

# Ad Libitum Absurdity

## Overview

Fame, fashion, glory and, of course, stardom! In *Ad Libitum Absurdity*, each player is an actor who was "on their way" in Hollywood before being typecast from the roles they were forced to take early in their career. The actors will participate in a series of jobs, called Gigs, that will help show their range to future casting directors, as well as lay the foundation for achieving a personal goal which may be entirely unrelated to their acting career.

# Getting Started

## What Will We Need?

You will need a stack of index cards, about 15 six-sided dice, and pencils.

## Character Creation

Each player should think of the role their actor played that got them typecast, and the TV show or movie the role was featured in. They should also describe the character's most famous scene in the show or film.

Note: When an actor is "typecast," it means Hollywood decision-makers are only able to see them in a very specific kind of role. This is usually because they played a memorable role early in their career that they were never able to shake, despite the fact they may contain the versatility to play a variety of characters. Consider William H. Macy, who is often cast as a pathetic, emotional punching bag; Helena Bonham Carter, who is typecast as the crazed, eccentric woman; and Michael Cera, who often plays the role of the awkward teenager.

Here is an example of how it looks in-game:

*Grant decides his actor has been typecast as the "drunk English friend," based off his portrayal of Freddy in the movie Love, Impenetrably. The most famous scene featuring Freddy was when he tries to get the lead female character to go out with him, but bumbles it when he vomits on her shoes.*

The other players then have a discussion and assign the character a score from 1-3 in each of three traits (Comedy, Drama, and Action), based-on the player's description. The player of the actor in question should note this information on an index card. An example:

*Based-on Grant's description of his character being typecast as the "drunk English friend," the players decide his actor has Comedy 3, Drama 1, and Action 1.*

Additionally, each actor has a Secondary Goal. The Secondary Goal should be something unrelated to escaping typecast they would like to accomplish in life (perhaps as a fallback if acting doesn't work out). A short sentence is sufficient. The goal should be fairly specific, meaningful, and achievable within human means. The player should note this goal on the same index card as before. Example:

*Grant decides his actor has the Secondary Goal "To get a really hot girlfriend," and indicates as such on his character card.*

Here is another example:

*Sarah has the Secondary Goal "Become Queen of the World." The rest of the table decides this is not a realistically achievable goal, so Sarah changes it to something more appropriate: "To run for public office."*

## Preparing the Decks

Each player takes twelve index cards. They write an adjective on four of these cards. The adjective cards are then shuffled together to form an Adjective Deck containing four cards per player. Example:

*Grant takes four of his index cards and writes one each of "Hard," "Fluffy," "Tiny," and "Fabulous."*

On the next four cards, players should write verbs. These verbs should end in -ing. The cards are then shuffled together to form the Verb Deck. Example:

*Grant takes four of his index cards and writes one each of "Splashing," "Taunting," "Singing," and "Euthanizing."*

On the last four cards, players should write the name of a subgenre of film or TV show. The subgenre should be very specific. "Comedy" or "Drama," for example, is too broad. The subgenre need not be one that actually exists. In fact, any old noun will probably work. You could, for example, have the subgenre "farm animals" or "toast." The cards are then shuffled together to form the Subgenre Deck. Example:

*Grant takes his final four index cards and writes on them the subgenres "Teen Horror," "Italian Surrealist," "Hospital," and "Pizza."*

# Gameplay

## Agents and Spotlight Actors

The first player is the Spotlight Actor. The player to the right of the Spotlight Actor is the Agent for their turn. When the Spotlight Actor's turn is complete, the next person (going clockwise) will be the Spotlight Actor and the person who was the Spotlight Actor in the previous round will now be the Agent.

## Order of Play

On each player's turn, the following steps occur:

- The Gig is created.
- The Agent decides which actors (apart from himself) are also in the scene.
- The Spotlight Actor compares his scores to the scores on the Gig and rolls dice (this is called Breaking Type).
- The scene is played out to a natural conclusion. Dice may be used to determine certain outcomes in the scene.
- The roles of Spotlight Actor and Agent pass to the next person in the rotation, and play continues until each player has had two chances to be the Spotlight Actor.
- At the end of the game, players discuss their actor's fate, and then narrate short epilogues.

## Creating the Gig

Spotlight Actors are the main characters in a scene (or series of scenes) called The Gig. The Gig is determined by first drawing one card from each of the decks you made in set-up. This means each Gig is an adjective-verb combo, plus a subgenre.

The Agent uses the results of the cards to frame a scene for the Spotlight Actor. The cards are merely inspiration for the scene. The scene doesn't have to be a literal interpretation of the cards, but the influences should be obvious to everyone at the table. The Agent can also decide the Gig will be a series of short, connected scenes. If he does so, he should indicate what outcome the scenes are pushing toward, so everyone knows when to end the Gig. Example:

*Sarah is the Agent for Grant. Grant draws "fluffy debating" in the "wrestling" subgenre. Sarah uses these cards to frame a scene in which each of the involved characters are engaging in a pillow fight during a boys' sleepover.*

Another example:

*Michael is the Agent for Carlos. Carlos draws "tiny euthanizing" in the subgenre "Christmas." He interprets this to be a series of scenes in which Santa's elves are seen getting sick, Santa and Mrs. Claus have to deal with the economic difficulty of caring for hundreds of sick elves, and, finally, a scene in which Santa must make a decision about euthanizing his little helpers.*

The remaining players at the table then assign the Gig a score from 1-3 in the categories of Comedy, Drama, and Action. Example:

*Owing to its serious subject matter, the table decides the Gig involving Santa and his sick elves rates Comedy 1, Drama 3, and Action 1.*

Another example:

*Owing to its lighthearted, action-packed subject matter, the rest of the table decides the pillow fight Gig rates Comedy 2, Drama 1, and Action 3.*

## **Who Else is in the Scene?**

The Agent now gets to decide which roles are important to the Gig. He should assign roles, or ask each actor (including the Spotlight Actor) which role they want to play. Everyone should have a chance to be involved in each Gig. The Spotlight Actor should be the most important character.

## **Breaking Type**

The Spotlight Character now compares his Comedy, Drama, and Action scores with those of the Gig. Ideally, he is "breaking type" and has scores that do not match that of the Gig.

For each score that is different, the Spotlight Actor gains a number of dice equal to the combined scores. For each score that matches, the Spotlight Actor gets a single die. Example:

*Grant has Comedy 3, Drama 1 and Action 1. The Gig he is participating in is about talking pigs who are studying to be lawyers. It has Comedy 3, Drama 2, and Action 1. Grant, then, gets 1 die for Comedy, because the scores match; 3 dice for Drama, because the scores are different; and 1 die for Action, because the scores match, for five dice total.*

The Spotlight Actor then rolls the dice. All dice with result 1 are handed over to the Agent for this scene. All dice 2-4 are given to the other actors, collectively. Dice showing a 5 or 6 are kept by the Spotlight Actor.

## **Playing Out the Gig**

The initial scene having been framed, the actors now begin free roleplay. Any actor can get the ball rolling by declaring what their character is doing in the scene. While the role being played by the Spotlight Actor is the most significant role in the scene, any actor can, and should, try to participate meaningfully in a scene. The Gig's scenes (and any side scenes resulting from dice) are played out to a natural conclusion.

## **Using Dice to Interrupt the Gig**

The purpose of the dice held by the Agent and the non-spotlight actors is to interrupt the scene. The scenes can be interrupted at any time so long as the player doing so has a die to pay for it. The Agent has his own dice from the roll; the non-spotlight actors use whatever dice are available to them as a group.



When an Agent interrupts a scene, it is always for a meta purpose, or, put differently, for a purpose related to the production of the Gig. What this means is the fiction being established in a scene is temporarily halted so the Agent, speaking in-character, can introduce new elements into the Gig. Perhaps the Agent decides the story about euthanizing elves would be more interesting if one of the actors started speaking in a high-pitched elf voice; or perhaps he has decided it would be much better if the present Gig was a musical, requiring everyone to sing their dialogue for the remainder of the Gig.

The Agent's interruptions can also involve side scenes going far afield from those of the Gig. Perhaps there is an issue with funding on this project and the actors now have to help him make a pitch to the executive producers for money. In that case, the scene would shift to one involving the actors begging a studio big-shot for more cash and then, when the money is secured, returning to the scene from the Gig. Example:

*Grant is the Agent for the actors on a Gig about an Inuit vacationing in Bermuda. The scene is going well, with the actors telling a classic fish-out-of-water comedy tale. Grant decides to spend one of his dice to interrupt the scene. He explains, in-character, as the Agent, that the casting studio big-shots will be really impressed if they introduce a huge fight with aliens into the piece. Unfortunately, because there isn't much budget for special effects, the actors have to help him figure out how to make alien ships and other props on the cheap. One of the actors says she has a brother who runs a hardware store, and so the scene shifts to be one*

*about acquiring the supplies they need to make their own visual effects. Once that is complete, the scenes from the Gig-proper resume (the Gig now about an ice fisherman vacationing in Bermuda and doing battle with alien invaders).*

When a non-spotlight actor interrupts the scene, he always does so in furtherance of his Secondary Goal. He spends one of the dice available (a die that rolled 2, 3, or 4) to introduce a new, self-serving element into the scene. Example:

*Sarah is a non-spotlight actor. She is currently participating in a Gig about an ice fisherman vacationing in Bermuda. Her goal says "To run for public office." She spends a die from the pool available to her to interject a short scene in which she does a monologue about the dangers of climate change.*

Another example:

*Grant has the goal "To get a really hot girlfriend." He is currently participating in a scene about dying elves at the North Pole. He spends a die to describe how his actor, playing a reindeer, is dressed in a particularly sexy reindeer costume. He describes how the costume is basically just a couple of tufts of fur covering his groin area, and a leather harness that strategically shows off his pectorals.*

## Dice and the Spotlight Actor

While it may not seem like it at times, the main character of any given Gig is its Spotlight Actor. The Spotlight Actor keeps all of his dice that turn-up a 5 or 6. He may spend these dice to dictate the outcomes of anything taking place in the scene, including its final resolution. Absent a die being spent by the Spotlight Actor, any conflicts or decision points that arise in the scene are handled by group consensus. The Spotlight Actor should be mindful of his desire to break free from typecasting, as well as his Secondary Goal, and should use the dice at his disposal to protect those interests. Example:

*Grant, who is typecast as the "drunken English friend," is the Spotlight Actor in a Gig about an ice fisherman (played by Grant) vacationing in Bermuda. The scene is starting to rely too heavily on drunken comedy, and so he spends his die to veer the Gig back to being about the romance he is pursuing with a beautiful native girl.*

Another example:

*Sarah is the Spotlight Actor in a Gig about Santa Claus wrestling with whether or not to euthanize some elves who are in pain and slowly dying. A group consensus is forming around having Santa put the elves down, but Sarah has the Secondary Goal of "To run for public office," and can't be part of a production that would endorse something as controversial as euthanasia. She spends one of her dice to conclude the scene in such a way that Santa does not euthanize the elves.*

## Continuing Play and Ending the Game

Once a Gig is complete, play passes to the left with a new Spotlight Actor and new Agent. The above steps are repeated, and play continues like this until each player has had the chance to be the Spotlight Actor twice. If there is enough time, and everyone is having fun, you may choose to go around the table a third or fourth time.

## Conclusion

Once the main gameplay is complete, players should openly discuss whether they think each actor 1) broke free from typecasting and/or 2) made good progress toward their Secondary Goal. Once a consensus is reached for each actor, players may choose to narrate a short epilogue for their character.

## Extended Example of Play #1

Below is an extended example of one player's turn in *Ad Libitum Absurdity*.

Players have made characters and created the three decks following the procedures laid out in the section titled "Getting Started," and Adam is the first Spotlight Actor. The player to his right is Bill and will take the role of the Agent (Juan will be referred to as the Agent for the entirety of this example). The other players at the table are Caroline and Danny.

Adam draws one card from each of the three decks. His verb-adjective combo is "Painful Dancing" and his subgenre is "Football." The Agent considers these three cards and decides the Gig will be about a former football player trying to join an elite ballet company. He decides on a trio of scenes: one in which we see the football player trying to fit into the elite world of ballet; one in which we see him forming a romantic relationship with another dancer; and a final scene in which he dances with the company on an opening night performance. Based-off this description, Caroline and Danny decide the Gig rates Comedy 2, Drama 3, and Action 2.

The Agent assigns roles: Adam will play the role of the football player, since that is the most important character; Caroline will play the role of the romantic interest; and Danny will play the role of the snooty ballet rival.

Adam is typecast as "the dumb jock," and his scores are Comedy 2, Drama 1, and Action 2. He compares his dice for Breaking Type and gets six total (one for Comedy, 4 for Drama, and 1 for Action). He rolls these dice for the following results: 1, 2, 2, 4, 5, 5. He hands the 1 over to the Agent. The 2, 2, and 4 are given to Caroline and Danny. He keeps the two 5s.

Adam begins roleplaying the scene by describing his character's arrival at the ballet school. He has an encounter with Danny's character, in which the latter declares that no one as big and dumb and hulking as a football player can ever learn ballet. Caroline's character is nicer to Adam's character, and tries to make him feel better by telling him that Danny is a jerk to everyone.

The Gig flows into the next scene, in which we see Adam's character and Caroline's character developing their romantic relationship. Caroline has the Sec-

ondary Goal of "Learn to Ride a Horse" and suggests the two characters can be on a date involving horseback riding. Adam is not really down with that, so Caroline spends one of the dice available to her. The scene proceeds with the characters on horseback. Danny has the Secondary Goal of "Become a rap star." He spends a die to have his character appear during the date and have a rap duel with Adam's character. Adam agrees, but, considering his typecast as a dumb jock, spends one of his dice to declare that his character is the winner of the rap duel (he likes the idea of playing a character who is quick-witted). Adam and Danny play out the rap duel and conclude the scene.

In the final scene, the Agent spends his die to interrupt. He explains to the actors the final dance number has been cut in favor of a scene in which terrorists attack the theater, and the dancers have to dance-battle their way to safety. As the scene plays out, Caroline, sensing an opportunity, spends the last of the dice available to her to declare her character actually rode to the theater on horseback, and that she will be battling terrorists atop her mount. The scene continues, and Adam spends his final die to conclude the Gig in a way that sees his character saving the day, but with Caroline's character being wounded by gunfire. As he kneels over her body and weeps, he lifts his head to the sky and calls out her name in dramatic anguish.

The Gig concluded, the role of the Spotlight Actor passes to Caroline, who sits to the left of Adam. Adam is now the Agent. Play proceeds with a new Gig.