

LAST CHANCE NOIR



a Play With Intent tool kit

LAST CHANCE NOIR

It was the last thing she ever thought she'd see. He rolled up on her doorstep, looking for another chance.

The money was in the bag. If he could just get through one more night in this low-down, rat's ass town. He just needed to keep one step ahead of them all.

It was her town. She'd made a name for herself and no two-bit criminal was going to take it away. This time, someone else was taking the fall.

LAST CHANCE NOIR is a tool kit for *PLAY WITH INTENT*, an American and Nordic Freeform framework for creating an improvisational, live role playing game. The setting is inspired by classic Hollywood noir films like *The Big Sleep*, *The Third Man*, *The Glass Key*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. You don't have to have seen these films to play the game, but it helps to understand some of the tropes and themes of the genre. If you haven't seen them, and you enjoy classic Hollywood films, I recommend running out right now and watching a few. Or pick up *Red Harvest* or *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett, or *The Simple Art of Murder* by Raymond Chandler.

How do I play? Gather a group of 3 to 8 players, and set aside two to four hours to play. With more people you need more time. It helps if at least two of the players is familiar with role playing games, perhaps larp (live action role playing) or tabletop role play. One person should familiarize themselves with the rules; they are the Facilitator. Sit down with the group, and pick out the rules you'd like to use. This is your framework for play. The players will work within it to act out improvised scenes and create a tale in the noir tradition. The rules give you tools to listen to one another and find this story together.

What do I need to play? A copy of the rules, and some paper and pencils, maybe some name tags. Some open space to play and move around in. A table and some chairs, enough for each player plus a couple more to use as props for sets. Each of the players should bring a noir-appropriate prop, and the Facilitator may wish to bring a couple extra for players to use. Having some water or something else to drink, and perhaps some snacks, is never a bad thing.

What is the tone of this game? *LAST CHANCE NOIR* draws on the tropes of 30s-50s film noir. These stories were full of violence, betrayal, and desperation. Play will be fairly serious and dark in tone. Issues such as drugs, alcohol, emotional abuse, murder and assault are quite likely to come up. A game for adults.

**Follow each other's lead. Venture into dangerous territory. Abandon your preconceptions.
Play to lose. Plunge into the darkness together.**

playwithintent.wordpress.com

Custom playset written for Intercon N. Based on game by Matthijs Holter and Emily Care Boss, with material by Alex Fradera. Play With Intent ©2012, free for use by others.

You will use certain roleplaying techniques as you see fit, selecting and incorporating them along the way, following the flow of the game and your own personal desires. What does this mean? It means there is no fixed set of rules. You'll be trying out different rules, techniques, ways of play as you go along. No rules at all? No structure? Yes, there is some structure. There are some principles.

We're going to talk about four things: principles, environment, structure and techniques.

Principles

The rules of this game will change, as all participants do things that fit the moment. Here is a list of the Principles which form a baseline guide for play. What follows is a brief description of each Principle.

Be attentive!

Listen to what the others are doing. See what the situation is while playing. The effect of this is to make sure you're all on the same page, playing the same game. Just like music can't function if every instrument plays its own tune in its own tempo, you can't roleplay if you're not aware of what others are doing.

Stay with it!

Don't chicken out on boredom, tension, pain or discomfort. Like massaging a hurt muscle until it warms up, go through it. The effect of this is to give people space and time to experience the story and the characters. As soon as you hurry, pushing things, you remove the breathing room needed to feel, reflect, understand. Fast play is a specific technique to be used at specific points—not a general principle.

Be in it!

Be your character, be your description, be in the situation. Accept that the narrative might not be perfect; go for the experience. The effect of this is to bring you into the game—heart and mind. Thinking outside the game will happen, and it is allowed, but if your focus is only on building a perfect story, your head will not be free to live in that story.

Take action!

Step in and do something. Your character can act. You can use techniques, give instructions, set scenes. The effect of this is that everyone feels ownership of their character, the story, the game. The experience belongs to everyone, and is being created by everyone.

Challenge!

Make others feel alive by providing them with challenges and hurdles. The effect of this is to bring their feelings—both player and character—into the light, to make them understand what they're experiencing. Personality traits come to the forefront when tested.

See the real people!

Help and challenge the actual players. Give them themes they might find interesting, provocative, hard. Scaffold them. The effect of this is to make the experience feel real and meaningful to the player, not only the character. It is more important that the player has a strong experience than that the character or story is believable.

Sense the spotlight!

When someone's doing something cool, help them do it until it's done. When there's not a spotlight, feel free to grab it, or point it at someone. The effect of this is that everyone gets a chance to shine, and that you will be part of each others' experience. When you make someone else awesome, you are part of that.

No planning!

Do not try too hard to connect all the dots. Do not set up a railroad to follow. Possible future events are tasty treats that we might want to pick up, not checkpoints on a to-do list. The effect of this is to give everyone space to contribute. It also frees you to explore the potential narrative and experience; instead of painting by numbers, you're seeing things for the first time, experiencing every moment because it's new and nobody knows what happens next.

Environment

The Place —

A private and comfortable space where play can go on uninterrupted. Open floor for live play to occur, perhaps in parallel scenes. A table or two, enough chairs for all to sit plus a few extra. Simple props.

A Safe Space —

By playing you agree to proceed in a respectful, professional manner with your fellow players. Especially when being cruel or abused in character, honor the trust being offered to you by being conscientious and act with kindness to the real people involved.

We're adopting modern, progressive attitudes towards all women, people of color, queer folk and others typically disempowered. Non-normative characters are encouraged. Stereotyped characters will be thrown out. Society in-game may, however, reflect discrimination. Plots may deal with racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, genderism, etc.

Cut and Brake —

A recommended technique for keeping people safe while taking risks is "Cut and Brake". It's very simple: If someone does something that pushes your boundaries a little too much, say "Brake". They should immediately tone down, back out a bit, but play still goes on. If you feel like things have gotten out of hand, or you feel scared or very confused, say "Cut". All play stops immediately, and the group should be quiet and listen to whoever cut the game, if they want to talk. Be supportive, find out what the problem is. Don't continue unless everyone feels safe and wants to go on.

Maybe you end up never using Cut and Brake. But knowing they're there may help you feel a lot more safe if things get weird.

The Group —

Play with people you know, or want to be with. Be respectful of those you don't know well. Each play-group has different dynamics based on how individuals' personalities interact. Be aware and try to see the other people for who they are. Be aware of the spotlight, some will gravitate to it, others won't step up. Notice what you tend to do and try to balance it out. Encourage others to do the same.

Structure

Overview

We gather in a good playing space.

We're in a safe space. We trust each other. We have time devoted to what we're doing. This is crucial. We are present to play.

We talk about playing with intent. We lay out the basics: We're here to explore. Our aim is to listen, to incorporate, to build, to listen more. To do what feels right, spontaneously.

We go through the principles. We discuss those we need to discuss, answer questions that need to be answered. We demonstrate "Cut" and "Brake."

We have loads of roleplaying techniques to choose from. Reading through, several stand out to us. We pick those cards. We put the principles up on the wall. Or maybe we just pick some techniques from the book to get us going.

We generate the seeds: A setting. A basic situation. Some characters. Here, we use techniques we know, or make some up on the spot. We use props, to delineate our character, or to inspire the framing of scenes.

We should expect the start to grate. Things can be slow and painful, but warming up we'll get into it. Stay with it! If it flows, see that as a gift. When things do stick, keep with it.

We start out with a simple, but functional structure—round-robin scene framing, for example.

Further play is guided by the principles and techniques we choose to use.

As we sense things are ending, we bring each others' attention to the fact.

Maybe someone takes charge, maybe we have a climax; or maybe we just acknowledge the ending with a silent nod and a sigh.

Authority

There are different forms of authority, and nobody needs to have them all. In fact, it's good if they're divided, so everyone contributes & everyone has to listen to someone else. Some of these things will be explicit choices, some will be determined by personality.

See who in your group may want to take some of these roles:

- The facilitator (who reads the rules)
- The alpha player (who usually takes the spotlight, and entertains people)
- The idea creator (who comes up with weird, crazy and/or fitting things in the fiction)
- The setting boss (who knows the period of history you play in, or the books you're borrowing from)
- The historian (who keeps track of character sheets, maps or other records of what-has-gone-before, more or less being needed depending on the game)
- The organizer (who says when and where you meet, who brings what, etc)
- The scene ender (who determines when scenes come to a close)
- The lead team (a team or one person who is in charge of making the game flow)
- The mood minder (who suggests when to take breaks)

Here are some other models for how your group can divide authority:

Rotating moderation

Each turn one person—or a group of people—take the job of a director or GM: making sure the game moves forward, agreed upon procedures are used, and spotlight is shared.

“Yes, and” or “Yes, but”

If someone doesn't like what's been established by another player, they accept most of it, but change its implications in order to have something else to work with.

Tokens

Each person has a token they can use to insert an idea or use a technique. Place out of play after invoked until all have used their tokens. May be cards with name of technique on them.

Beginning the Story

At the start of play, you need some seed of the story and characters to begin with. You may start very simply, or use a bit more structure to give yourself ideas. With more players, more structure may be helpful.

Cast and Plot

In *LAST CHANCE NOIR*, the setting is US 30s-40s and early 50s, with film noir tropes and cultural landmarks. Players may suggest elements to incorporate e.g. “night-club”, “drug den”, “gambling ring.” When in relation to World War I and World War II does the story takes place? Is it during or post-prohibition? Create the characters together, and see what story suggests itself from their pasts, current problems and interconnections.

Last Chance

Each character is desperate and at the end of their rope. Make at least one main character per player. Each player may pick up a prop to inspire the character and say:

- a brief physical description (e.g. the beautiful dancer, a grey woman in a grey suit)
- their role or position (the squad leader, the mole)

The person to their left says:

- what they dreamed they would accomplish (fame, wealth, love)
- how they have fallen (corrupt, domestic, drug-addled)

The person to their right says:

- what terrible mistake they have made (debt, sex, crime)
- who is after them now (the law, criminals, spouse—may be another player's character)

Write this down on a piece of paper or note card. Choose a name. Play the one you made, or choose among them.

Many incidental characters may be played, those mentioned in the creation of the character, for example. Players step in to play them as needed if their main character is not in the scene.

Note that social roles of the past can be jettisoned. Police, detectives and wealthy corporation heads need not be white cisgender males. Love interests and home makers need not be cisgender women. Criminals, informants and prisoners need not be people of color. Ditch the stereotypes.

Framing Scenes

Your story may be divided up into smaller sections, like scenes in a film or play. If so it will be helpful to know how your group will move from scene to scene. Beginning a new scene is often called “framing” the scene.

Here are some ways to share framing scenes:

Round-robin scene framing

Each player takes a turn setting the scene for where play takes place. They say where it takes place, who is there. Perhaps what is happening, and when it is.

Inspirational objects

Everyone has brought a noir-setting appropriate object. Use these as seeds for scenes. Set them all out, and each player can choose one as the basis for a scene that gets played next.

Reincorporation

One element is suggested and written down by each player. These become elements of play. Could be used as a timing structure: make a list and circle when it is introduced in play. When comes back in to play, cross it off. When all have been crossed off, begin to wrap up game.

Separate play and reflection spaces

Have a designated space for group reflection, breaks, planning. Have another area that’s for play, especially if you’re going to use physical play. When you play, go back and forth between the two areas.

Ending things

When a scene accomplishes its goal or comes to a dramatic conclusion, end it concisely. If it is losing energy, or the players are unsure what to do, let it go. Thank the players.

Here are some techniques you can use to end scenes:

Anyone ends

When anyone feels that a scene has done all it can, is starting to wander, or is losing energy, they say “Cut.”

The Ender role

Someone is given authority to end things. When they say so, start wrapping up the scene, or even cut it right away. Players may ask for more time and the scene goes on for a brief time more.

Techniques

This tool kit is a collection of techniques you can use to aim for creative goals in your game. Start with one or two Warm Ups, then demonstrate Techniques. Use them as desired in Scenes framed using one of the Structures.

Start out with the Warm-Ups, these are exercises that will help set the mood for play and get the players used to working together. They may also demonstrate some techniques that will be used in the games.

Standard Techniques for LAST CHANCE NOIR:

No stereotypes

throw out or modify characters that fulfill derogatory stereotypes.

Physical play

Stand up, move around and act out what the characters do. Embody the characters. Use simple props. Also, use the space and movement to represent the emotional elements of play.

Transparency

All is known by all the players. Characters may have secrets but these are known by the players, allowing all to help build upon them, and for the group to collectively bring them into play.

Warm Ups

Personal space exercise

Stand in lines across from one another. Approach step by step until it feels uncomfortable. Back off, approach again. Find equilibrium.

Status Play

A round of Status play - players in pairs act out the relationships between those in high/low status relationships: boss/employee, parent/child, police/criminal, rich/poor, master/servant, mob boss/victim, kidnapper/victim, etc. May be characters created for play, if so state how their relative status (higher/lower). Play a status drop or switch if desired.

Countdown

Everyone closes their eyes. One player starts counting down from 10 to 0. For each number, someone describes a sensation or experience, possibly related to the setting or potential characters. At 0, everyone opens their eyes.

Noir Techniques Tool Kit

Act Structure

Just as a play is broken into acts, the game can be divided into two or three sections. This provides pacing and is a cue to escalate tensions in the tale. Each Act may start with a certain pre-set event, or be triggered by certain events coming to fruition.

Another approach is to have each Act have different rules or techniques. For example, no characters may be killed in the first act, while in the third act whenever a gun is drawn someone must die in that scene.

Breather

A quick character scene as an interlude. Shows the human side of the characters.

Bust Down the Door

To crank up the tension, you can always introduce conflict by way of having someone with a gun bust down the door, or allow the characters to break into a scene in progress by kicking the door in.

Chekhov's Gun

Proverbially, Anton Chekov said that if a gun is hanging on the wall, it should be fired by the second or third chapter. Applying this, if a gun is introduced, someone gets shot. Bringing the gun back in for an appearance at a later time is particularly satisfying. Works well in conjunction with *Act Structure*.

Clashing Interest

Create characters at odds with one another. Rivalries, victims, ruthless opponents and allies with diverging interests.

Conspiracy

A variant of *Sides/Teams*. Pairs and trios of characters work together, then backstab and jump sides when the chips are down.

Endowment

Players gift each other's characters with problems/aspects. Accept what other say about you in play and bring it into the game. Build on what they've said, whether it is something that helps your character of puts them at a disadvantage. Complications help create openings for plot to develop.

Flashback

Cut back in time to a point earlier than the most recent scene. May interrupt a scene which is then resumed, or follow in-between two scenes from the present of the chronology.

Flash Forward

Cut forward to a time long after the most recent scene. May be a possible future, ideal outcome, nightmare scenario or what have you. Following scene may return to the earlier chronology, or continue on in the future that follows from the Flash Forward.

Goals/Victory

There is a way to win this game. Maybe it is getting the goods on your enemy, maybe it is making your way to the top, maybe it is getting that dream you've always had that drives you onward day by day. You know what it is, and you know when you've attained it—or not.

Ghosts

The dead can speak. This may be a side character who is killed off-screen, or a main character who dies during the course of the story. Either as in-character haunting or dialogue that only the players can hear.

In Media Res

Action is happening. Begin the scene in the midst of a fight, or with an argument or confrontation happening. May be action that needs to be explained. Allow the scene to play out and find your connections to the past events as you go along—or provide an explanation as you frame this scene.

Inside/Outside Voice

Alternate between character's inner voice and external narration/dialogue. Speak interior thoughts other characters would not perceive. May also speak broad connecting information, like a narrator's voice-over in a film, that fill in pieces of the puzzle or push the characters in new directions.

Love 'em and leave 'em

Relationships are almost always an angle. If someone wants you, they're a sucker and you can use that to get them to do what you want. Real love and loyalty are rare.

MacGuffin

Is it treasure? An heir? A rare bird? This is something everyone wants to get their hands on. Keep it moving.

Montage!

Shotgun play of brief thematically related actions. Quick succession of brief, preparatory or development scenes.

Secrets/burdens

The characters enter play with things they wish to hide from others, or that pull them down emotionally. These are known to all of the players, and should be brought into play if possible.

Shadowing

A player follows someone else playing a character. They may give direction, whisper thoughts or take the role of a ghost or voice of conscience. Physical direction can be used to enhance emotional experience of the role. For example, pressing down on the shoulders of someone who is care worn. For physical play, demonstrate prior to play and clear with group as an accepted activity. Well suited for play with *Ghosts*.

Sides/teams/good-bad dichotomy

The plot provides sharply delineated conflicts between groups involved in play. May take the form of moral disparities (those willing to kill/maim/destroy for their goals vs. those respecting or protecting the rights of others), or strongly disparate goals (competition for single goal, biases against one another) that put the players at odds with one another.

Slo-Mo Violence

Violence is endemic in noir. To have this occur safely, slip into slow motion whenever fisticuffs break out. Matrix-style, have the fighters strongly telegraph their intended target. Don't land any punches. The target reacts as though they've been hit, or chooses to take the advantage. If you've got the motif *The Beat Down* in play, that character may take a serious, slow motion-no contact beating. In the next scene play out the consequences and hurt for full effect.

SETS

- choose from these related options

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When there is a decision point or disagreement about what happens next, use some rules to decide who gets to say. Determine what's really important about it:

Vote & Consequences. Pekka and Georges are facing each other down in the dramatic climax. Pekka is Georges'

lieutenant who is betraying him now to save her sister. They square off with guns, and each want to kill the other. Other players point to side they want to win, and the group chooses negative consequences the winner suffers. Lois, Danika and Peter vote for Pekka, but they says: "Shot and bleeding, caught by police, she lives to see the next Don continue in the dead one's footsteps."

Draw Cards & Winner Take all. Pekka and Georges are facing each other down in the dramatic climax. Both want to control or kill the others. Each side draws 2 cards. For each other player supporting their side, draw additional card. Highest wins. Pekka wins. She narrates killing her boss, and having a grateful reunion with her kidnapped sister.

DREAM SEQUENCES

Surreal fever or drug-induced dream, with characters from the main story-line in unsettling or nightmarish setting. Dream characters carry accusations and recriminations, or desperate pleas for help. Dreamer cannot take any effective action. Use some of these techniques to good effect:

Remapping

A player calls a scene, framing its location and characters, that attempts to recreate the dynamics found in an earlier scene—probably the one just completed. Lifting elements wholesale is encouraged—slices of dialogue, activities, pace of the scene.

People as objects

When an object is needed for attention in the scene, such as a statue, alien obelisk, or business slide presentation, players act this out. Wherever possible, this should be used to make a blind offer to the players with speaking roles in the scene, to make sense of.

Absurdity curve

Do a bigger and bigger version of one thing. This can involve two people competing or one alone (for example, by stacking on Impossible Environment). Effective when it's played with truth underneath the absurdity. (Also good for introducing Humor.)

HUMOR

Leaven the tension or horror with levity. Allow for jokes, have a character or two who gives comic relief, pick a light scene before or after moments of unbearable strain. Here are tips on bringing in humor.

Status differences

Simply be mindful of high status being ripe for humour. Pomposity, arrogance, etc. are all gold.

Don't say it, do it! (Just do it!)

Whenever you have an urge to joke about an in-game event relating to your character, see if that translates into a character-led action.

Impossible environment

Find something everyday in the environment to have trouble with, interfering with some other activity that you are meant to be focusing on.

REPEATING MOTIFS

- connected to specific characters
- may be added during the course of play.

The Beat Down

Character gets the shit kicked out of them, regularly.

Cold Heart

There are a lot of hardened characters in this world, but this one strikes fear in even the most formidable. Group may choose one character who does not fear them.

Everybody loves me

Everyone who meets this character falls for them, at least a little. Choose one person to be immune to their charm.

Marked for Death

The character has doom hanging over them. They will die by the time the story is through. This may be a purely meta-concern, the players know but the character does not, or it may be a brooding sense or prophetic intuition that the character feels.

Tangled Past

This character or characters' lives have crossed and criss-crossed with many others. Their dark secrets, or innocent past, are intertwined with the lives of those around them. And may bring them all down.

True Love

Pick two characters, they share true love. See how far it gets them in this world.

CUSTOM TECHNIQUES AND MOTIFS

As you set up the game and as you play, be inspired by the genre and add your own techniques or motifs. For example, *Bust Down the Door* and *Tangled Past* (among others) came from the first two runs of this playset. There are blank spaces on one of the Technique sheets for you to write in new ones. Make the game your own.

"I'm going to send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. That means you'll be out again in twenty years. You're an angel! I'll wait for you. If they hang you, I'll always remember you."

—Sam Spade, from the screenplay for *The Maltese Falcon*

Further Reading:

<http://scripts-onscreen.com/2011/film-noir-scripts/>

Further Viewing:

The Thin Man
Murder, My Sweet
Gilda
Criss Cross
Double Indemnity
The Killers
DOA

Neo Noir:
Memento
The Big Lebowski
Cast a Deadly Spell
Chinatown

Musical:
City of Angels

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<i>Act Structure</i>	<i>Breather</i>
<i>Bust Down the Door</i>	<i>Chekhovs Gun</i>
<i>Clashing Interests</i>	<i>Conspiracy</i>
<i>Endowment</i>	<i>Flashback</i>
<i>Flash Forward</i>	<i>Goals or Victory</i>
<i>Ghosts</i>	<i>In Media Res</i>
<i>Inner Voice</i>	<i>Love em & leave em</i>

<i>MacGuffin</i>	<i>Montage</i>
<i>Secrets & burdens</i>	<i>Sides & Dichotomies</i>
<i>Shadowing</i>	<i>Slo Mo Violence</i>
<i>Voice Over Narration</i>	<i>Transparency</i>
<i>Physical Play</i>	<i>No Stereotypes</i>

<i>Resolution: vote</i>	<i>Resolution: cards</i>
<i>Humor: just do it!</i>	<i>Humor: status</i>
<i>Humor: impossible environment</i>	<i>Dreams: absurdity curve</i>
<i>Dreams: remap</i>	<i>Dreams: people as objects</i>
<i>Motif: true love</i>	<i>Motif: beat down</i>
<i>Motif: everybody loves me</i>	<i>Motif: tangled past</i>
<i>Motif: cold heart</i>	<i>Motif: marked for death</i>

Facilitator	Alpha
Setting Boss	Ideas
Historian	Organizer
Scene Ender	Mood Minder
Lead Team	Lead Team