

Silent Film

By Nick Wedig

It is somewhere in the early 20th century. You are employed by a failing movie studio. The company is nearly bankrupt. It has barely enough money to create one last picture. Your creditors are demanding payment immediately. If you can get the picture to the distributor by the end of the day, then they will give you an advance that will let you pay the people you owe. And that way you can keep the studio open a little while longer.

If you don't get a finished film out the door in just a few hours, though, the bank will seize the studio's assets and shut the place down.

You don't have time, budget, script, props, costumes or talent. But you'll have to make do as best you can. Get the picture - any picture - made and the company just might survive.

Or will the production fall victim to constant infighting and conflicting motives? We'll have to play to find out.

This is a freeform live action roleplaying game (“larp”) for 3-12 people. You’ll need an open space to play in, the cards associated with the larp, and whatever costumes and props you can throw together on short notice. A gamemaster is not required, but having one or more designated organizers might be useful if you have a very large number of players.

(The game scales nicely to larger groups of players, provided that you have multiple copies of the cards involved. With an additional set of cards, you could play with up to 24 people, for example.)

The Conceit

The basic idea is that the game is playing out the production of a movie. You are roleplaying the behind the scenes lives of actors and movie production crews, making a silent film. The film you are creating is not just any movie, though, it is the long-lost “original” silent film era version of a modern, more recent movie.

Before you begin play, choose a movie to remake. If you have a small group, you can collectively discuss and come to a decision. With a larger group, the person(s) organizing the game should probably pick a movie to begin with. The movie you choose should be a real world film that most of the cast is more-or-less familiar with. Not everyone has to have seen the movie, but everyone has to have an idea of the film’s genre, plot and characters. Over the course of the game, all the players of the game will collaborate to make a silent movie version of the film, under the conceit that this version you create is an obscure silent film version of the story. In the fictional world of the game, your final product will go on to inspire the real world movie you’re all familiar with.

If all goes well, you may even have a completed movie by the end of the game! You can have the camera grip players film the event on cell phones or camcorders. With any modern computer, you should be able to assemble the footage together, apply a black and white filter, add some old-timey ragtime music and insert title cards for dialogue. With relatively little effort after the game, you’ll have a complete silent film that you and your friends made yourselves.

Setup

Before you begin play, discuss the style and tone of the game. Also talk with your players about safety and gameplay procedures. Use safety protocols that make sense for you and your specific group. If you're playing with strangers, then you might want to be more explicit in your procedures for physical and emotional safety of all. If you have players you're familiar with, you can be less formal regarding your procedures, but you should still make sure everyone is comfortable with the game and that no one gets hurt (physically or emotionally).

Set a time limit for play. Decide how long the studio has to create a movie in. This in part depends on your local culture of play, but it also affects how good the movie might be. A short span of time will lead to shorter, more rushed films at the end, and a higher chance of failing altogether. Longer time for the larp would lead to slower play, more polished results, but possibly also a chance that the game stalls out and becomes less entertaining for the players. If you are unsure, I'd suggest a deadline set two hours after character creation is finished.

To get ready to play, you'll need to create some characters. The cards for the larp have three varieties: Role, Motive and Relationship.

To begin with, every player should choose a role from those available, or create their own. It's okay if people duplicate roles, and it's okay if roles are unfulfilled. Maybe the studio's lack of a Star is the source of the studio's problems? If no one volunteers to be the Director of the picture, then finding a way to fill that hole will be a major problem for the characters to solve in play. Right now, though, each player should pick a role that they will enjoy playing.

Once roles are selected, each player character also randomly receives a motive. Shuffle the motive cards together. The first player draws two motives and chooses one to be true of their character. This motive is a secret for them to hide or reveal as they please. If you run out of motives to draw, shuffle the rejected motives together to be a new draw deck.

Each player character also has at least one relationship. Shuffle the relationship cards together. Each player again draws two, selects one to be true and discards the other. (Reshuffle the discards into a new draw deck if needed.) Each player then should choose another character with which to have that relationship, and ask them the question on the card. The other player creates a fictional answer to the question, providing detail about the pair's past and future interactions.

In Play

Once characters are created, play is largely freeform. Certain characters, such as directors, producers or lead actors, should direct the other players in the process of filming the movie. All characters should be working on advancing their own goal, and on interacting with their relationships in an appropriate, entertaining manner.

Most of the structure of the game during play will come from the movie you are 'premaking'. Players will have to agree to a script outline, find locations to film, assemble costumes, film and act out scenes, etc.

This is not a game that focuses on combat or conflict. There shouldn't be much in the way of violence or impossible actions that require additional game rules. If you do have a situation that requires physical conflict, you can follow the rules below (or substitute your own preferred larp rules).

The general rule is that, if you can act out an action in real life, then that is how you perform the act in the game. If that act involves another player character, you will need to be conscientious of the other player's wishes. If your character is going to touch or physically interact with another player's character in any way, you want to be sure the other player is okay with the physical touching. One way to deal with this is by acting in **slow motion**. If you are going to punch or grab someone else, act to make clear what your intention is, but do it at a pace much slower than real life action. You want it to look like your character is in a movie where the camera slows down to highlight. You know how to act in slow motion, right? Kids do it all the time.

If necessary, you might also want to telegraph your intentions, by saying something in character like "I'm going to punch you in the face!" or maybe "I've got you" when you go to grab someone. You could also state your intentions out of character, depending on your local play culture's feelings toward breaking character during a game.

So the aggressor in the situation acts in slow motion. This gives the other player a chance to identify what is happening and decide what the outcome is. The targeted player decides if they are punched in the face, or grabbed or what have you. This is important: If you start an action on another player, they decide the outcome.

The slow motion also helps players perform violent acts in a way that is safer: the responding player can then move in a way where they are punched, kicked, etc. with less risk of being actually punched or kicked accidentally.

Wrap-Up

After the set amount of time passes, then shooting is complete. If you have a reasonably complete film made at the end, then the studio is able to survive a little longer. If you were unable to complete a film in the time allotted, then your company goes under, and you all become forgotten footnotes of cinema history.

After play, talk with your players out of character about what happened, why characters did what they did, and what could be improved for future games. Give all the players a chance to wind down.

After the game, you can have someone take the video you recorded (assuming you did so) and turn it into a silent movie. Assuming you have access to a modern-ish computer (and if you're reading this, you most likely do), then you probably have a relatively minimal video editing program that came preinstalled with your operating system. (Windows Movie Maker or iMovie are the two most likely candidates.) Even if you're a novice at using the software, you can take the raw footage and turn it into a short silent film in a matter of an afternoon. Take the footage recorded. Assemble it into appropriate order. Apply a black and white filter to all of it. Remove the sound, and replace it with appropriate 1920s silent movie music. (You can find free or Creative Commons licensed music available online with only a little bit of searching.) Add some black frames with text for dialogue. Export the thing and upload it to a video-sharing website of your choice. And so you have a movie you made, for you and your friends to share and enjoy.

And be sure to contact me at nickwedig@yahoo.com so that I can see the movie that you made.

Credits

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Playtesters

Matthew Campbell, Stacie Davis, Wendy Davis, Kate Davoli, Dan Hall, Jeff Hoskinson, Sarah Kendall, Adam Laslo, John Laslo, Randall Laslo, Kerry Lazarus, Debbie Schuessler, Wayne Schuessler, Amber Wedig, Madeline Wedig, Sophia Wedig, Alex Zitzelberger, Sabrina Zitzelberger

You can see our example of play at <https://youtu.be/VUjbA2S9NTk>