The How To

A manual – but really a copy/paste job from the website

Patrick Gantz
@Improyster
ImprovDoesBest.com

Do Improv As Improv Does Best.

An ensemble of players gets on stage without previously rehearsed lines or blocking and acts out, making up the show as they go along. The audience understands that this show is constructed from nothing before their eyes. In these aspects, improvisational performance differentiates itself from any other performance medium.

Improvisation is at its best when it leverages its monopoly on spontaneity before a live audience. When a group of individuals creates something out of nothing together on stage, the audience sees magic. Magic. “How’d you all do that?” they ask, blown away by the ideas, characters, scenes and show built piecemeal from their simple suggestion.

We want to cultivate that “you had to be there” magic.

When we are Specific with our Details in-the-moment – surprise!

Improv as improv does best.

When we Emotionally React to imagined Active Endowments – crazy!

Improv as improv does best.

And when we Collaboratively Establish and Heighten Patterns that gel an ensemble and connect an audience –

We get it!

Improv as improv does best.
How To

Whether you are looking to become a better improviser or desiring to grow into a better improv teacher, I can help.

Teaching improv is my favorite thing. I love – and excel at – taking subjective processes and developing concrete steps for teaching them.

And I’m extremely proud of my approach as detailed below in my “Improv As Improv Does Best” manual, combining theory and practical walk-throughs.

My approach to Group Collaboration is based in progressive pattern building, developing a game through agreement, empowerment and repetition (not just through one person’s subjective view of “the first funny thing”).

My approach to Two Person Scenes is based in establishing and heightening patterns of emotional behavior that allow players to react through rather than think through their scenes, making improvisation easier for the performer and more satisfying for the audience.

Teaching improv is the thing I am best at, and I do believe myself to be among the very best at teaching improv. But don’t take my word for it; engage my manual.
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1.0 – The 3lements

Improvisation: Making it up as you go along.

A group of players gets on stage without previously rehearsed lines or blocking and acts out. The audience understands that this show is constructed from nothing before their eyes. In these aspects, improvisational performance differentiates itself from any other performance medium.

Improvisation then is at its best when it leverages its monopoly on spontaneous collaboration before a live audience. When a group of individuals creates something out of nothing together on stage before their eyes, the audience sees magic. When improv is as improv does best, it is magic. “How’d you all do that?”

And yet we improvisers all too often focus on approximating other performance mediums. We want to perform an episode of Seinfeld, chalk full of witty lines, tight stories and comic timing. We want to build a world out of wacky characters and random occurrences to mirror the cartoons of Comedy Central’s Adult Swim. And there is success to be had in attempting this approximation. But it will forever be the “second best” success that comes from the inherent comparison.

We don’t want the “That was amazing considering you made it up all on the spot” audience reaction. We want “The way you made that all up on the spot was amazing.” You know how even our best improv shows never seem as good when we watch a recording? We have to remember – and capitalize – on how our live audiences are crucial to improvisation. We want to cultivate that “you had to be there” magic.

To my mind there are three elements that when focused on help us harness the magic that makes improvisation unique among performance mediums: Details, Reactions, and Games.

THE DETAILS

The Details are the specifics about improvisation. They are the words, the characters and the premise. This is the tool most improvisers focus exclusively on using: They seek to say, be or do something funny.

But you don’t have to try so hard to be funny to wield the power of The Details. You just have to be specific. The surprise inherent to improvisation is made even more satisfying when we’re specific in-the-moment.

When an improviser digs into their specific knowledge on stage, they are sharing themselves with the audience. Isn’t it fun to be in the audience and think, “Damn, that guy knows a lot about how cheese is made”?
Specifics connect us to the audience through their knowledge, too. “You were totally right; Cheez-Its are totally better than Cheese Nips.”

Specifics also help the audience visualize what’s not there. Don’t just drink a beer; drink a Coors Tallboy.

And starting specific helps us fall into more specifics. A scene about a guy who loves cars isn’t going to ramp up as quickly as a scene about a guy who loves manual transmission, German-made vehicles with diesel engines.

Inherently, the audience knows that what comes out of your mouth comes out of your head. Let the audience see you to give them the ability to connect with you and ultimately root for you.

The more you know the more you can share. So read a lot. Watch a lot. Do a lot. And bring all the specifics that make up YOU to the stage.

THE REACTIONS

Anyone can talk about something on stage. Not everyone can react to in-the-moment stimulus on stage. The few, the proud, the brave improviser reacts boldly in-the-moment to make-believe and taps into the art’s unique surprise.

The audience knows there’s no script to tell you how to react, so your reaction comes out of “your” perspective. The audience reaction of “I would have said that,” or “I know a woman who would have said that,” is such a satisfying response for any performance medium. In improvisation, that power is compounded as the audience knows that your reaction was “your” reaction in-the-moment.

The Details certainly enhance our reactions. But don’t delay and thus dilute the power of The Reaction by mulling over what the funniest response might be in your head.

The most powerful reactions are emotional reactions. Choosing to feel strongly about something made-up-in-the-moment is, well, insane. But it’s fun to watch. Surprise!

A scripted actor’s whole job is to make an audience believe that the emotional reaction they’re rehearsed is real in-the-moment. In improvisation, we have a leg up; we are all experiencing what’s happening for the first time. So just react. Don’t be in your head thinking about how you should feel or why we should feel. Just react. React without words until the words come. React without why until the why presents itself. If you commit to your reaction, that’s all the “why” an audience needs. If you invest in your emotion, the audience will believe that you have a reason even if you don’t have a motivation in mind.

Just react emotionally. Don’t over-think an easy win. You don’t need a motivation. You just need commitment to the moment.
The Games

Again, the uniqueness of improvisational performance relies on two aspects: That a group of people is collaborating in-the-moment to build something out of nothing, and that an audience is a participant in the process.

Games allow us to capitalize on both.

Games help performers collectively craft cohesive scenes. And games engage the audience, helping them to better understand the world performers are making up and reinforcing the idea that the show was “made for them.”

Games bring us all – performers and audience – together.

Not incidentally – not simply semantically – we’re playing games. We’re having fun. We’re not in our heads worried about what we “should” do; we’re engaged in doing whatever it is we’re doing. We’re letting the audience relax because we’re visibly playing in-the-moment; we’re not wearing terrified faces as we struggle to figure out why we’re on stage, which tenses an audience. We’re playing. We’re playing games.

The word “game” gets thrown around a lot in improvisation. This is my definition:

Game – a sequence of actions, related by rules of cause-and-effect, that heightens with repetition.

Games help improvisers build something collaboratively out of nothing and they enable the audience to be in on it.

We want the audience to feel “in on it.” Soap Operas. Football. American Idol. Arrested Development. Audiences that invest in a medium’s format reap the most benefit. We know how it works but not what’s going to happen. Maybe we even know what’s going to happen, but we’re excited to see how.

I believe improvisation is at its best when it purports to engage the audience, not just through getting their suggestions, but by inviting them to “get” our mechanics.

Simply think about how your friends are the ones that laugh the loudest at you from among the audience. They know you, so you’ll always be funniest to them. Knowing what a person does for a living, where they live, and the other assorted details of one’s life may define friendship on Facebook, but when we really know someone we understand how they work. We want our characters and our scene mechanics be knowable.

Short-form improv games live off of audience engagement. Comedy Sportz requires significant audience stimulus certainly, but it also straight tells the audience what the mechanics will be in the scene so they can be “in on” the in-the-moment challenge to the performers. An audience member is brought to stage to talk about his day and then given a bell and a gavel to use when the improvisers reenacting his day do either something that rings true or something deemed
false. I like the laugh that comes the third time the audience participant clanks the gavel – it comes before the improvisers do anything about it. It comes because the audience is settled into how the game is going to be played.

They “get” it. Through understanding the game rules, an audience comes to react to the expectation of the joke.

We want to leverage the power of The Games in all improvisation that we do. We want to entice the audience to invest in what they’re watching. Tasked with building something out of nothing on stage, we want our group to unite behind a shared focus, enabling us to heighten together more effectively and efficiently.

It should be easy.

We are hardwired to respond to patterns. As babies that’s how we learned how to interact to the world: learning the power of action and the necessary reactions. Patterns help us understand. When we reach puberty we get in our heads about the “right” reaction to stimulus. We’re in our heads more. Our responses become tempered more by how what we encounter matches our preconceptions than by our natural tenancy to follow patterns.

That pattern recognition and response part of our brain never goes away; it just goes to the background. It’s why our ears notice when the song randomly playing on the radio matches your thought at that exact moment. It’s why your eyes seem to “only notice” your speedometer or digital clock when it displays your lucky number.

It’s why an audience can get greater joy out of a performance made before their very eyes than they can a scripted, edited and masterfully performed movie.

The audience will respond instinctively – almost unconsciously – to the patterns that shape our games. “Why was that so funny?” “Man, you had to be there,” because the game they played engaged my Pavlovian propensity toward patterns and the timing of lines struck an inner chord.

We improvisers will also participate Pavlovian-ly, reacting to rather than thinking through the evolving patterns our group develops on stage. You’ll get to where your group is responding to an infinitely spiraling pattern through instinct with your minds in-the-moment. You’ll get there with practice.

The most important tool in playing patterns is simply pattern recognition. Becoming good at pattern recognition requires that you devote yourself to analysis – breaking down the progression of moves, slowing down and really focusing outwardly on everything that’s happening verbally and physically. As a result of devoted analysis and concentrated thought, you will come to the point where you are seeing and responding to patterns seemingly without “conscious” thought.
Sooooooo...

We wield specificity in pursuit of The Details. We employ emotion in our leveraging of The Reactions. And we deploy pattern mechanics in developing The Games.

We focus on Details, Reactions and Games to capitalize on what makes improvisation unique among performance mediums. Leave it screenwriters to agonize over premise and character motivation. Let stand-up comics struggle for the perfectly worded joke.

Let’s do what improv does best.

NEXT: The Self-Contained Emotional Statement
1.1 – The Self Contained Emotional Statement

How do you start an improv scene? My answer was forged from the perspective of giants’ shoulders.

Mick Napier, of The Annoyance Theater, says we start with just one thing.

– Assume a posture.
– Grab an object.
– Start a motion.
– Engage your environment.
– Embody a character.
– Emote.

What do you do with that one thing? Expand, says Napier. Discover through “if this than what” extrapolation. Build that one thing out, or draw a line to another point of the scene.

The direction I believe you should expand to – the scene start structure most conducive to good improvisation – is the Self-Contained Emotional Statement.

It can be as simple as:

– I love it here.
– I hate the arts.
– I’m uncomfortable.

The Self-Contained Emotional Statement aligns you with an emotional perspective. It’s a solid foundation on which to build the possibilities.

It’s a statement. Not a question shifting the responsibility of providing information to your partner. There’s a period. It’s definitive.

It’s an emotional statement. Emotional reaction is one of our three key tools; let’s get to it. You need to feel and, for the reaction, you need to give that feeling a direction. Give X the power to make you feel Y.

Being self-contained, the statement places you on solid ground without dictating the scene to your partners. Mick Napier urges us each to “take care of yourself” without confining the scene. Allow your partner the choice of whether to mirror you in some fashion or to take on something entirely their own. Being self-contained is increasingly an imperative the larger a group you have on stage.
In the examples employed for following chapters devoted to larger group work, I will use the Self-Contained Emotional Statement in a fairly rigid construction. Of course on stage, the statement’s same content can be born out much more subtly. I can’t act out love in text; I have to write it.

On an improv stage, I think clarity, though, must take priority over subtlety. The world we build around us needs to be clear so others – performers and audience members – can play along.

So don’t skimp on The Details. Give your emotion specific direction.

– I love being a part of this office.
– I hate paper mache.
– All these gosh darn marsupials are making me uncomfortable.

Clarity is about specificity and brevity. If you keep your initiations short and succinct, you will enable your partners to establish a verbal pattern around your contribution.

I initiate with the Self-Contained Emotional Statement because it gives me a defined point in space on which I can stand solidly. And because from that one point, the scene has the flexibility to build in myriad directions.

For example...

Player 1 – I don’t like the way this painting is staring at me.
Player 2 – Oooh, our view is amazing.
P1 – I don’t think I’m going to be able pee all weekend with this fella looking at me from above the toilet.
P2 – I’m so glad we chose the mountain view over the city view.
P1 – He’s old and French and he’s got a mustache.
P2 – I just want to cut out this window and send it as a picture postcard.
P1 – Martha, we’re changing rooms!
P2 – Damnit, Gerald, just sit down to pee!

Player 1 – I don’t like the way this cereal box is judging me.
Player 2 – I don’t like the way this stamp condemns me with its eyes.
P1 – Are you saying I’ll never be immortalized in a portrait?
P2 – Are you saying I’ll die sooner as a result of your high sugar content?
P3 – Are you saying this bill payment will never arrive on time?
P1 – Stop staring and I’ll buy you.
P2 – Stop judging me and I’ll buy five more boxes.
P3 – Stop condemning me, and let me lick your back.
Player 1 – I don’t like the way this painting is staring at me.
Player 2 – I like his expression. It says, “ole.”
Player 3 – I don’t get it. How’d the guy not get gored before the painting was finished?
Player 4 – Daddy, I want a bull.
Player 5 – Exhibit’s closing in five minutes, folks.
P1 – I don’t like that mustache.
P2 – I like his mustache. It says, “I have horns of my own.”
P3 – Seriously. How do you get an angry bull to stand posing instead of goring that guy?
P4 – I’m going to take my bull and I’m going to trample Judith Lynn’s stupid face.
P5 – Um, folks. Did you hear me? I said, five minutes. Less now.
P1 – I don’t like that shit-eating grin.
P2 – I like his shit-eating grin. It says, “I eat shit.”
P3 – Well, I guess this guy, he had to stand still. But they must’ve gone through, like, forty painters.
P4 – She’ll be all, like, “Oh, no, I’m sorry I didn’t invite you to my slumber party.” And I’ll be all, “Too late.” Trampled.
P5 – Ignore me? Oh, hell no. This some bullshit. I got a bar mitzvah to get to.

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Three different types of scenes stem from one solid point – a Self-Contained Emotional Statement. From the self-contained statement, the scenes grow organically. A group builds something out of nothing, establishing themselves individually so as to move forward together.

It’s this collaborative construction that the audience came to see. Let’s use its magic to wow them.

AND FOR OUR FIRST TRICK: WALKING BACKWARDS!

Starting with one player’s Self-Contained Emotional Statement, our troupe can build two person, three person, four person, five person, any-number-of-persons scenes. We can play along the entire spectrum of scenes driven by emotional patterns and characters. We set the stage for sustainable scenes that are conducive to heightening through callback.

The Self-Contained Emotional Statement is a single point in space among infinite possibilities. With the addition of the second contribution to the scene, we have two points, and with two points we have a line. And with every consecutive point, we continue to define the trajectory of the scene.

As improvisers, we must get good at walking backwards with direction. In an improvised scene, we can’t know where we’re going; we can only keep track of where we’ve been. Make each step based on those preceding it. Only through studying the path we’ve laid down can we determine where we’re going.
And then we must get good at kayaking while facing upriver. While we choose our headings based on charting past coordinates, we also design to go with the scene’s flow. We have to make adjustments – not corrections – to get where we want to go. We have to keep flexible focus, fluidly embracing each new current as part of the new plan.

We learn improvisation as a troupe similarly to how any team learns its sport. The team runs rigid drills focused on navigating a particular aspect of the game, like getting the ball inbounds. The team practices exercises designed around successfully executing a discrete task, like ensuring an offensive player gets open to catch a pass. The team’s individuals collectively learn a book of plays so they can be flexible in-the-moment, reacting fluidly as a unit to changes in-the-moment.

Let’s fill our improvisational toolkit with rigid mechanics that we can bend and flex in developing organic scenes in-the-moment. From a self-contained emotional statement any type of scene is a possibility. If we study the variations, we can learn to confidently follow and manage the scene’s flow wherever it goes.

In this endeavor, we’ll start with large group scenes. The more people on stage, the more clarity each individual needs to bring, and so in group work the steps required to build a successful scene are most discrete.

How do we learn? It takes a village.

NEXT: Collaboration
1.2 – Collaboration

**YES, GOOD IMPROVISATION REQUIRES A GROUP. AND, WE AGREE.**

A great improvisational performance requires both a group and an audience.

It’s the collaborative building that makes improvisation exciting. The ability to riff is dependent on having something to riff off of. The definition of riffing demands that there be an “accompaniment” or “exchange.” Sure, a single improviser can riff off an audience like a stand-up comedian can. But rarely is there enough audience input to require that a performer relinquish control of the show. To my mind, performers who put up “one person improvised shows” are playing with themselves in front of a crowd – and the inappropriate connotation is intended.

Improv as improv does best requires a group. Two people. Three people. The over-flowing stage of a festival improv jam. You need people to play with. You need people to riff off of.

Creating something out of nothing with a group of people in front of a live audience is hard. There are more people on stage for the audience to watch and listen to. There are more opinions about what’s happening and what needs to happen. More things breed less focus.

The more people you’re playing with, the clearer you have to be. When initiating with the Self-Contained Emotional Statement, the individual serves the scene’s clarity by concentrating on specificity and brevity. When there’s more than the initiator on stage (and there should be), continuing to serve the scene’s clarity relies on Agreement.

**Agreement is a cornerstone of improvisation.** We’re on stage creating something out of nothing. If I create one thing out of the ether then we have something. We want to build that something up and out; we don’t debate the validity of something made up.

**Agreement is the improviser’s mantra: “Yes, And.”** We are, remember, walking backward, taking each step in the context of the path preceding and including the last step. It’s not Yes “cereal” And “aliens.” Agreement helps us build something out of nothing together. Yes, “This porridge is cold,” And “it’s been sitting on the counter for a week.”

**We can’t share one mind, but we can make it look like we do if we’re each making a concerted effort to unify all that’s been laid down in a collective direction.** Through agreement we can minimize the amount of “stuff” on stage which facilitates focused collaborative building.

As we build something out of nothing, our improvisational performance leverages what makes it unique among performance mediums when we as individuals come together collaboratively through one group mind.
GROUP MIND

Group Mind. I had one improvisation instructor who revered Group Mind as the power that allowed him to teach because he was taught directly by a person who was taught directly by a person who was taught directly by Del Close. Another instructor described Group Mind as a single brain that unites us all which we can access by grabbing a brain tendril and plugging it into our belly button.

Yes, a group is able to play together as a tighter unit if they’re working from the same playbook.

Yes, to be aligned with a group we have to plug ourselves into the group.

But “The Allusive Group Mind” is not a “History Channel Investigates…” episode. Group Mind is not a spiritual collective that possesses our bodies.

Group Mind is about immediate, enthusiastic acceptance. Group Mind requires an individual’s confidence that what is is right.

Group Mind is an individual choice.

You need to show your fellow players that you trust their ideas, and trust that you can make a bold move and have your group respect and love it. “I trust you – I’m going to follow your ideas whatever they are, wherever they go, and I’m going to launch into my ideas and trust that you’ll follow me.”

It is not up to the group to earn this trust. You must give the group your trust. You must surrender to the group.

Surrender yourself to the group. That’s neither being so supportive that you never voice an idea of your own, nor being so unabashedly “you” that you remain unaffected by your fellow players. It’s about sticking the balance between confidence and vulnerability.

Picture the quintessential Dead Head, or just watch the series finale of Freaks and Geeks. “I’m cool with who I am and with how you are.” “Right on, man; I’ll get behind that.” “Whatever, brother; it’s cool.” Play focused outward in acceptance from a secure center.

We don’t make forward progress by judging each step.

Accept whatever is.

You have to. The audience saw and/or heard it. From nothing, what is is now the something we have to build from.

Accept whatever is confidently.

The audience will only get in their heads to wonder “why” if you are in your head wondering “why.”
If everyone is doing it then no one looks dumb “doing it” – but the moment it becomes apparent that someone in the group is not committed then the audience doubts the entire endeavor.

Repetition is the only “why” you’ll need. Why did John do that? Because Jane did. Why did Jane do that? I don’t know, but it must be right because John did.

Accepting what has happened through repetition of what has happened will create all the “sense” we need in a scene. If you say “vulture” and I say “porridge,” our fellow players and the audience might be hard pressed to see the “Yes, And” connection between those two things, but now that those two words have been spoken in juxtaposition they have been connected. So if the next time you say “vulture,” I say “porridge” we set up a world where that connection is normal. And the next time anyone says “vulture,” the response better damn well be “porridge” because now that’s the “right” connection to make.

WALK BACKWARD WITH ME...

Player One takes the stage, mimes adjusting a ship’s wheel, and says, “I hate the sea.”

Player Two, not feeling secure individually, can’t accept Player One’s initiation. “Why do you hate the sea?” he asks. Now Player One is on the hook to defend an emotional perspective she just made up.

Maybe instead, Player Two accepts Player One’s initiation, but, in seeking to support the initiation with explanation, says, “Yes, and the crew is mounting a mutiny because they can’t sail under a captain that doesn’t love the sea.”

Maybe instead of trying to direct the scene, Player Two commits to leading the scene by following the scene. Maybe Player Two decides that to get everyone moving in a common direction, he needs to say, “Hey, guys, Player One’s contribution was awesome and we should all get behind her.”

If Player One takes the stage, mimes adjusting a ship’s wheel, and says, “I hate the sea.” And, Player Two takes the stage, mimes adjusting a ship’s wheel, and says, “I hate the sea.” And Player Three takes the stage, mimes adjusting a ship’s wheel, and says, “I hate the sea.”...

Then...

Then...we’re headed into improv as improv does best.

Audiences don’t want to see improvisers negotiating the reality they’ve made up on the spot; they think, “if you performers aren’t certain about what you’re doing, why should I be?”

Audiences might listen to your explanations for a while, but if all you have is exposition and you don’t sufficiently explain by the end, then the whole work is suspect (SEE: The Matrix versus Back To The Future).
But if two sea captains both hate the sea, well, the audience might entertain that they have a point. If three sea captains each hate the sea, well, the audience believes they have a reason and they are all ears. If ten sea captains all hate the sea, well, the audience just has to accept that, whatever the reason, ten sea captains can’t be wrong.

If ten players each take the stage, mime adjusting a ship’s wheel, and say, “I hate the sea.” Then a ten-player scene, through agreement and repetition, becomes a One Person Scene.

THE ONE PERSON SCENE

We minimize the amount of stuff on stage through agreement and regardless of the number of players on stage we establish a One Person Scene by uniting behind a single emotional perspective.

It’s an easy scene to establish – you just get out there and agree to the existing perspective. And it’s a fun scene to watch – united behind one emotional perspective, the group can quickly heighten in that collective direction together.

Improvisation doesn’t have to be any more complicated than that. And One Person Scenes are so damn satisfying for the audience.

Resist the impulse to be different for difference’s sake. A captain doesn’t need a first mate, a lookout, a cook and a cabin boy in order to solidify that he’s on a ship. Nine ship captains don’t need a player to embody the sea to facilitate an on-stage discussion. We don’t need to worry about how ten captains can each stand at their own ship’s wheel and share the same space.

Forget sense. Remember, repetition is the only “why” you need.

Everyone can share the same self-contained emotional statement. You don’t need to understand the motivation before you can participate in the emotion – just agree to the feeling. “I hate the sea.” “Yeah, the sea is the worst.” “Yeargh, stupid sea.”

If everyone gets on board, then the ship can take off and we can set about finding its direction together. Don’t stand on the docks demanding to know where the ship’s going before you get on.

Prioritize heightening the agreement and the group will find fun areas to explore together. Each contribution doesn’t need to be individually funny, it only needs to align with the common perspective. “I hate the sea’s rough waves.” “Ugh, I get so seasick.” “Yeargh, I have ruined so many shirt ruffles with vomit.” Agree, agree, agree.

Committed to agreement in a One Person Scene, we can collectively share any single player’s endowment. If a player says, “My father was killed by the sea,” a resultant discussion about the other players’ condolences could stagnate the scene. But if a player says, “My father
was killed by the sea,” and another player says, “My father was also killed by the sea,” and another player says, “My father was also killed by the sea,” then we’re ramping up our collective momentum with simple agreement.

If one player wants to punch the sea in the face, you can, too!

**Resist the impulse to be different for difference’s sake.** Yes, not every scene should be a One Person scene, but as I see far fewer One Person scenes than I do scenes dragged down by negotiating conflict or disparate scene elements, I know improvisers need to work to make their default setting “agreement” instead of “contrast.” Let the scene call for difference. Here’s my rule: **If you have to think about “how to be different” then the scene doesn't need you to be different.**

**Trust the power of Agreement and its ability to facilitate heightening through repetition.** Trust the collective direction’s ability to evolve through commitment.

The hate you feel toward the sea can heighten to a furious collective gnashing of teeth and shaking of fists. The Details that are subject to hatred have the opportunity to grow in breadth and depth.

**Commit.** Don’t play half-assed because you’re not confident the group direction will lead someplace. Don’t be in your head worried about the “right” thing to do next. **Commit to what’s happening.** Don’t judge “it;” do “it” more.

When the group does heighten its shared emotional perspective to its apex then you’ll know it’s time to alter direction. All we need is another emotional perspective the group can unify behind. We’ve blown out our hatred of the sea, so a player notes, “I do like the uniform though.” “Oh, yeah, being able to wear a captain’s hat is awesome.” “And I do love my parrot.”

**There’s no shortage of places we can go if we’re committed to moving together.** A stage packed with players can find focus by prioritizing Agreement. Regardless of the number of improvisers in play, by uniting behind a single emotional perspective we establish One Person Scenes. With a One Person Scene we find a collective focus early that we can collaboratively heighten through repetition.

One Person Scenes. Improvisation doesn’t have to be any more complicated and is rarely more satisfying.

**I AGREE. BUT HE DOESN’T.**

Establishing a One Person Scene requires that every individual commit to Agreement. A single player who refuses to align with the group makes a One Person Scene unachievable. So what hope do we have?

Group Mind is an individual choice. For an entire group to move in a single direction, each individual needs to be committed to prioritizing Agreement. **If no single player is**
concentrated on Agreement, then group cohesion is compromised. But if any one player is concentrated on Agreement, then the group’s trajectory is that much more focused.

Ten players each playing with their own perspective can be chaotic. If Player Ten chooses to agree with Player Nine, then at least we have a Nine Person Scene to navigate rather than a Ten Person Scene. If Players Four and Ten choose to agree with Player One, and Players Five and Nine choose to agree with Player Two, and Players Six, Seven and Eight choose to agree with Player Three, well now we have a Three Person Scene to navigate.

Group Mind is an individual choice. If even just YOU choose to foster Group Mind – through immediate, enthusiastic acceptance – the group will benefit.

Agree with another player’s emotional perspective to help focus what the scene is about. Mirror another player’s physical posturing to help unify the tableau. Repeat the progression of moves that has already occurred. Reduce the amount of “stuff” on stage by aligning your contribution with what’s already been established.

Every player in a group is necessarily “playing by their own rules,” making their own connections with individual inspiration. But with each additional player that commits to accepting and building from what the group has established, the group enjoys that much more focus.

If you’re ever lost in a scene, return to what was done before. The group will be grateful you helped reorient it back on a familiar path. If you’re lost, chances are the rest of the group is, too. Don’t wait for someone else to clarify what’s going on; take responsibility yourself.

Lead by following. To get everyone moving in a common direction you have to focus on where the group has been. Respect your fellow players’ moves by accepting them, agreeing with them, heightening them and building from them. Work to make your partners’ moves look good. And to follow the group, you must be aware of what the group’s doing. You can’t engage the group from inside your head. You must be focused outward; pay attention. Focus outwardly on all that is happening both verbally and physically. Try as you might, you won’t catch everything, but if you don’t try you will catch nothing.

Even the smallest move is still a part of the scene in play and if recognized could enhance the scene through repetition and heightening. Integrate even those moves your teammates make unintentionally, as they often result in the most fun for players and audience members.

Work to notice not only what is happening, but also how what happens relates to what happened before. And pay attention to what happens after. Even if there is no inherent connection between moves, by working to repeat that sequence we begin to establish patterns and clarify group direction.
By committing to focusing outward and following the group, we will look to an audience like we have ESP and create that unique improvisational magic.

We get on stage to improvise with a group. With each individual playing for the group, we play as a team.

NEXT: Game Time
1.3 – Game Mechanics

OFFER, SET, CEMENT: THAT’S GAME!

Some definitions:

**Pattern** – a sequence that can be repeated / a structure that can be reused

**Game** – a sequence of actions, related by rules of cause-and-effect, that heightens with repetition


But in aspiring to elevate pattern work into game play, we focus on two aspects. One, **we want a relationship between the nodes of the sequence**. And, two, **we want a progression of subsequent relationships that heightens the sequence in a concentrated direction**.

The improviser’s “Yes, And” motto implies a relationship between what is agreed to and what is added. *Yes*, I’m afraid of the dark, *and* I’m a big wuss. Tight games are developed by making each contribution in the context of everything that came before it. As we consistently “Yes, And” to the whole of what’s been laid down before us, we aim to heighten in one direction.

The “rules” of a game define how the parts of a sequence relate – “C” follows “B” as “B” follows “A.” Clear rules enable everyone – the audience included – to play the game. With clear rules, improvisers no longer have to contrive a response, they are compelled to respond – it’s that “Ooh, ooh, I got this” moment. With clear rules, the audience is engaged in the scene, proud for having “gotten it.” The clearer the rules are defined, the faster and easier the game can be heightened, can be evolved, can be played boldly and confidently.

**Think of patterns as being defined by three moves.**

– The first move is the Offer. Anything is an offer. In the nothing of space, we have improvised one something. Anything.
– The second move is the Set move. Of the myriad directions available after the Offer, the Set move begins to define a single trajectory.
– The third move is the Cement move, clarifying the pattern in a direction that can be repeated and heightened.

In our One Person Scenes, the Set move is Player Two’s choice to agree with Player One’s initiation – mirroring the perspective, the self-contained emotional statement, the posture, the anything of the Offer. When Player Three also agrees with the other players – and all three are captains at ships’ wheels who hate the sea – it is cemented for the rest of the group that they’re playing a One Person Scene.
The Offer is anything. The Set move seeks to establish a relationship with the Offer move. The Cement move seeks to heighten the relationship between the Set and Offer moves through its own relationship with the Set move. The progression of Offer, Set and Cement moves define the rules to the relationship between nodes in the sequence. *Walk* backward with me using Word Associations...

From the Offer of “Orange,” there are many different paths to take, but the Set move seeks to orient the group onto one of them.

- Example One – “Orange,” “Red”
- Example Two – “Orange,” “Lemon”
- Example Three – “Orange,” “Blew”

Thanks to the Set move we start to see that the first example is following Colors, the second is following Fruits and the third, Homophones. But we don’t want our Cement move to just be any Color, Fruit or Homophone; **we want to establish a heightening progression.** With a Cement move we want to confirm more than just the category **we want a clarified direction for subsequent contributions.**

- Example One – “Orange,” “Red,” “Violet”
- Example Two – “Orange,” “Lemon,” “Kumquat”
- Example Three – “Orange,” “Blew,” “Read”

So now thanks to the Cement move we know we’re not just contributing Colors but Darkening Colors. We’re not just adding on Fruits but Sequentially Smaller Citrus Fruits. Not just Homophones but Color-Centric Homophones.

When the progression’s path is clear, everyone can come out and play...

- “Orange,” “Red,” “Violet,” “Purple,” “Grey,” “Black”
- “House,” “Neighborhood,” “County,” “State,” “Country,” “Continent,” “Planet,” “Galaxy”...
What if the direction is clear but the path seems to have reached a dead end? What if – using Example 2 above – no one knows another citrus fruit smaller than a kumquat? You can always reset the sequence, heightening the Offer, Set, Cement progression with another Set sequence.

“Orange,” “Lemon,” “Kumquat,” “Orangutan,” “Gibbon,” “Tamarin,” “Orange County,” “Onsville,” “KumTam Square”...

Or


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFFER Pass</th>
<th>SET Move</th>
<th>CEMENT Move</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Lemon</td>
<td>Kumquat</td>
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<tr>
<td>SET Pass</td>
<td>Tan-ger-ine</td>
<td>Hon-ey-dew</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can-ta-loupe</td>
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<td>CEMENT Pass</td>
<td>Wa-ter-me-lon</td>
<td>Pom-e-gran-ate</td>
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<td>Lo-gan-ber-ry</td>
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Patterns on Patterns on Patterns

Resetting the sequence is always an option. If you’re ever lost, go back to what you did before, building layers of patterns, heightening with each subsequent sequence. Resetting can be especially helpful if the initiating sequence does not establish a clear direction. Take this example: “Orange,” “Purple,” “Green.” There is no clear relationship between contributions. But if we attempt to reset the sequence, we can help clarify a progression.

“Orange,” “Purple,” “Green,” “Tangerine,” “Plum,” “Olive,” “Mango Tango,” “Mountain Majesty,” “McMinty,”...

Redefining which move is which can also prove useful. We establish rules by making each next move on the basis of everything that came before it. And – walking backward – we define our rules in retrospect. Defined in retrospect, each “move” needn’t be “one line” or “one player’s contribution.”

For example, Player One says, “Orange,” and Player Two says, “Peel.” When Player Three says, “Melon,” he is signaling to his troupe that – in retrospect – “Orange” and “Peel” together constitute the Offer move. And this should lead Player Four to say, “Rind.” So...

OFFER Orange + Peel
SET Melon + Rind
CEMENT Apple + Skin
The clearer a pattern is, the easier it will be for a group to heighten it through repetition.


But, and this is IMPORTANT, capital-letters-IMPORTANT, whatever happens...

**There are no mistakes in patterns on stage.** There is no “right.” There is only “what has happened” and “what’s happening now.” We work to make our partners look good. We accept everything that happens and work to integrate it. The group fails when we fail to integrate each individual contribution into the whole. Everything that happens becomes part of the pattern. “A” then “B” then “Y” is not a mistake. The next part of the pattern is “C” then “D” then “Z.” Don’t judge. Accept. Remember, **every player in a group is necessarily playing by their own rules, making their own connections with individual inspiration.** But if every additional player is committed to accepting and building from what the group has established, then the group increasingly focuses behind a collective direction.

**Group Mind is an individual choice.** Choose to help focus the group with an individual commitment to facilitating patterns. Even if you’re alone in this pursuit, the group will enjoy that much more focus.

Each individual is 100% responsible for the success of the group and **we lead by following.** If something is not clear, don’t ignore it or play it half-assed, make it clearer – by heightening it or otherwise emphasizing the move.

**Prioritizing clarity and brevity in establishing rules will enable more people to participate on stage (and off).** And the clearer a pattern the faster and better it can be heightened and expanded.

There is a fractal nature to evolution of patterns and there are often many interrelated patterns at play in an improvised game. These fractals can build so dense as to be suffocating, but with analysis and practice one is able to recognize and play to them. **The more relationships between moves one recognizes, the more opportunity exists for heightening.**

Here are some more contrived examples of Word Associations. What patterns/progressions/relationships do you see?

**Example One** – “Orange,” “Apple,” “Kiwi,” “Color,” “Company,” “Countryman,” “Carrot Top,” “Steve Jobs,” “Flight of the Conchords,” “I’m ugly but rich,” “I’m nerdy but popular,” “I’m a fruit but I get lots of women.”


I like Word Associations. I find them a helpful exercise in flexing mental pattern muscles.
What else helps an improviser learn how to recognize and build game mechanics? By playing games – card games, board games, dice games (and – to lesser extent – video games). I love the game “Set” by Enterprises, Inc, that has players identifying patterns between cards. Cultivation of pattern recognition skills takes practice. Focus outwardly and open up your lizard brain to the patterns surrounding you in daily life. Slow down and notice the speedometer.

Get nerdy over patterns. Concentrated analysis builds rote memory. Learning takes work, but the goal of dedicated practice is being able to play reflexively in-the-moment on stage.

Establishing and identifying the Offer, Set and Cement moves that define a game’s pattern will help you with exercises spanning from Word Associations to Kick the Duck, Red Rover. The ability to track the relationships between pattern moves facilitates strong games in all our scenes, from the most structured to the most organic. Whether we’re on stage with one other player or twenty, our personal attention to pattern mechanics helps focus scenes and enhance their sustainability.

Learn rigidly to play free.

GAME ON! AND, SCENE.

We’re improvisers; we’re leaving plot and exposition to writers. We focus on what makes our art unique among performance mediums. With detailed, emotional reactions we establish patterns that allow us to play games collaboratively and engage a participating audience.

We want to establish and heighten games in all our scenes.

In any given scene there can be many games at play. I find it helpful to distinguish between Personal Games and Scenic Games.

**Personal Game** – how you react to who you are, where you are or what you’re doing
* I love cake; when I eat a piece I’m overcome with joy and I sigh involuntarily

**Scenic Game** – how you react to who your scene partner is, what your scene partner is doing or how your scene partner is acting
* Greg is my hero; when he criticizes me I’m destroyed and flagellate myself
* We are scared of ghosts; when we hear a noise we freak and run around

The games represent a pattern of behavior established through evolving rules. While all scenes feature these games, when we extenuate the game’s pattern we often categorize the result as a Game scene.

When is it most important to play clearly and tightly? **The more people on stage the clearer we have to be, the tighter we should attempt to be with our rules, and the closer we must stick to the pattern.** In a Group Game scene, we establish focus behind patterns that unite all players.
The more people on stage, the greater the emphasis becomes on the scenic game. Or rather, the greater number of Persons on stage, the more emphasis falls on the unifying scenic game.

In our One Person Scenes, we all share a personal game, collectively heightening one – ideally emotional – perspective.

In Two Person Scenes – be they one-on-one, five-on-one, three-on-three, etc. – we have to balance the personal and the scenic games.

If we have nine distinct perspectives on stage, any single personal game is significantly less important than the scenic game that links them.

We track the relationship between personal and scenic games the same way we track the pattern of any single game, by identifying and establishing Offer, Set and Cement moves.

From one self-contained emotional statement, infinite scenes could sprout. But, similar to chess, while the possibilities are endless as to how a game might play out, history has highlighted particular trends in the progression of moves.

For focus sake, I find it easiest to learn to track pattern moves as they relate to three rubric Group Games: To The Ether, Help Desk and Hey Everybody games.

NEXT: To The Ether
1.4 – To The Ether Games

HEIGHTENING A PROGRESSION OF INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

I like Frisbee.
I like hacky sack.
I like hitting this one stick I wrapped in ribbons with these other two sticks I wrapped in different ribbons.
I like the Grateful Dead.
I like acoustic guitar around a beach bonfire.
I like blowing into this diggerydoo I crafted in the company of native Aborigines during the Australian leg of my Peace Corp stint.
I like tie dye.
I like white-girl dreadlocks.
I like the hemp clothing, ropes and cleansing products I handmake and sell in open air markets and on commune tours with all profits going to Amnesty United.
Man, I just like being stoned.

In a To The Ether game, the progression of personal games establishes the pattern, and the scenic game is heightened in that pattern’s evolving repetition.

For focus sake, the pattern is emphasized over any need to contextualize or justify where the players are or who they are to one another. Players can literally deliver their lines into empty spaces without expectation of a conversational response. Thus, “To The Ether” games.

While to explain the progression of the To The Ether game mechanic I will lean on text, the To The Ether game is not a purely verbal exercise. Characters help. Emotion’s a must. A game that progresses from, “Ooh, my stomach,” to “Ooooh, my stooomach,” to “Ooooooooooooh, my stooooooooooomach” with each player heightening their character’s physical and emotional agony is most certainly of the To The Ether ilk. Furthermore, players should interact with and inhabit physical space; it’s just that this style of game does free players from having to exist in the same physical space.

While seemingly the most elementary of the three rubrics, To The Ether scenes are most illustrative of pattern variations due to its comparative propensity toward mutation. Practice with To The Ether games will enable your group to seamlessly flex with the pattern’s progression.

How do we play?

Like all our games it’s best facilitated with a self-contained emotional statement and built through Offer, Set and Cement moves that establish the rules of its pattern and enable it to be repeated and heightened.
In the opening example, the game is built like a One Person Scene.

Offer – I like Frisbee.

Remember, the Offer is anything. A self-contained emotional statement, though, is certainly conducive to To The Ether, as being self-contained the opening line does not dictate a dialogue.

Witnessing Player One’s Offer move, Player Two, in attempting the Set move, need only to make their contribution related to the Offer move.

In facilitating the option for a One Person Scene, Player Two need only agree with the Offer – “I like Frisbee” would suffice. Remember: It’s that easy. What’s important is that Player Two – whoever he or she is - gets out there and supports Player One. And the quickest route to support is agreement.

There is, in fact, danger in straying too far from the Offer. To facilitate group participation, we want this group game to have a direction to build in quickly. Set the direction with clarity.

Just change one thing. And heighten everything you don’t change.

Heighten Player One’s delivery while substituting a different noun. Change character and express an identical sentiment. You can never go wrong choosing to heighten the established emotion.

From the Offer stem infinite possible moves. Player Two’s job is to get out there and choose one.

Offer – I like Frisbee.
Set – I like Kleenex.

Now what?

Player Three’s job, in attempting the Cement move, is first to make a decision about how the Set move is related to the Offer move. The Cement move seeks to heighten the relationship between the Set and Offer moves through its own relationship with the Set move, clarifying the direction of the pattern so that it can be repeated and heightened.

If A, then B, then what? “C” – for Cement – should attempt to relate to B as B relates to A.

Offer – I like Frisbee.
Set – I like Kleenex.

What the Set move keeps the same from the Offer move, the Cement move should also keep. Player Three should now feel obligated to stick the “I like” phrasing for the sake of the tight pattern, in addition to heightening the actual “like.”

And what changes from the Offer move to the Set move should change again in the same direction.
Frisbee and Kleenex are both brand names that get bandied about in reference to the generics. So Player Three’s Cement move is “I like Coke.” That’s a pretty straight line from Offer through Set to Cement. Player Four has no excuse not to get out there. “I like Xerox.” “I like Jello.” “I like Band-Aid.”

Player Three has cemented a run of Categories. “I like [brand name that gets bandied about in reference to the generic brands].” The beauty of a Categories run is that everyone can come out and support. The game is clear and all can play along. **When everyone’s committed to playing we’ll crescendo collaboratively**, as opposed to when we’re in our heads, working hard and begging for the close of business bell. **Trust the pattern – it will always find you an exit faster than if you abandon it.**

**Run out of options with which to fill in the blank? Call out what it is you’re doing** – “I love genericide.”

**If the run is laid clear, it may be appropriate to throw the game on its head.** “I like RC Cola,” coupled with resultant disgusted reactions from all prior players would provide a good exit, **BUT ONLY if the run has been played out.** Throwing a pattern on it head too early is a dangerous game. If you don’t find your edit, you have to reinvest pretty heavily.

**A Categories run** of a To The Ether game is a fine thing. It’s clear and everyone can play, and that buys us time to find an exit line.

**The relationship between the respective “Frisbee,” “Kleenex,” and “Coke,” Offer, Set, and Cement moves defines the Categories run,...**

But...

It is a Categories run because the relationship between **the moves is not dependent on a progression.**

Example One – Frisbee, Kleenex, Coke
Example Two – Kleenex, Frisbee, Coke
Example Three – Coke, Frisbee, Kleenex

**The order of the contributions isn’t definitively important. As a result, the contributions don’t necessarily build in a cohesive direction.**

So while – as explained – a Categories run is certainly manageable, the Cement move makes a pattern most conducive to subsequent heightening if it seeks to establish a progression. **The Cement move seeks to heighten the relationship between the Set and the Offer move.**

Even in the categorical format of “I like Frisbee,” “I like Kleenex,” and “I like Coke,” if subsequent players heighten “I like” with intensified emotion, “I like Playboy” could call the edit to a scene with the (im)proper physicalization of desire. Player Three could also seek to cement a progression by delivering her “I like Coke” line in a clear robotic voice; subsequent exaggeration of a robot’s delivery presents a collective direction for heightening.
The clearer the pattern’s progression the more conducive the pattern will be to heightening.

WALK BACKWARD WITH ME...

Offer – I like Frisbee.
Set – I like varsity sports.

Player Three is paying attention. To him, Frisbee is a frivolous game young people play. In relation, Varsity sports infer a comparatively more serious activity played by comparatively older participants. So...

Cement – I like corporate golf outings.

With the Cement move, the progression is clear to Player Four who adds, “I like family board game night.” Player Five heightens with, “I like senior night at the bingo hall.” And Player Six leverages the progression saying, “I like when we angels play paintball.”

The pattern’s progression leads the group to a collaborative culmination.

WALK BACKWARD WITH ME DOWN A NEW ROAD...

Offer – I like Frisbee.
Set – I like batting a ball of yarn around.

How might you cement this pattern? How do you see the Set move relating to the Offer move?

Together, the Offer and Set moves infer “things that pets do.” So a Cement move could be, “I like playing fetch.” It could be. But remember when attempting the Cement move to focus on servicing a progression.

Frisbee is an activity for dogs. Batting a ball of yarn around is an activity for cats. What is the relationship from dogs to cats and how can that progression be clarified in a Cement move?

Cement – I like running in a wheel.

From dog to cat to hamster, the track follows progressively smaller animals.

I like Frisbee.
I like batting a ball of yarn around.
I like running in a wheel.
I like perching on a pointer finger.
I like swimming through plastic castles.
I like performing in table-top circuses.
I like avoiding nit combs.
I like swimming across eyeballs.
and...
(in either the progressively heightened tiny voice or in a new monstrous voice)
I like living in your mouth.

But what if – no matter how clarifying the progression of pattern moves is – a Player Four does not come out on stage and support it?

**WALK BACKWARD WITH ME AROUND THIS CONIC SPIRAL...**

With their Offer, Set and Cement moves, Players One, Two and Three have established a pattern and defined their individual places in it. If no one else comes out to support them, they need only **re-Set** the pattern they’ve created and heighten the pattern through repetition themselves.

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like batting a ball of yarn around.
Player Three – I like running in a wheel.

We have a dog, a cat and a hamster but no bird courtesy of Player Four. We need to **reset** the pattern.

The pattern started with Player One; **Player One’s job is to reset the pattern when necessary.** Recognizing when it’s necessary to reset a pattern is a matter of patience, timing and practice. When there’s no sound of supportive feet running in from the wings, it becomes necessary to reset the pattern.

**And when it’s necessary, the act of resetting a pattern is more important than the content.** We’re defining a second pattern pass, which begins with an Offer, and the Offer is anything. When met with the question of whether to speak again or speak again “correctly” it is most important that Player One choose to speak again, signaling to Players Two and Three that the pattern is being repeated.

That said, for focus sake, **Player One serves the pattern at play to this point in the To The Ether game by employing this second contribution in heightening his Personal Game.** In this way, Player One’s second offer to the scenic game sets the direction of each subsequent player’s personal game.

What is Player One personally about? He’s about Frisbees. All he has to do is reengage the pattern with a line heightening his preference for Frisbees. “Nothing flies like a Frisbee.”

This signals to Player Two to heighten her preference for her personal game in a similar fashion. “Nothing bats like a ball of yarn,” is good enough.

Now Player Three takes his role in the pattern, heightening his personal game in a similar fashion. “Nothing runs like a wheel.” Easy.

**With a second pass complete, the pattern is set.**
Back to Player One. He needs to re-restart the pattern. Now he’s had some time to think, and **what he should of been thinking about is how he can using heightening his own personal game to best set up Player Three to heighten his personal game.** How about...

I’ve tried other flying discs but they didn’t grab me.
I’ve battered other things, but I couldn’t get caught up in them.
I’ve tried running outside the wheel but it never got me anywhere.

**In a To The Ether game, the progression of personal games establishes the pattern, and the scenic game is heightened in that pattern’s evolving repetition.** If the pattern hits a wall progressing in one direction it can be restarted and heightened in layers. In repeating the pattern, the repeating players heighten their personal games through the pattern that unites them scenically.

For another example, let’s revisit the example that introduced the To The Ether game, this time with the players’ roles defined –

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like hacky sack.
Player Three – I like hitting this one stick I wrapped in ribbons with these other two sticks I wrapped in different ribbons.
Player One – I like the Grateful Dead.
Player Two – I like acoustic guitar around a beach bonfire.
Player Three – I like blowing into this diggerydoo I crafted in the company of native Aborigines during the Australian leg of my Peace Corp stint.
Player One – I like tie dye.
Player Two – I like white-girl dreadlocks.
Player Three – I like the hemp clothing, ropes and cleansing products I handmake and sell in open air markets and on commune tours with all profits going to Amnesty United.

With Player Three’s first contribution it’s abundantly clear that the scenic pattern of personal games is heightening “things hippies like.” But maybe a Player Four is kept from supporting the scene by Player Three’s verboseesness. Hopefully Player One recognizes without too much dead air that the pattern has hit a wall and needs to be reset.

**Each subsequent player’s contribution heightens the scenic game of “things hippies like.”** But each player’s contribution is also pushed **through the filter of their personal games.**

Player One participates in the pattern through a filter of hippy-endorsed branding.
Player Two focuses on specific hippy attributes that make hippies look like douchebags.
Player Three heightens through the increasingly verbose rants of a pompous hippy.
These improvisers can play these games forever. But they won't need to. **An edit will probably come naturally as the audience’s lizard brains react to the third move of the third pattern pass of the game.** Or Player Four realizes that the hippies on stage are too energetic and that that fact runs contrary to our concept of hippies who, man, just like being stoned.

But, man, once a pattern is cemented, it can go on forever. **Trust the pattern – it will always find you an exit faster than if you abandon it.**

Continuing our To The Ether lesson, this game mechanic has another common mutation to learn from.

**WALK BACKWARD WITH ME BETWEEN POLES...**

Offer – I like Frisbee.
Set – I like work.

Okay. What do we got here?

**What’s the progression from “Frisbee” to “work” with a mind’s eye toward what lies on the far side of the resultant line?**

*Frisbee is to work as work is to...?*

If Player Three is paralyzed on the wings, Player One could of course choose to reinvest in the established pattern through heightening his personal game.

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like work.
Player One – I toss it out with a flick of the wrist and I catch it gracefully.
Player Two – In one movement, I drop it in my Outbox and pick it up from my Inbox.
Player One (mimes missing a catch, following it with his eyes) – Little help?
Player Two (mimes pulling a memo out of the Inbox and, clearly confused by its content, scans the office) – Little help?

Buuuuuut, Player One is now great at restarting. Let’s put it on Player Three.

A Player Three could attempt a **Categories run**, but “things you do” is a pretty broad category which might prove hard to facilitate through a tight pattern. “Frisbee” and “work” are more opposing than they are aligned and so it’s difficult to determine a third object/activity that is like the originating moves.

A Player Three could settle into the gap between the opposing moves. And in this particular example, that might work.

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like work.
Player Three – I work for the weekends.
Player One – I want to have fun.
Player Two – I want to be productive.
Player Three – I’m productive during the week so my time is free for fun.
Player One – I’m going to blow up your banks.
Player Two – I’m going to cancel your Welfare check.
Player Three – I’m going to vote for Obama. No, I’m going to vote for Romney. No, I’m going to take the kids to Disney World.

BUT most times settling into the gap between the opposing moves can be dangerous...because it can be boring.

I’m hot.
I’m cold.
I’m lukewarm.

If you're Harry Shearer and you're in a movie you can edit before it reaches an audience, you can assume the role of lukewarm water. More often than not, playing the middle between two poles ensures that you’re the least fun person on stage. **We want to lead by following, not by negotiating.**

So **how do we handle poles?**

Remember this?

OFFER: Orange + Peel
SET: Melon + Rind
CEMENT: Apple + Skin

Remember that **our pattern rules are defined in retrospect.** If Player Two’s move does not sufficiently set the pattern, then Player Three can make it part of the Offer move.

**Met with two poles, Player Three seeks to set another two poles by focusing on heightening Player One’s Offer.**

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like work.
Player Three – I like video games.

Player Three has heightened Player One’s personal game – “recreational activity” – and she did it in the context of the initial relationship – “frivolous activity.” She is signaling to Player Four to decide the answer to “as Frisbee is to work so are video games to...”

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like work.
Player Three – I like video games.
Player Four – I like balancing the books.
So if Player One’s contribution plus Player Two’s contribution constitutes the Offer move, and Player Three’s contribution together with Player Four’s contribution defines the Set move, then...

Player One – I like Frisbee.
Player Two – I like work.
Player Three – I like video games.
Player Four – I like balancing the books.
Player Five – I like presiding as Dungeon Master over my role-playing cronies.
Player Six – I like being Chairman of the Board.

Talk about a game that could go on forever.

Player Seven – I like playing with Monopoly money.
Player Eight – I like leveraged buyouts.

When a Player Three hears “poles,” her Pavlovian improvisational instinct should be to recreate those poles’ pattern in a heightened context.

Player One – I’m hot.
Player Two – I’m cold.
Player Three – I’m suffocating.
Player Four – I want to snuggle.
Player Five – I want a divorce.
Player Six – I want to be dead in your coffin.

And what if these Offer, Set and Cement pairings do not evoke a scene edit or the joining of another supportive pair?

Then Player One has to restart. Luckily he’s practiced enough that he’s playing on instinct.

Player One – I’m hot.
Player Two – I’m cold.
Player Three – I’m black.
Player Four – I’m white.
Player Five – I’m young.
Player Six – I’m old.
Player One – Stop it with the thermostat; I’m burning up.
Player Two – You stop it with the thermostat; I’m freezing.
Player Three – Stop it with the racial oppression; I’m burning up.
Player Four – You stop it with the reparations; I’m freezing up.
Player Five – Stop it with your conservatism; I’m burning up.
Player Six – You stop it with your liberalism; I’m freezing up.
Player One – Wear a sweater!
Player Two – Take off a layer!
Player Three – Have a heart!
Player Four – Lift yourself up!
Player Five – Die already!
Player Six – Over my dead body!

Obviously in this To The Ether game, **character and emotion are important components.** **Attention to stage picture**, too, would heighten the scenic game in this example – staggered groups of two would serve to emphasize the poles more than a line of six players could.

The ability to navigate poles is just one of the skills cultivated through repeated practice of To The Ether games with the end goal of enabling rote memory to serve us as improvisational actors collaboratively building something out of nothing before a live audience. While a seemingly simple mechanic, the resulting progressions can take many forms.

**“To The Ether” Variations**

1. Standard

![Diagram of standard setup](image)

2. Resetting

![Diagram showing resetting](image)

3. Poles

![Diagram showing poles](image)

4. One Person Scene

![Diagram showing one person scene](image)

The ability to navigate **poles** in a To The Ether scene is a solid prerequisite for an improviser’s mastery of the second rubric Group Game scene...

**NEXT:** [Help Desk Games](#)
1.5 – Help Desk Games

HEIGHTENING A PROGRESSION OF INTERACTIONS

Two players meet in the middle of the stage and focus on figuring out the scene together.

I want to return this vacuum.
What’s wrong with it?

Or...

I want to see a manager.
Ma’am, he’s on a break.

Or...

I bought this and it won’t work.
I’m going to need to see a receipt.

Or...

That’ll be five ninety-nine.
Okay, I have ten eighty-eight.

I don’t want to see improvisers question, oppose, negotiate with or engage in transactions with each other. Even written, honed, acted and edited these scenes can prove tedious. But we can salvage these boring scenes with our good friend, the pattern.

The Help Desk dynamic is named in reference to those scenes defined by one player needing assistance and the other player responding to the request. Improvisers are taught to avoid “transaction” scenes because they are often stagnation by players negotiating – instead of declaring and heightening – their reality. Inquisition, opposition, negotiation and transaction are counterproductive on stage to our doing what the audience came to see: improvisers exploring an invented reality. The Help Desk dynamic may start with a self-contained emotional statement but rather than heightening the progression of moves, it persists in waffling over the same material.

These scenes bore us all. But utilizing patterns, we can leverage the Help Desk dynamic for collaborative exploration and satisfying laughs. Remember, we’re on stage to make each other look good. We lead by following. We don’t sweep a bad scene under the rug, we commit to it.

In a Help Desk Game, the progression of the scenic games establishes the pattern, and that pattern’s evolving repetition serves to heighten a personal game.
Here’s how...

Player One – Welcome to J. Bish’s Fishes. How can I hook you?
Player Two – Um, well, uh...
Player One – You want a carp? A trout? A marlin?
Player Two – I want ah...
Player One – We got a red snapper that’ll knock your socks off.
Player Two – Uh, give me one of those that does like this (makes his open hand move like a fish)
Player One – Oh, you want some salmon.
Player Two – Yep.
Player One – Okay, here you go.
Player Two – Um, thanks. Okay. Bye?

Not a great scene. Player One is a steamroller who thinks he’s hilarious. Player Two is overwhelmed and has trouble committing. It’s stuck in an unemotional premise. And everyone wants it to be over.

But Player Three can make it look good by initiating a Set move for a Help Desk game.

He enters the stage and either...

Intercepts Player Two’s exit through eye contact and says, “Welcome to F. Hitchen’s Chickens. How do you like to be clucked?”

Or...

Enters stage as Player Two leaves, engaging Player One through eye contact and saying, “Um, hi,” in an awkwardness that heightens Player Two’s demeanor.

By clearly assuming a role from the Offer dialogue, Player Three signals to the group that the pattern is going to be repeated and indicates the direction for heightening.

Player One or Two might be surprised but they should know their role. All they have to do is what they just did.

The Set dialogue proceeds with both players seeking to recreate and heighten the Offer dialogue.

Players on the wings should really be paying attention now. They need to track the progression of the Set dialogue so as to be able to participate in the Cement move. They need to pay special attention to what changes between Offer and Set dialogues and what stays the same.

Player Three – Um, hi.
Player One – Welcome to J. Bish’s Fishes. How can I hook you?
Player Three – Um, well, I uh, gosh, um...
Player One – You want a carp? A trout? A marlin?
Player Three – I want ah...
Player One – We got swordfish steaks that’ll impale you.
Player Three – Uh, give me one of those that does like this (shakes his arms indicating an octopus)
Player One – Oh, you want some giant squid.
Player Three – Sure do.
Player One – Okay, here you go.
Player Three – Ummmmm, thaaaaaaanks. Ohhhh, kay. (backs slowly toward the door.)
Bye. (runs off stage)

It’s time for Player Four. She wants to keep everything the same that stayed the same between Offer and Set dialogues so as to further heighten through repetition. She wants to continue the progression indicated by what changed between Offer and Set dialogues so as to cement the direction of heightening.

Player Four – Um, hi.
Player One – Welcome to J. Bish’s Fishes. How can I hook you?
Player Four – Um, I, well, I uh, well, um...
Player One – You want a carp? A trout? A marlin?
Player Four – I want ah...
Player One – We got crabs that will...give you crabs.
Player Four – Uh, give me one of those that does like this (bends over and wiggles her whole body with her arms against her sides)
Player One – Oh, you want some sperm whale.
Player Four – That’s exactly right.
Player One – Okay, here you go.
Player Four – Ummmmm, thaaaaaaanks. Ohhhh, kaaaaay. (backs slowly toward the door.) Bye! (bolts off stage)
Player One – Oh, shit. No body paid.

From Offer to Set to Cement, what stayed the same stayed the same and what changed was progressively heightened. Players Four builds on Player Three’s heightening of Player Two’s awkwardly furtive character. Player One heightens his dialogue with both simple repetition and progressive references.

Clearly, being written-out this Help Desk example is easy to keep confined to the pattern of dialogue. But clarity and rigid repetition are as beneficial here as in the To The Ether games.

The clearer the pattern, the easier it will be to heighten. And the audience loves seeing the pattern develop. When the audience “gets” the game, players get laughs for simply sticking the pattern – the third iteration of “marlin” can get a better reaction than any joke.

Don’t rush the pacing. Lines that came out naturally the first time can be hurried once they’re known. The cadence of the dialogue is part of the pattern. Stick the dialogue’s natural rhythm – it’s part of the pattern and you’ll be rewarded in laughs if you try to match your fellow players’ delivery as well as their words.
Don’t skimp on the emotion. Player Two was simply overwhelmed during the Offer dialogue, but Player Three and Four heighten the emotion of being overwhelmed characters. Emotions connect players and audience, and heightened emotions will ensure an earned edit even should all else fail.

Don’t ignore what you perceive as “bad” moves. Make them look good through repetition. By employing the mechanics of a Help Desk game, you can make a boring scene exciting, you can make a unfunny move hilarious, you can make an uninspired character the star of the show.

Trust the pattern. The player initiating the Set move is most important to the mechanics of a Help Desk game, but s/he is also the least rewarded. The second iteration of any pattern is rarely as funny as the first or third. If the Offer dialogue was especially awkward, the audience might regard a player attempting to recreate it warily. But that third player wins the audience because of his/her commitment to the pattern. Most importantly, the Set move allows for the Cement move. And that fourth player should feel very lucky to have all the ducks lined up. If Player Four abandons the pattern because Player Three didn’t get huge laughs in the initial repetition, then he’s an idiot; if he’d also trusted the pattern he would have looked brilliant to the audience and have been drowned in laughter.

But Help Desk game mechanics aren’t only valuable in turning turds into gold; repetition of a scenic pattern can also turn gold into plutonium.

NEXT: More from our friend the Help Desk game
1.6 – More Help Desk Games

HELP DESK HELP YOU

Through the progression of a Help Desk game’s dialogues, we heighten the participants’ personal games.

Two players swapping opinions on a piece of art can be a pretty funny scene. But, with Help Desk game mechanics, we can heighten personal games to make the characters’ emotional perspective more important than the premise of “what makes art valid.”

Player One is really pretentious about art theory. Player Two is comparatively ignorant about art theory but knows what he likes. Through a Help Desk game, we can heighten these perspectives beyond the realm of art. In addition to playing out the verbal pattern, the game can also heighten a character’s personal game through an established progression.

Player Three can heighten Player One’s perspective by initiating a Set dialogue around the “value of war.” In seeking to repeat the Offer dialogue, Player One heightens his character’s personal game, justifying war through foreign relations policy. Player One’s pretentiousness though is heightened most by the progression of context; connected this way, “art” and “war” are individually less important to the game than Player One’s emotional pattern of being pretentious. The topics progress while the reactions repeat. It is to Player Three’s benefit to, following the verbal pattern, admit that, while she doesn’t know much about war theory, she knows she doesn’t want to fight.

Player Four can cement this progression by initiating a Cement dialogue around the “justification of genocide.” Player One’s pretentiousness now enjoys being heightened through his justification of genocide and through his juxtaposition with Player Four who doesn’t know much about genocide history but knows she doesn’t want to be wiped off the face of the earth along with her friends and family.

The progression of “art” to “war” to “genocide” heightens Player One’s character game; it might be reasonable to discuss the validity of art but arguing the sides for genocide makes you an asshole. If Player Four had focused instead on “universal healthcare” instead of “genocide” we might have had more of a Categories game type Help Desk game on our hands; the players still have lots of patterns in play to heighten out to an edit, but instead of a core progression we have topics that could have been reordered within the game without effect.

Remember: Tighter patterns facilitate expanded heightening which enables satisfying edits. More pattern, more good. “Guy willing to debate any topic no matter how indefensible” is a stronger personal game arc than “Guy willing to debate any topic.”

But of course, the Help Desk game does not need to end with four players. “Genocide” could follow “universal healthcare,” “Redaction of homicide laws” could follow “genocide.” If given the opportunity, Player Seven could throw the progression of in-defensibility on its head with a childish “Eek the Cat was the greatest show of all time,” compelling Player One’s “You’re absolutely right” response. When you have a pattern, you get to choose your edit.
But what if Player Three chooses to heighten *Player Two’s personal game*...

Player Three could initiate a Set dialogue that serves the progression of Player Two’s perspective. For example, Player Three could assume Player One’s role in pontificating over the value of creative sex. **In seeking to repeat the Offer dialogue, Player Two heightens his character’s personal game,** expressing general ignorance but individual preference. Again, it is the progression indicated by the **Set dialogue that is most important in heightening Player Two’s personal game.** In this case, Player Three pontificates on embracing sex with a knowledgeable and open mind; in juxtaposition, Player Two’s stance that what he knows and what he likes “is missionary” really heightens his ignorance and rigidity.

Player Four can cement this progression by initiating a Cement dialogue around “the beauty of the world.” Player Two’s ignorance and rigidity is heightened when, despite Player Four’s assertions that “there’s so much pleasure to be derived from the world,” Player Two maintains, “I don’t know much about the world, but I know that I like my couch.”

Who should you replace, Player One or Two? Remember, the **most important aspect of the Set move is the decision to make it. If the scene needs it, get out there.** Deciding which active player to heighten should never keep you on the wings. **To have a pattern to trust, we need a Set move** – get out there.

Remember, **repetition alone is heightening.** Get out there. Establishing a **Set move with recycled opening dialogue is a clear signal to all involved that a pattern is being played.** Whomever you choose to replace, we want to **focus on heightening reactions. You’re either the one heightening emotional reactions or the one feeding details out for heightened reactions; ideally you’re doing both.** When each player is both having and causing reactions the resultant patterns hit harder and are more sustainable. The player chosen to remain will heighten his information and reactions as you heighten the context and reactions of the player you replace. And the progression of your interaction will provoke the Cement dialogue.

If a line was said in both the Offer and Set dialogues, it better be repeated in the Cement pass. **When heightening context, rely on your To The Ether skills; we want to cement a progression.** If the Offer dialogue revolves around a Flea Circus, and the Set dialogue introduces a Cell Circus, the setting of the Cement dialogue should be inspired by the sequential relationship of previous dialogues’ settings. Which setting would you choose?

A) Quark Circus  
B) Family Circus  
C) Plant Circus  
D) RNA Roundup

**There are no mistakes in patterns.** But the answer is A.

A lot of times we’ll facilitate choosing who to replace in a Help Desk game with a **Tag Out** – instead of trying to inhabit the same space and time as the Offer dialogue, in initiating the Set dialogue, Player Three will tap the player she’s replacing on the shoulder to indicate that the
Tagged player should go to the wings and that the remaining player should stay on stage and repeat the pattern.

Tag Outs are great. But a Tag Out is a tool, not a game. I like teaching through the Help Desk dynamic because being constricted to inhabiting the same space and time helps improvisers focus on following the pattern of dialogue – from beginning to end – which enhances the game. Too often Tag Out runs, while certainly heightening a personal game, prioritize bits over pattern repetition. If I’m playing with tag outs I can run on stage the moment I realize Player One doesn’t like house cats and I can heighten his perspective by introducing a tiger. If I’m focused on Help Desk game mechanics, I’m reaping the rewards of not just the one progressive pattern (of house cats to tigers to…) but all the patterns ripe for plucking in the interaction.

In the Help Desk game, we make the most out of repeating a character’s personal game through commitment to the pattern and its progression.

**HELP DESK HELP THEME**

Help Desk game mechanics can also be employed to heighten the scenic game of an interaction.

Let's look back to the “art theory” example.

Player One is really pretentious about art theory. Player Two is comparatively ignorant about art theory but knows what he likes.

We previously chose to employ Help Desk game mechanics in heightening players’ personal games. We heightened Player One’s pretentiousness and, in a different progression, we heightened Player Two’s rigid ignorance.

But we can also use Help Desk game mechanics in service of heightening the scenic game between pretentiousness and ignorance. Reestablishing the dynamic in a progression of contexts heightens the interaction above any one scene’s specifics to help us highlight a theme.

Remind you of anything?

Given more dialogue, the variation of the To The Ether game around poles resembles a Help Desk game. And all the same construction aids are there for you.

For example:

Player One – I want a baby.
Player Two – Oooh, I don’t know. Baby’s are complicated.
Player One – I want a little part of us running around our house.
Player Two – This house? There’s barely enough room for us.
Player One – Ah, c’mon. Picture having a little boy in your arms.
Player Two – (picturing) Be a man!

Player Three – I want a crumb.
Player Four – Ooooooh, I don’t know. Crumbs are messy.
Player Three – I want pieces of us spilling over this plate.
Player Four – This plate? This plate is dirty enough as it is.
Player Three – Ah, c’mon. Picture having a little chocolate chip in your arms.
Player Four – (picturing) You’re going to be eaten alive!

Player Five – I want a maggot.
Player Six – Ooooooooooooh, I don’t know. Maggots are fucking gross.
Player Five – I want larva overflowing this rancid meat.
Player Six – This rancid meat? We can’t expect it to be around forever.
Player Five – Ah, c’mon. Picture having a little maggot in your arms.
Player Six – (picturing) AHH! KILL IT!

Rather than heighten any one perspective in the argument, this Help Desk game variation heightens the argument itself.

Again, the power is in the pattern and the progression. Don’t allow “sense” to derail the pattern. Don’t let, for example, being a chocolate chip cookie keep you from having “arms.” Follow the pattern to the fun it forces you into.

And – remembering our To The Ether skills – if “AHH! KILL IT!” fails to earn the scene an edit, we can reinvest in the pattern. Player One just has to reassert her desire for a baby.

We get our edits by playing the pattern to heightened effect. We get our edits through repetition and progression of details. We ensure our edits by investing in emotional perspective and interpersonal reaction.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP, HELP DESK

Whether it’s in service of heightening a scenic theme, enhancing a personal perspective, or making a “bad” scene look good, Help Desk game mechanics are applicable whenever it is a sequence of interactions that is being heightened.

That initial interaction does not have to be a two player scene; it doesn’t need to be a Two Person scene.

You can turn a Ten Person scene into a Help Desk game.

NEXT: Hey, Everybody!
1.7 – Hey Everybody Games

HEIGHTENING PERSONAL GAMES THROUGH REPETITION OF A SCENIC SEQUENCE

How do you focus a Ten Person game?

Step right up. Step right up.
I want to ride the roller coaster.
You're too short to ride this ride.
See the two-headed boy for two dollars.
I'm afraid of clowns.
I ate too much cotton candy.
Where can I buy beer?
I'm on mushrooms.
Don't miss Smash Mouth at the amphitheater.
Hey, baby, want me to win that whale for you?
I'm pregnant.

We have ten different perspectives. We didn't build with collective agreement to focus ten players into a One, Two or Three Person scene.

We have ten different perspectives on ten different things. While we've expanded the environment of a carnival, we didn't heighten a collective idea through a united progression of a To The Ether game.

We have a couple different interactions based on questions and opposition. We have a lot of disparate elements sharing the same scenic space. To justify each character's juxtaposition risks dragging the scene down with exposition and tearing it apart with split focus.

A collective direction was not established through the progression of initial moves, but our bed is made.

It’s time for the Hey Everybody rubric group game.

We didn’t establish a collective direction through the progression of initial moves. Maybe we were each too in our heads and not adequately focused outward in the spirit of Group Mind to serve our fellow players with immediate, enthusiastic agreement. Maybe that’s because we were all thrust on stage on top of one another and to “take care of ourselves” we each invested in individual self-contained emotional statements. Maybe we were all gathered around a central idea but felt we should bring unique characters to a shared space.

Hey Everybody game mechanics allow a group to build a focused direction out of disparate parts. They are so named because, though they have wider applications, they are useful to a player in navigating a scene initiated with a rush of players to the stage.
For example...

“Hey, everybody, look at this.”
“Brainstorm time, people. What do we name our product?”
“Take a knee, team.”
“I think we all know what we’re doing here.”
“Step right up. Step right up.”

**The potential for trouble in a “Hey Everybody” initiation is high.** Players may rush out on stage to support the initiation with disparate reactions that then battle for dominance; chaos ensues and awkwardness follows. Or though players may rush out on stage to support the initiation, they await to take their cues from the initiator who becomes the facilitator in a stiff and slow series of interactions that typically revolves more around thinking than feeling.

Upon hearing a “Hey Everybody” initiation we want to focus on employing Hey Everybody game mechanics.

**In a Hey Everybody game, the scenic game is the pattern of personal games and all games are heightened through that pattern’s evolving repetition.**

**HEY EVERYBODY! FOCUS THE CHAOS**

How do find focus through the chaos? Through patterns.

Remember, **if you’re ever lost in a scene, simply return to what’s already happened. Make “sense” of the scene through repetition.** We might feel it makes “sense” to acknowledge the character standing beside us in the same scenic space, but, if there are ten players all seeking their own justification, we we inevitably split focus to our detriment. But remember, **though the first time you do something, it might be weird, the second time you to it, it’s normal, and the third time you do it, it’s “right.”**

Within To The Ether games, we explored how a group can restart a sequence when it’s clear the initial progression isn’t heightening. **To establish a game built out of pattern layers, Player One need only restart the sequence through his personal filter to set up the second layer.**

Hear me. Hear me. Step right up.
I want to ride the roller coaster!
Hear me: You’re too short.
Two heads, two dollars. One helluva freak.
Clowns freak me out.
I feel sick.
I’m too sober.
I can taste colors.
Smash Mouth. Remember Smash Mouth?
Pregnant? How did this happen?
I guess you have great aim.
The Set pass of the Hey Everybody game, like in any game, seeks to establish cohesion. Through repetition of the Offer sequence's order, we set about establishing the scenic game as the pattern of contributions. When it's their turn to participate in the scenic game, each individual seeks to heighten their personal game. While each individual personal game represents a vector off the collective arch of the scenic game's pattern, commitment to an outward focus and agreement facilitates the intersections of the disparate vectors.

Establishing pacing is of utmost importance to a Hey Everybody game Set pass. Don’t let thinking about what to say delay, complicate or allow to reroute the cadence of the pattern unnecessarily. If nothing else, succeed in speaking in turn, even if it’s just to repeat what you just said. Remember, execution of a tight simple pattern in improvisational performance can evoke a bigger laugh from the audience than any individual joke.

While your initial contribution may have had nothing to do with anyone else's contribution, moving forward seek to heighten your personal game in the context of the heightened personal games that came before it. Mirror language. Heighten emotions. Repeat details.

The more perspectives on stage the less focus any one personal game can take away from the scenic game. In a Hey Everybody game, your primary focus needs to be on the scenic game of the pattern of contributions over the heightening of your personal game.

Please, dear God, won’t someone step right up.
Am I short enough to do this?
Wha? Ugh [as he mimics being struck in the crotch in response to her head-butt]
He’ll take your breath away.
I do like vampires.
I want to throw up.
I want to throw up.
Cool! Check out my vomit.
No, no, not Splash Mouth. Smash Mouth.
I guess I won you a baby.
[Patting her stomach heavily] You won yourself a whale.

As each player contributes within his/her role in the scenic pattern, they seek to cement their individual personal games.

If a personal game's pattern has been made clear enough and has been built up steadily enough, throwing that pattern on its head can be hilarious. Remember though, if you don’t achieve an edit when throwing a pattern on its head, you have to reinvest in that correlating leg of the pattern. So, especially when there are more perspectives sharing stage, be careful about flipping a pattern too early.

And it doesn’t have to end with three passes, especially if we’ve sought to intersect the vectors of our personal games, then we can enjoy heightening their joined trajectories.
If, instead being deep in our head while awaiting our turn, we are focused outward on our partners, we increase our chances of that improvisational performance magic that is Group Mind. **Through the Hey Everybody game mechanics, what once seemed infinitely disparate becomes a collective progression.**

But Hey Everyone game mechanics are not just for channeling chaos...

**NEXT:** *Hey Everybody Gold*
1.8 – More Hey Everybody Games

HEY EVERYBODY! START SOMETHING!

“Hey Everybody” initiations can lead to some pretty stilted scenes wherein the initiator forces the role of facilitator. If you’ve seen improvisational performance, you’ve seen these scenes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, [important person] is ready for your questions.”
“I gathered you all here today because...”
“Class! Class, pay attention (to me).”

Players rush out on stage to support the initiation, but compose themselves in deference to the initiator. Play follows this pattern: Player One to Player Two to Player One to Player Three to Player One to Player Four to Player One to Player Five to Player One to...

Admittedly, these can be funny games. A classic warm-up exercise highlights this...

We need a product.
[Alarm clock]
What can that product do that no other product in its line can?
[The alarm clock actually shocks you out of bed]
What’s our product’s slogan?
[Get yeee(electric-shock-noise)eer ass up.]

But most often these “Hey Everybody” initiations devolve into a call-and-response joke mechanism that serves to highlight how funny an individual can be as opposed to how funny a group collaboratively building a scene together is.

I worked with an improviser we used to tease for his propensity to initiate scenes saying, “People, people.” He would inevitably establish a press conference that he facilitated – though often as the proxy for the person of interest rather than that person himself. On his last night before he moved on (to great things; he’s a great guy; he knows who he is), our group presented him with a podium that he could take with him for future “People, people” scenes.

We made fun of our friend and fellow improviser. But we did have fun in those scenes. He was funny and he could sustain them. But we had our most fun when we built the scenes as a group.

Player One – People, people, the PTA President is ready for your questions. Yes, you?
Player Two – Paul Champion, Neighborhood Insider. Madam President, how do you respond to allegations that you embezzled from the can food drive?
Player Three – Paul Champion? It’s me, Pam Superion. When did you start working the PTA desk?
Player Four – Madam President, is it true your basement is full of canned corn?
Player Five – Pete Best, wait your turn.
Player Six – Is Madam President a hoarder?
Player Seven – I am not a whore!
Rather than wait to be directed like an orchestra, the group took matters into their own hands and set up a sequence of reactions. Sure, this zig zagging reactions sequence invited the potential for chaos, but we knew we could keep the game focused through Hey Everybody pattern mechanics.

The Offer pass is defined by the sequence of reactions between players. The initiator facilitates the establishment of the Set pass by restarting the pattern.

Player One – People, people, let’s focus on the issues. Who has a serious question?
Player Two – I do. Paul Champion, Neighborhood Insider. Pam, what are you doing here?
Player Three – Newspaper’s shrinking, Paul. I now cover the PTA, CIA, and NWA.
Player Four – Madam President, the people need their corn.
Player Five – When is it my turn?
Player Six – Will the President show us her cans?
Player Seven – I am not a whore!

The Set pass seeks to clarify the sequence of players’ contributions. In addition, each player uses their moment in the pattern to heighten the progression of their individual personal game.

The initiator facilitates the game by ensuring the pattern restarts, but s/he should not dictate the pattern’s sequence. As a character, the frustrated facilitator may demand that the group pay him attention, but, as an improviser, the facilitator wants to be able to heighten his frustration so he needs the group to heighten – not give up on – what they’re doing.

A facilitator can help each pass by giving players a topic they can choose to respond to through the filter of their personal games. But s/he doesn’t want to direct discussion around that topic. The key is allowing the other players to choose how they react.

Good example:
We’re here to discuss peas.
I love peas.
Peace?
Please.
Man, fuck the police.

Bad example:
Who likes peas? Nathan?
I love peas.
Great, who else likes peas?
...

But, even if the facilitator is trying to dictate the scene, remember that the group can overthrow the dictation through reactions.
Bad example gone good:
Who likes peas? Nathan?
I love peas.
I love Nathan.
Oooh, Sue loves Nathan.
She wants to kiss him.
She wants his peaness.
That’s enough, children. Let’s move on. Who likes melons? Megan?

Player Three’s reaction to “Nathan” instead of “peas” breaks the game out of the structure as defined by the initiation. But Hey Everybody group dynamics refocus the group into a collaboratively built pattern. The initiator’s job now is to set up a second pass of the pattern through which each individual heightens their personal game.

If in the initiating pass any one player asserts themselves over a greater share of the focus, a Hey Everybody game pattern keeps the group cohesive. If in the initiating pass the sequence of contributions goes Player One, Player Two, Player One, Player Three, Player Four, Player One, Player Four, Player Five…then…the Set pass should seek to repeat that sequence.

Through the Hey Everybody group game, we can focus cohesion from disparate parts. An individual can make bold moves trusting the group to fold any new information into the pattern of contributions.

Whether we’re focusing a group’s chaos, or asserting collaborative building over any individual dictator, Hey Everybody game mechanics are a valuable piece of our toolkit.

NEXT: Try Organic
1.9 – Organic Games

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Using To The Ether mechanics we can build a pattern from a progression of personal games, establishing and heightening a scenic game in the pattern’s evolving repetition. Using Help Desk mechanics, we can establish a pattern out of a scenic game, and repeat that pattern to heighten a personal game or theme.

Using Hey Everybody mechanics, we can develop a pattern from a scene’s disparate personal games, and then heighten all games through that pattern’s evolving repetition.

With these rubric game mechanics in our toolkit, we can confidently navigate any progression of moves. We can start a pattern that resembles a To The Ether game and then layer on a Help Desk game pattern and then tie it all up with a Hey Everybody game pattern.

Utilizing each of the rubric games’ mechanics in collaboratively building a game, a group could improvise “Summer Nights” from Grease.

Danny – Summer lovin’ had me a blast.
Sandy – Summer lovin’ happened so fast.

This could easily become a To The Ether game, right? “Summer lovin’ swelled up with gas.” “Summer lovin’ lit up a match.” “Summer lovin’, we’ve been dispatched.”

But no Player Three comes out to join the game yet. So Danny reinvests in the pattern already established to set up a game.

Danny – I met a girl crazy for me.
Sandy – I met a boy cute as can be.

This could easily continue as a To The Ether game around poles. “We connected with just one glance.” “He reminded me of Bruce Vilanch.”

But now that we’ve clearly set a direction, everyone wants to play. With “Summer days driftin’ away but uh-oh those summer nights,” the cast swarms the stage forming two groups around Danny and Sandy respectively with “Uh well-a well-a well-a huh.”

Group One – Tell me more, tell me more.
Doody – Did you get very far?
Group Two – Tell me more, tell me more.
Marty – Like does he have a car?
Now we've added a Help Desk dimension to this game. The interaction between Group One (The Thunderbirds) and Danny is heightened through evolving repetition of the interaction between Group Two (The Pink Ladies) and Sandy.

But we're not going to let this new game make us drop our old game. Danny is going to set a new pattern that encompasses all that came before it.

_Danny_ – She swam by me, she got a cramp.

Danny says “Hey Everybody” we’re returning to the beginning of the sequence. In doing so, he signals to Sandy to reinvest in their initial To The Ether dynamic.

_Sandy_ – He ran by me, got my suit damp.
_Danny_ – I saved her life, she nearly drowned.
_Sandy_ – He showed off, splashing around.

And when we reach their part of the pattern, Groups One and Two need to heighten the Help Desk dynamic of the scene.

_Group Two_ – Tell me more, tell me more.
_Frenchy_ – Was it love at first sight?
_Group One_ – Tell me more, tell me more.
_Kenickie_ – Did she put up a fight?

Now what? The group needs to cement what the group laid down. They need to take it once more from the top and have it progress in the context of all that has preceded it.

_Danny_ – Took her bowling in the arcade.
_Sandy_ – We went strolling, bought lemonade.
_Danny_ – We made out under the dock.
_Sandy_ – We stayed out ‘til ten o’clock.
_Group One_ – Tell me more, tell me more.
_Putzie_ – But you don’t got to brag.
_Group Two_ – Tell me more, tell me more.
_Rizzo_ – Cos he sounds like a brag.

The game is cemented. Everyone can play with confidence. With concentrated pattern work, several scenic games and many personal games are heightened collaboratively. But the scene’s not over just because we reach magic chorus number three. The group invests in a fourth pass and then a fifth pass that further heighten all games at play.

Sure, Grease is not improvised; tracking the progression of “Summer Nights” helps illustrates the layering patterns. On stage improvising, if we’re focused on how a game builds through subsequent moves keeping To The Ether, Help Desk and Hey Everybody mechanics in mind, we can confidently navigate any game, following
its organic evolution together as a group.

TRY ORGANIC

On the IO stage in Chicago, most teams start their show with an organic group game, which essentially entails a game that begins abstract and can go anywhere.

In Chicago, improvisers can learn by watching and doing. On this page, I’m going to teach in text.

Our game mechanics will be our guide.

WALK BACKWARDS WITH ME...

The suggestion is “Zombies.”

Player One enters stage walking like a zombie and moaning, “Brains.” Player Two enters stage walking like a zombie and moaning, “Brains.” So when Player Three enters stage walking like a zombie and moaning, “Brains,” everybody better enter stage walking like a zombie and moaning, “Brains.”

Now we have ourselves a One Person scene.

Then a player speaks. And we work to establish a To The Ether game.

Offer – I need someone with brains.
Set – I need an intellect I can really bury my teeth into.
Cement – I’m hungry for a smart girl.

We’ve cemented a game that heightens the zombie scene with the context of seeking out a desirable mate. It’s a pretty clear game, so everyone can play and we can trust it to evolve in a concentrated direction.

Someone who does crosswords.
Yum!
Someone who listens to NPR.
YUM!
Someone who reads the WSJ.
YUM!
Someone who knows not to say, “Irregardless.”
YUM! Brains! BRAINS!

We’ve heightened this pattern’s progression and emotional energy. Reaching this apex, it occurs to a player that there’s a line that pulls together the scene’s dual contexts while flipping the scene’s emotion.

Why is it so hard to meet someone these days?
Maybe the player who spoke this line expected it to generate a run where the zombies heighten their lamenting. And this would work; the zombies set a pattern by investing in another pass with individual games heightened through the new filter of disappointment. Then, cementing the pattern, they might continue oscillating between desire and disappointment. Or they could repeat the sequence, this time with a self-criticizing filter – “I’m too slow.”

**We’ll follow this example though:** Hearing “*Why is it so hard to meet someone these days,*” another player feels the scene is ripe for a transition. This player breaks away from his fellow zombies to become an angry survivor with a shotgun.

*Get away, ugly monsters. Bang!*

First things first, **all players must break away from being zombies to become angry survivors with shotguns. Establishing this new One Person scene,** everyone contributes their “Bang!”

Now, we could focus our heightening on how this new initiation answers the zombies’ question. **Why can’t they meet someone? Because they’re ugly.** And this would work. The survivors would heighten their disgust with ugliness in the context of relationship-based language. Then the scene would continue with shades of a Help Desk game; we’d heighten the established interaction by playing out a few more monster/survivor pairings through the relationship lens. Vampires who want someone to neck with versus hunters who hate things that suck. Aliens who want to “get up inside” versus astronauts who feel taken advantage of for being good hosts.

Or…

**We could simply reinvest in the established pattern through this new context. We just need to restart the To The Ether / Hey Everybody pattern** while we reload our shotguns and roam the stage.

- *I want someone who makes me feel safe.*
- *I want a partner who protects me.*
- *I want a living situation I can relax in.*
- *I don’t want to hear any more cross words.*
- *Damnit.*
- *I can’t handle any more crying.*
- *DAMNIT.*
- *I can’t carry any more dead weight.*
- *DAMNIT.*
- *I’m sick and tired of people blowing up on me.*
- *DAMNIT. BANG!*
- *What happened to this world?*

It’s time for the **Cement** pass. If zombies then survivors then what?
A player breaks away from her fellow survivors, raising a mimed vial into the air.

_Eureka! With this serum, no one will ever die!_

First things first, **all players must break away from being survivors to become excited scientists with vials.** Establishing this new **One Person scene**, everyone contributes their “Eureka!”

Then we **reinvest in the established pattern in the context of all that led to this point.**

- I’ll have my family with me forever.
- I’ll always have my friends.
- I’ll never be lonely again.
- I’ll be on the cover of the New York Times.
- EUREKA!
- I’ll win the Nobel Prize regardless of who else is nominated.
- EUREKA!
- I’m the smartest girl in the world!
- BRAINS!

And everyone turns back into zombies and devours the smartest girl in the world.

Magic.

“You wrote that,” the audience will say. Sure. You might be discounting my example with the same accusation as you read this. Sure. But with strong game mechanics in a team’s tool belt this game progression is possible.

And you can enjoy these same results. You just need to **commit to honing your pattern reflexes through rigid exercise and practice.** Concentrated analysis of how games are built, with emphasis on the To The Ether, Help Desk and Hey Everybody mechanics, will enable you to respond in-the-moment to recognized patterns.

With a commitment to making each move in the context of what preceded it in order to serve the collective direction of the group through patterns and repetition, your team can confidently navigate any group game together.
Objective: To establish and heighten organic group games collaboratively as an ensemble. When I was in Chicago, we mostly learned how to do group games through seeing them on stage whenever we wanted. When I moved to DC, I developed To The Ether, Help Desk and Hey Everybody Group Games to help me explain the mechanics that enable an improviser to collaborate with others to establish and heighten patterns as a group. While I love the fact that these rubric group games are performed on stage, by design they rigidly focus on specific cellular structures that can be used to build organic forms.

This workshop does not focus on one particular structure but rather on how any structure can be built organically through the progression of moves.

I love organic group games.

I love watching a series of players building off each other, creating something together that not one of them could have imagined alone. And the audience loves watching this too, seeing the spontaneous creation of something out of nothing before their very eyes. Everyone’s in on the joke. And the results are magic.

PATTERNS AND GAMES

- **Pattern** – a sequence/structure that is repeated/reused
- **Game** – a sequence of actions, defined by rules of cause-and-effect, that heightens with repetition

We use Patterns to establish and heighten Games. We build Patterns out of connected Games. Patterns on Patterns on Patterns. Games on Games on Games.

The nuances between the definitions is less important than how we use them both: Patterns and Games help a group of improvisers know what's next. A pattern’s “this follows this follows this” structure enables an improviser to contribute confidently; if a boy enters stage, then a girl, then a boy, then a girl, everyone knows the next person that enters should be a boy. A game’s “X causes Y resulting in Z” structure enables an improviser to play Pavlovian-ly; if a player’s temper causes another player to cry resulting in the first player calming his outburst, then everyone knows tempers have the power to make people cry and crying has the power to stop tempers.

Patterns and Games help establish expectations for the audience. The first time something happens is random, the second time is purposeful and the third time is expected. In our character work, establishing patterns of behavior makes the audience know and invest in who we create. **You can make new shit up, but effective drama happens when two people are at odds with each other for reasons that arise out of established personalities.** We have to establish expectations before we can subvert them; if your character just keeps changing willy-nilly the audience will give up on trying to follow you.
So Patterns and Games help improvisers build collaboratively and help engage the audience. How do we establish and build these Patterns and Games?

**BUILDING PATTERN PROGRESSIONS**

“Apple,” “Laser,” “Cedar,” is a sequence that, when repeated, can be made a pattern. You could feasibly create a wallpaper that had these three things repeated up and down and around a room. So we can make anything a pattern by repeating it. But an initial pattern that grows with a discernible *progression* will make it possible for players to collaborate confidently.

For example, if the nodes of the sequence are “Baby,” “Teenager,” and “Adult”, no one will have any problem making the next contribution.

Three moves define the pattern progression –

- 1st move = **Offer** *(anything is an offer)*
- 2nd move = **Sets** the pattern (of the myriad directions available after the Offer the Set move begins to define a single trajectory)
- 3rd move = **Cements** the pattern (clarifies the pattern in a direction that can be repeated and heightened)

The Offer is anything. The Set move seeks to establish a relationship with the Offer move. The Cement move seeks to heighten the relationship between the Set and Offer moves through its own relationship with the Set move. The *progression* of Offer, Set and Cement moves define the rules to the relationship between nodes in the sequence.

Example One – “Orange,” “Red,” “Violet”
Example Two – “Orange,” “Lemon,” “Kumquat”
Example Three – “Orange,” “Blew,” “Read”

So now thanks to the Cement move we know we’re not just contributing Colors but Darkening Colors. We’re not just adding on Fruits but Sequentially Smaller Citrus Fruits. Not just Homophones but Color-Centric Homophones.

When the progression's path is clear, everyone can come out and play...

“Orange,” “Red,” “Violet,” “Purple,” “Grey,” “Black”
“House,” “Neighborhood,” “County,” “State,” “Country,” “Continent,” “Planet,” “Galaxy”...

We make each next move on the basis of everything that came before it. Defined in retrospect, each “move” needn’t be “one line” or “one player’s contribution.”

For example, Player One says, “Orange,” and Player Two says, “Peel.” When Player Three says, “Melon,” he is signaling to his troupe that – in retrospect – “Orange” and “Peel” *together* constitute the Offer move. And this should lead Player Four to say, “Rind.” So...
OFFER Orange + Peel  
SET Melon + Rind  
CEMENT Apple + Skin

The clearer a pattern is, the easier it will be for a group to heighten it through repetition.  

To drill students on building pattern progressions I run Word Associations around a circle. Additional insight into Word Association variations can be found in this post focused on Game Mechanics. What’s important is that every player commit to building based on the progression they see connecting the moves already made.

**Word Associations:** Players stand in a circle. One player is asked to say “any word,” this is the Offer. The next player says another word related to the Offer, this is the Set move. The next player, making whatever connection they see between the Offer and the Set moves, says another word that seeks to establish the trajectory of the pattern’s progression. Start slow, with each player thinking aloud through the connections they’re making. Then allow for uninterrupted attempts that are dissected on the backend, by you and by the group. Committed concentration on the mechanics of building a pattern progression now will enable players to trust their pattern recognition skills in-the-moment later.

**Lessons:**

- **A to B connections are great.** A to C connections may be clever, but the clearer we make the connection between moves the faster everyone can get on the same page and the sooner the pattern can evolve collaboratively.

- **Resetting the sequence is always an option.** If you’re ever lost, go back to what you did before, building layers of patterns, heightening with each subsequent sequence.

- **There are no mistakes in patterns on stage.** There is no “right.” There is only “what has happened” and “what’s happening now.” We work to make our partners look good. We accept everything that happens and work to integrate it. The group fails when we fail to integrate each individual contribution into the whole. Everything that happens becomes part of the pattern. “A” then “B” then “Y” is not a mistake. The next part of the pattern is “C” then “D” then “Z.”

**ESTABLISHING RULES TO THE GAMES**

“Rules” in this context aren’t unbreakable constraints defining engagement. Here, “Rules” are relationships of cause and effect that, once established, can help improvisers react through instead of think through scenes. In a Word Association for example, if a “use” always follows an object – for example, “Pen,” “Write” – then it’ll be easier to know what to say when some says, “Brush.”
When a group builds organically together, each individual is by necessity playing by their own rules. But if each individual is striving to establish rules based on what’s already been introduced and to clarify rules through repetition, then the individuals begin working as a group.

Simplification and Clarification help many players heighten collaboratively. We Simplify through Agreement. We Clarify through Repetition.

Depending on the number of people in a workshop, I will teach establishing rules through Kick the Duck, Red Rover or through a circle game like Dukes of Hazard. In either case, what’s important is for improvisers to become thoughtful about connecting moves through relationships of cause and effect.

Dukes of Hazard: Players stand in a circle and are given three Rules. Rule #1: To pass the focus to the left or right around the circle, a player waves his arms in the direction of an adjacent player and says, “Woosh.” Rule #2: To reverse the direction of the focus’ motion, a player receiving a “Woosh” can cross her arms and say, “Rrrrrt” (brake noise). Rule #3: To pass the focus to anyone other than an adjacent player, a player arches an arm and points at another player while saying the Dukes of Hazard theme music, “Do-do-doodle-do-do-do-doot-doodle.”

Have players just start playing with the three rules. Then stop them and ask something like, “When do you pass the focus across the circle?” They won’t have been playing by any rules. They will have employed moves “When we felt like it.” Have them start again fresh, this time focused on establishing rules of cause and effect that determine when to use moves. The first time a move is used it might be random, but if players are paying attention to what happened before and after that random occurrence then they can seek to recreate that sequence and make the random purposeful, then expected. As players seek to recreate sequences it will certainly evolve as individually conceived rules are clarified, and the whole set of sequences heightens through attempts at repetition.


It doesn’t have to be played that tight. And it won’t possibly be the first few times through. But if everyone’s concentrated on working to establish and clarify rules, then it’s possible for the group to be playing by similar (if not the same) rules and then suddenly the game is fun for all involved.

Lessons:

- Playing is following. As kids we made up silly games in-the-moment. We did that because we followed our friends impulses and our friends followed ours. We just focused outward on fun and weren’t in our heads judging. Your pre-puberty, non-judgmental selves are still accessible. Follow the fun to find him or her. Play with a “Me, too” mentality not a “Nuh, uh” mindset.
• **Fold it all in.** Just because you thought the game was to pass across the circle three times doesn’t mean you can give up trying to play along with the group the moment something didn’t work out as you expected. Remember, **there are no mistakes.** If everyone is committed to clarifying, then we will get on the same page.

• **Trust the pattern** – don’t overcomplicate. The sooner everyone is on the same page, the sooner we can heighten and evolve collaboratively. Playing this game, a group starts to have fun with very simple mechanics simply because they know how to play and can just play. We tend to overcomplicate unnecessarily. And then we end up in our heads trying to figure out how to navigate all our complications. Keep it simple and have fun with it.

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**FOLLOWING PROGRESSIONS AND RULES TO STAGE-READY ORGANIC GROUP GAMES**

Ultimately, to get students practice establishing and heightening Organic Group Games, we’ll do a run of scenes built through the following steps:

1. **Initiate with a Self-Contained Emotional Statement as the Offer**
   - The Self-Contained Emotional Statement establishes an effect and a cause, aligning you with an emotional perspective. It’s a solid foundation on which to build the possibilities. Connecting your emotion to an active element in the scene – Not just “I love the arts,” but, “I love THIS painting” – enables a Pavlovian reaction.
   - It’s a statement, not a question shifting the responsibility of providing information to your partner.
   - It’s an emotional statement, giving X the power to make you feel Y.
   - Being self-contained, the statement places you on solid ground without dictating the scene to your partners. Being self-contained is increasingly an imperative the larger a group you have on stage.

2. **Seek to Set the progression with one of four ways to join the scene**
   - **Heighten with Agreement** – “I love the stars.” “They’re so bright, sparkly and perfect.” Agreement allows multiple players to collaboratively heighten one emotional perspective.
   - **Heighten Tangentially** – “I love the stars.” “I’m more a planets man myself.” Tangential heightening enables juxtaposition of emotional perspectives and exploration of theme.
   - **React** – “I love the stars.” “Your astronomy prowess isn’t getting me in bed.” Emotional reactions establish a scenic game to heighten in one scene or juxtaposed scenes.
   - **Disparate Initiation** – “I love the stars.” “Whoa, you hear that?” We don’t have to “make sense” of disparate initiations we can heighten through repetition of the sequence; first time is random, second time is purposeful, third time is expected.

3. **Seek to Cement the progression**
   - Clarify the game(s) by following the moves already made with a move that heightens in the established direction
4. Follow, Heighten and Evolve the established game(s)
   • Do more of what was done. Do what was done again bigger. Do what was done again with a different context.

5. Have fun
   • On stage you have to focus outward and follow the moment. Hard work and concentrated thinking off stage are necessary to become better improvisers, but you can’t perform to your best ability in your head. **There is no reason to get up on an improv stage other than to have fun.**

Here are the exercise I employ building to that ultimate goal –

**Self Contained Emotional Statement Circle:** Everyone stands in a circle. A player provides a **Self-Contained Emotional Statement** toward an active element – what s/he is doing (“I love filing”), what object s/he shares space with (“Ugh, this ice cream has icicles”), or what s/he is (“I’m super snazzy”). The next player around the circle then provides a brand new, unrelated Self-Contained Emotional Statement (SCES). Play continues with each player providing their own SCES.

**Lessons:**
   • As initiations, **SCESs toward active scene elements immediately ground an improviser in a repeatable cause (active element) and (emotional) effect.**

**1 SCES and 4 Set Moves Tutorial:** Have one player get on stage and give an SCES – ex: “I’m afraid of my face.”

Then prompt a player to come up to join that SCES with an Agreement line – ex: “*If I see a mirror, I'll scream.*” In agreement this player could say, “I’m also afraid of your face,” or “I’m afraid of my own face.” Remind players that anyone can have what anyone else has; if one player is pregnant, everyone can be pregnant.

Then prompt a third player to come up and join that original SCES with a Tangential line – ex: “*I love this fully mirrored room,*” or “*I’m terrified of my voice.*” There is certainly bound to be some overlap between Agreement and Tangential lines, but the nuance is that with Agreement two players share the same perspective, with Tangential two players have related but not identical perspectives.

Then prompt a fourth player to come up and join the original SCES with a Reaction line – ex: “*How dare you? I’m the best plastic surgeon around.*” This is the type of move we employ most often when starting any typical “two person scene.” What we’ll learn is how to build a group game on top of this interplay between characters.

Finally prompt a fifth player to come up and join the original SCES with a Disparate line – ex: “*I'd kill for an apple right now.*” The juxtaposition of disparate initiations can be fun. These scenes and games will continue stronger if this second initiation is also a SCES.
SCES and Set Move Lay-ups: Have players split into two lines with one on either side of the stage. One line will initiate with a SCES. The other line will join with one of the 4 Set Moves – whichever they want. After these two lines are given, the players are wiped, each to go to the back of the other line.

SCES, Set and Cement Move Lay-ups: The player at the head of one line initiates with an SCES. The player at the head of the other line joins with one of 4 Set moves. Then either player now at the head of the lines can join the scene in working to establish the progression of the game. This third player can – but does not have to – enter after only two lines are given. For example:

1 – “I’m afraid of my face.” 2 – “If I see a mirror, I’ll scream.” 3 – “Look at the polish on this floor; No, don’t – aaaaahhh.”

1 – “I’m afraid of my face.” 2 – “I love this fully mirrored room.” 3 – “I love it, too; Everywhere you look, there you are.”


1 – “I’m afraid of my face.” 2 – “I’d kill for an apple right now.” 3 – “Did someone say they had an apple? I’d slaughter the innocent for one.”

Remember: Simplification and Clarification. A third person must only enter a scene to serve what has already been established. To add a third perspective or to be a third totally unrelated person risks over-complication. Simplify with Agreement, by adopting one of the two perspectives already in play. Clarify with Repetition, by heightening the emotional reaction and stakes already in play.

Organic Group Games: Everyone get on the wings. Anyone is able to contribute the SCES, the Set Move, to add on in seeking to cement a game and/or to add in serving to heighten a game.

As an instructor, you have to pay attention to the progression of made moves so as to be able to talk about how each successive addition affected the trajectory of the scene. There are no mistakes, but there are complications; every new add becomes something else that needs to be folded into the pattern. Encourage simplicity.

You can direct, by stripping back a game that went awry to the last moment it was stable, or by side-coaching a player into a particular move. But I try to keep this to a minimum as you don’t want to kill their momentum, only open their eyes.

There are so many paths these games can take that it is tough to outline any “standard” paths. But here are a few examples from workshops that worked particularly well:
EXAMPLE 1 –

Player One enters miming a rod and saying, “What a great day for fishing.” Player Two enters with a pronounced hunchback and says, “Ah, what a great day for fishing.” Player One looks at Player Two with a large resigned sigh and says, “Hi, Bob.”

A progression of fishermen enter, each with an even more exaggerated physical and verbal disability, and a variation of “What a great day for fishing.” With each entrance Player One gets more and more deflated but still manages a polite “Hi,” naming each entrant.

Player Six enters stage as a happy fish, saying, “What a great day for swimming.” Player Seven enters as a disabled fish...

EXAMPLE 2 –

Player One enters as an old lady proud to say, “Yep, everything I need is in this one bag.” Player Two joins and says sadly, “I think my mother hates me.” Player One responds, “Best get your bag packed.”

Player Three enters on the opposite side of Player One as Player Two, pivoting attention to Player Three and signalling that Player Two should leave. “I think my wife hates me,” Player Three says. “Best get your bag packed,” Player One responds.


EXAMPLE 3 –

Player One enters in fear. “Oh, my god,” she says. “I can’t see anything in this cave.”

Player Two enters in mirrored agreement, also scared of the dark cave. Together they freak out. And they worry aloud about the threat of bats.

Player Three enters as a bat and says, “Marco.” Player Four also enters as a bat and says, “Polo.” As the bats play, the initiating players heighten their freak out.

Players Five and Six enter as other scared people.

Players Seven and Eight enter as bats. Player Seven says, “Red Rover, Red Rover, send Thomas on over.” The people all scream...

I love Organic Group Games.


NEXT: 2.0 Scenes
2.0 – “Two Person Scene” Theory

When we whine that we don’t want to do group game work anymore, we ask, “Can we just do some two person scenes?” We want to breathe. And we equate “two person scene” with “time to breathe up top.” There’re just two of us; there’s less impetus to force our voice into the scene. We’re free to discover the scene without fear of hijack.

We can walk up to center stage to face our partners, careful not to make any sudden moves, meet them eye to eye – chests turned out slightly to the audience – and in our round, enunciated theater voices negotiate the reality of the scene. “Well, if I am your lawyer then I need to know why you’re in the pokey in the firsty place.”

What happened to the Self Contained Emotional Statement? Where’d your patterns go? “But...uh...we’re doing two person scenes now.”

There are many approaches to two-person scenework. I prefer to do two-person improv as improv does best.

Leveraging The Details, Reaction and Games, the key to sustainable, dynamic two person scenes is setting up patterns of emotional behavior.

**PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR**

**PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR**

You have to feel. You have to react emotionally.

We placate improvisers allowing them to live between actors and stand ups, freeing them from the responsibility to feel convincingly or assume a strong opinion. “I make clever observations.” Go fuck yourself.

A troupe recently defended passivity as “playing it real.” I slaughtered them and ate their babies.

“That’s how I would have reacted!” Depends on the vocal improviser, but my response is usually either, Well, you’re boring, why am I watching you? or this little explanation: What’s funnier, a guy milling mixed feelings in his head while sitting paralyzed and fish-faced across from a pretty date, or a guy who first openly boasts his lustful feelings only to shut himself down with dictates of decorum? The answer is either can work if the audience believes you are feeling. And active feeling is easier to discern across a packed house.

 Actors imagine it real. They are never themselves on stage. Think about it. Nope, nope, there I go being an improviser again. Feel about it.
PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR

Yes. Feel about it.
In the grammar of The Self Contained Emotional Statement, there is an implicit object bearing the feeling of the all-important self.

We have to act emotionally. We have to react to stimulus. We are what we like.

“It’s a two person scene.” This is our chance to really dig at The Details, baby. The clever shit. What in this world is making me feel this way?

Check yourself: Am I explaining more than I’m exhibiting my behavior?

Our default should be toward active stimulus in the scene because it’s what’s active in a scene that provokes reactions. Bemoaning (convincingly) how the Armageddon is really shaking up your vacation plans is a better scene when asteroids are hitting the stage. Expressing hatred for a politician is best when the other player is the politician or you only endorse Romney to annoy her when she annoys you by picking her teeth.

Give something existing – but, better yet, happening – on stage the power of your reaction. See new details in what you’re experiencing through the focus of your emotional behavior. A cup you see on stage will be white, but stained with lipstick, and maybe there’s a logo. But the cup you see and feel about on stage will definitely have just the sweetest little puppy/kitty mash-up photo across its copious girth.

Imagine it real. And let emotion be your guide to and inspiration from The Details. React to what you discover on stage.

If you are ever lost in an improv woods: Feel Something about Something.

And in the spirit of “two person scenes,” let’s remove the constraint from The Self Contained Emotional Statement. A self contained statement allows the greatest flexibility for group game play, but the flip side is that choosing to comment on your scene partner is a solid sign to the ensemble that you want a “two person scene.”

Feel Something about Anything.

Feel things. But feel about things.

Exhibit behavior through emotional reaction to active stimuli on stage. And repeat.
PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR

The same pattern mechanics from our group game work are applicable to “two person scenes.” And they can be played just as tight. Though they don’t have to be. Remember, the extent to which we prioritize Pattern over its brother and sister elements dictates the “gamey-ness” of the scene. But to ignore Game all together in our “two person scenes” is to tie your hands in creating improv as improv does best. So, we’re still focused on Personal Games and Scenic Games.

**Personal Game** – how you react to who you are, where you are or what you’re doing

* I love cake; when I eat a piece I’m overcome with joy and I sigh involuntarily

**Scenic Game** – how you react to who your scene partner is, what your scene partner is doing or how your scene partner is acting

* Greg is my hero; when he criticizes me I’m destroyed and flagellate myself

* We are scared of ghosts; when we hear a noise we freak and run around

The games represent a pattern of behavior established through evolving rules.

Sorry to repeat myself, but this is 2.0.

And what have we covered to this point? We’ve committed to **feeling**. We’ve committed to feeling about something. Something makes us feel. Catalyst and reaction. A **behavior** is established.

Attention to patterns and games can help those established behaviors explore more sustainable, detail rich and active scenes. **Games define the trajectory of the scene initiated by Details and Reactions.**

If beauty is defined by symmetries and proportional asymmetries – and it is – then we can craft beautiful trajectories in our scenes through pattern mechanics. Some people can draw beautifully perfect arcs and angles free hand. There are profound artists that never bother with technique. But in learning how to be a better artist, **I find it helpful to evaluate and define trajectories** as technicians do, with math terms.

The initiation is a point in space. From the initiation to the next contribution a line is drawn, defining their relationship. **Offer, Set.** In math terms, a line is plotted by the relationship between the y variable and the x variable. Player x + Player y = Scene.
We know **Flat Scenes**, \((Ax + By + C = 0)\), when we just follow our story straight ahead, never looking back, never reaching any interesting height or depth.

We know **Scatter Shot Scenes**, where we jump from topic to topic, from character to character. No one has any idea what’s going on or how anything’s connected. Though, with this shotgun approach, you do hit occasionally.

These are two types of scenes that Game can help us eradicate from our sets by helping us **hone in on the progression of our Details and Reactions**.

We know **Steady Slope Scenes**, \((y = x)\), where we invest heavily in heightening the tension of a plot or an emotion or a gag. Ramping up or sliding down, we certainly have Game in these scenes. These scenes can be done very well. But often not for very long.

**Flat, Scatter Shot and Steady Slopes Scenes hang a lot of their goodwill on the strength of their edit.** A flat scene is hard to edit because there are no highs. A scatter shot scene renders you too slow on your feet to catch the joke you didn’t see coming, and now you have to wait until players find the next laugh where you can cut it off before it can go someplace brand new.

Patterns and games enable us to graph 3D Calculus, drafting undulating worms with our scenes across the X, Y and Z axes.

Let’s get from flat, scatter-shot and steady-slope shaped scenes to undulating worms by way of trigonometry. **Picture a sine curve.** It’s the one the looks like a roller coaster. Nope, no, that’s a cosine curve you’re picturing. **The sine curve starts at the origin \((0, 0)\) on the scale of contributions.**
Now picture each apex and nadir as moments in a scene where one perfect arc of contributions meets another perfect arc of contributions heading in a complimentary direction. Now picture each point where the sine curve crosses the X axis as moments in a scene when one character’s transformation leads to another character’s transformation in a complimentary direction.

I like to think about these nodes where one pattern meets another – they define for me a more sustainable and dynamic improv scene where energy is neither saved for the big finale nor wasted in scatter shot nor deadened with a flat line.

A preteen is geeking out to be able to share the room of an admired older cousin. The older cousin is annoyed as hell, but needs to “play nice” or he will be punished.

This scene could be played muted and flat as inner conflicting emotions render each player paralyzed to make choices. It could be developed scatter shot, with players jumping between addressing different motivations in slap dash attempts to gain tension. The tensions could simmer and then boil on a steady slope, exploding when the older cousin can’t take it anymore and lambastes the preteen who suddenly feels like a geek and bawls – and maybe the energy grabs the edit.

Focused on oscillating game trajectories, though, we can get to that energy sooner because we can sustain it with patterns. Let’s paint our scene on the sine.

WALK BACKWARDS WITH ME

Player x and Player y take a step onto stage (0, 0).

The preteen, backpack high on his shoulders, says, “I’m so excited to get to be with you this weekend.” The older cousin, looks nervously over the stuff in his room, and says, “Yeah, well…I’m under orders to make you feel at home.” (1, 1)

x – Yeah, General Mom, right?

y – (disdainfully) Uh, huh.

x – I’m stoked to be here. Stoked. Wait. That’s surfer, not military.

y – It’s fine. Just, uh...

x – (snaps into a salute) It’s an honor to be here, sir.

y – Are you fucking serious right now? Are you going to be up my ass all weekend?
Yeah, we can get to it that soon. **We can hit our reactions hard while feeling relaxed that we can sustain our pace by oscillating between our games.** Player x has been focusing on his part of the *scenic game*: He is excitedly kissing his cousin’s ass. Player y started with his personal game of restraint, but played up its tension with the *scenic game* of his being annoyed by his cousin excitedly kissing his ass.

Now what? Player y can return to his personal game immediately, quickly acquiescing and apologizing, returning to restraint and waiting for the preteen to build up his annoyance again.

But – big BUT – **Player y should wait for his return to the personal game of restraint to be a reaction to something active on stage, thus setting up the Pavlovian responsibility of recreating the pattern when revisited.**

**So Player y heightens his insult barrage until met with something new to react to.** Now, maybe Player x is too dense to wield the power of reacting himself; there are other options. Player y can choose to return to restraint for a reason of his own making – as long as he does define a reason, even in retrospect. Player z could also pipe in from offstage, serving the games in play with a shout for decorum from General Mom – but that’s the 3D portion of our Calculus and we’ll get to that later.

In this example, Player x *will* decide to react. He can build tension himself, but he should **be aware of the precedent he’s setting for the progression** – if he waits for a long string of insults before creating a reaction node, then he is probably going to have to wait for a longer string during the next game pass.

   
y – ...God help me if I have to –

   x – (suddenly bawls)

   y – Hey. Hey!

   x – I know I’m a geek. That’s a fact.

   y – Hey. You’re not a geek.

   x – (blubbering) I am, too. I’m in ninth grade and I’ve already broken the wedgy record.

   y – 1,891?

   x – 2,456

   y – Wow.

   x – See? I’m a geek. I’ve kissed *negative* girls.

   y – You like Goth girls?
x – Negative as in the number. Girls signed a pledge vowing they would never hook up with me and travel back in time to talk sense into any girl that ever does.

y – Hey. (softening) You want to see some porn?

x – (sniffles) What?

y – Check it out. (pulls magazine out from under mattress) These girls can’t say no to your seeing them naked.

x – (reacting) Eeeeew – (recovering) oooooh. Yeah, that’s...gnarly.

y – (shaking his head with an endeared sigh) Yeah. Okay.

x – Yuck-a-rific, there’s come on that girl’s hair. Humph. That’s shooting the curl, am I right?

y – (sucking his teeth) Yeah, man, that’s right.

x – Oh, my God. I mean, praise Jesus, a gang bang! That girl's hanging ten.

y – Are you fucking serious right now? I’m not going to tutor you in ass all weekend.

x – Oh, right, military not surfer speak. Twenty-one dick salute at attention, sir.

y – (snatches the porn away) I can’t fucking believe we’re related...

See the sine curve? See how we can sustain a scene by establishing emotional behaviors and heightening them with patterns? Feel about something and that reaction sets up the game we then cement with repetition. Find the relationship between personal and scenic games and define the trajectory connecting them. What triggers each game? What caps off the sequence?

The curves’ deltas open up more doors for edits, and knowing we can ride the wave helps us play without panic. If the scene is edited “too early” that’s often a good problem to have and you’ll have in your pocket defined patterns of emotional behavior to return to in subsequent beats.

It won’t always be a sine curve, but, when we play “two person scenes” focused on patterns of emotional behavior, – doing improv as improv does best – we will paint beautiful trajectories, symmetries and proportional asymmetries.

We might create juxtaposed tangent curves, like when Jerry rants about his thing and George rants about his thing and the game between them is they don’t acknowledge each other. We can draft scene trajectories that clover leaf in different quadrants, like a scene where a couple grades their admiration of each of the states meeting at Four Corners.
Performing, we just plot the points the best we can – *taking each step walking backwards, responding to the path traveled*. In coaching, I run regressions – *defining common trajectories between plotted points*. In learning improv, be a student of the math – *evaluating how scene variables equate, add up, and correlate*.

NEXT: *“Two Person Scenes” Practical*
2.1 – “Two Person Scene” Practical

We’re going to build “two person scenes” on patterns of emotional behavior.

LET’S WARM-UP

Get everyone standing in a circle. Give them all a single emotion. Make them emote. Change the emotion. Repeat.

The key is starting the emotion at a ten. Push it to eleven. To twenty.

Next, one by one, have each player enter the circle and express an emotion of their choosing for thirty seconds. It’s not a scene – players in the center are not to interact with the players forming the circle, and players forming the circle aren’t to interact with the player in the center.

So no dialogue. No monologue either. The player in the center is to show emotion, not talk about it.

And playing at eleven doesn’t equate to being loud.

This exercise – a variation of I Am Superman – also helps us recognize that we don’t need someone on stage with us in order to commit ourselves on stage. We can handle thirty seconds alone, sixty seconds, many minutes (though not a whole show, because that wouldn’t be improv at its best). It may suck sometimes, with all those eyes watching you sustain yourself, but we can do it. This exercise also helps us recognize how it can suck to be on stage alone – get out there and support your scene partner.

Next exercise. Everyone’s in a circle. In turn, have each person turn to the player to their left with a mimed object in their hands for that player to react to emotionally. I don’t care if the person turns to the player with an open palm, a non-descript “something” in their hand – what’s mimed is not important. The mimed object and physical offer matters only to trigger the reaction. Players’ emotional reactions need not – and, for the sake of the exercise, should not – depend on the context of the physical offer. Don’t wait on “why.” Fuck “sense.” Commitment and repetition are all the “why” the audience needs. React emotionally.

We’re now done with our circle. But let’s recap the lessons of this warm-up.

1. Start with strong emotion; don’t wait to reach your emotion’s apex.
2. Show your emotion; don’t just talk about it.
3. Start with a strong emotional reaction; don’t get caught up in having to know “why” before you empower the object of your reaction.
ENDOWMENT EXERCISES

We want to leverage the power of The Details. **To leverage the power of emotional Reactions through The Details, it helps if those details are active in the scene.** If the object of our reactions exists in the time and space of the scene, they are more likely to trigger those emotions. We can fume about how mad our mom makes us, but if mom is actually on stage with us then we are actively fuming as a direct result of her presence. **We want active emotions in our scenes.**

So let’s practice creating active details. **Let’s endow our scenes.**

*Get two people on stage. Give them a physical object to focus their endowments on – a golf ball, an axe, a sunset. Each player is tasked with two things only: Defining the object and feeling about those defined characteristics.*

**Visualize the object. Decide on and commit to an emotion.**

- Example 1 – “The golf ball has so many dimples. It’s so cute.”
- Example 2 – “This axe is bad ass.”
- Example 3 – “The amount of color in the sunset is terrifying”

**Focus outwardly on the object through your emotion. See it, and color what you see with the emotion.**

- Example 1 – “It’s so small.”
- Example 2 – “This looong handle. These sharp blades – like Janus’ head – making me a god.”

Remember: “Sense” **is not important.** Even the golf ball’s whiteness will be cute if you act like you feel that it’s cute. **It’s fun for the audience to see you force an emotion despite “sense” – especially one seemingly non sequitur at the outset.** A terrifying sunset? It’s more fun that the standard old beautiful sunset. Sure, down the road you’ll recognize that the terror comes from the pollution causing the colors, but **the audience’s fun is less contingent on your defense than on your commitment to the feeling.** “Oh, my god, oh, my god, now it’s purple” progresses the scene in a much more active direction than any explanation.

**Go beyond visualizing the object. Imagine it. And, through emotional reaction, experience it. Remember weight and resistance – the keys to mime.**

- Example 1 - “It’s so light, like a bird egg in my hand.”
- Example 2 – “Hefting this mother requires muscles.”
What is the object’s capability? If we want active scenes, we have to get active with our objects.

Example 1 – “Little rascal, trying to roll away.”
Example 2 - “Yeah, Log – axe and I turned your ass to butter.”
Example 3 - “We only see it on the horizon. It’s all around us. Surrounding us. Choke(*choke*)ing us.”

This exercise also helps us avoid the common eddy of commenting on someone else’s emotional commitment instead of investing in our own. Yeah, maybe a straight man forcing the player to defend his fear of the sunset’s colors will be funny. But that straight man has effectively made his partner the only person to watch in the scene. In improv as improv does best we utilize the strength of both players in tandem. If I decide that sunsets are terrifying, that’s a fun choice. Fuck you for calling me out on it – I haven’t decided why yet. Questioning a player’s commitment is especially tough when green improvisers are involved – they’re too likely to give up on their commitment when pressed. I want to support your fun choices, not undermine them.

Similarly, if the second player feels that sunsets are “beautiful” for contrast, I don’t want to see a debate of made-up facts. Show the audience the contrast through committed, individual feeling, not through negotiating dialogue. Heightening emotional perspectives enables a progression; debating reactions’ validity stagnates a scene. Remember wanting the toy your brother is enjoying: if you demand it, he’ll say “no;” if you engage something else on your own, he’ll trade you his toy for yours. More on losing to win later.

First, let’s repeat the exercise. This time we’ll endow each other.

Without a suggestion this time, two players on stage will begin to endow each other – creating active details and feeling about them.

Remember, we’re not changing the “Self” part of the Self-Contained Emotional Statement for a two person scene; we’re just relaxing the “Contained” restriction.

Player 1 – “I love that curl in the front of your hair.”
Player 2 – “I’m not a big fan of your boldness.”

Just as it avoids debate and negotiation, this exercise helps us avoid the contrived conflict caused when one player chooses to question the other player’s perspective instead of committing to their own. The audience doesn’t want to hear you say, “Oh, so you won’t like it if I come closer;” they want to see you move closer out of desire for that curl and see the other player be put off by the resultant closeness.
Explore the other player through emotional reactions.

Player 1 – “It adds the perfect asymmetrical element to your otherwise perfectly symmetrical face.”
Player 2 – “Wow, THAT is a lot of cologne. Not. A. Big. Fan.”

Don’t explain yourself; just keep doing what you’re doing. Focusing outward on the other person through our emotional lens will help keep us from the classic improviser’s self doubt problem causing us to validate our behavior through monologue, which often only serves to undermine our actions because often the story we create to explain our behavior is way more questionable than the simpler choice to commit to the emotional perspective by heightening the emotion.

Showing the audience boldly-pursued, juxtaposed emotional perspectives actively creates tension. When the tension needs to be diverted, that’s what caps are for (more on that later) but, as the improviser’s default is to give up on commitment, this exercise forces players to commit to their emotional perspective through their trigger object beyond the point where the scared improviser pulls the ripcord.

Player 1 – “Your curl. In my mouth. It’s like God’s Ramen.”
Player 2 – “Okay, your perpetual five-o-clock stubble? My eyeballs are not big fans.”

To recap this exercise:

1. Endow the scene with active details for reactions’ sake.
2. Engage your environment through an emotional perspective.
3. Engage your two-person scene partner through an emotional perspective.
4. Commit to your emotional perspective despite – and to spite – “sense.”
5. Focus outward through your emotional perspective; don’t give in to self doubt, relapsing inward and falling on exposition.

PERSONAL AND SCENIC GAME INITIATIONS

Let’s combine environmental endowments and player endowments into an exercise that will help us build Personal and Scenic Games.

Form two lines of players, one on either side of the stage. These will be blind scenes in which the player on stage right initiates by engaging the environment emotionally, though without sound, and the player on stage left, who starts the scene with her back to the stage, initiates by turning and feeling something about the player on stage right.

The player from stage right doesn’t just mime pulling baked goods from the oven, he decides to feel about what he’s doing – he’s visibly pleased while opening the oven. How he’s feeling is infinitely more interesting that what he’s doing. And
associating an emotion with an active element in the scene will help facilitate subsequent reactions.

The player from stage left turns toward the stage action and has to react to her scene partner. “I adore your muffins.” “Holy crap, you’re making breakfast? You’re amazing.” “That’s a terrible color on you.” These and a limitless number of variations exist at this player’s disposal for initiations – what’s important is for this player to feel something toward an active characteristic of her scene partner.

In the first moments of this exercise then, players have planted seeds for the patterns of Personal and Scenic Games that will sustain the scene. The player from stage right, in feeling pleased about his baking, lays the foundation for his personal game. The player from stage left, in feeling about her scene partner, establishes her half of the scenic game.

In running the exercise there’s value in simply running through these two players initiations, cutting the scene, sending each player to the end of the other line, and starting again with two new players. We are practicing making bold choices that define our characters by an emotional perspective.

In subsequent iterations of the exercise we relax the constraints on players but remain focused on how players’ initiations establish emotional perspectives that provide the basis for Personal and Scenic Games. For example, the player from stage left no longer has to feel about her scene partner but can choose to feel about any active element of the scene. With this freedom, this player can initiate with a personal game of her own to juxtapose with her scene partner’s.

The player from stage right is visibly pleased while opening an oven. The player from stage left turns toward the stage action and...bells, “I love cooking with vegan ingredients,”...weeps, ”My cake failed,”...smiles smugly, “I’m diabetic.” This player’s initiation doesn’t have to relate to her scene partner’s oven even – she just has to feel about something.

Now let’s drop the whole blind scene angle of this initiation exercise. Now the player from stage right and the player from stage left are both free to feel something about anything. They are each charged with entering and initiating – choosing whether to engage a personal game or a scenic game through an emotional perspective.

What they will not do with their new-found freedom is walk out to center stage, wait for their partner to join them and then talk out the scene. No. No. No. No.

We want bold emotional initiations the moment we enter the stage. And we are now practiced at initiating personal games so we don’t need to check in with our partner before getting started.
They will also not rely on verbal initiations because we are practiced at letting our visual emotions speak for themselves. And we have a stage full of active environmental elements that we are practiced in engaging.

So, focused on what we practiced, and avoiding the pitfalls of lameness and verbal chaos, a player will enter from stage right and a player will enter from stage left and each will choose an emotional perspective to an active scene element that will begin to define personal and scenic games. The two players on stage will initiate scenes by endowing each other and the scene environment through reactions – developing active details that trigger feelings.

With Player 1 and Player 2’s contributions there are four potential combinations that will define the initiating sequence: Personal / Scenic, Personal / Personal, Scenic / Personal, and Scenic / Scenic.

PERSONAL / SCENIC

This sequence is the result seen in the blind scenes exercise. Player 1 engages a personal emotional perspective and Player 2 engages an emotional perspective of her scene partner. Player 1 doesn’t have to engage the environment, but that’s not a bad default to rely on as improviser defaults go.

Player 1 – (staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers) “sigh.”
Player 2 – “Oh, I’ve had it with your attitude, mister.”

Scene (for the exercise’s sake).

PERSONAL / PERSONAL

This sequence can contain disparate initiations...

Player 1 – (staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers) “sigh.”
Player 2 – (looking around in panic) “I heard it again.”

Scene.

...or complementary initiations...

Player 1 – (staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers) “sigh.”
Player 2 – (flipping nostalgically through a big book) “Those were innocent times.”

Scene.

...or mirrored initiatives.

Player 1 – (staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers) “sigh.”
Player 2 – (playing with a yo-yo sadly) “siiiiiggghhh.”

Scene.
All options are valid. Agreement (complementary and mirrored) facilitates unified heightening and is a critical consideration when building group games, but disparate initiations, as long as there’s no negation or negotiation between them, can foster dynamic two person scenes as well.

Because improvisers default most often to scenic choices, it’s worth celebrating the Personal / Personal initiation sequence. Scenic choices have to be addressed with dueling emotional perspectives while personal choices can be heightened without drag. Juxtaposed, heightening, disparate initiations are unfortunately less prevalent on stage than stagnating conflict or negotiated contrast.

Remember, too, that the fun of improv as improv does best is focusing the channel carved out behind us as we remain open to the myriad possibilities before us. Remember that Self-Contained Emotional Statements best facilitate group games. In the complementary and mirrored initiation examples above, a third player could easily cement a group game scene – can you think of how? In the complementary example, Player 3 could sadly suck on his thumb while holding a blanket, then remove his thumb with a distasteful look and say, “We were stupid enough to love dumb things.” In the mirrored example, Player 3 could act like a cat batting around a ball of string and “siiiiiiiggggghhhhhhh.”

We don’t, of course, have to have more than two players on stage. The Personal / Personal initiating sequence is just more conducive to the potential.

SCENIC / PERSONAL

This sequence is the rarest because, when Player 1 initiates toward a scenic game, it is often Player 2’s default to react to the emotional perspective levied against her. But because it’s so rare, it can be fun for Player 2 to choose a personally grounding emotional perspective despite Player 1’s attempt to initially engage her in the scenic game.

Player 1 – I want to kill you and steal your life.
Player 2 – Oh, hey, my Diamond of the Month Club package arrived!

Scene.

SCENIC / SCENIC

This is the least rare initiation sequence in two person scenes. As just addressed, it is a natural default for Player 2 to react to Player 1’s initiating scenic game. And it’s too often an improviser’s default to latch on to their scene partner instead of establishing themselves personally.

Player 1 – I want to kill you and steal your life.
Player 2 – I’d like to see you try; I’m coated in gold, bitch.

Scene. Because it is a valid choice and the subsequent scene has potential.
But the scene’s sustained success depends on recognizing that the initiating sequence is, just as discussed in group games, the *Offer*, and that in every “two person scene” we have *at least* two Personal Games and one Scenic Game at our fingertips.

Sustained success of any “two person scene” relies on the interplay between developing patterns of emotional behavior.

Practiced in **bold emotional reactions toward active scene elements** we are ready to **build scenes through the pattern between Personal and Scenic Games**.

NEXT: *Building scenes through the pattern between Personal and Scenic Games*
2.2 – More “Two Person Scene” Practical

How do we build our two person scenes after the initiating sequences? **Practice.**

Let's review the **components of strong two person scene initiations:**

1. **From the moment you enter the stage, actively engage either your environment or your scene partner with an emotional perspective dialed up to 11.**

That is all.

With that, or those, emotional perspective(s) established, we seek to build sustainable scenes through heightening the pattern of the games at play and establishing and heightening the pattern between the games at play.

Ready?

Two players up. When I say, “**Go,**” each player will **choose an emotional perspective toward an active scene element, thereby establishing an initiating sequence.**

Remember there are **four options for initiating sequences:** Personal / Scenic, Personal / Personal, Scenic / Personal, and Scenic / Scenic.

Remember that **whichever form this Offer sequence takes, that we have at least two Personal Games and one Scenic Game at our fingertips in every “two person scene.”**

Remember that we **can engage our initiating emotional perspectives dialed up to 11 because we have other Personal Games and Scenic Games at our fingertips to switch our focus to if our current trajectory is unsustainable.**

**WALK BACKWARDS WITH ME....**

*from a Personal / Scenic initiating sequence.*

Player 1 – *(staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers)* “sigh.”
Player 2 – “Oh, I've had it with your attitude, mister.”
Player 1 has a **choice;** he can **continue to invest in his personal game...**

Player 1 – “There’s no cat and no cradle.”

... or he can **engage the scenic game initiated by Player 2.**

Player 1 – Go fuck yourself.

Both are valid choices. For the sake of illustrating initiating emotions dialed up to 11, let’s follow the latter.
The scene is currently engaged in the Scenic Game. Where do they go from here? They heighten the game at play. In doing so they remember the exercise of endowing their scene partner through their emotional perspective.

Player 1 – (staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers) “sigh.”
Player 2 – Oh, I’ve had it with your attitude, mister.
Player 1 – Go fuck yourself.
Player 2 – Fuck myself? No. Not this time. I’ve had it with your self-righteousness.
Player 1 – Stop being a little prick and go fuck yourself.
Player 2 – Little prick? No. Not this girl. This girl’s going to cock some sense into you – big cock some sense into your myopic, selfish world.

Tense, huh? I’m illustrating a point with aggressively conflicting emotional perspectives. Where do they go from here? The scene is tense (especially for the audience) and the players are no doubt center stage up in each other’s face. Where do they go from here?

They can continue to escalate the conflict hoping they’ll find an edit before they punch each other...

...or they can remember that there are other games at their fingertips that will allow them to disengage from this tense scenic game. What’s required is a cap for this scenic game that was triggered by Player 1’s “attitude” and Player 2’s aggression.

Player 1 – I’m sorry.

You want the audience to root for you? Make your character lose. What would have happened if Rocky beat Apollo Creed in the first movie? Not a sequel.

Unmitigated tension is a bomb that players have to hope goes off in conjunction with an edit. Managed – not “mitigated” – tension is a time bomb that players can manipulate to demand an edit. In the parlance of Chapter 2.0, we’re talking about $y = x$ versus the sine curve.

Choosing to lose also allows you to win the audience. We don’t like watching players give-up, but we love rooting for affected characters. “Losing” makes you sympathetic.

Either player could choose to lose. In this case, Player 1 – with “I’m sorry” – decided to lose in the face of Player 2’s aggressive pursuit of the scenic game that pitted the two players at odds. Player 2 could have just as easily diverted the tension by investing in a personal game – “Ah, man; I spilled my drink.”

Where can their current trajectory lead? Player 1 does have a personal game already in play.

Player 1 – (staring forlornly at the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers) “sigh.”
Player 2 – Oh, I’ve had it with your attitude, mister.
Player 1 – Go fuck yourself.
Player 2 – *Fuck myself?* No. Not this time. I’ve had it with your self-righteousness.
Player 1 – Stop being a little prick and go fuck yourself.
Player 2 – *Little prick?* No. Not this girl. This girl’s going to cock some sense into you – big cock some sense into your myopic, selfish world.
Player 1 – I’m sorry.
Player 2 – *You’re sorry?* No. Not this-
Player 1 – I just... *(refocuses forlornly on the Cat’s Cradle he works with his fingers)* 
Player 2 – *You get overwhelmed when you think of how simple life used to be–* 
Player 1 – *(cutting Player 2 off again)* Yeah. It used to be I could make Cat’s Cradle all day without worrying about what I was actually contributing to society.

Deep, huh? Again, I’m illustrating a point. Player 1, choosing to defuse the scenic game, focuses back on his personal game which, at the time of initiation, was simply the Cat’s Cradle connected to a sigh. But now, given Player 2’s endowments, Player 1 reacts to the Cat’s Cradle through the lens of being forlornly “selfish.”

Player 2 has attempted to remain focused on her half of the scenic game, choosing to heighten the pattern of her frustration toward Player 1. But now it’s her turn to lose. Player 2 here has to remember that she, too, has the potential for a personal game at her fingertips. How would she react to the environment of the scene if Player 1 wasn’t on stage?

Player 2 – *(takes a deep breath and engages the environment, picking up an object she has yet to define in her mind)* I look at this – at all these toys in your childhood bedroom – and I... *(gets verklempt)*...just realize how important it is for a child to be loved.

Now that Player 2 is focused on her personal game, Player 1 can continue to heighten his.

Player 1 – Being a child was great. Oh, how I miss it. This Play-Doh Factory...you could make one thing then mash it up and make something else.
Player 2 – Your dad slaved away to buy you this Fisher Price cash register so you could practice being good with money in a safe place.
Player 1 – This Lite-Bright? siiiiggghhh. Everything I made came alive but nothing was ever permanent.
Player 2 – *Jesus Christ,* this attitude of yours! You and I are having a *baby!*
Player 1 – Go fuck yourself. Again.
Player 2 – I fucked myself with your frozen sperm, but it was *your* frozen sperm! You and I are having a *baby!*

Sine curve. A more-dramatic-than-comedic sine curve to be sure, but, again, it’s to illustrate a point. **The funny in this scene played out on stage comes from the bold reactions, the details and the patterns of emotional behavior.** A scene where a couple negotiates whether or not to have a baby is drama, but **the zig-zag of emotional behavior through bold reactions is comedy** *(See: Clowning).*
The audience didn’t “know” who these players were to each other right off the bat, nor what the “scene was about.” I didn’t know either of those two things when I started writing this scene; I just followed the patterns of emotional behavior and the scene wrote itself. It’s always better in a scene to discover that you have a gun in your pocket than to force your fingers into a gun’s shape because you’re trying to get a reaction from the audience.

This scene was engaging right off the bat because the players made bold emotional choices without knowledge of “why.” They trusted those emotional choices enough to heighten them and follow their patterns. And choosing to cap the initial scenic game’s progression by returning to and focusing on individual personal games allows the tension of the established scenic game to heighten even while it is not directly addressed. Diverting attention to personal games also allows the players to discover “what the scene is about” instead of having to either force an explanation because unmitigated focus on the scenic game requires them to retreat to exposition or follow the initial \( y = x \) trajectory to the fight-or-fuck moment and hope for an edit.

This scene as played out doesn’t have to end here. It can, but, since the players are now comfortable with their personal and scenic games, they aren’t playing in desperation for an edit. If the latest outbreak of the scenic game is allowed to continue, Player 1 need only say a variation of “I’m sorry” again once then tension reaches its second sine curve apex. Then there’s a whole room of toys on which Players 1 and 2 can refocus their personal games.

Focusing on building the pattern between Personal and Scenic Games in a two person scene allows players to engage any individual game diangled up to 11 without forcing focus onto exposition. “Why” did Player 1 react the way he did? Because he set up a pattern of behavior wherein he always reacts that way. “Why” did he acquiesce in escalating that behavior? Because he’d reached the point when he always acquiesces.

This pattern between patterns allows the improviser to discover his character’s “why,” but the committed pattern alone is all the “why” the audience needs to get on board and take the ride.

So. Rather than focus on on-stage script writing, in pursuit of improv as improv does best, an improviser focuses on defining the Triggers and Caps of his patterns of emotional behavior.

**TRIGGERS AND CAPS**

There’s an esoteric exercise I like to use as a warm-up to explain Triggers and Caps that I call My Three Rules, but, in the spirit of the “practical,” this post will continue its exploration of the concepts through two person scene work.

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**For more exercises and lessons around Leveraging Emotional Stakes**

click the links below or search improvdoesbest.com for:

- Relationship Stakes
- Behavioral Stakes
- Situational Stakes
A Trigger is the active scene element that instigates a player’s emotional behavior. A Cap is the active scene element that tempers a player’s emotional behavior. Walking backwards, both triggers and caps can be defined in retrospect.

Defining triggers and caps along our trajectory can help lead us Pavlovian-ly through sustainable, exciting scenes. We’re navigating a kayak through rocky rapids while facing up river; triggers and caps let us play confidently amidst the chaos.

One Trigger is the active scene element that you initiate toward. It makes you feel something. Maybe in that initiating moment you made yourself feel something about that element, but now, and moving forward, you’ve given that element that emotional power over you. More of it will make you feel more of your something.

Be specific and focus your trigger to a point so you’ll jump when pricked with it. Player 1 walks out, feeling the rain around him with opened palms and a grouchy face, and says, “I hate the rain.” Evolving, he would do well to focus on what it is specifically that makes him feel, and specifically the effect. Player 1 says, “I hate the ping of raindrops on my skin” while reacting with sharp pains to each individual rain drop that hits him. That’s empowering an element.

Player 1 initiates a scenic game – choking back tears – saying, “I’m really proud of you, man.” Players 1 and 2 would do well to define specificity around the trigger. Player 1 could focus on endowing his scene partner – embracing even the obvious – while heightening his affected emotional behavior. Gasping, “You’re standing!” Retching, “You have feet!” Gushing sobs, “The world exists!”

If you’re lost in a scene go back and visit where you were more confidently. What was your emotional perspective and the active element in your initiation? Give more power to that cause-and-effect reaction and let that pattern you’re establishing lead you to success.

In reacting to “I’m really proud of you, man,” Player 2 could choose to help focus her partner’s trigger, coyly responding, “You liiiikke my baaaadge”. Now Player 2 is in control of a dynamically active element – a great gift in a scene. She can play up the specific elements of the badge – “De-tect-tive.” She can heighten through expanding around the badge – “You like my blaze orange sash?” while sashaying. Now, whenever Player 2 plays her half of the scenic game, Player 1 HAS to heighten his emotional behavior. The scene has a rule that triggers fun for all, players and audience.

A Cap puts a top on the game. One Cap is the moment that earns your scene an edit – game topped and ended. But if your first Cap is also your last then you know you played an \( y = x \) or \( Ax + By + C = 0 \) scene.

Another Cap is our Reset button from group games. We’ve reached the end of this pattern. Now replicate it.
A Cap can also put a top on a game to save it away for later. Knowing that you can deploy a cap without it requiring an edit should help give you confidence to aggressively **heighten the emotional behavior instigated by its trigger.** In the scene where Player 1 is proud to the point of sobs over the fact that his partner and the world still exist, the height of that game will be hard to sustain – he can only gnash his teeth, bellowing maniacally, “Existence exists!” for so long. But what if Player 2 chooses to suddenly hiss, “Shush. You’ll wake the other Morlocks”? Player 1 could continue the triggered game into this new context, getting some new life out of the new details – “Praise the lord, the Morlocks are alive” – but he’s running an old game on borrowed steam. Better to **put the heightened game away for a while, and Player 2 just provided a perfect opportunity for Player 1 to be affected off an unsustainable path** – in hearing about the Morlocks, Player 1 changes from ecstatic to scared into a statue. A **bold choice from Player 2 is endowed with the power to change Player 1’s emotional behavior,** and a fun game is put away while it is still wet.

Caps, like Triggers, can be defined and refined in retrospect. Player 1 **doesn’t have to wait** for Player 2 or any bold new element to choose to cap his current emotional behavior. If Player 1 feels too dependent on – and/or too aggressive toward – Player 2, he can can always just choose to feel something personal. The Player 1 that’s drooling pride over Player 2’s badge could suddenly stop and say, “I’m late” – to say it, **he doesn’t need to know what he’s late for,** he just has to **feel being late.** Remember, you have at least two personal and a scenic games at your fingertips in a two person scene – think about having a few additional initiations at your service. **Feel like you should feel differently? Feel differently.** I love you, I love you, I love you, I’m depressed. Why the change? Pick an active element. Because you just said “blueberry,” that’s why. Because I only just now noticed this painting’s of a matador.

But **don’t wait for “why” when you need a Cap.**

Triggers and Caps shape the oscillation and flourish in our trajectory, connecting and embellishing the curves of our **patterns of emotional behavior.** The timing and progression of activating Triggers and Caps define the slope, height and depth – and **beauty** – of our progress through scenes.

**ONE MAN’S CAP IS ANOTHER MAN’S TRIGGER**

By activating Triggers and Caps, we establish the overall game of the scene as the pattern between individual games in the scene.

**Player 1’s Personal Game** is laughing at the comics in his newspaper, then referencing how the jokes are particularly funny given his specific circumstances.

**Player 2’s Personal Game** is searching frantically for his cell phone, freaking over the fact that he’s running late but will need his phone to find his destination.

**The Scenic Game** is Player 2’s vehement belief that only idiots fail to keep up with technology and Player 1’s demand that he be respected in his own house.
From these games, the overall pattern of the scene can be crafted in myriad ways. But let’s remember, **Offer, Set and Cement – with each move we seek to focus our path.**

The first two Triggers are the focus of our initiations – an emotional reaction to an active element. They are the Offer; they are anything. “Ho, ho. That’s my Marmaduke.” “Further mocker, I have to find my phone.” And now we have a Personal / Personal initiation sequence. How long do we focus on heightening these two games through their triggers? As long as you feel like.

But, there are advantages to capping a game right away, especially when capping one game means triggering another.

Player 1 – Ho, ho. That’s my Marmaduke.
Player 2 – Further mocker, I have to find my phone.
Player 1 – I had this dog once – big girl by the name of Tiny – she usedta hop up on my lap, too. *(mimes playfully being crushed)*
Player 2 – Print is dead, dummy.

Demanding a different reaction from your scene partner with a different reaction yourself is a strong sign of a Cap.

Advantages to quickly stuffing a strong game trajectory back in your pocket? **It builds tension, especially when two successes happen:** The strong game had sharp triggers that the audience can recall. And the next curve of the trajectory is even more fun to be a part of. If I initiate with “Kiss me,” and you kiss me, we’ve triggered dynamite. And we’ve avoided waffling through a negotiation. Sure, we could keep kissing. But if we break away after the first passionate kiss? Then, while we might be licking the wick of that particular piece of dynamite, the audience knows that this game’s wick still smolders, and now we’ve also lit up another stick.

Player 1 – Ho, ho. That’s my Marmaduke.
Player 2 – Further mocker, I have to find my phone.
Player 1 – I had this dog once – big girl by the name of Tiny – she usedta hop up on my lap, too. *(mimes playfully being crushed)*
Player 2 – Print is dead, dummy.
Player 1 – You will respect me in this house!
Player 2 – Fiiiiine. *(beat)* Fittie tucking, where’s my phocking fune!
Player 1 – Ho, ho, Mister Bumstead, you’ve spoken to me again.

A lot of Triggers and Caps tucked into a tight pattern.

But it doesn’t have to look like that. We are playing “two person scenes” after all. **Enjoy your pauses. Your explorations. Your Details. Your perspectives. Any single game in the scene above could have been exposed more before being capped.** We can follow demanded tangents – like the fact that old technology was harder to lose.
The key is remembering that you can set up a pattern of patterns so no one game ever has to be beaten up and dried out. And feel the freedom of being able to start scenes dialed up to 11 knowing that you have the keys to keeping the scene sustainable and progressing.

GAAAAAAASSSSSSSSSS, CLUTCH, SHIFT...

- Player 1 – You’re my exact double!
- Player 2 – We look identical!
- Player 1 – You have my haircut.
- Player 2 – You’re wearing my same shirt.
- Player 1 – You’re wearing my same smile.
- Player 2 – I’m a realtor!
- Player 1 – I’m Sagittarius!
- Player 2 – I’m Chris!
- Players 1 & 2 in unison – Me, too!

They have engaged the fun, headlong trajectory of a Scenic Game. Now, take a breath. Break away. Change gears.

- Player 1 – *(drawn away by his nose)* I smell hotdogs.
- Player 2 – *(drawn away by her ears)* Ice Cream Man’s coming.

Get lost in there a while. Inhale. Listen. Rev it. You’ll find your way back to the mirror. Or maybe you’ll find your way into an expansion where each player has a conversation with a separate tertiary player on either side of the stage while heightening their related games.

Circle back if you feel it. Spiral out if you feel that. Cut reflecting trajectories in separate fields of play if that’s where your feelings lead you.

Trace your game moves, activate Triggers and Caps, and follow your feelings. Build the scene’s pattern of patterns while walking backwards, focusing the flow your emotional behaviors direct you in.

**TRUST WHAT IS**

In the Rule of 3s, the 2nd iteration is typically the least impactful. Don’t lose faith in the pattern. Commit and the audience will follow. If you’re worried about what’s happening, the audience will worry with you. Do it again – whatever it is – and they’ll be convinced you meant it the first time.

Don’t self-consciously revert to an inward focus because you think you need to fix a scene.

“Look,” “Listen,” and “I mean,” are red flags that an improviser is abandoning active reactions in favor of defensive justifications. Here’s an example from real life:
Player 1 starts the scene drenched in drunken frustration. Player 2 engages the scene with weathered tolerance, dutifully clearing and cleaning mimed bar tables. Player 1 grabs a shirt and attempts to clumsily force it on. Player 2 screams, “Damnit, Frank, those shirts are for people who finish a Four-Floor Burger under four minutes!” Player 1 relents and self deprecates. Player 2 softens, acknowledging that Frank may be stupid but he’s loyal. After rebuilding his drunken frustration, Player 1 grabs a pair of pants and attempts to kick them on. Player 2 screams, “Frank! Those are Shot-tober Bar Crawl participant pants!” Player 3 walks on as the bar manager, “Is there a problem here?” Player 2 softens and assures Player 3 back off to the wings.

So far, so awesome. I can see that Player 1 is now an excited improviser; he knows what direction to heighten in and what path to follow. I can also see that Player 2 has crept back into her head; she’s thinking, “wait, what’s going on here? I have to explain.”

So when Player 1 reaches out, picks up a heavy object and places it on his shoulder, Player 2 doesn’t even notice from inside her head. She turns to him and says, “Listen, I know you don’t have anyone to be with and that it’s Christmas...” She keeps on talking. Player 1 listens, standing with his hand propping up the shouldered object Player 2 still hasn’t seen. Soon all activity is gone and both players stand facing each other in the center of the stage.

Now, Player 2’s tangent into exposition didn’t have to be a “problem.” After diverting the audience’s attention with her monologue she could have snapped back to the active moment screaming, “Now put down that Pint Proletariat Parrot!” But she didn’t. Why? Because she was in her head instead of following the scene’s patterns.

There are no mistakes on an improv stage. But there are missed opportunities. Don’t miss opportunities because you’re in your head instead of focused outward, leading by following.

Getting good at pattern work demands a dedication to developing pattern-recognition skills through practice and critical analysis. Getting good at improv as improv does best requires – as does anything we want to get good at – an enthusiastic engagement in the process and a confident vulnerability allowing us to try, fail and try again.

NEXT: Being Tertiary
3D.1 – Being Tertiary

Pop quiz, hotshot. **When do you add on to a two-person scene in progress?**

A. When you have a funny idea  
B. When the scene needs to be saved  
C. When there are holes in the information on stage  
D. When you want to get in on the fun  
E. When you can heighten the game in play

Think about it. Now realize the question is flawed because its answers are not mutually exclusive.

Here is the proper pop quiz: **When do you add on to a two-person scene in progress?**

A. To serve yourself  
B. To serve the show

Hopefully now the answer is more obvious.

Entering a two-person scene in progress, you are a **tertiary player.** The scene’s not about you and you shouldn’t make it about you.

If your funny idea serves the show – **triggering a reaction, capping a sequence or inciting a satisfying edit** – bring it on. If it gets you a laugh and at best gives nothing and at worst takes momentum or focus, save it for the bar’s “I was thinking…” session post show. Improv is a great hobby for people who like to talk over drinks about what they could have done.

If you can drive focus toward a potentially meaty aspect of a scene that’s flailing, get out there and remind the two players of the great idea they already have at their disposal.

**But beware the impulse to “save” the scene.** Too typically an improver executes on this impulse by inserting a new element – to the rescue! But for players who are already treading water on stage, this is like being thrown an anchor instead of a life preserver. Players 1 and 2 think, “I don’t know how to react to what we’ve established. How am I supposed to react to this?” **You become just one more thing to figure out in an already belabored scene.** Players treading water can also panic and drag down and drown any “helping” hand. **Don’t try and save the scene with new information. If the scene really needs your help, focus the players on information they’ve already established.**

**The impulse to fill the “holes” in information can be similarly derailing and/or burdensome.** Describing to the audience that the players on stage – who are bemoaning a tragic accident wherein a car packed with their friends was crushed by a Mack truck – are wearing clown costumes, could help establish and heighten a funny dynamic. Entering a scene where a loving couple is enjoying a sunset through mixed metaphors to establish that they’re
on a cruise ship will likely require that the couple divert or dilute their fun to incorporate your tangential detail.

A scene that you are watching go well is going well without you in it. Don’t enter a two person scene to divide the fun into thirds; enter a scene if you can all share three times the fun. A scene – wherein Player 1 is embarrassed to learn from Player 2 that the office knows it’s her birthday – could probably use Player 3 as another congratulatory coworker. But a pair of children mapping the divide between rich and poor across their sandbox constructions probably doesn’t need your insertion of a childish representation of the middle class.

So if there is an answer to the first pop quiz posed, it’s E) When you can heighten the game in play. In entering as a tertiary player into a scene in progress, we serve the show by heightening the game at play. The move must play to what the players on stage have already established.

Likewise, the players on stage must commit to heightening what they had in play, and not dropping the reactions and sequences that the additional player’s move is targeting. If a Player 3 enters your two person scene, assume he’s trying to elicit a reaction he’s already seen you produce, just more of it. If nothing else react emotionally. Especially if your scene is flailing, don’t drag down things more by focusing on figuring Player 3 out.

An improv team should agree to this Tertiary Player Good Faith Mantra: I will only enter a scene in progress to serve what has already been established. And I will react to those who enter my scene in progress on the assumption they seek to heighten what has already been established.

Now,...what do you do? What do you do?

TERTIARY MOVES AT YOUR SERVICE

Embodying the Environment – we can be set pieces; we can be crowds. Player 3 can physicalize the scene’s referenced ottoman, addressed grandfather clock, or admired Empire State Building. This works nicely when the physicalized object is called for by the players on stage and especially nicely when Player 3 plays a mute object, because both conditions minimize the chances that the scene will become “about” Player 3. You’re a tertiary character; the scene’s not about you. This is also why one should be careful when fleshing out the scene with other human characters. If Players 1 and 2 are at a dance, by all means the scene needs background dancers. But a waiter isn’t necessary in every scene wherein a couple is eating dinner. The tangents created when acknowledging filler players can hamper heightening. Executed with deference to the games at play, embodying environment can add help focus while expanding the scene.

Scene Painting/ “We See” – we can come in from offstage to describe (and physicalize) a previously unseen “visual” aspect of the scene. For example, a pompous character is painted with a monocle, “#1 Boss” button, etc. For another example, a scene with a child bemoaning having to do his/her chores is painted with a window showing a beautiful day outside, an
Everest of dishes to clean, etc. This type of move is typically executed by a player entering the scene, not as a character, but, with a verbal aside directed at the audience. “These people are in clown costumes.” “We see this man has a hole through his torso.” These are Detail moves, but they work best when they are delivered emotionally and when they connect with a character’s emotional behavior. Sometimes, while contributing his verbal add-on, Player 3 will wave his hand generally over or toward the area of stage he’s referring to; but a better Player 3 will often define what he’s describing in mime as well as words. In conjunction with “We see this man has a beard,” this Player 3 shows how big and bushy the beard is by cupping and fluffing it with his hands before exiting the scene.

**Walk-ons** – we can enter a two player scene in progress as another character, offering a move that contributes to the progression of the game(s) at play. Two high school boys are feeling self conscious in the hallway so Player 3 enters as a mean girl to point out their foibles. Two players are arguing over the value of the movie they just left, so Player 3 enters to agree with one of them and rile the other. If there is one tertiary move an improviser knows, it’s the Walk-on. Unfortunately, too few improvisers know to Walk Off. You’re a tertiary character; the scene’s not about you. A Walk-on should only be used to heighten/sharpen a game already at play. An entering character must acquiesce to those already on stage and strive not to be the focus of the scene.

“**Cut-to**” (aka “Show me,” flashback, flash-forward, etc.) – when players doing a scene refer to a particular moment or event (from the past, present or future), we can take the scene there with a Cut-to. Like the “We see,” this move is typically executed with a verbal aside to the audience. Player 1 is proving his masculinity to Player 2 by boasting that he will climb a mountain; “Cut to the mountain.” Players on a first date awkwardly walk out of a theater; “Show the movie.” A comfortable ensemble can perform the “Cut-to” without telegraphing the move by shouting “Cut to.” Players wonder what their boss does with all those profits; show me what their boss does with all those profits. You don’t have to say, “show me what their boss does with all those profits;” a sweep in from upstage – not across downstage – should be ample sign to a twosome alert to the potential “Cut-to” moments they’re prompting to recognize a “Cut-to” is cutting into their scene. As with Walk-ons, though, a Cut-to should be followed by a “Cut back.” It’s a tertiary move; the scene’s not about it.” If Player 3’s “Cut to the mountain” exposes that Player 1 was not nearly as masculine as he claimed to be, then we will want to cut back and forth between the mountain and his boasts to Player 2. But still Player 3 seeks to serve the game at play. Don’t know what Player 3 expects from you with his “Cut to...”? Doesn’t matter – React; Move; Change posture; Do something; Do anything. If Player 3 says, “Cut to five hours later,” and you and Player 2 just stand there, the audience may laugh, but they are laughing at you, not with you. Leverage the power of immediate enthusiastic acceptance embodied in a quick reaction and/or movement following a Cut-to.
Tag out – when one character from the scene in progress begs to be seen juxtaposed next to a third character, we can be that third character. The inspiration for execution is similar to that which should inspire the “Cut-to.” Take the mountain scene for example. Instead of “Cut to the mountain,” Player 3 can tap Player 2 on the shoulder – indicating to Player 2 that she is being replaced on stage and should go to the wings, and indicating to Player 1 that he is now in a different space or time – perhaps saying, “Dude, we’re only ten meters high and you need oxygen?” An in-sync group can signal a Tag-out with a wave instead of a tap, or an articulate initiation making it clear who should go and how whom remains should react. As a tertiary move, the scene should avoid becoming about the Tag-out. And s/he who is replaced should be ready on the wings to perform a Tag-back-in.

BUT...

Maybe Player 3’s Tag-out serves the scene by inspiring a string of Tag-outs all heightening the same emotional behavior of Player 1, perhaps utilizing Help Desk game mechanics.

Maybe Player 3’s Tag-out serves the scene by inspiring a series of laddered Tag-outs each heightening the scenic game dynamic (like a progression of bosses) established by the initial two players.

And maybe Player 3’s Tag-out serves the progression of scenes by tying in a character, object, event, theme or reaction that the audience saw three scenes back.

A tertiary move should be made to serve the show. Sometimes the focus should be on serving what’s been established in the scene of the moment. Sometimes the focus should be on serving what’s been established in the show up to the moment.

SERVING THE SCENE OF THE MOMENT

The two players already on stage are working – if pursuing improv as improv does best – on building patterns of emotional behavior. If you are going to enter stage, it should be to aid them in their pursuit.

The two players already on stage are working to establish and heighten their personal and scenic games and the pattern(s) connecting those games. Enter stage as a tertiary addition to heighten a game by triggering a player’s or players’ reaction(s). Enter the stage to facilitate the pattern building between games by providing a catalyst for capping and resetting a sequence.

Players 1 and 2 are at the zoo. Player 1, a child, imitates the chimps they’re watching, laughing at how stupid they are. Player 2, a mother, is consumed by thinking of whom it is.
that a chimp reminds her. When Player 1 pulls on Player 2’s dress hem and hollers, Player 2 dutifully gives the child a bit of food.

What can a Player 3 do?

Player 3 could become a crazy funny chimp, running around center stage and hollering, taking full focus as the trigger for the personal games of both Players 1 and 2. And maybe this Player 3 is hilarious. She better be; she just stole the scene.

So, the better question is: **How can tertiary players deploy moves in service of the personal and scenic games established?**

**Player 3 could embody the environment.** She could be a never acknowledged background extra enjoying the zoo. She could stand beside the chimpish child as a well-behaved child to heighten Player 1’s personal game. A zookeeper and a chimp could perform a feeding ritual that echoes Player 2’s feeding of the child. Players 3 through 7 could all become caged chimps. The more any of these tertiary embodiments remains mute, the better a chance the scene stands of remaining about the initial two players. Sadly, there are too few improvisers who know how and when to keep their mouths shut.

**We can be verbal tertiary characters.** We can be tertiary characters that actively affect the progression of the scene. Just remember – as we emphasized in our Group Game work – the more “stuff” on stage, the harder it is to keep the scene tight. If we are simply embodying the environment, we can just be on stage. But the more active we are as tertiary players in scenes the more important it is for our active additions to align with the progression of the scene.

...  
Player 1 – *(aping the chimps)* “Stupid monkey, acting so...stupid.”  
Player 2 – *(scratching her head)* “Is it George? No. Who does that chimp remind me of?”  
Player 3 – “**We see** the boy has long arms and hairy knuckles.”  
...  
Player 1 – *(aping the chimps)* “Stupid monkey, acting so...stupid.”  
Player 2 – *(scratching her head)* “Is it George? No. Who does that chimp remind me of?”  
Player 3 **walks on** as snobby teenage girl.  
Player 1 – “Mom! I’m HUN-gryyyyy.” *(pulling on her skirt)*  
Player 2 – “Yes, little man.” *(pulls snack from purse)* “Calm...now catch!”  
Player 3 – “Yo. Totes gross.” *(walks off)*  
...  
Player 1 – *(aping the chimps)* “Stupid monkey, acting so...stupid.”  
Player 2 – *(scratching her head)* “Is it George? No. Who does that chimp remind me of?”  
Player 1 – “Mom! I’m HUN-gryyyyy.” *(pulling on her skirt)*  
Player 2 – “Yes, little man.” *(pulls snack from purse)* “Calm...now catch!”  
Player 1 – *(aggressively chewing while talking at chimps)* “Look at you. Idiots.”  
Player 2 – “Tom? No.” *(scratching the back left side of her head with her right arm; her*
“elbow raised high) “Who is it?”
Player 3 – “Cut to them at their house.”
Player 4 – “Honey, I’m…” (beats his chest) “hoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-ome.”
Players 1 and 2 run happily around the room banging on things.

...The tertiary player in these instances entered when inspired, served the scene, and – like a Boy Scout – left the scene better for her having been there. The player’s content plays clearly to what’s been established so that the initial players have no excuse not to roll right along. And – at least in the “We see” and Walk-on example – the tertiary moves heighten the games of the initial players without re-railing the established progression.

Now, in all of these examples, the tertiary move could be a one-off. Propelled along established rails by the “We see” and Walk-on example moves, Players 1 and 2 could continue to invest in their games without the need to see the boy’s pronounced brow or the snobby girl’s return. The Cut-to scene example could certainly be edited at this point.

But there is fun to be had working the rhythm of tertiary moves into the rhythm of the scene.

BUT, the more “stuff,” the more important tight patterns become.

So how can we continue serving this scene’s games with our tertiary moves?

**First card played is trump.** The “We see the boy has long arms and hairy knuckles” and the snobby teenage girl both serve to heighten the chimpish child, but they do not heighten off each other. Both can coexist in the scene, and a tight pattern could incorporate both “We see” and Walk-on elements moving forward, but it’s an unnecessary complication when right off the bat we could heighten the progression of tertiary moves. “**First card played is trump**” should be our group’s default. If “We see the boy has long arms and hairy knuckles” beats snobby teenage girl to stage, snobby girl should let her idea go and instead figure out how to heighten the “We see” game.

**Work to Set the sequence established by the tertiary Offer.** Why did any of the Player 3s in the given examples enter the scene? Because they were inspired in that moment to heighten a game. In order for a Player 4 to heighten the tertiary game, the question he needs to be able to answer is “**When did Player 3 enter the scene?**” We could bombard the scene with We-sees directly on the heels of the first, but in doing so we aren’t leveraging the power of pattern. Better then to play the triggers and caps of the tertiary game, getting the players and audience engaged in the pattern sequence to maximize the effect of moves.

... Player 1 – (aping the chimps) “Stupid monkey, acting so...stupid.”
Player 2 – (scratching her head) “Is it George? No. Who does that chimp remind me of?”
Player 3 – “**We see** the boy has long arms and hairy knuckles.”
Player 1 – “Mom! I’m HUN-gryyyyyy.” (pulling on her skirt)
Player 2 – “Yes, little man.” (pulls snack from purse) “Calm...now catch!”
Player 1 – (aggressively chewing while talking at chimps) “Look at you. Idiots.”
Player 2 – “Tom? No. Who is it?”
Player 4 – “We see the boy wears special shoes to accommodate his opposable toes.”
...
Player 1 – (aping the chimps) “Stupid monkey, acting so…stupid.”
Player 2 – (scratching her head) “Is it George? No. Who does that chimp remind me of?”
...
Player 1 – (aggressively chewing while talking at chimps) “Look at you. Idiots.”
Player 2 – “Tom? No. Who is it?”
Player 4 – walks on as a stogy gentleman holding a monocle in place.
Player 1 – “Oo-oo-Mom. Hungry, hungry, hungry.” (pulling on her skirt)
Player 2 – “Okay, Coco.” (pulls snack from purse) “Siiiit...now catch!”
Player 4 – “Well I never. Positively primitive.” (walks off)
...

When there are 2 there should probably be a 3rd. This is not a hard and fast rule, but it is a solid default. Especially when the Set move clearly clarifies the pattern sequence, the audience is primed to react strongly to the third iteration of a move; to not do it is to leave laughs on the table. Remember, the second move may not garner as strong an audience reaction as the first or third, but it serves both. Also, remember, once you reach the third move the scene doesn’t have to end there either; with a solid rhythm we can go all night.

Follow the flow, carrying everything behind us with us. Wherever your scene is in the moment is the “right” place. Whatever moves led to that moment are moves we embrace. Your scenes don’t have to play as tightly tied to the pattern as the given examples.

And pattern moves that you think are abundantly clear, may not be as clear to your fellow player. But if we are each working to heighten what we see as established, we make progress together. In the Cut-to take on the chimp scene, the scene could oscillate between the zoo and home with Cut-tos and Cut-backs, heightening Player 2’s continued confusion and what is crystal clear to the audience. Or the home scene could be given more breathing room at which point Player 4 is revealed as Tarzan, who never shared his history with his wife. With subsequent Cut-tos we could transplant the Tarzan family to all manner of places where manners matter. What we’ll never do is reach the point where we feel we have nothing left and have to invent new premises through “Look,” “Listen,” or “I mean...” Trust what’s established and lead forward by following.

And what’s true in any given scene is doubly true for the show as a whole.
SERVING THE SHOW UP TO THE MOMENT

A long-form set can take many forms. For the sake of finishing up this section on Being Tertiary, let’s envision a long-form based on a string of two-person scenes. Two players start and build a scene that may or may not involve tertiary moves. When that scene is edited, another two players start and build a scene that may or may not involve tertiary moves.

We know when and how to be tertiary when looking at each scene individually. On top of this knowledge, there are a couple guidelines that will help us to know when and how to be tertiary with an eye toward the whole of the show up to the moment.

**Variance. This applies to content and pacing.** If the last two-person scene was besieged by Walk-ons, it might be better to let this two person scene breathe – without Walk-ons and maybe without any tertiary additions at all. Let the demand of Variance break your group out of its go-to tertiary moves. Improvisers love Tag-outs and We-sees, but they can love them to death. An emphasis on variance can help ensure that when a Tag-out run injects itself into a two-person scene it’s special, not the default.

**Callback.** Having a character from several scenes before appear in a Tag-out run during the current scene can be a lot of fun. When the first scene of a long-form involves a world reeling from a nuclear strike and the current scene involves a couple prepping for their wedding, it can be fun to “Cut to the wedding day” only to find it ruined by that nuclear bomb. Tertiary moves can help players weave in threads that help connect the piece as a whole. And Callbacks earn a rich laugh from an audience who are made to feel “in on” the joke. BUT Callbacks can’t serve the show as a whole at the expense of the scene of the moment. Don’t force a Callback and then require the two players on stage to deal with your presence just because you thought it would be funny to see your wacky monkey character again. You want the current scene to inspire the callback; don’t stand on the wings looking for your chance to return to your bit. Now, the tertiary move can be outside the progression of the current scene if the players on stage are able to ignore it. For example, “We see [X object from previous scene] in the corner” can connect two scenes, while not requiring that players acknowledge that object. A Walk-on followed quickly by a Walk-off can similarly connect the show without derailing the scene. But use caution – if a tertiary move does derail the scene in progress, it wasn’t worth it.

That’s enough on Being Tertiary. But it’s not the end of our exploration of the third dimension...

NEXT: **3D.2 SUBSEQUENT BEATS**
3D.2 – Subsequent Beats

Pop quiz, hotshot. **What do you take as inspiration in initiating subsequent beats of a scene during a long-form show?**

- A. This makes me think of that
- B. If this then what
- C. If first beat is “a day in the life,” then second beat is “the day when X happens”
- D. If a character was at work, show her at home. If a character was at home, show him at work.
- E. If *that* makes him feel *that* emotion, *this* should make him feel *this* emotion.
- F. If *that* makes her feel *that* emotion, *more of that* should make her feel *more of that* emotion.
- G. A place/event/time was mentioned – let's go there.
- H. That same character dynamic would be funny mapped over these new characters
- I. That same theme would be heightened through this context
- J. The theme of this whole piece would be sharpened if I callback that scene with this focus

The answer, if you know your 3D.1, is, of course, **serve the show.** And we serve the scenes of our show, and the show of our scenes, by **heightening the emotionally derived games at play.**

Any of the approaches above are valid sculptors of subsequent beats – they leverage an aspect of an originating scene in setting up a new scene. **But...** As our goal in any scene is establishing and heightening patterns of emotional behavior, *initiations that clearly focus attention on emotional reaction get us to our meat faster and leverage the power of pacing and pattern in building a show.* Any of the outlined options can get us to emotional reaction, but the mindsets of E and F hone us in quickest.

Using NONE of the approaches is also an option. We don’t **need** to revisit earlier scenes with subsequent beats during our long-form shows, unless, as with the Harold, the long form’s structure dictates that we do. We could perform an entire montage without characters, relationships, worlds or themes ever recurring. We could. **But... Too many unconnected scenes will fatigue the audience’s desire and ability to follow and care.** *And...* By not connecting subsequent scenes for the audience we are denying ourselves the powers of recall and pattern that only improvisation before a live audience can wield.

In any single scene we work to establish patterns of emotional behavior. With subsequent beats of that scene we can expand and heighten those patterns to great effect.
THIS IS HOW WE DO IT

No, wait. First...

THIS IS WHO SHOULD DO IT

There are three reasons the “two” players in the originating scene should not bear the onus of having to initiate the subsequent beat of their own Offer scene. One, those “two” players need to be focused on their moment – reacting to their specific stimuli and establishing their personal and scenic games – they can’t be expected to devote brain power to thinking about how games can be heightened with subsequent scene initiations.

Two, players on the wings have the advantage of perspective and time to understand established personal and scenic games from the outside and focus on how one or more of those games can be heightened with a focused initiation. Three, by itself, the injection of a new player into the world of the originating scene helps protect against a simple retreading of the same, unheightened ground.

When players from the originating scene initiate their own subsequent beats, it is too likely that they will over-prioritize plot or simply repeat what they did originally. A focus on plot too often renders the emotional behavior of the initiating character shallow and inconsistent – or, worse, tentative – by following the “sense” of the situation. Without a clear progression of how an originating scene’s games are being heightened, players resort to flatly rehashing old games or desperately clutching for new, unrelated material.

If an originating character delivers a heightening initiation great. But, I prefer to put the onus on initiating subsequent beats of an originating scene on those standing on the wings. Especially in a classroom setting, it forces those not participating in the scene on stage to pay attention, damnit.

Players on the wings are better positioned to suss out the personal and scenic games of the originating scene and think about initiating lines of subsequent beats that aim to heighten those patterns of emotional behavior without reliance on the “plot” and/or simple rehashing.

And, when it comes to initiating subsequent beats off an Offer scene, heightening the personal game of one of the originating characters beyond the originating scene’s premise, or heightening the scenic game of the originating characters – even excluding the originating players to heighten theme – is...

HOW WE DO IT

Pay attention to characters’ reactions. How do they react? What do they react to? Why do they react? Reread that. That’s important. As a player on the wings we need to be watching and listening to what originates in the Offer scene that has the greatest emotional stakes, either to a particular character and/or to the relationship established between
characters. On the wings we can think about the initiating line that clearly sets the progression of a game by eliciting a heightened sense of an established reaction.

**Pay attention to names and details.** It’s easier to call back an earlier scene if you can call it out by name. Players on stage, you know *details are important*. You know *characters have names* (it’s what separate them from the caricatures). *Details – especially names – are helpful in first beats and critical to subsequent beats.* Players on stage, name each other so a third player can call you back to stage and so the audience has help remembering you. Thoroughly describe the baseball game you and your scene partner are watching so it’ll be clear that the two new characters are attending that same game scenes later.

**Play attention to the progression.** We’re building patterns of patterns on patterns.

**Players on the wings, pay attention.**

*Player 1, Bobby, is obsessed with working out – exercise makes her feel vital and alive, and not working out makes her feel that she’s deteriorating. Player 2, Sam, loves watching movies but his enjoyment stems from watching with another person and making comments; watching by himself is not as satisfying. Sam hints to Bobby that he’s not satisfied with their relationship and is thinking about breaking up, but Bobby is oblivious, thinking Sam’s restlessness stems from not exercising enough.***

It’s a solid, active scene with emotional stakes and clearly established patterns of emotional behavior that define players personally and scenically.

So how can the scene be heightened through subsequent beats?

**The players could just do more of the same,** showing Bobby intensely engaged in P90X and Sam intensely engaged in Angela’s Ashes. **Following plot,** they could show the audience the day when they actually breakup and we could see if they care enough to stay together or go their separate ways.

**Or instead** – in pursuing improv as improv does best – **players could honor the patterns of emotional behavior established in the originating scene by establishing a new progression of personal games, scenic games, and themes.**

**SET THE PROGRESSION OF SUBSEQUENT BEATS**

In learning **To The Ether** games, we focused on one thing to clearly set the progression of heightening. In learning **Help Desk** games, we found focus through the repetition of dynamics and language. And in learning **Hey Everybody** games, we practiced heightening a series of reactions. Those same guiding principles can help us in initiating subsequent beats.

*Bobby, is obsessed with working out – exercise makes her feel vital and alive, and not working out makes her feel that she’s deteriorating.*
One thing.

**Bobby, is obsessed with working out.** Player 3 initiates with, “Bobby, if we lose the Johnson account, we lose our jobs; and you’re doing push-ups?”

**Exercise makes Bobby feel vital and alive.** Player 3 initiates with, “Dude, Bobby, herbal supplements make me feel vital and alive.”

**Not working out makes Bobby feel that she’s deteriorating.** Player 3 initiates with, “Now, Little Miss Bobby, if you can’t sit still you won’t learn how Sam-I-Am finally sells green eggs and ham.”

As To The Ether teaches, if we focus on one thing it’s easier to heighten that one thing in the Set and subsequent moves. In the first example, Bobby’s obsession that ruined her personal life now threatens her professional life. Focusing on this one aspect of the originating scene sets a progression for the subsequent beats based on a pattern of emotional behavior. A third beat could have Player 4’s St. Peter initiate with, “I’m tallying your karma for admittance to Heaven, and you’re doing squat thrusts?”

As Help Desk teaches, we sharpen triggers by honing language, helping evoke Pavlovian reactions from both scene partners and the audience. In the second example, the initiation makes the resultant pissing match between exercise and supplements clear. Bobby knows how to react because she knows that it’s exercise that makes her feel vital. We also have a clear progression set up in this initiating move – lazier activities making people feel vital. A third beat could further heighten Bobby’s personal games with, “Oooohhhhhmmmm, mediation makes me feel vital and alive.”

As Hey Everybody teaches, there’s power in recreating sequences of reaction. In the third example, Player 3 heightens the stimulus that defines who Bobby is. And Bobby knows how to react to characters who seek to confine her need to be active. And again, a progression is established by this set move. A third beat could be initiated by a pregnant player shouting at her belly, “Damnit, Bobby, stop the scissor kicks.”

Interested in Subsequent materials with a beat?

Click the link or search improvdoesbest.com for:

- Revolver Exercise
- Three Beat Video
- Emotional Beats Video

In each example, Player 3 has initiated in service of an aspect of Bobby’s character, clearly leveraging the details of the originating scene to incite an established reaction. Focused on one thing, the moves set a progression for heightening that can be quickly seized upon in the second beat and leveraged for the third.

We can also set a progression by holding a mirror to an established character.
IMPERSONATE A PERSONAL GAME

It’s one of my most favorite moves. Want to heighten a character from an earlier scene? Be him or her bigger.

Player 2, Sam, loves watching movies but his enjoyment stems from watching with another person and making comments; watching by himself is not as satisfying.

Several scenes later...

Player 3, miming a phone since the moment he enters, says, “Oh, my gawd, Sam; are you watching?” Player 2 returns to stage as called for, also miming a phone, and reacts to his own set-up; “You kiddin’ me, filmfriend; that T2000 just pulled himself together.”

Player 3 shines the spotlight on Player 2’s personal game by adopting the same emotional perspective. The move triggers an established reaction instead of recalling plot. And, in and of itself, the addition of Player 3 keeps the beat from rehashing.

And, focused around Player 2, this subsequent beat initiation could facilitate a run of walk-ons or tag-outs to further stoke the powers of pattern and pacing.

Player 3 walks off – He tells Sam through the phone, “That’s the kids’ school beeping in. Gotta go,” leaving Sam to a less satisfying viewing of Terminator 2. That is until...Player 4 walks on, dialing a phone and then saying, “Hole-lee shiitake mushrooms, Sam. Did you just see what I did?” “You know I did, moviebuddy. I thought T1 was bad, but now he’s good; and T2 is baaaaaaaad.”

With the help of Help Desk game mechanics, this run of walk-ons could continue introducing characters to heighten Sam’s enjoyment of watching movies with another person and his unhappiness when left alone.

And when a second beat heightens one of the originating characters through a mirror, there are several paths available to a third beat in service of the progression of games. A theater full of Sam and his fellow commentators would further heighten the personal game of needing to interact during a movie. And it could make good use of the Hey Everybody game mechanics.

If Sam alone annoyed Bobby, phone calls from Sam clones that constantly disrupt Bobby’s workout when Sam’s not home would heighten both originating personal games, bringing the scenes’ progression around full circle.

If Sam has a twin, so could Bobby; and the four could meet, doubling back to and down on the originating scene’s scenic game dynamic and both personal games. The sides could square off and/or Sam and Bobby could recognize they missed each other – “Let’s rent Marathon Man and watch it from treadmills.”
When seeking to heighten the patterns of emotional behavior established in an
originating scene, impersonating one originating character’s personal game sets a solid
progression that can be heightened further in subsequent beats. It’s a good trick to keep in
mind.

But there are still other approaches to subsequent beats that we can apply...

SET A PROGRESSION USING THE ORIGINATING SCENIC GAME

Players on the wings, pay attention. Pay attention to how characters react to each other.
Player 1, Bobby, is obsessed with working out – exercise makes her feel vital and alive, and not
working out makes her feel that she’s deteriorating. Player 2, Sam, loves watching movies but his
enjoyment stems from watching with another person and making comments; watching by himself
is not as satisfying. Sam hints to Bobby that he’s not satisfied with their relationship and is
thinking about breaking up, but Bobby is oblivious, thinking Sam’s restlessness stems from not
exercising enough.

We want to heighten the interplay between Bobby and Sam without simply rehashing
the original interaction between their individual personal games. We do this by raising the emotional stakes of the original scenic game with a new situation that players can
address through expanding their personal games.

In this example, the scenic game involves Sam’s dissatisfaction with the relationship and
Bobby’s obliviousness. We want a new situation wherein, reacting through their personal
filters, the couple can heighten the emotional stakes of their incompatibility. Sam likes to
talk during movies – widen that: Sam likes to talk through experiences. Bobby needs exercise to
feel vital – widen that: Bobby needs to be active.

Maybe Player 3 initiates with, “Alright, Bobby and Sam, your wedding registry’s all set up.
You just have to scan what you want.” Upon receiving his scanner, Sam says, “Let’s talk
about china patterns.” Upon receiving hers, Bobby commences scanning everything
around her in dramatic, exaggerated fashion.

Maybe Player 3 initiates with, “We see Bobby and Sam in bed watching a porno.” Sam
says, “Do you think they respect each other?” Bobby makes an aggressive sexual move. Sam
reacts with, “Bobby, please, I want to watch this.” Bobby relents, pouting, “I want to do
that.”

In these examples, Players 3 set up a new situation that heightens the originating scenic
game, and Players 1 and 2 react through expanded personal games filters. Neither
example is a rehashing of the original scene and the emotional interaction between Sam and
Bobby is each example’s focus.

And for subsequent subsequent beats? Follow the set progression.
A progression through time is set and can be cemented in both examples. A progression through time is a handy default as long as the focus is on the emotional behavior of characters and not plot.

Maybe Player 4 initiates a third beat with, “Yes, Bobby and Sam, I am Saint Peter. And, yes, the process of getting into Heaven is exactly as depicted in Defending Your Life.”

Maybe Player 4 initiates a third beat with, “We see Bobby and Sam, now old and decrepit, sitting on their porch, watching kids play in their yard.”

Through a progression of situations, originating players can heighten their scenic game(s) with expanded personal game reactions.

But we can also set a scenic game progression without using the originating characters at all.

SET A PROGRESSION BY HEIGHTENING THEME

We can leverage an originating scene’s games as inspiration for subsequent beats without revisiting the originating characters at all. In lifting the reactions from the originating scene’s players and situation, we give those reactions wider applicability and telegraph to our fellow players that we are heightening the theme represented in those reactions.

Thematic heightening is useful for inspiring subsequent beats but also in tying a show’s many scenes together. Theme-focused subsequent beats can include players from the originating scene, but excluding them makes it abundantly clear to all involved that the new beat is not about them. Initiating subsequent beats focused on theme is also certainly not the only way to infuse a heightened sense of theme into your format. Regardless of how you use theme, the key skill is being able to identify themes.

What are the themes of Bobby and Sam’s originating scene? What ideas are explored by the originating scene’s actions?

The idea of watching versus doing. Maybe Player 3 initiates with, “Wow, the production value in these al Qaeda threat videos has really gone up.” To which Player 4 reacts, “Jesus Christ, we have to act. Get me the president and a staging team.” And the idea of passive and active engagement is heightened through a new situation and a progression of emotional stakes.

What is another theme? Which particulars of the originating scene speak to a larger issue?

The issue of gender identity. Maybe Sam and Bobby are replaced by Chris and Pat. Player 3’s Pat wants his wife, Chris, to settle down and have a baby with him. Player 4’s Chris, though, doesn’t want to give up her thrilling career of taking cannon balls to the stomach. The beats’ progression is set on the theme of gender roles and perspectives.
More themes? **What emotional game mechanics from the originating scene can be deployed in a wholly new genre of scene?**

**The mechanics of breaking up.** Maybe Player 3 initiates to Player 4 with, “Thank you for the presentation, I just, it’s just that I don’t think I have room in my life for a set of Ginsu knives right now.” Player 4 responds accordingly; “Just give these beauties a chance to cut through a brick,” he barrels on enthusiastically. And the language of a romantic breakup continues to be heightened through the details of a door-to-door salesman scene.

This approach to scene initiation is often called **“Mapping,” wherein we lay the dynamic structure of one genre over the particulars of another genre.** And it’s a handy move to heighten thematic and narrative depths. You’ve seen Mapping every time two male improvisers talk about cars or sports while really talking about women and/or sex. Play the emotional dynamic of a young man asking a father for his daughter’s hand over the particulars of a teenager asking his dad for the car keys – “Boy, what are your intentions with my sedan?” Engage the mechanics of being saved from a fire over the reality of being saved from a boring staff meeting – “All those fumes, that hot air, you saved my life, mail guy.”

So put Mapping in your utility belt. **Hopefully you’re finding that belt good and full. Now tighten it up, honing your ability to quick-draw the right utility at the right time.**

**PAY ATTENTION AND PRACTICE**

Do a string of unconnected scenes with players on the wings responsible for leading discussion on potential subsequent beats. Do a single scene from which many different progressions of subsequent beats originate. Do a proscribed number of scenes then immediately play through their subsequent beats in order.

**Serve the show. Seek a progression of emotional stakes.**

Remember **the clearer your subsequent beat initiation is in focusing on how it’s heightening the originating scene’s game(s), the sooner players will be able to get on board and build collaboratively.**

Run drills specifically focused on heightening...

- **A Personal Game** – *just one thing*
- **A Scenic Game** – *the expanding cycles of emotional dynamics*
- **A Theme** – *an idea, an issue, the mapping of one genre over another*

From the originating scene to setting up a game progression in a subsequent beat to cementing that progression in a third scene, remember our exploration of trajectories in Group Game work. **Trust the patterns. In an ascending sequence of scenes, the second beat may not be as fulfilling as the first or the third. A third beat can throw a pattern on its head, but it only works if that pattern has been clearly established. Introducing new mechanics late in the pattern often means the scene has to go on longer to incorporate the new**
**moves.** Talk through a bunch of three beat scene trajectories. Play through a lot of progressions.

Do it all again. **Practice so you can react to subsequent beat patterns with ingrained mechanics and honed flexibility.**

**NEXT:** *Forging an Organic Format*
4.1 - Forging an Organic Format: part one

I’m enamored by memories of the Chicago teams “People of Earth” and “American Dream.”

Often an audience member remembers a show by the handful of great scenes it produced.

These groups of talented improvisers created memorable shows because the scenes built on each other to create a singular experience.

This post aims to provide some guidance to groups that endeavor to perform memorable shows not just memorable scenes.

In a show that has since become improv lore, “People of Earth,” starting from the suggestion of “recess,” opened with every player on stage hanging from monkey bars, afraid to let go lest they be sniped dead by an off stage gunman. In the subsequent first two-person scene, Danny Mora, as a teenager who’d had too much to drink and vomited on his sweater, took off – not his improv sweater, but – his actual sweater. Andy St Clair, Mora’s scene partner, recognizing the importance of an improviser taking off his real clothes, made it, not just not “the game of the scene,” but the game of the show. In every subsequent scene, Mora was forced to stay on stage and, coerced by the individual scene’s need, remove another layer of clothing (ex: I need a tourniquet, give me your shirt.) Luckily for Mora this occurred in Chicago during one of the many cold months. Over the course of many scenes – to include a moment where a camera’s flash interrupted the flow so that St Clair could say, “No. No. If you’re going to take a picture of this we’re all going to pose for it” – Mora was forced to reluctantly shed layers. Down to but long-underwear, Mora desperately traded the layer for the windbreaker worn by a petite female co-improviser (Laurel Coppock). The jacket was not long enough to tie around Mora’s waist so he had to hold it in place with a hand. Now “People of Earth” returned to their first scene – everyone held desperately with both hands to the established monkey bars except Mora who had to devote one hand to holding up the windbreaker strategically stretched across his waist. “Danny, what are you doing?” “If you don’t hold on with both hands you’ll drop and die!” Mora, with a resigned eye roll, released his grasp on the windbreaker. And as his hand went up to the monkey bars, the windbreaker fell, and the lights went out.

At a Del Close Marathon, “American Dream” coached by Joe Bill, came out to announce to the audience that they were to perform their “signature game” of “Party Quirks.” As the short form game dictates, they sent the host out of earshot and assigned the cast “quirks,” to include a man who had vaginas in his armpits. The host, Ben Johnson, returns to stage to host the party as Comedy Sportz would dictate: he welcomed and queried guests as they arrived to guess
their assigned quirk. But even with their quirk guessed, the guests didn’t leave, turning the party into a long-form mono-scene around a party of misfits. The guests turned the guessing game on the host, making it echo an intervention to have Ben come to grips with his own quirks.

Amazing.

In other shows I have seen “People of Earth” create each scene around a different train car, setting up players to run though previous scenes as the show progressed.

I have seen “American Dream” create an entire show around their first scene’s impulse to engage in a rap battle.

Now, maybe this is beyond an improviser who is just starting to feel comfortable performing one great scene or a group that’s only barely confident turning one great scene into a string of heightened subsequent beats.

But it’s the next step. Yes, having an audience member say, “Great show; that scene where X happened was awesome,” is an applaudable reaction. But when days, weeks, years after seeing you perform an audience remembers your [Danny Mora getting naked/Party Quirks as long-form/Train car/Rap battle] show that’s when you know you’ve created something in improv that no scripted theater can touch.

So let’s start to explore how you can make that happen.

First step: Get a coach dedicated to and capable of moving you in this direction.

Getting a group of individuals united behind the collaborative building of a single scene can be tough work; getting a group of individuals to align behind an effort to make one collaborative show is tremendous work. The success of the endeavor relies on the ability of a team to support one direction, and to flex with whatever direction the moment dictates.

So...the following walk though of developing an organic format is built off of The Johnsons, a group that I coach, and the format that they’ve been adhering to. With your own group, leverage the learnings related to focusing on a theme that fosters myriad opportunities and using tertiary moves to connect disparate facets of a show into a collective piece.

The Johnsons Forging an Organic Format workshop

Part One: Focusing on Theme –

The Johnsons open with duologues inspired by the ask-for. They work to explore the suggestion in a wide variety of ways. Example: “Underwater.” Duologue 1 is about a hotel
under the sea. Duologue 2 is about a couple addicted to debt. Duologue 3 is about an obsession with The Little Mermaid.

**Second step:** Think about what THEME connects the parts of your Opening other than the suggestion. In this example, the character pairings goaded each other into dumb decisions.

**Third step:** Initiate your first scene inspired by the connection you make. In this example, two kids daring each other to eat bugs.

**Fourth step:** Considering the first scene the Offer scene, seek to Set and Cement a progression with the subsequent two scenes. In this example, the second scene is a middle aged set of coworkers encouraging the other to be lax while s/he secretly worked harder. And the third scene is about elderly gentlemen going cold turkey from their meds. *Note: up/down/through one location, through time and across ages are sample standard progressions.

**Fifth step:** Initiate a Group Game inspired by the THEME that you see between the first three scenes. In this example, “I'll never get too old for pranks!”

**Sixth step:** Play with what you have, setting and cementing patterns on patterns on patterns. In this example, a string of scenes exploring childhood, middle age and old age in a third world country... an advanced alien race that loves pranks... a speed dating setup where first and third world denizens meet... and finally a group of fish on the precipice of evolving that decide it’s not worth it and crawl back into the sea.

**Focus outward. Follow. Offer, Set and Cement a Progression.** The same tools that help us establish patterns in scenes enable us to build patterns between scenes. As in any improv, everyone’s playing by their own rules in their head, but if everyone is working toward collaboration then a group direction emerges. Practice weaving scenes into progressing patterns may be stiff at first, but you'll train your brain to follow the group’s construction however it evolves.
Part Two: Using Tertiary Moves –

How we deploy Edits, Walk-ons, Tag-outs, etc. can create a language for our show that can enhance its cohesiveness. Like in building most patterns, the first time it can be random, but the second time it’s purposeful and the third time it’s expected. Like learning patterns most often, you may have to force it; but forcing it builds the muscles to see the opportunities when presented.

Step one through three: Establish rules of engagement.

First time it’s random: You’re moved to do a certain type of edit, walk-on, tag-out, etc.? Great. Do it.

Now, you all in the wings, what was the move, when was it made, and how was it made? Can you heighten that? Second time it’s purposeful.

Third time it’s expected. Are you compelled to heighten the move further along a progression?

Edit Progressions

Example #1: From the wings, a player edits the scene in progress by grooving across stage singing a song containing a lyric matching the last line of dialogue. If another player can edit the next scene with another song – and the players on stage could pimp him/her with a lyric – look for it. And if there’s a second there better be a third. (Check out The Johnsons as they pull this off)

It doesn’t have to be heady or verbal.

Example #2: A player on stage says “This is for the birds.” A player from the wings sweeps the stage as a bird. Later edits are done as birds or other animals or other flying things, etc.

Example #3: Without rhyme or reason, a player from the wings sweeps across stage while spinning in circles and saying “bebop buwhop.” Later edits make this move look good. And you don’t have to wait to make it look good; several players editing creatively in unison is improv as improv does best. Trust and follow.

Walk-On Progressions

Example #1: Timing matters. Is every called-for walk-on comically late to arrive? How many lines are there between walk-ons, and between entrances and exits?

Example #2: Tempo matters. Do tag-outs always come in groups of three this show? Is it always one person, then two people, then four people?
**Example #3: Use matters.** Is a walk-on used time and again to establish location? Does a string of players walking on different scenes to count down a doomsday clock evoke a shared world?

**Example #4: Who matters.** Does the same character enter multiple scenes? Does the same player enter whenever a technical definition is needed?

Remember, as should every Tertiary Move, a Walk-on should be made in service of what’s already established. So those of you who see a way to serve the show that may not service the scene in progress, I caution you. Ideally a move serving the show serves the scene. If following a pattern of a show disrupts a scene’s flow but earns an edit, then okay. But beware improv hubris: We’re all, the audience included, playing by the rules in our heads. If you make a bold leap assuming the majority is at least near your wavelength and you miss? **Follow your compulsion as it serves the ensemble; keep your ego in check.**

**Tag-Out Progressions**

**Example #1: Mirror/Heighten relationships.** Do several scenes of players at work get tagged back to their domestic lives? Do relationships progress more to the dominate or submissive? Who has twins and/or bigger versions of them?

**Example 2: Build worlds.** Can disparate scenes each heighten Take Your Daughter To Work Day? Do different scenes’ characters intersect if maybe only for a moment? Could every character at some point be tagged in and out of a T.G.I. Fridays?

**Example 3: Employ triggers.** It’s very Family Guy, but can players establish a language to evoke tag-outs, like “That’s just like the time...” **Remember to first serve the scene before the show, so don’t kill what’s been established on stage for your little joke.** Remember, too, that if all your tag-out consists of is a joke then the original scene can always tag back in.

Please don’t read me as saying that once a tertiary move is made one way it has to be made that way each time. **If an edit, walk-on or tag-out is called for by the established scene, by all means bring it – first and foremost serve the scene in play.** But force this tertiary move mirroring and progression in practice and your group will train its eyes to see the connections. And when your group coheres its scenes with its use of tertiary moves – giving the audience a show to remember – then you’ll be hooked.

**Want more?**
4.2 - Forging an Organic Format: part two

The first time it’s random.

The second time it’s purposeful.

The third time it’s expected.

This progression informs how we build collaboratively in improv, be it in service of a pattern of emotional behavior, a relationship dynamic, a group game, or forging an organic format.

What is necessary to elevate a random occurrence into a shared experience? It requires that second move – the choice to make the first move matter.

“It Takes Two.”

Want to build an organic format with your team? Commit to repeating stuff. Then, once repeated, commit to repeating it again.

What stuff? All of it. Characters, scenes, conventions, themes, language, locations, accents, objects, reactions,...all of it.

To illustrate, let’s walk through Horse Apples’ 8/6/16 show –

- **Suggestion**: Conservative in-laws
- **1st scene**: Matt plays the new preacher in town having dinner with older couple, David and Patrick. Matt donates to charity through phone app, which seems too new fangled for the older couple.
- **2nd scene**: David plays the old preacher talking to a pair of kids, Matt and Patrick. David introduces idea of a special umbrella that, when opened, blocks your thoughts from heaven.

And now we just to playing with the established information.

- **3rd scene**: Matt, David and Patrick are angels looking down from Heaven, frustrated by all the people using umbrellas to block their thoughts. Then, worried about how their frustrated language would be perceived, they pull up umbrellas of their own. Matt, David and Patrick quickly move to stand on stools to act as archangels looking down on the angels with umbrellas.
- **4th scene**: Return to the dinner with the preacher scene, only this time Patrick is the preacher and Matt and David are the older couple. The couple heightens their
dissatisfaction with how the preacher is changing the congregation with new technology.

There was a lot of information in the first two scenes. The choices made in the 3rd and 4th scenes help set for the team which information they’ll focus on: the umbrellas, the tiers of heaven, the integration of new technology and the dinner with the preacher scene. It's an amazing moment as an improviser to feel “we got this.” That feeling happens when a teammate purposefully revisits something that was random the first time, because everyone expects that something to be revisited again. The moment when David brings the show back to the preacher dinner scene but sits in a different seat to designate playing a different role, all three players know, “oh, yeah, we'll be doing this scene again.” And they did.

- 5th scene: Congregation members watch Orange Is The New Black under umbrellas
- 6th scene: An inmate strapped into an electric chair awaits an emoji from the governor
- 7th scene: Archangels bemoan mankind’s persistence in killing people despite the commandments, but pull up umbrellas to discuss their own fears about no longer being relevant. One of the archangels’ umbrellas has a tear though so God hears him and summons him to Him. God decides the archangel needs a little time on Earth to reflect.
- And...8th scene: The archangel is the preacher in the final return to the dinner scene.
  David was the one actor who had not played the preacher and it was he who was the cast out archangel. Perfect.

Before the show, we talked about wanting to make up a format. We talked about how we could use standard edits, like the scene painting move wherein you take an object from one scene and transition in into another (ex: “The loose kite darts away in the wind, dancing high enough for it to be glimpsed by a young boy in an airplane…”). We talked about using Transformations. We talked about Dual Casting. But in the end we didn't want to force any particular move. We wanted whatever we did to be Organic.

In retrospect we could define our form. We could call it “The Up, Down and Across” for how we explored hierarchies and connected ideas. But we didn’t find it because we mapped out ahead of time how we would transition between scenes and heighten beats. We found our form by choosing to repeat choices and committing to again repeating what we chose.

The first set of scenes were random. The second set was purposeful. And the final series were expected. But, please note, those final scenes were not rigid or cliched. We knew what we were playing with in those scenes; and when you know what you're playing with then you can really PLAY.

So Let’s Play!

Here’s an exercise to help us set and cement patterns that can facilitate organic format creation.

CARTOON BASED BUILDING – Prepare for the exercise by finding comic strips you can cut out. Sitting around in a circle, pass out the prepared stack of cartoons to the ensemble; they
can pick their favorite. Using their chosen comic strip as the first scene, their job is to come up with the second idea based on the cartoon. Each cartoon is bound to have several different aspects to it: type of characters, age of characters, location of characters, relationship between characters, conventions of language and interaction, and of course the joke. From the myriad options, the improviser can choose any to base his/her second scene on. One at a time around the circle, an improviser reads his/her chosen comic strip (as though sharing it with a kindergarten class) and then shares his/her idea for the second scene. Then a different improviser – it doesn’t have to be anyone in particular – shares an idea for a third scene based on the established progression. Repeat.

As an example, take this [Family Circus from Bil and Jeff Keane]:

Typical of this legendary cartoon, there's a lot at play here. Camp. Unappetizing food. Kids needing parents to make them do the right thing. So the lead improviser has a slew of options.

**Option 1 Second Scene:** A bunch of bros at a bar lamenting how their girlfriends aren’t around to keep them from getting drunk.

**Option 1 Third Scene:** A bunch of old men sitting on a porch crying over how if their wives were alive they wouldn’t be yelling at passers-by.

**Option 2 Second Scene:** Other camp kids running with scissors around the craft area.

**Option 2 Third Scene:** Still other camp kids adrift in a canoe without supervision.

**Option 3 Second Scene:** The teenage staff at camp drinking smuggled in beers.

**Option 3 Third Scene:** The parents doing drugs since their kids are at camp.

The scenes don't even need to heighten “the game” of the comic strip; they can just expand the world. Campers, to Staffers, to Parents would suffice. **The key is making a choice of what to repeat from the comic strip and then committing to repeating what was repeated.**

**Importantly, the subsequent scenes are self contained.** If we went the route of the Parents of Campers, the parents are not going to talk about how they expect their kids to be eating healthy in their absence. While they might reference the fact that their kids are away, allowing them to do drugs, they are going to be engaging with the drugs way more than they’ll be talking about their kids.
Here’s another example from *Frank & Ernest* by Thaves:

If the Second Scene is set in modern times, say an Ironic Hipster with a music-playing tie, where does the Third Scene take place? I’d say “the future,” but really anywhere but back in Medieval times as we’re looking to follow the established progression.

If the Second Scene is based around a Medieval lute player, well then, so should the Third Scene be set in Medieval times. Maybe a peasant is popping his plague boils in rhythm.

But, again, we don’t have to adhere so hard here to heightening the joke. Knight, to Lute Player, to Peasant, without any focus on the music would suffice.

**So Let’s Put It Up On Its Feet!**

It’s one thing to come up with a Second Scene after you’ve been given time with the base material. It’s similarly easier to come up with a Third Scene when the onus is shared by all the improvisers and it can be discovered through discussion. The pressure to satisfy a progression is harder in the moment of a show. As a result, players can miss editing a scene when they should because they’re in their heads thinking of the “right” next thing. We want to reduce that pressure.

**ORGANIC PROGRESSION SETTING** – Two players on stage. The rest of the ensemble are in ready-positions for executing edits. The first two players on stage are charged with just doing a scene – any old scene. The players on the wings are charged with watching that scene to identify what – from amongst the many options – they want to repeat when they initiate the Second Scene. Those players not in the Second Scene are thereby charged with thinking up a way to repeat through their Third Scene what was repeated in the Second Scene.

What if the First Scene involves kids in a clubhouse accessed with a password and imagined into a pirates’ ship...

Second Scenes could follow:

- Other places kids play
• Other places accessed with a password
• Pirates

Third Scenes could in turn follow:

• Still other places kids play
• Other places accessed with a password
• Pirates?

You’ve watched the First Scene from the wings. Then you see the Second Scene use Pirates. You’re on the wings thinking, “How do I heighten the progression from kids to pirates?” And you’re thinking so long you miss the edit. We don’t want that.

In forging an organic format, following the pattern progression is less important than making that second choice to repeat. If there’s no clear move on the progression, just repeat. Repeat kids playing. Repeat pirates. Be kid pirates playing. Be pirates forgetting passwords. Be anything as long as you’re repeating something. By repeating we draw focus on material that can then be the spine of our organic format. That organic spine need not be straight; there needn’t be a progression of scenes. We just want to base our subsequent scenes on established material by repeating something.

. Whatever you do, do some part of it again. Once you’ve repeated something, look for an opportunity to repeat it again.

The second step is your first step in forging an organic format.
4.3 - World Hopping

I love World Building in improvisation. With World Building in mind we can bring focus to our Organic Formats.

The first scene of a show starts in a train; the rest of the show exists in that same train.

The first scene of a show starts with Little League players. The next scene focuses on the parents in the stands. The next scene focuses on the players’ siblings hanging out in the parking lot.

The first scene of a show introduces a reality wherein people shield their improper thoughts from heaven with an umbrella. The next scene shows angels using the same umbrellas to shield them from God’s view. And later we see God himself hiding his own self-doubt under an umbrella.

In our efforts to build worlds though we mustn’t lose sight of Improv As Improv Does Best, which relies at its core on heightening established Personal and Scenic Games. So how’s about we build worlds around our patterns of emotional behavior?

Here is a series of exercises I ran to that purpose...

Post Warm-up you’re standing in a circle (you did Crazy Eights, right? “I don’t know if Richmond improvisers know how to improv without doing Crazy Eights first,” said Robert Nickles upon joining The Coalition).

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL JUMP – Everyone’s in a circle. Player One gives a personal Self-Contained Emotional Statement (SCES). Something s/he personally believes, like “I love taking bathroom breaks and getting paid for it,” or “I struggle to want Republicans in my daughter’s life.” Around the circle, Player Two and then Player Three and so on, performs a semblance of that same SCES through the filter of any world they choose to bring to it. For example, Player Two through the filter of a cowboy says, “Nothing’s better than hiding out in the outhouse on the posse’s two bits,” or “I know the war’s over, but I still don’t trust no Confederate to date my daughter.” And Player Three through a child’s filter could say, “Oh, boy, I sure love having to go potty during test time,” or “Yeah, sure, I read above my level, but I don’t trust me no English curriculum that don’t have on it ‘Not Without My Daughter.’”

Player One has to be the last player to heighten that initiating SCES. Then Player Two starts with a brand new SCES. Then repeat.
MULTI-DIMENSIONAL JUMP EXTRA JUMP – What if instead of jumping from cowboys to children, Players One and Two worked to establish a progression? After Player Two’s cowboy filter, if I was Player Three, I’d chose a filter that sought to Cement the progression I saw of “going backward in time.” I might then say, “I attribute my life to the strategic use of availing myself of the chamber pot during The Crusades,” or “Alas, were it not the truth, but ’tis; I shan’t see my daughter off with a Montague.”

Follow the progression as long as possible. What would Player Five as a caveman say? But when it’s done, it’s done. If the progression can’t be progressed beyond Player Five’s caveman, then Player Six resets with a new SCES to Offer a new progression. And so the progression doesn’t have to go all the way around the circle, and it also can go beyond the end of the circle, multiple times. It’s up to the team to know when to change an when to follow.

Key Lesson: Though the details may change, the key is not losing the emotional reaction at the root of the character that is independent of the details. Too often we focus on the details of the filter and forget the emotion we’re filtering through that filter.

Contrary Key Lesson: Too often, too focused on the emotional reaction we neglect the details of a potential new world and simply repeat the same line through a new voice. The Details – what they are doing, seeing, being – help with selling the authenticity of your character’s reactions.

Balanced Key Lesson: Make a bold choice with emotional stakes in it. The more you can be inspired by others’ contributions the better. The more you can base your emotional reaction on the last choice within the context of all that came before it the better.

. Now we’re done with the warm-up circle. But we’re still focused on heightening Personal Games.

PIVOTING BETWEEN TIME AND SPACE – We’re going to focus on heightening one character through showing him or her at various times and places in their life. In transporting the character to different points, we seek to provide additional stimuli to evoke the character’s Personal Game from the initial scene – how the player felt about who s/he is, what s/he has and/or what s/he is doing.

For this exercise focused on a character’s personal game, I like to get a suggestion of “a relationship between two people.”

For example, suggestion is “Divorced couple.” In the initial scene Players One and Two are amicably dividing possessions. While Player One is generous in taking minimal shares, Player Two clearly received the raw end of an emotional breakup. Player Three pivots on Player Two and says, “Because you did 90.5% of the research it only seems right for you to sign our 50/50 partnership papers first.” Player Two knows to heighten being put upon and being amicable. After the scene is allowed to progress, Player Four pivots on Player Two and says,
“Aren’t you so proud of our daughter? ‘So proud’ being equal to my pride despite my being, technically, ‘an absentee Mom’?”

I call the Pivot “the sexy Tag-Out.” It’s the same replacement strategy but without the awkward tagging or waving away.

Through the Pivot, we can take the fulcrum character anywhere through time and space. The fulcrum character just needs to trust that wherever s/he is taken, the expectation is that s/he will continue to react through the established patterns of emotional behavior. In class once a scene broke out between the planets Venus and Pluto, and Pluto was very distraught over having been reclassified. Player Three’s Pivot made Pluto an elemental compound that was to be stripped of its covalent bonds; all that mattered was the improviser reacting as The Compound the same way Pluto did.

Now let’s follow our Scenic Games to new worlds...

**SPLITTING DIMENSIONS** – We’re going to show heightened versions of the same relationship through different worlds. In seeking to heighten an interaction, we leverage our Help Desk Game skills, being mindful of language and pacing, and aiming to establish a progression through the different details.

We’re going to use the Split Screen. We’re going to carve the stage into different areas where different scenes – from different dimensions – are played out.

Players are to initiate focused on their Scenic Games – how they feel about who their scene partner is, what they have and/or what they’re doing. For this exercise focused on a mapping a relationship onto different worlds, I like to get a suggestion of “an event in people’s lives.”

For example,...

- **Suggestion is “Best Man's speech”**
- **Player One (P1):** You’re my brother’s wife, but you’re my sister.
- **Player Two (P2):** You’re drunk.
- **P1:** Does a bottle of Jager make you drunk?
• **P2:** Yes. And smelling like licor-ass. Licorice. Liquor-ass. Get it?
• **P1:** *You’re* drunk.
• **Player Three (P3) establishing Split Screen by addressing an invisible player with his back to Players One and Two:** You’re my bastard, but I consider you my son.
• **Players One and Two exit stage**
• **Player Four (P4), entering to inhabit the addressed invisible player:** You’re drunk.
• **P3:** Does being a white male landowner make you drunk?
• **P4:** Drunk with power. Patrician Power. PP. You’re drunk on PP.
• **P3:** *You’re* drunk.
• **Player Five (P5) establishing a new Split Screen by pulling Player Six up with her:** You’re my rib, but you’re my wife.
• **Players Three and Four exit stage**
• **Player Six (P6):** You’re drunk.
• **P5:** Does being Man, created in God’s image, make you drunk?
• **P6:** Yes. But I don’t give a damn. A-dam. Get it?
• **P5:** *You’re* drunk.
• **P6:** Serpent makes’em strong. [sips cocktail]

At The Coalition Theater where the stage is long and not deep, Split Screens provide a way to utilize the extremes of the stage, adding more people without adding more clutter.

*Note that* in the example above I had the joined players leave stage rather than remain as in the stage pictured depicting the Split Screen move. **If you’re ever “joined but ignored,” you have two options: Stay or Go.** The stakes in the decision are literally the opposite of in *The Clash’s “Should I Stay Or Should I Go;” Going multiples your success, not your trouble.** If you and your scene partner stay on stage when another two improvisers enter to do a Split Screen, you have to return to your scene. If you and your scene partner go, you can always come back and return to your scene but you don’t have to; another new set of players can take the stage to follow the Set progression with a new set of characters.

Now, **we’ve taken emotional perspectives through dimensions, we’ve taken characters through time and spaces, and we’ve heightened relationships across worlds.** What’s next? Let’s put it all together in a...wait for it...

**INTER-DIMENSIONAL MONTAGE** – Everyone go to one wing as you would to start a show. I’ll introduce you and get your suggestion. Inspired by the Suggestion your **Opening will have you each coming “through the curtain,” from up stage center to down stage center, with a Self-Contained Emotional Statement.** Like this exercise’s Post-Warm-up activity, the first SCES is **personal to the improviser** and the subsequent SCESs push that emotional perspective through a filter (time, genre, caricature, etc.). **Think about progressions.** Feel free to reset if the player before you can’t be heightened any further. Once everyone has come “through the curtain” and is on the wings... A Two Person Scene...that is built upon through either a Pivot or a Split Screen. **I want to see a lot of Pivots and Split Screens. But, damnit, I’d rather you do an un-sexy old Tag-out or Wave-Off if it meant you were playing to heighten characters and relationships across worlds.**
And of course, feel free to reset to a new Two Person Scene if the series of Pivots or Split Screens can't be heightened any further.

My consummate example, The Johnsons, had a run at this Inter-Dimensional Montage...

- Suggestion is “Antique”
- Opening –
  - Personal Statement: “My body ain't what it used to be.”
    - As an old man, “My body ain't what it used to be.”
    - As a Cougar, “My body ain't what it used to be.”
    - As a cracked voiced teen, “My body ain't what it used to be.”
  - Personal Statement: “I need help understanding things.”
    - As an old man, “What the hell’s this supposed to do?”
    - As a timid user, “How much am I supposed to do?”
    - As a robot, “Tell me what this button does.”
- Two Person Scene
  - P1 the student, looking at text book, “What does any of it mean?”
  - P2, the tutor, “Test is tomorrow, pal.”
- SPLIT SCREEN
  - P3, looking at her elbow, “What the heck is that?”
  - P4, “S’pose the doctor’ll be able’ta tell ya after tomorrow’s test.”
- SPLIT SCREEN
  - P5, looking down own shirt, “Well, would you look at that?”
  - P6, “Test is tomorrow.”
- Two Person Scene
  - P1 the doctor, clearly engaged with body on table, “Oh, God, we’re losing him.”
  - P2, the nurse, “What can I do, doctor?”
  - P1, “Get your hands in here; pump the man’s heart.”
  - P2, “Oh, doctor, I neither qualified nor cleaned enough.”
- PIVOT
  - P3, looking at a cadaver, “This corpse needs a tweaking.”
  - P2, “Oh, mortician, what can I do?”
  - P3, “Well, how small are your hands?”
  - P2 holds up his hands
  - P3 steps forward to wriggle P2’s hands through P3’s tight fist
- PIVOT
  - P4, doing something with her hands, “Sure, Jim Henson’s dead, but his puppets – er, Muppets, need our life.”
  - P2, putting hand in puppet with a whole lot of guilty emotional reaction, “Should I be doing this?”
- Two Person Scene
  - P1, watching a TV set with dismay, “This? This is Children’s Programming?”
  - P2, the nurse, “Hideous, right?”
  - Players 3, 4, and 5 walk-on and off as Muppets
- SPLIT SCREEN
- **P3**, “Oh, my God, this is prison?”
- **P4**, “Makes you think there but for the grace go I, right?”
- **Players 5 and 6 walk-on and off as Muppets**
- **SPLIT SCREEN**
  - **P7**, “This? This is Hell?”
  - **P8**, “Yeah, I thought it’d be worse.”
  - **Player 9 walks-on and off as a Muppet**
  - **P8**, “Kinda funny.”

I think so.

I love World Building. I love The Details.

But Emotion Engagement has to be at Improv As Improv Does Best’s core, and we can neglect establishing and heightening patterns of emotional behavior when focused on The Details of World Building.

I want us to having our subsequent scenes and game moves inspired by those patterns of emotional behavior that define Characters and Relationships.

In doing so we not only build worlds defined by a set of details, but universes defined by shared emotional perspectives.
“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” – Sir Issac Newton

The “Improv As Improv Does Best” approach to long-form improvisational performance was developed by Patrick Gantz from 20 plus years improvising with a slew of brilliant players and coaches from myriad theaters and schools of thought.

Patrick started improvising in the seventh grade at James W. Robinson Secondary School thanks to the passionate Douglas “Chip” Rome, the school’s theater coach who established the Northern Virginia improv comedy scene with Theatre Sports Competitions. For college, Patrick went to The University of Virginia only to find fifteen a cappella groups, five dance companies and no improv – so he started The Whwhethermen. After college it was off to Chicago, where Patrick studied at the IO Theater, at the Annoyance Theater and at the feet of the many masters of the art. His House Team at IO was Alpha Squad, coached by Jason Chin. Of his side projects, he is most fond of The Second City born Chairs, directed by Bina Martin, that stood out in Chicago and was a smash at the Edinburgh Fringe Fest, where The Guardian called him “somewhat overwrought.” Patrick left Chicago for a relationship, but he did not abandon his affair with improv. In Washington, DC, Patrick linked up with WIT, The Washington Improv Theater, where he taught (building out the curriculum), coached (the 1st coach of Season Six), performed (with Jackie, Best Friends, Bullsh*t, Deuce, Neutrino Video Project, etc.) and had this nice thing written up about his performance at Del Close. A new relationship that grew into a marriage (love you, Crista Whitman), brought Patrick to Richmond, VA, where he currently performs, teaches and coaches with The RCC, The Richmond Comedy Coalition.

There’s more to come. And Patrick can’t wait to share it with you.

Patrick’s Life in Links:
- Robinson Secondary Theater Arts
- NoVa Theatre Sports
- UVA's Whwhethermen
- IO Theater Chicago
- Alpha Squad
- The Annoyance Theater
- Chairs
- The Guardian’s review of Chairs
- The Jester's review of Jackie at UCB's Del Close Marathon
- WIT
- The RCC
- My 200th post is all about me, improv and the things I enjoy that have skills in common with improv.