

Sudden Light: A Story Game of the Mundane and Sublime

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I have been here before,

But when or how I cannot tell:

I know the grass beyond the door,

The sweet keen smell,

The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

You have been mine before, -

How long ago I may not know:

But just when at that swallow's soar

Your neck turned so,

Some veil did fall, - I knew it all of yore.

Has this been thus before?

And shall not thus time's eddying flight

Still with our lives our love restore

In death's despite,

And day and night yield one delight once more?

-Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Introductory Comments

Sudden Light is an interactive storytelling game designed for three players. While the mechanics of this game maintain the role of the GM (called Guides throughout this text), *Sudden Light* inverts the traditional player-GM dichotomy used by most role-playing games. Instead of multiple players playing different characters with a singular GM, *Sudden Light* uses two GM's with a single player acting out the role of a lone Protagonist. This game also introduces an element of competition between these GMs, as each represent a force attempting to seduce a singular individual toward their domain. These Guides, in *Sudden Light*, become the better angels or the base desires of the Protagonist, pushing her toward or drawing her away from, encountering the Truth of the setting.

Necessary Materials

Very little, beyond an active imagination and a flair for improvised drama, is necessary to play *Sudden Light*. Three players are required to take on the roles of the Protagonist, the Sublime Guide, and the Mundane Guide. Differently colored tokens of similar shape and texture are necessary for use as Influence Tokens; poker chips are especially suited for this role as well as a hat or other container for drawing lots. Beyond these bare requirements, pens or pencils, a few pieces of paper, and a standard six-sided die are especially helpful to have on hand.

The Truth

This game is a "setting-less" system. This, however, does not mean that this game is generic. The mechanics of *Sudden Light* are not meant to emulate any genre, story, or play style, but is meant help players create tales of epiphanies, revelations, deceptions, existential struggles, philosophic discoveries, personal betterment (or regression) and transcendence above ideological lies and distortions. Through Protagonist generation, the players will generate the setting in relation to the story of one individual's struggle to overcome banality and blindness.

The most fundamental question which must be answered by all players before the start of play is; "what is the Truth of our setting?" Determining the Truth is the basic social and imaginative contract for play, as all themes and system mechanics hinge upon the agreed upon Truth. The Truth is what the Protagonist will encounter and her reaction to the Truth will determine her ultimate fate.

The Sublime Guide will represent all aspects of the Truth in the game world and will attempt to awaken the Protagonist to realize and be transformed the Truth.

All Truths should be able to be summed up in a single sentence or two; Truths should not be lengthy philosophical treatises, but rather simple parameters for the game session(s). Example Truths might include (and there are far too many to include here); "Aliens are real," "God does not exist," "magic is real and is fading from the world," "reality, as we know it, is a dream of a dying ancient god," "utopia can be achieved on earth," "revolution is necessary to ensure freedom," etc.

Some groups many wish to avoid vast cosmological/philosophic questions and concentrate more on stories more grounded in pragmatic, material realities. In *Sudden Light*, these sorts of stories are certainly encouraged and groups should scale back the Truth to whatever parameters they are comfortable. Example Truths for these settings could include, "We should live at peace with one another," "Addiction destroys lives," "Racism is an evil practice," "One must live for the moment," etc.

It should also be stated that it is not necessary that all players personally believe the Truth established for game play. Challenging and engaging stories could likely emerge from establishing game Truths which stand at radical odds with actual player beliefs.

The group should reach consensus on the Truth before moving onto the next step. If not everyone is enthused by proposed Truth, the group should place that Truth to one side and collaborate to generate a new Truth which excites and engages all involved.

The Lie

The Lie is what stands in fundamental contradiction to the Truth. If the group has defined the Truth in a broad cosmological sense, it is assumed that few believe or know the Truth, while many are enslaved by corruptive tendrils of the Lie. To determine the Lie, players should simply ask themselves, "why hasn't the Truth been acknowledged and accepted by the majority of people through time? Why is the Truth specifically not accepted by the Protagonist in their current situation?" Put differently, the Lie is the sum totality of ideological forces dedicated to suppressing the apprehension of the Truth by the Protagonist.

All narrative control and creative parameters for the Mundane GM are derived from the content of the Lie. Example Lies could include; "Aliens are figments of the human imagination," "God is real and we must fight for His cause," and "Reality is no more than the objective conditions discovered by science."

If the group has chosen to define the Truth in a very small, personal scope, the breadth of the Lie should be scaled back as well, oftentimes in close relation with the Protagonist's specific life issues. These sorts of Lies would be the collection of personality traits, situations, histories, and rationalizations that keep the Protagonist blinded and enslaved to forces that are often against their best interests. If the Truth is that "Addiction destroys lives," the personal Lie for a Protagonist might be "I've got my drinking under control," or "drinking is a natural and harmless part of life," or "I'm not an alcoholic."

The Machine

The Machine is the sum total of the functioning apparatuses which keep the Protagonist believing the Lie. If the Lie is a false Truth, the Machine consists of those individuals, ideas, institutions, cultural norms, and other conditions of the story and setting that ensures that the Lie is believed and the Truth is suppressed, rejected, and/or relegated to the realms of fantasy.

Elements of the Machine should be easy to derive from the content of the Lie. Institutions are often some of the best fodder to represent functionaries of the Machine. For example, if the Truth is that "Aliens are real," and the Lie is that "Aliens are nonsense and are easily dismissed by scientific research," a common institution that might represent an aspect of the Machine might be government agencies such as the CIA or the FBI and associated conspiracies theories regarding their activities. Organized religious groups are perfect functionaries of Machine if the Truth has been suppressed of "unorthodox" or "subversive." Players wishing to explore Marxist themes might identify corporations and CEO's as embodiments of the Machine supporting the Lie of capitalism.

A game concentrating on the personal scope should also scale back the breadth of the scope of the Machine considerably. Institutions most certainly play a role in the functioning of the Machine, such as organized religion encouraging an abused woman to stay with her violent husband. Destructive personal habits, webs of demeaning relationships, traumatic cultural memories, etc., can all be part of a personal Machine, but players should push themselves to

think of the global contexts and conditions which make these more visible elements of the Machine possible.

Protagonist Generation

All stories in *Sudden Light* will concentrate on a singular Protagonist represented by one player. While the Protagonist will no doubt interact with many other interesting non-player characters with rich stories of their own, this game, thematically and mechanically, concentrates on the struggle of one individual to free themselves from chains of ignorance and transcend their limited perspective to be transformed by a greater revelation.

All three players should collaborate to generate the history, personality, and beliefs of the Protagonist. While one player will have the sole responsibility of role-playing the Protagonist, each player will have a keen interest in helping to determine what makes the Protagonist tick.

To generate the Protagonist, each player, in turn, should be given a few minutes to think out loud, simply naming qualities, quirks, characteristics, and any other images that springs to mind concerning the their vision of an interesting Protagonist in a setting framed by the Truth, the Lie, and the Machine. Other players should feel free to ask the brainstormer questions about any of the elements that he or she names, which can very well generate further Aspects of the Protagonist for exploration. Allow the player each ample opportunity to envision and describe interesting characteristics of the Protagonist.

After all players have had a few minutes to brainstorm, grab a pen and a piece of paper, preferably legal-sized or larger. The group should agree on the name of the Protagonist, write it on the center of the sheet, and circle it. Randomly determine who should go first. This first player should name a quality, person, belief, place, occupation, idea, or anything else which they believe would be especially important or influential over the Protagonist's life in the established context. These qualities are called Aspects. After writing a word or a descriptive phrase that they believe would be especially important to the Protagonist, the player should circle that Aspect and draw a line that connects both circles. The player should pass the sheet to her immediate left and the new player should then write another Aspect. This circled aspect could connect to either the Protagonist's name, or could be connect with the first Aspect. Eventually, the sheet should be filled with a web of short descriptive words and phrases.

This exercise is meant to stir the imagination and creative juices in all players. Players should blurt out whatever comes to mind as she or he is inspired by previously named qualities. Players should be urged to name Aspects and pass the page as quickly as possible, allowed no more than a few moments for each player turn. A player who cannot name an Aspect in more than a few seconds, should say "pass" and allow the next player a chance to contribute. Not every description named will be used and players should feel free to name whatever qualities might spring to mind. If a player is stuck, they should repeat a previously named Aspect and complete the sentence "When you named [the previously named Aspect], I thought of

The generation of these Aspects should be allowed to continue for as long as possible, until all players "pass" or their is no more room left on the page. At the absolute minimum, potential Aspects on the page should not number less than 20-25.

Next, each player should declare what role or sphere of influence they would like to represent in game play. Available roles are; the Protagonist, the Sublime Guide, and the Mundane Guide. Each role must have one player and no player can fill more than one role.

After these initial steps are complete, pass the sheet filled with potential Aspects to the first player who initiated the brainstorming. If this player is playing the Protagonist, the player should pass the sheet to her immediate left (the Protagonist player does not participate in this step). This Guide should then "claim" a listed Aspect. Guides should choose an Aspect that they find particularly interesting or intriguing and should make a mark by the Aspect to represent that it is unavailable for selection by the other Guide. Players should only claim Aspects which they could plausibly associate with either the Truth (for the Sublime Guide) or the Lie (for the Mundane Guide). This next Guide should choose a listed a Aspect and pass the page to the first Guide. This process should continue until all Aspects have been claimed. For best game play, each Guide should, at minimum, have ten claimed Aspects.

After the Mundane and Sublime Guides have claimed their Aspects, they may alter their chosen Aspects by spending Influence Tokens. A Guide may spend 1 Influence Token for every Aspect they would like to modify. These spent Influence Tokens are subtracted from the Guide's starting pool of 10. Any alterations made must be connected in some way to the starting Aspect; modifying Aspects does not allow Guides to propose a Aspect not at all connected with the initial Aspect.

For example, a Sublime Guide has chosen the Aspect "has dreams of saving his ex-wife." By spending an Influence Token, the Guide could broaden the Aspect and change it to "hero complex." The Guide might want to generalize the Protagonist's relationship mentioned in the original Aspect by modifying it to "still loves his ex-wife." However, the Guide could not propose modifying the Aspect to "friends with a wise professor," "writes poetry," or "does volunteer work." These later Aspects are certainly legitimate, but have little or nothing to do with the original Aspect of "has dreams of saving his ex-wife." However, within this constraints there should be allowed a great deal of latitude. Extremely general Aspects beg for modification. An original image of the Protagonist with "has red hair," could be modified to "extremely proud of Irish heritage." Modifying Aspects need only have a tenuous connection with the original Aspect.

Modified Aspects have a mechanical connection to their originated Aspects. If, during the course of playing out a scene, a Guide includes the pre-modified Aspect in narration, that Guide gains a number of Influence Tokens equal to half the rating of the Aspect in question (round down). To continue an above example, the Sublime Guide has modified "dreams of saving his ex-wife" to "still loves his ex-wife." The Guide has rated "still loves his ex-wife" at 5. In during course of winning a Conflict, the Guide narrates the Protagonist attempting to reconcile with his wife. During the course of the narration, the Guide includes the detail "Tom begs passionately for Alice to realize that her drug addiction is destroying her and that their love can overcome it. Deep in his mind, he still imagines himself as a hero in shining armor, ready to save her from herself." By including the details concurrent with a pre-modified Aspect "dreams of saving his ex-wife," the Sublime Guide gains 2 Influence Tokens (half of the Aspect rating, rounded down). Gaining Influence Tokens through this process may only be done once per game session for each Aspect.

No more than 5 of the starting 10 Influence Tokens may be spent modifying Aspects for each Guide.

The Sublime and Mundane Guides each have 10 points to allocate to any Aspects of their choosing. The higher the Aspect rating, the more important or influential the Aspect is to the Protagonist's life. An Aspect with a rating of 5 might be the Protagonist's young child, a true love, a warm memory of a grandparent, a dream job, a secret overwhelming obsession, an

enslaving addiction, etc. An Aspect with a rating of 1 is only vaguely connected to the Protagonist's life, such as passing fad, a friendly business associate, etc.

Guides do not have to allocate any points to a claimed Aspect. No Aspect may be rated at more than 5 points, but players may max out any Aspect if they so choose, although hedging all bets on one or two Aspects can be a risky proposition.. On average, Sublime and Mundane Guides will have an average of 3-5 Aspects rated at 2-3 points apiece.

Once this is complete, the Sublime and Mundane Guides should explain how each one of their Aspects relate to the Protagonist and how these Aspects might challenge the Protagonist with Truth (for the Sublime Guide) or how they function to keep the Protagonist tethered to the Lie (for the Mundane Guide). For example, the Aspect "best friend" might be described as a loyal and caring compatriot who could help the Protagonist become aware the divinity of all human beings or, alternatively, could be described as a drug-dealing lowlife who continually drags the Protagonist to ever deepening levels of degradation.

Example of Play: Protagonist Generation

Ben, Karen, and Abby have gathered on a Friday evening to play a game of Sudden Light. Karen, after having a great time art class that afternoon, suggests that the Truth of tonight's game should be "The world is filled with Beauty and meaning." After considering that Truth, and after some kibitzing, the group decides that an interesting Lie would be "Life is filled with ugliness, horror, and meaninglessness." Ben, prompted by a recent sociology class, suggests that the Machine might be crime and poverty in the inner city and Karen and Abby agree. Abby suggests an interesting Protagonist in this setting might be a firefighter who has encountered some horrible accidents and tragedies in his job. Ben and Karen both think it's a great idea to use a profession to stress how the Lie has beat down the Protagonist, but don't want the Protagonist to be a hero, but something far more gritty. "How about a police officer who patrols some of the worst neighborhoods in the city?" Ben suggests. The group agrees and settles giving a cop a name: Tom.

The group then moves onto the brainstorming stage, taking nearly half an hour to envision their personal image of Tom the cop, as well as adding qualities and descriptive phrases in a relational web noted on a legal pad. After this exercise, they generated the following qualities for potential Aspects: likes to follow people taking notes, voyeur, smoker, has dreams where he saves his ex-wife, taking drugs for insomnia, short temper, doesn't care for exotic food, unconsciously racist, drinks black coffee, red hair, scuffed black boots, secretly inherited Nazi memorabilia from grandfather, goes to church sporadically, goes to confession regularly, recovering alcoholic, best friend is his sponsor, 3 small kids, prize possession is a snow globe he keeps under his bed, his grandfather gave [the snow globe] to him, he's never seen snow, believes in justice, wants to make the world a better place, jaded from work, poetry and blue-collar. Abby volunteers to be the Mundane Guide, while Karen decides she wants to be the Protagonist player. Ben smiles and winks at Abby as he takes on the role of the Sublime Guide and begins to tease her that Tom is going to be enlightened quicker than last time. Abby responds by sticking out her tongue.

Ben and Abby alternate passing the sheet filled with qualities back and forth. Ben claims the following qualities as potential Aspects: has dreams where he saves his ex-wife, goes to church sporadically, goes to confession regularly, best friend is his sponsor, 3 small kids, prize possession is a snow globe he keeps under his bed, his grandfather gave [the snow globe] to him, believes in justice, wants to make the world a better place, poetry. Abby claims: taking

drugs for insomnia, short temper, unconsciously racist, recovering alcoholic, jaded from work, blue-collar, voyeur, and secretly inherited Nazi memorabilia from grandfather. Although she doesn't have exactly ten qualities, Abby believes that she's claimed enough to have a good choice for generating Aspects, so the group moves on.

Ben looks over the qualities that he has claimed. He wants Tom to be driven by a relationship with a non-player character so he takes "has dreams where he saves his ex-wife." However, Ben wants to change his relationship a bit, so he spends 1 of his 10 starting Influence Tokens to alter this Aspect to be "still loves his ex-wife" and gives it a rating of 3. He now has 6 Influence Tokens left and takes "best friend is his sponsor" at a rating of 3. With 3 Influence Tokens left, Ben, thinking it would make an interesting character choice takes "poetry" at a rating of 2. Reasoning that Tom's time on the force would leave him sufficiently jaded by what he's encountered during his beat, Ben takes "believes in justice" at only a rating of 1 with his last remaining Influence Token.

Abby wants the theme of addiction to be the overriding factor of Tom's life, so she modifies "recovering alcoholic" to "alcoholic" by spending 1 Influence Token and buys the newly minted Aspect up to a rating of 5. Abby wants to be able to send Tom into a rage at the drop of a hat, so she takes "short temper" at a rating of 2. With her last remaining point, Abby give the Aspect "blue-collar" a rating of 2.

Will

While the Protagonist character will be represented via Aspects during game play, the Protagonist player only has one trait; Will. Will is derived from the sum of the single lowest Aspects of the Sublime and Mundane Guide's Aspects. If a Guide spends Influence Tokens to raise the rating of an Aspect after a conflict and is that Guide's lowest rated Aspect, the Protagonist player's Will rating is immediately increased as well.

The Will rating of the Protagonist supplies the player of this role several means of altering the direction of the story. At the beginning of each scene, the Protagonist player gains a number of Influence Tokens equal to his or her current Will rating and may be spent in several different ways.

At any time during the game, including scene framing, setting stakes, and conflict resolution by the Guides, the Protagonist player may spend 2 Influence tokens to Resist the current narration. When the Protagonist player Resists a narration, he or she agrees with previously narrated events, but may introduce an element of complication to them. Once a Protagonist player decides to Resist, he or she temporarily assumes narration and begins the next sentence of the story with the phrase "yes, but..." filling in a difficulties, exceptions, or twists to the current Guide's telling of the story.

Any Influence Tokens spent by the Protagonist player to Resist a Guide's narration are immediately added to that Guide's Influence Pool and may be spent normally.

If the Protagonist player Resists in such a way to as narratively alter or negatively effect an Aspect already In Play, the Protagonist player must pay one half of the Aspect's current rating (rounded down) to Guide of that Aspect.

A Protagonist player may also Resist and remove any Aspect from being In Play. To do so, the Protagonist player Resists (paying 2 Influence Tokens), narrates the scene so as to minimize the importance of an Aspect currently In Play, and pay a number of Influence Tokens equal to the rating of the Aspect to that Aspect's Guide. An Aspect removed from a scene in this way may not be brought back In Play to the current scene, but may be brought back In Play to

any subsequent scene as normal.

A Protagonist player may also want to agree with a Guide's narration and may simply want to add some depth to his or her current narrative trajectory. By paying 1 Influence token to the currently narrating Guide, the Protagonist player starts narration with the phrase "yes, and..." and may add color and details to the story which do not complicate the Guide's narration.

Any Influence Tokens not spent by the Protagonist player are lost at the end of every scene. There is no way for the Protagonist player to "bank" their Influence Tokens; Protagonist players should be encouraged to spend Influence Tokens regularly and creatively.

Example of Play: Will

Karen looks at the lowest rated Aspects chosen by Ben and Abby. Ben took "believes in justice" at a rating of 1, while Abby took "blue collar" at a rating of 2. Adding these lowest Aspects together, Karen's Will rating is 3. She receives 3 Influence Tokens during every scene that can be used to Resist a Guide's narration, remove an Aspect with a rating of 1 from its In Play status, or add color to a scene. If Ben would raise "believes in justice" to a rating of 2, Karen's Will rating would increase to 4.

Influence Pools and Tokens

Both Sublime and Mundane players begin the game with 10 Influence Tokens, which constitute an Influence Pool and will spend Tokens from this Pool throughout the game to influence the form and direction of the narrative. Each Guide should have Tokens which are easily distinguishable from the other Guide's. These Influence Tokens should be similar so as not to be able to be distinguished by touch. Different colored poker chips or colored beads work extremely well as Influence Tokens.

Influence Tokens refresh, for both Guides, at the beginning of each scene. Influence Tokens refresh at rate of half the sum of the highest and lowest Aspect of each player (round down). For example, a Sublime Guide with "Patriotism" at 5 and "Poetry" at 2 would get 3 additional Influence Tokens at the end of each scene, regardless of which Guide frames the scene. Influence Tokens are only lost by spending them; unlike the Protagonist Player, Guides may save their Influence Tokens for as long as they wish.

Example of Play: Influence Pools and Tokens

At the beginning of a new scene, Abby and Ben's Influence Tokens refresh. Ben has "still loves his ex-wife" at a rating of 3 and "best friend is his sponsor" at a rating of 3, while having "believes in justice" at a rating of 1. His influence pool refreshes at a rate of 2 Influence Tokens at the beginning of every scene. Abby, however has "alcoholic" at a rating of 5 and "blue collar" at a rating of 2; she would receive 3 Influence Tokens at the beginning of each new scene.

Framing Scenes

The Sublime and Mundane Guides alternate framing scenes. The Guide who framed the current scene is known as the Active Guide, while the other Guide is referred to as the Passive Guide.

To frame a scene, the Active Guide should describe the general setting of scene, the Protagonist's involvement in the scene, other characters involved, and the general activity commencing at the beginning of a scene. Generally, to infuse a scene with a feeling of energy,

Guides might find it useful to start the scene in the middle of action, involving the Protagonist in situations and with characters that must be responded to immediately. Scenes end when after a Conflict has been resolved, and conclusions to scenes are narrated by the Guide who won the conflict of the scene.

The Active Guide may put In Play any of his Aspects into the scene at the cost of the Aspect's current rating. The Passive Guide may put In Play any of their Aspects in the scene for a cost of 1 Influence Token per Aspect introduced. For example, an Active Guide introducing a 3 point Aspect into a scene would cost 3 Influence Tokens, while a Passive Guide placing a 3 point Aspect In Play would cast 1 Influence Tokens.

Energizing Aspects to be In Play consists of more than simply spending Influence Tokens. Many Aspects, by dint of their profound connection with the Protagonist, are most certainly physically or psychically present in many or most scenes. However, simply because an Aspect is presently in a scene does not mean that the Aspect in question is a primary element currently shaping the Protagonist's thoughts or actions. By spending Influence Tokens, a Guide alters the trajectory of the narrative so that the Protagonist cares about an Aspect to a much greater degree. When a Guide announces that she is putting one of her Aspects In Play, in addition to spending the required Influence Tokens, she also must narrate a plausible reason why the Aspect in question is suddenly a quite influential factor over the Protagonist's life and actions. To do so, the Guide must recount the inner thoughts or bodily responses of the Protagonist and how the Aspect being introduced as In Play has force over the Protagonist's thoughts or behaviors.

After this narration, the Protagonist player should attempt to follow the narrative trajectory initiated by the Guide. If the Mundane Guide put In Play the Aspect "Alcoholism" and narrated that the stress of the scene has caused the Protagonist to begin fantasizing over having a drink, the Protagonist player should role-play out actions and dialogue consistent with this development, such as the Protagonist having shaky hands or staring off into space when addressed by others.

Example of Play: Framing Scenes

(it is Abby's turn to frame the scene, as Ben framed the last scene).

Abby: Wearied by a long shift, Tom returns home. What he finds cuts him to the core. Alice moved out, taking along all the furniture save the kitchen table and a single light bulb hanging from the fixture. Tom realizes it was foolish for them to attempt to reconcile; he was never good enough for her. (to Karen): Ok, what do you do?

Karen: Hmm, Tom's not a sensitive guy. He wouldn't weep or anything like that. I'll say that he goes into a rage and tears the house apart.

Abby: Ok, describe it for me.

Karen: He puts his fists through the walls, cursing with each punch. He throws one of the kitchen chairs into the living room and it lands where the television used to be. He takes his billy club—

Ben: Wait, he's still in uniform?

Karen: Why not? He's just come home from a long shift. Anyway, he throws his billy club at the kitchen window and it shatters, but doesn't break, as the club rebounds off and lands in the sink. He drops into one of the chairs at the table, taking deep, sharp breaths and stares off at a dusty corner of the ceiling.

Abby: Ok, I'm putting my Aspect "alcoholic" into play (she spends 5 Influence Tokens).

Karen: Let's hear why this Aspect is important to Tom right now.

Abby: Uh, ok. Sitting in the chair, Tom begins fantasizing about the bottle of whisky that he had hidden in the cupboard. The stress of the situation is too much. Tom just needs to loose himself in an alcoholic oblivion, so he doesn't have to think about the pain he feels.

Ben: I thought I had Alice convince him to get rid of all the booze in the house? (Ben had won a previous challenge with "still loves ex-wife" and narrated the scene to shake Tom up to the consequences of his drinking).

Abby: Yeah, but he kept just one bottle as sort of a safety blanket.

Karen: That's cool. Let's go with that.

Abby: Great. He removes the bottle from behind the flour and unscrews the lid. He inhales the smell deeply, taking every bit of it into is nostrils. He raises the bottle to his lips and—

Ben: Hold it right there. I'm going to challenge this.

Conflicts and Challenges

If the Passive Guide wishes to challenge something going on in the scene between the Protagonist and the Active Guide, the Passive Guide must announce her intentions to Challenge. The challenging Guide states which Aspect she is using to Challenge and why this particular Aspect would have the most importance to the Protagonist at this juncture in the story. If none of the Guide's Aspects are involved in the scene, the Guide may only bid one Influence Token and must give a reason why the Protagonist would lose interest in the Aspect used by the opposing Guide. If the Guide challenges with an Aspect already In Play in the scene, the Guide may bid a number of Influence Tokens up to twice the value of the Aspect. In response, the opposing Guide declares what Aspect he will be using in the conflict. No Guide may Challenge or respond with more than one Aspect.

Each guide should make an improvised argument to the Protagonist player as to why their bid Aspect would be most influential over the Protagonist in the given scene and at that particular narrative juncture. If a Guide is having difficulty articulating this argument, they should attempt to finish the following sentence: "The one reason why [their bid Aspect] would be most important to [the Protagonist's name] right now is because..."

The Protagonist player then declares the draw limit for the conflict. This number is automatically 1 by default. The Protagonist player has the option to raise the draw number as high as her Will score. To do so, the Protagonist player must spend a number of Influence Tokens equal to the amended draw limit. For example, it would cost a Protagonist player 2 Influence Tokens to raise the Draw Limit to 2. Any Influence Tokens spent by the Protagonist player in this way are immediately added to the Passive Guide's Influence Pool.

Conversely, the Protagonist player has the option of declaring the draw limit until after the Guides have made their bids. Like a normal Draw Limit declaration, the Protagonist player must spend a number of Influence Tokens equal to the amended draw limit and immediately puts these Influence Tokens into the Improvement Pool of the challenging Guide. However, if the Protagonist player declares the draw limit after the Guides have bid Influence Tokens, she should immediately roll a six-sided die. If the player rolls a number less than her declared draw number, her Will rating immediately drops by one.

Each Guide may bid up to twice the rating of her challenged or challenging Aspect. This bid is made in secret by depositing available Influence Tokens into a covered container, such as a dice bag or hat. The Protagonist Player then randomly removes a number of Influence Tokens equal to her declared draw limit. After drawing, the Protagonist Player then chooses any one

Influence Token from her draw. This token represents the winner of the challenge. The winner of the challenge claims back her Influence Tokens from the bid and sets aside the Oppositional Guide's tokens into an Improvement Pool. The victor of the conflict also has narrative authority for resolving the conflict in any way he or she chooses, so long as the other Guide's Aspects are not undermined in a narrative sense. The victorious Guide must narrate how their bid Aspect overcame its opposing Aspect bid by the other Guide. Did the influence of the Protagonist's supportive lover overcome the influence of the Protagonist's corruptive best friend? Did fear of the government agents overcome the Protagonist's inquisitive nature? The winning Guide must narrate how this challenge resolved itself in the Protagonist's life and how the Protagonist was brought a tiny bit closer to the Truth or ensnared even more tightly in the webs of the Lie.

The losing Guide in the conflict forfeits any bid tokens and immediately reduces the rating of defeated Aspect in question by 1.

Example of Play: Conflicts and Challenges

Abby: Ah, you want to challenge me, eh? What'cha got?

Ben: Alright, I'm going to put "best friend is also sponsor" In Play (Ben spends 1 Influence Token). Before he can take a swig, his cell phone goes off. Before he even looks at the screen, he knows that Jerry is calling, wondering why he wasn't at the last AA meeting. A feeling of creeping guilt washes over him.

Karen: Sounds good. I'm going to increase the draw limit to 2 for this challenge. (Karen spends 2 Influence Tokens to raise the draw limit, which are immediately put into Ben's Influence Pool) Make your bids!

Ben: (has a rating of 3 in "best friend is also sponsor," so he could bid up to 6 Influence Tokens. Unfortunately, even though he just gained 2 Influence Tokens from Karen raising the draw limit, he only has a total of 4 Influence Tokens currently in his Influence Pool. This is not a conflict that Ben wants to lose, however, because he thinks Tom's life could go really downhill from this point. He secretly bids all 4 of his Influence Tokens and hopes for the best.)

Abby: (has a rating of 5 in "alcoholic" and could bid up to 10 Influence Tokens. Abby is a more conservative player and knows that she could drive Tom to drink at any time, so chooses to only bid 5 Tokens from her Influence Pool.)

Karen: (after Ben and Abby have secretly bid, Karen blindly draws 2 Tokens from a dice bag. Randomly, she draws two of Ben's Tokens. If she had drawn one of Ben's and one of Abby's, she could have chosen between them and decided who won the conflict and got to narrate the rest of the scene. However, given that Karen must choose one of the Tokens she just drew, Ben is the winner of the conflict).

Ben: Really? Awesome!

Abby: Humph. I'll get him next time (laughs). And his little dog too!

Karen: (smiles) Ok, Ben, you get all 5 of the Influence Tokens that Abby just bid; they are set aside into your Improvement Pool. Abby, drop the Aspect "alcoholic" from 5 to 4 on your sheet. Ben, you get to narrate the conclusion to the scene.

Ben: The ringing phone is a call of conscience for Tom. With each ring, his fingers loosen a bit from his grip on the bottle, until the bottle tumbles downwards and shatters on the tiled floor. He answers the phone, confessing to Jerry what he was about to do. After some convincing, Jerry persuades Tom to meet him at a coffee shop downtown to talk things over.

Raising Aspects

Aspects represent those things that the Protagonist cares for most or those forces which most profoundly influence the Protagonist's life and decisions.

Aspects may only be raised after successful conflicts involving the Aspect. This may not be challenged by the opposing Guide. The victorious Guide must narrate why the Protagonist cares more about the Aspect more now than ever. The Aspect must be In Play the scene and it must address why the Protagonist started to care more about this particular Aspect.

The cost of raising an Aspect is 3 times its new rating. For example, raising a Aspect rating from 4 to 5 would cost 15 Improvement Tokens.

A new Aspect may be introduced at any time by a Guide for a cost of 3 Improvement Tokens, but may only be introduced in a scene framed by its Guide. The introduced Aspect begins with a rating of 1 and can be raised normally after that point for the normal cost. Note: A newly introduced Aspect will never trigger Epiphany.

Example of Play: Raising Aspects

Ben: Before we move onto the next scene, I think I'd like to raise an Aspect.

Karen: Yeah?

Ben: Yeah. I just won that conflict and it makes sense that Tom would care more about Jerry and how he just saved him from falling off the wagon. I want Jerry to be a great influence over Tom in seeing how beautiful the world can be beyond his terrible addiction.

Karen: Do you have the Improvement Tokens for it?

Ben: Let's see... I have 7 that I had won from a few early conflicts and counting the 5 I just won from that conflict, I've got a total of 12. I'll raise "best friend is also sponsor" from a rating of 3 to 4.

Karen: Cool. Let's hear some narrative.

Ben: As Tom puts on his coat to leave the house, he's suddenly filled with a gratitude for Jerry and his concern. Although Tom isn't a deeply religious man, he starts to feel as though he and Jerry were meant to be friends and says a very quick prayer of gratitude to whatever deity might be out there to hear him.

Abby (playfully): Ugh. Yuck.

Ben (smiles): Hey, what can I tell you? It pays to be a white hat.

Conditions:

After the Active Guide has framed the scene, the Passive Guide may bid 5 Influence Tokens to introduce a scene Condition. The Passive Guide must identify a theme or action for the Active Guide to weave into the narrative of the scene. The introduced Condition must be possible for the Protagonist to experience, must not break setting conditions previously established by the Truth, the Lie, and the Machine (for example, it would be impossible for a Guide achieve the action "repair a space station" in a game set in 16th Century Germany), and it must be possible for the Complication to occur within the bounds of the framed scene. If the Active Guide challenges the possibility of incorporating the Condition into the scene, the Protagonist player may accept or reject the Condition. If the Protagonist player rejects the Condition, the Passive Guide loses all bid Influence Tokens.

If the Active Guide and the Protagonist player accepts the Condition, the scene plays out as normal. If the Active Guide is able to incorporate the theme or action of the Condition into the scene (the Protagonist player determines if and when this has occurred), the Active Guide

gains a number of Influence tokens equal to the sum of any two of the Guide's Aspects. If the Active Guide fulfills the conditions of the Complication in a way judged by the Protagonist to be especially clever or inventive, the Active Guide may raise any the rating of one Aspects by 1 point for free, so long as the Active Guide can explain how fulfilling the Complication caused the Protagonist to care more deeply for the raised Aspect. Note: Raising an Aspect in this way will never cause an Epiphany to occur.

If the Active Player cannot or does not incorporate the Complication before the end of the scene, the Passive Guide gains a number of Influence Tokens equal to the sum of all her Aspect ratings.

The Active Guide may fulfill the conditions in resolving narration of a successful conflict. Fulfilling Conditions this way gains the Active Guide a number of Influence Tokens equal to any one Aspect rating In Play in the scene in which the condition was fulfilled. The Active Guide may never automatically raise an Aspect rating through this method.

Complications:

At any time during a scene, a Passive Guide may call for a Complication. The Active Guide and the Protagonist player must then immediately narrate a difficulty involving the Protagonist and any one Aspect of the Active Guide's currently In Play in the scene. Note that Aspect ratings are not lowered because of a Complication; the Protagonist does not necessarily stop caring for something just because of a spot of trouble—indeed, the Protagonist might even care more for a particular Aspect if it is threatened. However, depending on how the Complication is handled, the Guide who called for a Complication may introduce an Aspect based on the Complication for one Influence Token. Any subsequent raise of the rating of this Aspect for one half the normal cost (round down). However, an Aspect introduced as a result of a Complication can never have a higher rating than the other Guide's originally Complicated Aspect.

Calling for a Complication costs 2 Influence Tokens and may never be Challenged.

Clever Active Guides will quickly note that Complications must only involve one Aspect currently In Play in the scene and that putting as many Aspects In Play can help guard against threats against higher rated Aspects. "Screening" higher Aspects with lower rated Aspects is possible, but putting multiple Aspects in play in every available scene can be a costly drain on your Influence Pool.

Epiphany

Epiphany occurs after a any successful conflict in which that Guide's total Aspect ratings are greater than sum of Protagonist's Will rating and opposing Guide's Aspects ratings.

At this point, the winning Guide narrates how the veil of the Lie covering the Protagonist's eyes is lifted as the Protagonist realizes the Truth. The victor Guide should narrate this final scene towards a conclusion appropriate to the Truth (for the Sublime Guide) or to the Lie (for the Mundane Guide).

If the Sublime Guide narrates Epiphany, the Guide should explain how the Protagonist's present and future is irrevocably changed by the revelation of the Truth. In contrast, if the Mundane Guide forces the Protagonist to Epiphany, the Guide should narrate how the Protagonist's life, mind, and/or spirit is crushed by the revelation. Perhaps the Protagonist is so comfortable with his life that he denies the validity of the Truth. Maybe the Truth overwhelms the Protagonist, driving him insane, or at the very least, unable to functional normally in

Mundane society. Or, the Protagonist may radically misinterpret the truth, leading him to wage war for a peaceful Truth, or maim others on behalf of a loving Truth. Perhaps the Protagonist is so entrapped in his Mundane life, that he slowly rationalizes away the profundity of the Truth, and perhaps, over time, denies his Epiphanous experience.

After the results of the Epiphany have been narrated by the victorious Guide, the specific story concludes. For all intents and purposes, the individual story of the Protagonist is over and players wishing to continue playing *Sudden Light* should return to the first chapter and generate a new Truth, Lie, Machine, and Protagonist.

Example of Play: Epiphany

(even though Ben had won a few early Challenges, through the rest of the narrative, things had not been going well. Most of his Aspects have dropped and he knows that Abby is one winning conflict away from reaching Epiphany. Because his Aspects have dropped so low, his Influence Pool has been quite small, with "Poetry" at a rating of 2 being his highest Aspect. It is his turn to frame the scene).

Karen: Ok, Ben, go ahead and frame your scene.

Ben: Even though he drank all night in the bar—it was all night, wasn't it?

Abby: Well, at least for a few hours.

Ben: Ok, after drinking for a few hours, Tom stumbles out into the evening air. He slumps down on a curb outside of a coffee shop that is open quite late. Suddenly, the door to the coffee shop swings open and he sees a woman who reminds him of his ex-wife. Her raven hair, her high cheekbones, her hazel eyes, still Tom's heart. From inside the coffee shop, Tom hears a beat poet performing. I'll put "poetry" In Play (this costs Ben 2 Influence Tokens). Although he can't make out what is said through the alcoholic haze, Tom knows that the words are beautiful and meaningful—

Abby: Stop right there. I'll challenge this. I'll bid "short temper." (Through previous conflicts, Abby had been able to raise "short temper" from a rating of 2 to a rating of 4). Tom's not happy to see this woman. It pisses him off at the world to be reminded how much he has lost. Anyway, how dare that hippy looser poet talk about the beauty of the world when Tom knows how horrible the life is.

Ben: No way! The beat poet's works are profound and speak to the deepest needs and desires of Tom's soul. The poet articulates the things Tom never could.

Karen: Go ahead and make your bids everyone. I'll let this be an even draw off and won't raise the draw limit at all.

Ben: (has "poetry" at 2 and can bid up to 4 Influence Tokens. He secretly bids 4 Influence Tokens)

Abby: (has "short temper" at a rating of 4. She knows that she only needs to win this conflict and raise this Aspect by 1 in order to reach Epiphany, so she makes a risky bid. She secretly bids 8 Influence Tokens.)

Karen: (draws 1 Token from the dice bad and announces that Abby won the conflict and thus, reached Epiphany for the Mundane side)

Ben: Oh, well. It looks like Tom was doomed from the beginning. Good game.

Abby: Thanks.

Karen: Let's here how all this ends, Abby.

Abby: This will end with blood and pain. (Grins wickedly). Ok, Tom's irate that the poet would dare to hold onto hope in the face of the horror that is life. He waits outside the coffee shop in a side alley until it closes. He gradually begins sobering up, but the rage remains. As soon as the side door from the coffee shop opens into the ally, Tom grabs the poet by his greasy dreadlocks and throws him to the ground. He proceeds to beat the living hell out of him, pummeling him until the poet's face is turned into a pulpy mass of bone, blood, and scalp. A large pool of blood begins spreading out from the twitching body, like a small black river reflected in the moonlight. Tom freezes and everything around him seems to slow to a crawl. He's shocked by the beauty of the blood on the pavement, enthralled by it's simple elegance. It all makes sense now. Yes, there is beauty and meaning in the world, but it is only achieved through suffering, pain, and death. An absent thought invades Tom's mind: he's glad he kept his old handcuffs.

Karen: Wow.

Ben: Jesus. That was a dark ending. I didn't think it would go into serial killer territory.

Abby: Yeah. I had a great time and I think it was quite a story. I'll remember this one for awhile. Next week?

Karen and Ben: Sure!