



a Narrative RPG for 4-6 Players

The year is 2019. **Bruce Orson**, a twenty-three-year-old Black man, is on trial for the murder of **Abigail Burke**, a thirty-year-old white woman. Ms. Burke was last seen with Mr. Orson at **The Yellowjacket Lounge** on the evening of **Friday, April 26th**. Her body was found the following morning at 7:42 a.m.

TRIAL is a narrative tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) for **3-5 players and a gamemaster (GM)**. This game requires a **six-sided die**, a **four-sided die**, a **twelve-sided die**, a **calculator** or phone, and a paper and pen to take notes and track points.

About Narrative Games

A narrative RPG is a game in which the players and GM are party to the creation of the story. There is no single storyteller; everyone has a part to play in making the story happen. When in doubt, let the plot drive your decisions, rather than the rules as written—ask yourself which decisions make for the most interesting story, rather than which decisions honor the rules of gameplay.

The Role of the Gamemaster

The GM's primary role is to interrogate witnesses as they take the stand. The GM may never speak as Bruce Orson, since Mr. Orson does not testify. However, the GM can narrate Mr. Orson's actions and demeanor as the trial unfolds. The GM is responsible for familiarizing themselves with the rules of play, guiding gameplay, and ensuring player safety.

The GM's desired outcome is to create an interesting and complex story.





The Role of the Players

Players are asked to take narrative actions as themselves (referred to as “players”) and in character (referred to as “player characters” or “PCs”). Players begin the game as one of the Starting Characters.

The players’ objectives may be different from their player characters’ objectives. A willingness to improvise and a “yes, and...” mentality are necessary. Players should not think of themselves as playing a single character, but rather as facilitating the telling of a story.

Roll 1d4 to determine your desired outcome as a player. This informs your testimony, cross examination, and votes. Your desired outcome as a player remains the same for all characters you play, though these characters have additional motivations.

1. You believe Bruce Orson is innocent, and want him found innocent.
2. You believe Bruce Orson is innocent, and want him found guilty.
3. You believe Bruce Orson is guilty, and want him found innocent.
4. You believe Bruce Orson is guilty, and want him found guilty.

Gameplay

This section provides an overview of gameplay and is followed by more detailed instructions for each step.

Each player begins the game with 3 points. Players earn points for different actions throughout the game and are responsible for keeping track of their own points.

To begin the game, the GM rolls to determine Abigail Burke's cause of death. The GM then assigns one of the Starting Characters to each player. The GM chooses in which order these characters will be called to the stand. When a PC is on the stand, the GM questions them while the other players look on.

Players may spend points to provide concrete evidence of any statement made on the stand. The GM may also introduce one piece of evidence during each witness's testimony.

If in the course of their testimony the PCs mention additional characters who may be useful witnesses, the GM can subpoena those characters by enlisting players to perform these roles on the fly. Allow all Starting Characters to testify before subpoenaing additional characters. Continue to hear testimony until all sides of the story have been heard, both from the Starting Characters and from any additional subpoenaed witnesses.

Each character may take the stand for a maximum of ten minutes. After a witness is questioned by the GM, the additional players may cross examine that witness for a maximum of five minutes. Players may spend points to introduce evidence during cross examination. If evidence is introduced that justifies calling back a witness, that witness may take the stand and be questioned by the GM for a maximum of five additional minutes.

After a character's time on the stand concludes, the testifying player secretly tells the GM their desired outcome. Each player then secretly tells the GM their vote: Guilty, or Not Guilty. Votes in accordance with the previous witness's desired outcome count as double. Players should vote in accordance with their own desired outcome, unless testimony has been introduced that causes reasonable doubt of your desired outcome. Reasonable doubt is here defined as "doubt that would cause a reasonable person to hesitate." The GM is responsible for keeping track of these votes throughout the game.

Once all relevant testimony has been heard, the GM delivers a brief closing statement. If the majority of votes are Guilty, they deliver this statement as Bruce's attorney. If the majority of votes are Not Guilty, they deliver this statement as the prosecution.

After the closing statement, players purchase additional Guilty/Not Guilty votes at the price of 5 points per vote. Players must discard as many of their points as possible by voting in this manner.



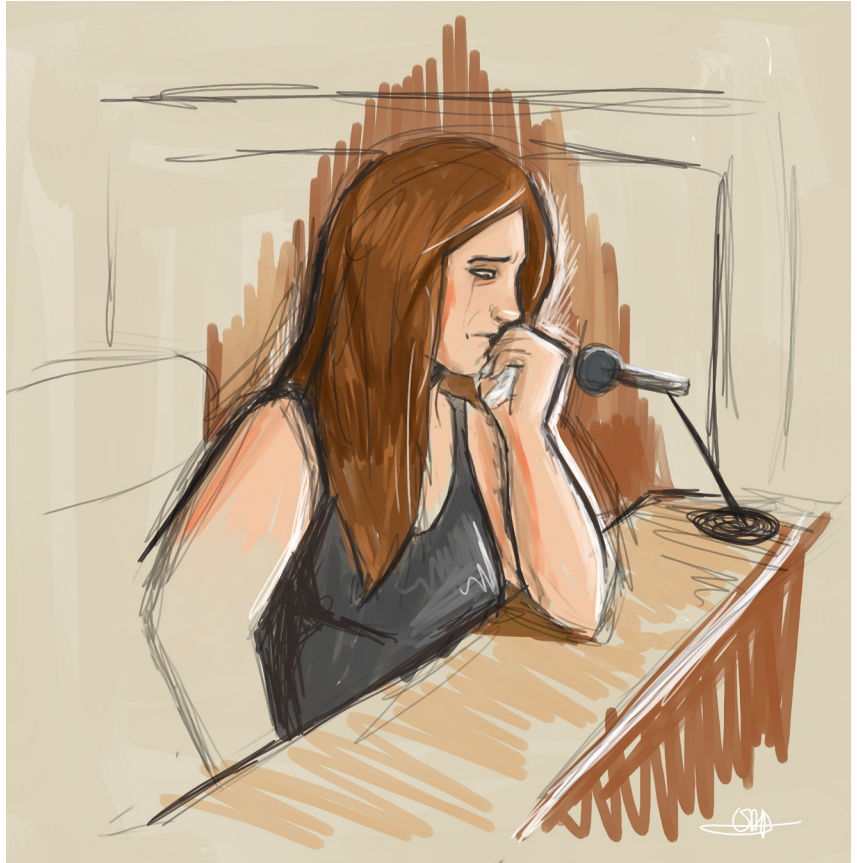
Safety and Responsibility

Before gameplay commences, it is the GM's responsibility to make sure all players are on the same page about what type of gameplay experience they are creating: Is humor acceptable? Are you creating a somber, serious environment?

The GM should also ask players if any triggering topics (sexual assault, death of a child, self-harm, etc.) are off limits. For a checklist of triggers, I recommend *Consent in Gaming* from Monte Cook Games¹. Some triggering topics may be excluded from the game entirely, while some may be discussed carefully and in limited detail. It is never your place to question anyone's triggers.

I encourage groups running this game to implement an open-door policy. Players are free to get up and leave the table at any time, for any reason, without question. I also encourage use of the Script Change tool, created by Brie Beau Sheldon. At any point, any player can say "rewind," taking the game back to before the uncomfortable content was introduced. Players can say "pause" to take a moment to check in. Players can also say "fast forward" to skip over something that may be upsetting.

Lastly, I encourage aftercare as part of your gaming experience. Aftercare allows you to safely leave the world of the game behind and slip back into your own life. Some ways to do this are by rehashing your favorite parts of the play experience, reflecting on what you learned during play, or generally chatting and decompressing. The included discussion questions can also be integrated into your aftercare, if you so desire.



Cause of Death

Before gameplay, the GM rolls 1d6 to determine Abigail Burke's cause of death, and shares this information with the group.

1. Drowning.
2. Strangulation.
3. A gunshot wound.
4. Blunt force trauma.
5. Stabbing.
6. Poisoning.

1 <https://www.montecookgames.com/store/product/consent-in-gaming/>

Starting Characters

After your Starting Character is assigned, roll 1d6 to determine your secret. Roll 1d6 to determine your drive. When you take an action informed by your secret, or act to protect your secret, gain 2 points. If your secret must be revealed in the course of your testimony, you immediately gain 10 points, but can no longer gain points from actions informed by or protecting your secret. When you take an action informed by your drive, gain 1 point. You are responsible for tracking your own points.

Your desired outcome, secret, and drive guide your character's testimony. Optionally, think of three facts about your character that reconcile your desired outcome, secret, and drive.

Officer Clayton Mosely.

The arresting officer in the case.

SECRET.

1. You have a history of misconduct within the police department.
2. You planted evidence on Bruce Orson when arresting him. Whether this evidence suggests guilt or innocence is determined by your desired outcome.
3. You destroyed evidence that makes Bruce appear guilty. Whether you did this on purpose or not is determined by your desired outcome.
4. In the course of Bruce Orson's arrest, you disobeyed a direct order from your Black captain.
5. You voted for Donald Trump.
6. You have ties to a local white supremacist group.

DRIVE.

1. Abigail Burke reminds you of your daughter.
2. Your handling of this case may lead to a promotion.
3. You acknowledge that you are part of a corrupt system. You have no desire to change that system.
4. You value property over human life.
5. You act primarily from a place of fear—fear of what would happen if you were killed, and of what your own murder trial might look like.
6. You act primarily from a place of shame. You are ashamed of actions you've taken in the course of your career, how you have hurt people or let them down. You are afraid of letting down Abigail's family.



Roberta Orson. The defendant Bruce Orson's mother.

SECRET.

1. You had a previous run-in with Officer Mosely.
2. You covered up Bruce's abuse of an ex-girlfriend.

3. You killed Bruce's father, and you believe you were justified in doing so.
4. Bruce is queer and closeted.
5. Your gun went missing several days before Abigail's murder, and you believe Bruce took it.
6. You and Bruce have a deeply enmeshed relationship, with an unhealthy lack of boundaries.

DRIVE.

1. You trust the criminal justice system wholeheartedly.
2. You knew Abigail, and found her to be a lovely young woman.
3. Prior to Bruce's arrest, you had never met or heard of Abigail.
4. You distrust the criminal justice system, and believe your son has been wronged in the course of his arrest and trial.
5. You are proud of who you raised Bruce to be, and know that you did not raise a murderer. (If your desired outcome indicates that you believe he is guilty, you are profoundly ashamed of him.)
6. You are deeply ashamed of Bruce, whether it be for Abigail's murder or for other wrongs you believe he committed.

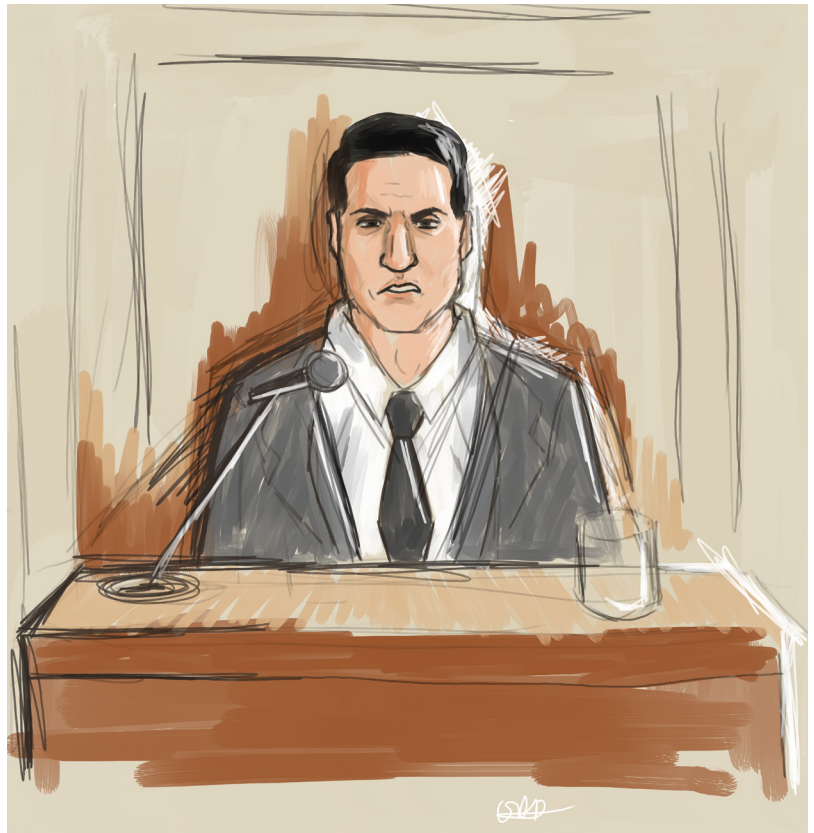
Emily Burke. The late Abigail Burke's sister and roommate.

SECRET.

1. Abigail was queer and closeted.
2. You are in love with Max Bonner.
3. You are in love with Bruce Orson.
4. Abigail was cheating on Max with Bruce.
5. Bruce gave you a gun to hold for him.
6. You "borrowed" the mace off Abigail's key ring right before she was murdered.

DRIVE.

1. You distrust Bruce on account of his race. Whether this bias is subconscious or not is determined by your desired outcome.
2. You are determined to see someone punished for Abigail's murder, whether that person is the killer or not.
3. You were frequently embarrassed by Abigail's behavior.
4. You feel guilty that Abigail died rather than yourself.
5. You feel that Abigail must have put herself in the position that led to her murder.
6. You feel that Abigail's death was entirely random, and are profoundly relieved to be alive.



Max Bonner. A romantic interest of the late Abigail Burke.

SECRET.

1. You suspected that Abigail was cheating on you, but had no suspicions about whom she might be cheating on you with.

2. You were romantically involved with Bruce Orson.
3. Shortly before Abigail's death, you had a physical fight with Bruce Orson.
4. You had a habit of snooping in Abigail's things.
5. You encouraged Abigail to go to The Yellowjacket Lounge the night she was murdered.
6. You wanted to break things off with Abigail, but were unsure of how to do so.

DRIVE.

1. You used to work with Bruce Orson, and parted on unfavorable terms.
2. You're "woke" but not necessarily anti-racist. You believe in equality, not equity or justice.
3. You distrust Bruce Orson on account of his race. Whether this bias is subconscious or not is determined by your desired outcome.
4. You consider Bruce Orson a friend.
5. You are determined to see someone punished for Abigail's murder, whether that person is the killer or not.
6. You believe that the justice system cares more about property than human life.



Earl Frame. The owner, manager, and occasional bartender at The Yellowjacket Lounge.

SECRET.

1. You're known to look the other way when patrons spike people's drinks.
2. You don't hesitate to call the police on rowdy patrons.
3. Bruce applied to work at The Yellowjacket Lounge. You elected not to hire him.
4. Abigail frequented The Yellowjacket Lounge, often with different men.
5. Bruce frequented The Yellowjacket Lounge, often with different women.
6. You lied to Officer Mosely during his investigation. The nature of this lie is determined by your desired outcome.

DRIVE.

1. You distrust Bruce Orson on account of his race. Whether this bias is subconscious or not is determined by your desired outcome.
2. Abigail Burke reminds you of your sister.
3. The outcome of this trial could mean bad press for your small business.
4. You want your bar to be a safe place for all patrons.
5. You believe that testifying in this trial could be the most meaningful thing you do in your life.
6. You're an abolitionist. You believe that our prison and policing systems are beyond reform and should be eliminated.



Additional Characters

These characters are generated in the course of gameplay. If you roll a secret or drive that contradicts something another PC has already established about your character, re-roll. Optionally, think of three facts about your character that reconcile your desired outcome, secret, and drive.

SECRET.

1. You have ties to a local white supremacist group.
2. You were at The Yellowjacket Lounge on the night of April 26th.
3. You are a member of a local radical anarchist group.
4. You are in love with the previously subpoenaed character of your choosing.
5. You would do anything to cover up your gambling addiction.
6. Revealing your whereabouts on the evening of April 26th entails in an affair.
7. Revealing your whereabouts on the evening of April 26th entails in a theft.
8. You blackmailed Bruce Orson into doing you an illicit favor.
9. You used to date Abigail Burke.
10. You had an affair with Bruce Orson, and have never revealed the extent of your relationship to anyone.
11. You are deeply discontent with the circumstances in your life that have led you to testify today.
12. You were pregnant with Bruce Orson's child. You terminated the pregnancy without telling him.

DRIVE.

1. You worked with Bruce and found him to be kind and gentle.
2. You worked with Abigail and found her to be insufferable.
3. You're an abolitionist. You believe that our prison and policing systems are beyond reform and should be eliminated.
4. You trust the justice system wholeheartedly.
5. You're "woke" but not necessarily anti-racist. You believe in equality, not equity or justice.
6. You aspire to become a cop.
7. You distrust Bruce Orson on account of his race. Whether this bias is subconscious or not is determined by your desired outcome.
8. You feel bad for Abigail on account of her race. This bias is subconscious.
9. You suspect Abigail Burke of framing Bruce Orson for her murder.
10. You suspect Emily Burke knows more than she's let on.
11. You were friends with Bruce, and he betrayed your trust.
12. You held a position of power over Abigail Burke and feel guilty for how you treated her.

Potential Questions

- Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you god?
- State your name for the record.
- What do you do?
- Where do you live?
- What connects you to this case?
- Where was Abigail Burke's body found?
- In what condition was her body found?
- What was the cause of death?
- What was the estimated time of death?
- How soon after the murder was the body found?
- What was Abigail's demeanor when you last interacted with her?
- Where and when was the defendant arrested?
- What evidence led to Bruce Orson's arrest?
- How soon after the murder did the arrest occur?
- Where were you on the night of April 26th? Why?
- What did you see on the night of April 26th that stood out to you?
- Have you ever seen Bruce behave in a way that scared you?
- Had you ever seen Abigail behave in a way that alarmed you?
- Have you ever been to The Yellowjacket Lounge?
- What was Bruce like as a child?
- How long had Abigail and Bruce known each other?
- How did Abigail and Bruce meet?
- Can you describe the defendant's relationship to the deceased?
- How did you meet the deceased?
- How did you meet the defendant?
- Can you describe your relationship with the deceased?
- Can you describe your relationship with the defendant?
- Who did you encounter on the night of April 26th?
- Who might know more than you about the events of that night?
- Can you describe Abigail Burke's appearance?
- Can you describe Bruce Orson's appearance?

Objections

At any point during testimony, a player who is not actively testifying may bring forth an objection. In return for objecting, the player receives 1 point. Other

players can overrule an objection by making a (brief) case for the objection's unsuitability. In conflict about overruling or sustaining objections, the GM arbitrates. You do not receive the point if your objection is overruled.

- **Asked and Answered.** This objection is used when the question has been previously asked and answered by the witness in question.
- **Leading.** This objection is used when the question asked suggests an answer.
- **Speculation.** This objection is used when the witness does not have first-hand knowledge of the fact they are testifying to.
- **Contradiction.** This objection is used when a witness contradicts something that they have previously said.

Potential Evidence

Players may spend 2 points to provide concrete evidence of any statement they make on the stand. Non-testifying players may spend 2 points to provide evidence during cross examination. The GM may also introduce one piece of evidence during each witness's testimony.

Whoever introduces the evidence is tasked with describing it in detail. It is not enough to tell us that security camera footage shows Mr. Orson at The Yellowjacket Lounge: what was he doing at the moment the footage was captured?

Suggestions for possible evidence include:

- A receipt.
- A murder weapon.
- Fingerprints on the murder weapon.
- DNA (hair, blood, skin cells) found in someone's vehicle.
- DNA (hair, blood, skin cells) found in someone's home.
- Tire tracks.
- Bullet casings.
- A recording of a phone call.
- Transcripts of texts or emails.
- Browser history.
- A car's GPS data.
- Defensive wounds.
- Gunpowder residue.
- The victim's possessions, found out of place.
- Security camera footage.

End Game

At the game's conclusion, the GM divides the number of Guilty votes by the number of Not Guilty votes.

Outcomes are as follows:

- If Guilty/Not Guilty is Undefined or greater than 0.9, Bruce Orson faces the death penalty.
- If Guilty/Not Guilty is between 0.5 and 0.9, Bruce Orson faces a life sentence.
- If Guilty/Not Guilty is between 0.1 and 0.5, Bruce Orson faces 20 years in prison.
- If Guilty/Not Guilty is between 0 and 0.1, Bruce Orson is a free man.

The severity of these outcomes may seem divorced from the experience of gameplay. For instance, Bruce

may be sentenced to 20 years in prison despite being largely believed to be innocent. This incongruence is deliberate, designed to mechanically represent the disadvantages that Bruce faces within the justice system on account of his race.

Discussion Questions

- If your desired outcome did not reflect your own beliefs, how did that make you feel?
- What were your secrets and drives? Did your secrets or drives conflict with any of your own convictions?
- Describe your experience of hearing the verdict read.
- Given your knowledge of America's criminal justice system, does the verdict you reached seem probable?

Designer's Statement

RPGs are an elaborate way of playing pretend: I know no better way to ask and answer questions about race and violence than to act them out through structured make believe. Games give us the space to explore cultural issues in a low-stakes and safe way—whether Bruce Orson is put to death by the players will have no bearing on our real lives, but it may reveal something about ourselves.

This is not how real trials happen. The point of this game is not to replicate the environment of a trial, but to explore how game design can be used to create experiences that are not necessarily pleasurable or comfortable. It is not comfortable or fun to grapple with race and racism in this way, but it is necessary work. For people of color, race is an unignorable part of how we move through the world. By explicitly making Bruce Orson a Black man, accused of the murder of a white woman, I have made race an irremovable part of the trial. How the gamemaster and players chose to interact with race is up to them, but interacting with race is non-negotiable.

The target audience for this game is players who want to explore how the justice system currently functions, that we might go on to replace it with a more equitable one. I hope that someday the Bruce Orsons of the world will all be given fair and just trials; however, it is impossible to ignore that in today's reality, more than half of all wrongfully convicted death row exonerees are Black². If this game inspires even one person to change the world around them, then I will consider it a success.



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