

Title Goes Here

A Game of Retellings and Discovering the Universe

by Mendel Schmiedekamp

Based on a Character Sheet by Claire Bickell

September 13, 2006

Titles are strange things, when you think about them. Words, symbols, and pictures can all contain multitudes, but a title attempts to contain an entire book, production, or even a person.

It sums up, and resonates within us. But a title is a symbol of a symbol, the book refers to something further, the production implies as much as it shows, and the person brings forth an entire context, the momentary representation.

While titles have their meaning, the wealth of it comes after we've read the book or seen the show. Only then does the title bring up everything which it supposedly refers, only after we've journeyed through it, and returned.

Is the book summed up by its title? Or is the title summed up by the book?

In either way, the path and journey through it are inseparable. But since each person walks a different path, reads or sees things a little differently, how do we bring everything back to the title, that universal term?

One way is to journey together, to forge into the many paths and reduce down to one, and that path becomes a new title.

In mapping the universe and charting a path through it many things can be accomplished, least of all a title.

Decoding a Game

Title Goes Here is a role-playing game (RPG) of exploration and meaning. Like most RPGs, Title Goes Here has layers, the top being the players gathered together to play the game, and lower in the layer of the *roles*, in this case *scholars* who have, likewise, gathered to delve into a great work.

Unlike many RPGs, however, Title Goes Here adds a few more levels beneath the world of these scholars. The next lowest level is that of the *great work*, usually a book, but it could be an epic poem, a movie, or a shadow puppet play. Here the story of this work is taken and retold, from different perspective, different decodings, and different meanings. At this level each player has a *character* from the work, championed by a scholar played by that same player. The lowest level, is that of *truths*, fundamental ideas which are represented by the arguments of the scholar, the actions of the character, and by the decisions of the player. Indeed, this

truth brings the layers full circle, acting as player commentary on the game in progress.

Each player has a character sheet, which when correctly folded can reveal one of three faces to the other players. You show which layer you are currently working in, by the face of your sheet. If your introspects face you, then you are in the layer of the scholars, commenting on the fictional work. If your inspects face you, then you are in the layer of the characters, acting within your own version of the story. If your aspects face you, then you are in the layer of truths and players, speaking about the game itself and what you wish to accomplish.

In each layer it is important to keep within your role, but there are ways during the game that you can change which layer you are using and there are ways for other players to shift your layer as well. This happens when your sheet rotates to show the correct face.

The Stories We Tell

Each game of Title Goes Here revolves around a single great work. Both art and story, the great work is the common point around which the characters' adventures, the scholars' investigations, and the truths' pronouncements hinge. But at the same time, the great work need not be something traditionally considered as such. If all of the players have just read the same story, you can use it, whether it is a literary classic or a trashy novel. Indeed, the great work could be anything from a classic opera to a child's

picture book.

All that matters is that the players share the same level of familiarity with the great work. So, if you have all read it recently, or all read it years ago, or even have only heard of it, then it can serve as a great work. You can even go one step further and make up a completely fictitious work, just discuss it and decide what you will all use. The great work sets the tone of Title Goes Here, and influences everything around it, so make sure everyone is agreed on what gets chosen.

Crafting the Roles

Once you've chosen a great work to build from, the next step is for each player to fill out their character sheet. At first your character sheet looks like this:

The character sheet template is enclosed in a large rectangular border. At the top, there is a rectangular box labeled "Title Goes Here". Below this box are three horizontal lines for writing, followed by a large, empty oval shape. A dashed horizontal line separates this section from the next. The next section is labeled "Introspect" in a stylized, vertical font on the left. To its right are three gray, square-shaped symbols with rounded corners and a white starburst in the center. Below this is another dashed horizontal line with a small icon and the text "Fold up here". The next section is labeled "Inspect" in a stylized, vertical font on the left. To its right are three yellow, square-shaped symbols with rounded corners and a white starburst in the center. Below this is another dashed horizontal line with a small icon and the text "Fold down here". The final section is labeled "Aspect" in a stylized, vertical font on the left. To its right are three blue, square-shaped symbols with rounded corners and a white starburst in the center.

Decide on a character from the great work, if you don't know any characters, make them up. This will be the main character your scholar identifies in the work, and will be played by you during your character role. Put this name in the oval. Then list a short summary of that character's story on the lines to the left of the oval. These will serve as reminders during the game, both to you and to other players.

The next step is to fill out the symbols, one for each of the boxes. The three introspect symbols are the ones most associated with your character role, the three inspect symbols with your truth role, and the three aspect symbols with your scholar. The nine symbols can be seen in the next section, Symbols in the Sky. Think about what these might mean, but don't worry too much about that. Much of the game is finding connections and meaning in

these symbols and their relationships.


Your sheet should look a little like this:

Title Goes Here

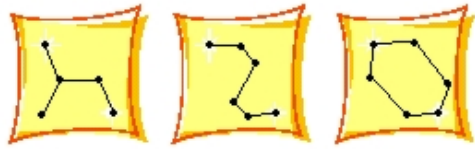
Unappreciated
Left home and
founded winery
Returned a Hero

Jerimiah

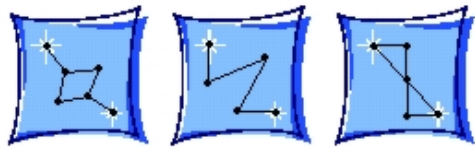
Introspect



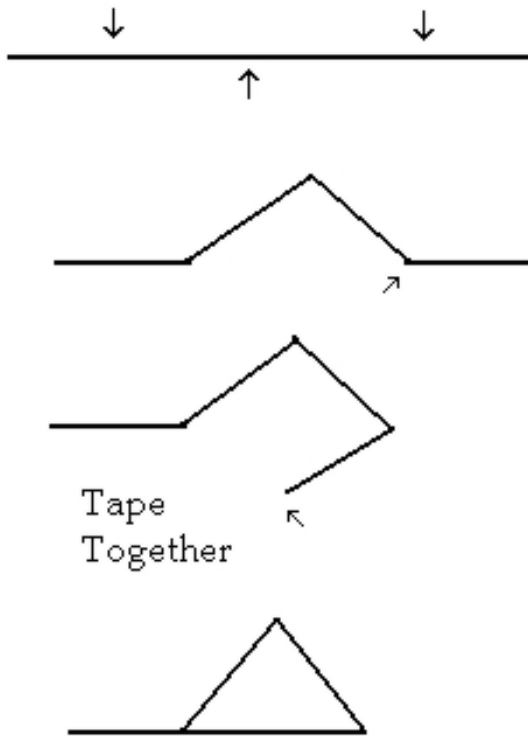
Inspect



Aspect

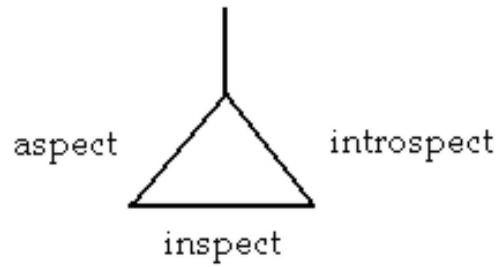


Once your sheet is complete, you can fold and tape your character sheet. Looking at the sheets from the left side, you fold it like this.

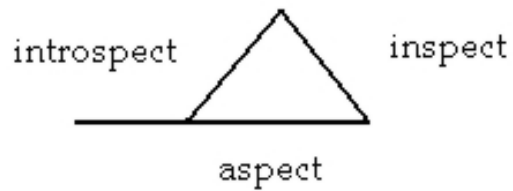


Folding the Sheet

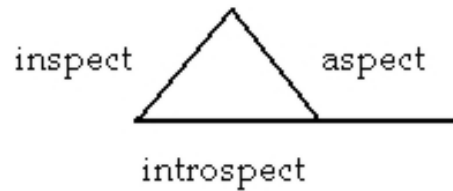
The positions of the sheets are as follows.



Scholar Position



Character Position

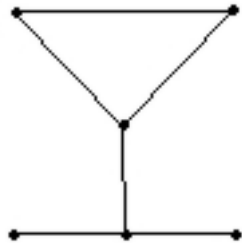


Truth Position

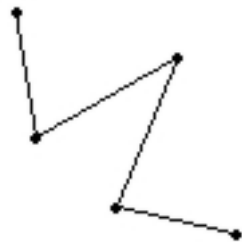
The symbols facing the other players, shown on the left here, are *revealed*. The ones visible only to you, shown on the right here, are *seen*. Lastly, the ones facing the table are *hidden*. So in the scholar role, the aspect symbols are revealed, the introspect symbols are seen, and the inspect symbols are hidden.

Symbols in the Sky

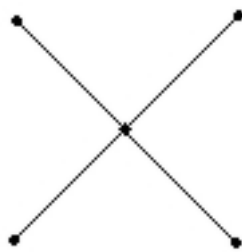
These are the nine symbols used in Title Goes Here. Each is a constellation, drawn using the two stars in the block, plus any additional stars needed. They each have a name, the rest is up to you.



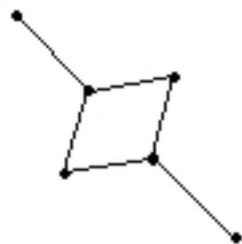
the Chalice



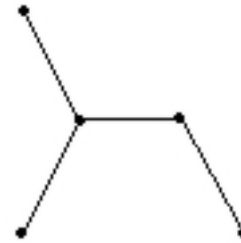
the Crown



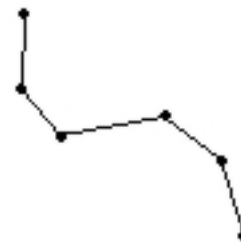
the Cross



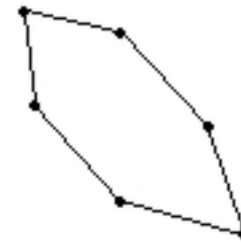
the Eye



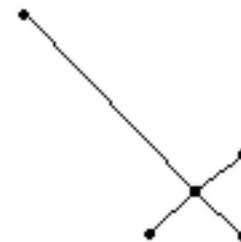
the Horse



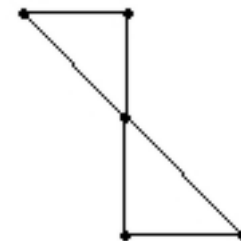
the River



the Shield



the Sword



the Wheel

Mapping the Universe

Once you've completed and folded your character sheet, you are ready to begin playing Title Goes Here. Sit around the table with all of your character sheets in the scholar position, and put in the center a blank piece of paper, a small pawn or token for each player, and small book. Whoever takes the book first, is the starting player, and keeps the book until another player asks for gnosis. If you are the starting player, write toward the top of the paper the Crown symbol, and circle it, Then place all the pawns there.

You may now pontificate as your scholar, describing why you have gathered your colleagues here and telling them of the secret you have decoded from the great work you all study. This is the first of the *narration rounds*, all of which operate using the same rules.

The active player in a narration round guides the discussion and story. Other players' roles may interact with the active player's role, but cannot contradict the active player's role, and must either shift or back down if challenged by the active player's role. This shift involves rotating the character sheet to another position, changing the player's role in the game. If the shifting player reveals the symbol currently occupied by the active player's pawn, the active player must accept the contradiction.

A narration round ends when the active player *concludes*, indicating a symbol matching the one on which his pawn rests from another player's revealed symbols. That other player then reveals the seen symbol behind the one indicated, the active player's pawn now moves to this next symbol, which is drawn if necessary, and a line is drawn

if one does not already connecting the two symbols. In this way the universe is mapped by the motions of the players from symbol to symbol.

Once this occurs, the player whose sheet just rotated becomes the new active player, beginning another narration round. This means that the active player can only conclude when at least one symbol matching the location of her or his pawn is revealed. However, if all non-active players have this symbol the active player must quickly conclude. While some time is reasonable, the active player should take this as a sign that they have gone on long enough.

Typically the movement between symbols is always kept within the same column, so that the first symbol revealed leads to the first symbol seen, and so on. By requesting the *gnosis* from the player holding the book this limitation may be circumvented. In that case the next symbol can be any of the symbols seen. When this is done that player will hand you the book, in which case you cannot request the gnosis until another player has requested it from you.

Narration rounds continue until the *ninth symbol* is added to the map. This symbol is the end symbol, and each pawn that moves there is removed from the board, and their player can no longer be active player during the mapping. If such a player would become the active player they can assign an active player of choice. When at least half of the players reach the ninth symbol, the mapping ends, and the last pawn to reach it is left there for the second part of Title Goes Here, the charting the path. The other pawns are removed from the map.

Charting the Path

Once you've mapped the universe, it's time to find the truth within the varieties. Starting with the player who shifted as the last player entered the ninth symbol, charting the path works much like mapping the universe. Narration rounds work exactly the same, with one difference, when a player concludes, the symbols revealed are the hidden symbols instead of the seen ones.

Charting the path also changes how narration rounds affect the map. The players now all share a pawn, so every time a player concludes, the pawn can move. But the pawn only moves if there is already a line connecting the current symbol with the next one. Any line crossed this way should be widened, indicating that it is part of the path. This continues until the pawn moves to the Crown symbol. At which point the game

ends.

While mapping the universe is very diffuse, with many views and ideas being thrown about, charting the path is more focused. Ultimately each step on the path is a piece of the true meaning of the work. *False steps* where the pawn fails to move were events and reasoning that failed to become part of the path, perhaps apocryphal or undesirable in some way. If you are given the narration by such a step, you should endeavor to show the error at its root as part of your own narration. If you receive the narration from a step which succeeded, then link with those ideas and expand on them. This way, when the Crown symbol is reached it will be at an apex of ideas and stories.

Which is a fitting place to end.

Design Notes

Much of the design of Title Goes Here derives from Claire Bickell's character sheet entry in the 2006 Reverse Engineering Game Design Contest. From the title of the game, I got the idea of a game where the story itself is indeterminant. From the various foldings of the sheet, I found one which fit well with the sense of encoding and decoding. From there a mix of pseudo-Kaballism, Umberto Eco's writing on semiotics, and Meguey Baker's excellent *A Thousand and One Nights* helped give rise to this game.

Once the concept was there, the game largely designed itself, with two notable ex-

ceptions. The first was the gnosis mechanic, which is actually present to avoid the risk of coding cycles. There is a small chance that all the other players have the same three symbols on the same column of their sheet. If so, you can never enter or leave those symbols. The gnosis allows you to break out, but not too often or easily. The second exception was revealing the hidden, in place of the seen during the charting the path phase. This allows players to use their intuition from mapping the universe to more effectively chart the path.

Index

Character, 2, 3

False Steps, 8

Gnosis - Passing the Book, 7

Great Work, 2

Narration Round, 7, 8

 Concluding, 7

Ninth Symbol, 7

Roles, 2

Scholar, 2

Sheet, 3

 Folding the Sheet, 5

 Sheet Positions, 5

Symbols, 3, 6

 Hidden, 5

 Revealed, 5

 Seen, 5

Truth, 2