie who gets to carry on in their own timeline.

What sort of life have they had?

What sort of life are they likely to have as they continue to grow?

What sort of person have you made?

Advanced Time Travel (Optional Rules)

So far this game has dealt with direct meddling with the important events in Jamie's life. This is a simple set up that makes for a focused and relatively short game. If you want to allow a bit more flexibility, at the expense of added complexity, change the way time travel works to the following:

- Any given Jamie can only visit any given event once *ever*, even if that event changes so that they're no longer relevant to the scene.
- Paradox increases whenever an event changes, even if it's the result of a ripple.

This means Jamies will have far fewer chances to intervene directly in affairs – but under this paradigm they can also intervene *indirectly*.

When it's your turn to frame a scene, you can frame one that doesn't exist on the Timeline yet but has a plausible causal link to one that does. You control the scene, just like any other time travel scene, and decide how it ends. Write out a new index card for the event with one prime mark and a Paradox of 1, slot it into the Timeline, then roll for ripples as normal.

The advantage here is that because you've specifically framed a causally linked scene you're always going to get that extra d6, and because many of the same elements are going to show up in both you're likely to get a pile of other bonus d6s as well, all increasing the likelihood of those 6s when you roll for ripples.

The disadvantages are that you don't get to just *declare* how the scene works out – the element of luck can still work against you – and that now other Jamies can pile into your new event and start screwing with it.

Note that adopting the Advanced Time Travel paradigm makes the ending of the game less clear, so it will come down more to an agreement between the players that further meddling will get nowhere.

The Nature of Paradox

Paradox is the law of unforeseen consequences. The Butterfly Effect. That thing where you split up a couple who are later going to have a child who becomes President whose economic policies undermine your business so you're fired and you have more time at home and that's how you invented a time machine, oops.

As Paradox mounts at an event, the number of things which can go wrong due to inadvertent time-traveller meddling increases until you just can't risk it any more. It doesn't crystallise in the sense of becoming hard and unbending; it crystallises in the sense of becoming brittle and easily shattered.

Metaphysics

This game assumes non-linear time, because trying to work it in linear time made my brain bleed. What this means is basically that you can't change your own history. When you go meddling in the past, you're actually just meddling with the events of *someone who was a lot like you right up until things went differently*. After that point, they're a different person.

You can return to your own timeline any time you want; it'll just be exactly the same as when you left. Depending on your outlook, the point of time travel is either to try to do right by that other you – make their life the best it could possibly be – or to make their life awesome then steal it. But you can't fix *your* life. Done is done.

This game also assumes that personal identity is rooted in continuity. We are the sum total of our experiences: the things we've done and the things that have happened to us. By definition, different experiences create a different person.

This is why the Timeline stops with the discovery of time travel. Once you use that time machine you're not dealing with your life any more – you're dealing with the life of Jamie-The-Next-Letter.

Or to look at it another way: The initial Timeline creates Jamie-A. Jamie-A creates a new Timeline with their meddling, which we'll call Timeline-B. Timeline-B creates Jamie-B. Jamie-B creates Timeline-C. And so on until someone creates Timeline-XX (conveniently when you run out of players) which creates Jamie-XX. The cards on the table are a way of describing the life of Jamie in terms of the experiences they've had.

Jamie-XX also stops the infinite recursion of time-travelling Jamies, which is best not thought about.

"I give Jamie-XX a time machine!"

No. No, just... don't do that. Allowing Jamie-XX to time travel means that you'll create a new Jamie, and a new Timeline, and now you've got a character without a player.

Infinite recursions, people. Please to avoid.

Killing Other Time Travellers

No problem. Jamie dies just as easily as anyone else.

But...

Let's say you're Jamie-B. And you kill Jamie-A. You find them fiddling with Jamie-XX's exam results and you hack them to death with a hatchet. That's pretty messed up, but never mind. Thing is, that doesn't mean that Jamie-A isn't going to keep appearing in *your* future, because from their point of view it's their *past*. They already did all that meddling, and at that time you had previously meddled, and trying to think about it is going to tie your mind in knots so you might as well just accept that murder isn't going to get you anywhere.

From a game-mechanical point of view, think of it like this: your Jamie can die, but that doesn't mean you can't keep interfering in things. It's just a slightly younger version of that Jamie who happened to travel to this event *before* they went to the one where they got killed.