

# Eat at Joe's

*Spies, defectors, refugees... there are thousands of cast-offs from the galactic cold-war, and unfortunately you're one of them. Fortunately for you, the Interplanetary Union is willing to protect you from the chilly grasp of the Communion. Unfortunately for you, the only thing left to do is hide. You've been placed in a remote section of a backwater planet called Earth, and disguised as one of their natives.*

*You've been disguised as a worker at a little diner in a place called Evansville, Indiana. The year, according to the local calendar, is 1955.*

*Now all you have to do is blend in, and hope that the Communion doesn't come looking.*

## Basics

Eat at Joe's is an RPG. One player will take on the role of the Game Master (GM) while the other players will take on the role of the main characters of the game (namely, aliens hiding on Earth).

The game is structured like a TV show. Each game session (or sometimes a group of sessions) will cover the events of a single Episode, and all of Episodes together will make up a Season and so on.

Different elements of the game are also referred to using the language of television. A character who's being controlled by the GM is an extra, supporting cast member, or guest star, depending on their importance to the episode (collectively these characters are referred to by the much more gamey term Game Master Character, or GMC). Recurring locations in the game are called sets. The GM will keep a list of characters and sets to be reused throughout the game.

Gameplay consists of a conversation between the GM and the other players about what happens in this fictional TV show. This conversation is shaped by various rules that determine who can say what when, as outlined below.

## **Setting, Theme and Tone**

The setting is a picturesque version of the 1950's Midwest. Though ostensibly set in Evansville, Indiana, the players can choose any Midwest town they want. Moving the placement or time period of the diner may also be a fun alternative, maybe Joe's is an automat in 1940's Manhattan or 24-hour coffee house of a major highway in the 1990s. Changing the setting in such a major way will likely change the tone of the game as well.

In tone, Eat at Joe's is primarily an homage to the episodic television of the 50's and 60's, mostly sit-coms like *I Dream of Genie* or *Bewitched*, but with a hefty dose of *Star Trek*, *Lost in Space* and *The Twilight Zone* thrown in for good measure. It is mostly light and comical, but with an ability to get more serious, and even surreal, when dealing with the character's alien natures. The player's goal in the game should be to be funny and engaging, and to create scenarios and situations that will be neatly resolved at the end of a session or two of play.

Another aspect of tone that the player's should discuss is how action-oriented the game should be. Shows like *Hawaii 5-0* and *Get Smart* can be templates for more action-oriented fair that sticks with the game's motif of 1950's TV.

The theme of the game is a wider open question. It can be a send-up of the everyday, an examination of otherness in a conservative and colorless world or even a look into the price that people are willing to pay to keep secrets. Whatever theme the group chooses to play towards will greatly affect the choices of the players and the GM alike and should be decided before characters are created.

## **A Note about Aliens**

The aliens in Eat at Joe's are whatever the game needs them to be, to either further the drama or comedy of a given scene. This extends to whatever intergalactic culture might exist, what restrictions are placed on the aliens in hiding, what the limitations are on their disguises and so on. This is also true of whatever super-human technology the aliens possess.

That being said, the GM will have the job of keeping the world of the game consistent by noting down what's been established from episode to episode and making sure that new developments don't contradict what's come before.

# Creating a Character

To create your character, follow the steps outlined below.

## 1. Design your Species

- **Come Up with a Species Concept:** Decide what kind of alien species you want to play. This can be anything you can imagine.
- **Set your Weirdness Score:** How strange is your character's appearance and mannerisms, from a human point-of-view? Assign the character's species a Weirdness Score from 1 to 6, with 1 being indistinguishable from humanity and 6 being so strange that a human wouldn't even recognize you as a life form.
- **Choose your Tells:** For each point of Weirdness after the first, select something strange about your character's appearance or behavior that shows through despite their human disguise.
- **Create a Special Ability:** Each species can do something that's beyond human ability.
  - **Come Up with an Ability Concept:** Decide what you want your specie's special ability to be. Describe what it is and how you imagine it working.
  - **Assign an Exposure Score:** Using your special ability might draw the attention of others. Assign your special ability an Exposure Score from 1 to 6.
  - **Determine its Usefulness Score:** Your Special Ability has a Usefulness Score from 1 to 6 which determines how often it'll come in handy and how much of an effect it will have. A 1 is a minor trick, something that might come in handy every once in a while. A 6 is a true superpower. You can assign your Special Ability a Usefulness up to the average of your specie's Weirdness and the ability's Exposure Score.

- **Determine Bonus Attributes:** If your Usefulness Score is less than the maximum value, you get an extra point to spend on Attributes during the next step of character creation.

## 2. Assign your Attributes

There are six Attributes, to determine their values, simply rank them from one to six. The Attributes (and their abbreviations) are: Agility (AG), Cool (CL), Personality (PR), Strength (ST), Will (WL), and Wit (WT).

### Attribute Descriptions

- **Agility:** Agility measures how well a character can move their body. It also covers their aim, sense of balance and manual dexterity.
- **Cool:** A character with a high Cool Attribute can stay calm under pressure and they can lie convincingly or otherwise hide their true feelings.
- **Personality:** A character's ability to influence others, from charm to intimidation to seduction, is covered by their Personality Attribute.
- **Strength:** Strength rates the character's raw physical power and ability to withstand physical punishment.
- **Will:** A character's Will is how much raw-determination they can muster.
- **Wit:** A character with a high Wit Attribute will notice more about the world around them and will be able to react to that information more quickly.

If you have an Attribute bonus higher from your Species, you may increase the value of any of your character's Attributes. The only limitation being that no Attribute can be higher than 7.

### **3. Come Up with a Recurring Plot**

Think of one thing theme or type of activity that will recur throughout the Series. This can be anything you find interesting, and can be something that occurs due to your character's actions or it can just be something that happens to the character often.

Example Plots include: secretly being a Communion spy, striving to keep the diner running, smuggling illicit alien technology on to Earth or constantly attracting unwanted romantic attention from the Indiana natives.

### **4. Have the GM Determine your Starting Story Points**

Your GM will look at your Recurring Plot and determine how detrimental it's likely to be for your character. If a plot is beneficial, you'll start with just a few Story Point, but plots that are likely to make your character's life hard (or dangerous) can grant more Story Points.

This evaluation should be made relative to the other player's characters. The easiest plot should get 1 Story Point, the next most difficult/dangerous 2 and so on.

### **5. Complete the Picture**

Describe your character in as much detail as you think you'll need to portray them in the game, from their appearance to their personality. Each character should have a job they've been assigned to do at the diner, from managing the place to washing dishes. You'll definitely want to give your character a name.

# Playing the Game

To play the game the players follow the steps listed below.

## Record the Character's Cover

If this is the first session, the character's Cover is 10. On subsequent episodes, keep track of whatever the character's Cover was at the end of the last episode.

## Begin the Episode and Set up the Opening Scene

If this is the first time playing Joe's, the initial scene will start in the diner and will introduce all of the characters working at their assigned jobs. Later, once you've added more sets, you can start in any set that's already been established.

The GM will give each player the option to open the scene. They can do this by calling on any of their Recurring Plots. Something is afoot that coincides with the plot at hand. If none of the players want to use their Recurring Plot to determine what's happening in the scene, the GM will introduce a new plot and take note of it.

Once the plot that's being addressed in the scene has been d

## Determine Character Goals

Once the set and the plot of the first scene has been determined, the GM and the players will talk about what's going on in the scene and what the player's characters are doing, as well as establishing who else is in the scene.

Whenever a player determines that their character is trying to accomplish something specific, they'll state that thing as a Goal. At that point, any other player who has a character present in the scene can state a Goal for their character, based on what's been happening so far in the scene.

Once the Goals are determined, the players and the GM will talk things out a bit more until its clear how the character goes about achieving this Goal.

The relationship between the Goals in the scene should be noted. If two characters are trying to achieve the same Goal, then they're cooperating, if they're pursuing opposing Goals are actively resisting each other, they they're competing. Otherwise, each Goal is resolved separately.

As soon as their methodology has been established enough to assign an Attribute, the conversation stops and the dice are consulted.

## **Roll the Dice**

Once the active Attribute has been determined for each character pursuing an independent Goal (not cooperating or competing), the players each roll dice. Whenever a player rolls, they roll five eight-sided dice (5d8) and compare the value of each die with the active Attribute.

Each die that comes up higher than the value of the Attribute means that a Complication occurs, while each die that comes up lower means that a Gain is made.

For each Complication that occurs, one of the following things occurs. The number in parenthesis after each entry determines how often that option can be selected:

- Two of the character's Attributes are Exhausted (2)
- One of the character's Attributes is Damaged (2)
- All present GMC's have their Suspicion increased by one (1)
- A single GMC has their Suspicion increased by two (1)
- A piece of evidence is left behind that could reveal the character's alien nature (1)
- The group's Cover is decreased by one (1)



- Something negative (an Obstacle) occurs in the scene that stops them from completing their goal. (3)

Gains are simpler, they always refer to something occurring within the scene. Each Gain moves the character closer to completing their Goal within the Scene. Assume that each Goal requires five Gains to complete entirely or perfectly. If a character's Goal deals with reducing the suspicions of a GMC or clear up evidence that they've left behind, than each Gain also translates into a one-point reduction of the relevant Suspicion score or the removal of the evidence.

A player choose to use a Gain to cancel out a Complication instead of using it to advance towards their Goal.

If two or more characters are competing, then they can trade any number of Gains they make for Complications the other character has to deal with. If two or more characters are cooperating, they combine their Gains for both completing the Goal and buying off Complications rolled by either character.

If a character uses their alien specie's special ability to help them complete a Goal, then they roll an additional number of dice equal to the ability's Exposure. The character can also uses their Attribute value +1 or the ability's Usefulness, whichever is higher. A special ability may not be used more times in an Episode than its Usefulness rating.

## **Exhausted and Damaged Attributes**

Throughout the Episode as character's Attributes may be temporarily lowered as a result of Complications. Each time an Attribute is Exhausted or Damaged, its value is lowered by one. Exhausted Attributes increase back up to their usual value at a rate of one-point per scene, but only in scenes in which none of the character's Attributes suffer

from Exhaustion or Damage. Damaged Attributes don't recover until the end of the Episode.

If an Attribute is Exhausted or Damaged below 1, that Attribute cannot be used to pursue Goals while its value remains below 1.

## **Determine Initial Outcome**

Once you know how many Gains are made towards completing a Goal, and how many Complications will equate to something in the story, you can narrate (talk through) what happens in the rest of the scene.

## **Move to the Next Scene**

Once the dice have been rolled and the outcomes talked through, a new scene occurs. If there were players with characters who were absent from the last scene, or whose characters didn't get a chance to pursue a Goal, then set up a new scene with just those characters, keep going until every player has had a chance for their character to pursue a Goal.

After each character has had at least one scene, check the Suspicion scores of the various GMC's. If their Suspicion scores are higher than 3, than a Suspicion scene occurs. Have the GMC try to do one of the following, based on their current score:'

**3: Try to assuage their suspicions.** The GMC will approach the character and attempt to confirm their humanity.

**4: Try and confirm their suspicions.** The GMC will approach the character and attempt to confirm that they're an alien.

**5: Confront the suspected character(s).** The GMC will directly confront the character(s) they suspect.

- 6: Seek outside help.** The GMC will go to the police or some other authority for help. This will automatically reduce the character's Cover by one.
- 7: Expose the character.** The GMC will attempt to publically expose the character(s).
- 8: Attack the character.** The GMC, through desperation or with purpose, will attack the character, not necessarily physically.

Suspicion scenes may not involve any of the player's characters. If that's the case, the GM simply narrates to the players what occurs with the GMC's.

If the character's Cover is 0, then a scene will occur, either introducing a new GMC, an agent of the Communion that's hunting the characters or one where an already introduced agent comes closer to finding the characters. A Communion agent needs to make three such approaches before a confrontation with the player's characters will occur.

If neither a Suspicion scene nor an agent scene occurs, than any player whose character failed to get five Gains towards a Goal may choose to have a follow-up scene where they pursue the previous Goal.

If none of the players wish to pursue a previous Goal (or if there are no Goals to pursue), then the GM starts a new scene around anything they think would be interesting.

Any scene involving player's characters proceeds just like the initial scene: talk it through until Goals are identified, continue going until an Attribute is selected, roll the dice and resolve the scene.

*Never have two Suspicion scenes in a row, even if there are multiple GMC's with Suspicion scores higher than 3. Never have two Cover scenes in a row if the Cover somehow is returned to 0 after the initial scene. Never let a player choose to have a follow-up scene twice in a row, always move onto a different character or start a new scene.*

## **End the Episode**

Whenever a character completes a Goal that they've racked up five or more Complications pursuing, that character gains a Star and the Last Scene begins.

In the Last Scene all of the other players and the GM will have a chance to resolve any dangling Goals. Every player with an unresolved Goal who wants to should get a chance to make a final roll. It may take some doing to make a scene that will put all the Goals 'on screen' at once, but the group should be able to devise an adequate scenario.

Whether or not the characters achieve these final Goals, the GM should have events play out so that the Goals are either completed or closed-off in such a way that they are no longer an open question.

Any character who completes a Goal they racked up five or more Complication pursuing in the Last Scene also receive a Star.

## **Stars**

A player can spend a Star they've acquired to increase any one Attribute by 1 point, as long as the Attribute still has a lower value than their highest rated Attribute. Alternately, they may spend two Stars to increase their highest rated Attribute by 1 point or to increase a different Attribute to be equal with the highest rated Attribute.

## **Notes on GMCs**

Whenever the GM needs a character to come into the scene, they'll need to invent them on the fly. Below are some basic types that you can use draw on to help you out:

**Authority Figure:** Authority figures, from police officers to elected officials, can be a great source of both comedy and drama. If competent, they're likely to act as foils to the more outrageous types around them, and if incompetent they can be straight up comic-relief or unwitting villains. Alternately, they can be intentionally corrupt or villainous, acting as obstacles for the players.

**Bully:** Bully's make a great addition to both a comedic and a dramatic scene. By making a GMC truly unlikable, you can free up the players to retaliate against them. Be careful with having bullies target the player's characters directly, as this may feel unfair or uncomfortable at the table.

**Bureaucratic Type:** Bureaucracy is a surprisingly evergreen source of comedy and can add both tension and realism to a dramatic scene. Having the players work through the red-tape required by the zoning commission to stay in business or seeing them fill out the requisition forms to get permission to get their pet Targarian Bilge Dog transported to Earth can add lots of droll humor to your session. The key is to make the bureaucrats themselves interesting and memorable, and to not let their meddling get too annoying or taxing on the player's patience. When people stop laughing at their antics, it's probably time to get them out of the scene, unless they're there to intentionally slow down the pace of a scene.

**Criminal/Rogue:** The arrival of a conman or a burglar, though fraught with obvious danger and tension, can also drive the story towards more comedic-tropes. Maybe the characters have to defend the diner from burglars who are about to get more than they planned for? Whatever their nature, introducing a criminal-type into the story is a way to up the ante and keep things interesting if a scene is dragging,

**Hapless Local:** The vast majority of GMC's will just be the regular people of the town, but even these shouldn't be overlooked. The nosy-neighbor, the unflappable regular, the lovelorn teens and the bratty kid are all interesting additions to the game, either as regular guests at the restaurant who act as supporting players, or one-off additions that add color to an Episode or help bring focus to the game's theme.

**Nervous Nelly:** Nervous characters are prone to suspicion and can ramp up the tension in a scene with their worrying. Neurotic types are also known to come with their own brand of comedy, as the audience is able to dismiss their woes as overwrought and out of place.

**Vagabond:** Hobos, travelling sales men and dashing adventurers and any other type of character you wouldn't expect to find in a small Midwest town are a great way to add spice to a game. These kinds of GMC's are almost always guest stars, taking up a considerable amount of space in the Episode, so they should be used sparingly, but dropping in an outsider when things feel a bit repetitive or undirected may just be the way to bring things back into focus.