

# Hero's Banner

THE FURY *of* FREE WILL

*A Roleplaying Game*



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TCK • Roleplaying  
Chicago, Illinois

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# Introduction

This game asks each player to consider a world that seems far away in place and time, but the themes that will affect your character are probably those that affect you. In your life you must make choices that will change the course of your future. From where I stand and look into the future, it seems as if the choices I make now will forever dictate how people consider me. In college I had to decide on a major. Once graduated, I had to decide whether or not to seek a job immediately or enter grad school – if grad school, then for what subject? In love, with whom should I spend my time, perhaps marry? In friendship, should I move to the city, away from those I know best, or stay in my hometown? What job, what career path is right for me? These are the sorts of choices that someone of my age must make.

*Hero's Banner*, however, asks you the player to make a single choice for your character. Presented with three equally desirable options, your character must make a stand. He must also, however, leave two options behind forever. The real difficulty with choice, you see, is not what you choose to pursue, but rather what you choose to lay aside.

You should play this game not for high adventure, although there will be plenty; nor should you play it for courtly intrigue, despite its constant presence. You should play this game to learn about what your characters value in life – before death removes the ability to choose altogether.

## — AN OVERVIEW —

In *Hero's Banner* you play a series of characters, each one struggling to make the most important decision of his or her life. The character must decide what to do with his life, what to stand for, what to commit to, and ultimately what to abandon so that his commitment will be possible. Each begins with three possible choices, or influences. These may include something as broad as “marry for love,” or as narrow as “prevent my brother from dying in the war against Uran.”

Each influence represents an equally attractive option to the character. The struggle to relieve the tension between each choice is where you, and all of your fellow players, will draw from to tell the story of your characters. The game's mechanics force choice upon you, and each roll of the dice is an opportunity to further define your character's relationship to the world he is entering. Through violent mood swings, dramatic changes of heart, and the upheaval of your character's comfortable world, you'll guide him until that day when he simply cannot put off his decision any longer.

Once the tension has been relieved, once your character chooses one influence over the other two, you'll then have a final opportunity to describe the consequences of his decision. You'll narrate your character's death. Afterwards, you'll put that character aside. At the conclusion of each session, when your character has died, you'll begin to create your next. Based on some hero that came before, each character draws from the past and from your previous characters to continue the story. Along with all of the other players and the GM, you'll fashion a story and answer questions about the meaning we all give to the power of choice, the consequences of commitment, and the many other themes your group will cooperatively develop during play.

### —❧ WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY ❧—

Playing a game of *Hero's Banner* takes little more than a group of players and a handful of ten-sided dice. Each player will also need a character worksheet (found in the appendices) and a pencil.

Specifically, you'll need somewhere in the range of two to five players. With more than five players, you increase your chances of suffering through an unsatisfying game. *Hero's Banner* is about playing characters, each of whom must face a difficult choice. Your character is much more than a pawn; instead, he is an emotional protagonist in an epic story. While you may enjoy the spotlight exclusively during scenes involving your character, you and the rest of the group will also have to sit back and listen when it's another player's turn to narrate a scene for his own character. Of course watching one of your fellow roleplayers work through a challenging scene is entertaining, but too many players can lead to a glut of downtime. To avoid frustration

and ensure that you can give your character all of the attention you're after, I advise you to keep the number of players in your group to five or less.

Finally, most players will take on the role of a single character during each episode. One player, however, will have to take on a different set of responsibilities. One player will not play a character struggling to uncover his fate, but instead take on the role of the GM, or game-master. The GM, unlike a normal player, is responsible for fleshing out all that is not the player-characters within the imaginative world that you will all share. The GM creates and plays most of the minor characters in your narrative. He fills in the setting details particular to your story. He sets up intrigue and tension between the player-characters (PCs) and the non-player-characters (NPCs). The GM does not create the plot; nor does he spend his time fighting the players. The GM is not the enemy, but rather a co-collaborator with a role different from the other players. His input during a game of *Hero's Banner* is both important and meaningful, but at the same time he does not play the lead. He is a great organizer, and ultimately his goal, similar to the other players, is to help everyone to improvise a meaningful narrative though the rules laid out in the chapters that follow.

#### — FOR NEW ROLEPLAYERS —

In truth, *Hero's Banner* was written for experienced roleplayers. If you're new to the hobby, on the other hand, then first of all I welcome you. Roleplaying is an experience that everyone can enjoy; nevertheless, reading this book may leave you with a few questions. For example, certain terminology may not make any sense to you, or you may not even have a clear picture of what roleplayers do when they sit down to play. For you, while I can't presume to answer all of your questions in a few paragraphs, I offer the following.

Roleplaying generally consists of a group of people sitting around a table telling a story together. The difference between simply telling stories, however, and roleplaying, is rules. The rules of the game determine how the players interact with each other. Sometimes the rules limit the players in a way that focuses the story on certain themes or actions. At other times the rules attempt to coax the players into ex-

panding on a particular element of the story. Dice, as an example, are often used to insert random complications into the story, which the players then have to improvise around. The rules also assign specific roles to each player. In *Hero's Banner*, for example, each player takes on the role of a single medieval nobleman. Then, whenever a certain player's nobleman is involved in the story, it's up to the player to determine how his character reacts and what he does or says within the fictional world. One player, called the game-master or GM, doesn't play a protagonist nobleman, but instead takes care of all of the supporting characters, antagonists to the player-characters, and other miscellaneous "set pieces."

Most of all, roleplaying is a collaborative process. No single player, nor even the rules, can truly determine where your group's story goes or how it ends. The story isn't determined beforehand, but rather it arises only as a product of roleplaying. Although you'll create the beginnings of a story before you sit down to roleplay, the rest is improvised. In this way, the story you all work to create can be surprising, suspenseful, and often humorous. Roleplaying is entertainment, and the object isn't to "win," unless by winning you mean the collaborative creation of story that everyone involved enjoys.

Like any collaborative activity, whether it's playing in a band or on a basketball team, the more you roleplay, the more you'll improve individually. But more importantly, you'll improve as a teammate. I encourage you to keep roleplaying, and to try different games. Each has its own style – its own unique way of creating a particular kind of story or a particular kind of interaction among the players – and *Hero's Banner* is only one among many. For more information on roleplaying and the wide variety of roleplaying games available, I suggest either finding a group of roleplayers in your area or else exploring the web.



for an additional passion increase of 2. Thus, the total passion increase here would be 15.

Most passion checks are straightforward. Nevertheless, one special circumstance does exist. When you roll doubles on a passion check (3/3 or 10/10 for example), your character has what's called a breakdown. Mechanically, this means that you immediately disregard all subsequent passion checks. You still add all passion rolled thus far, including the roll that caused the breakdown. On the tied result, however, only one of the values counts towards your passion increase.

For example, if instead of rolling a 3 and 1 on his first of three passion checks, John rolled double 4s, he would add 4 to his monk's passion score (adding only one of the doubles to passion). Additionally, John would not roll the second or third passion check normally required of him. Instead, he would immediately proceed to narrate his monk's breakdown.

When a breakdown occurs, you may disregard the outcome of your ability check, whether it was success or failure. The degree of success your character enjoys during a breakdown is left to you and your narrative whim.

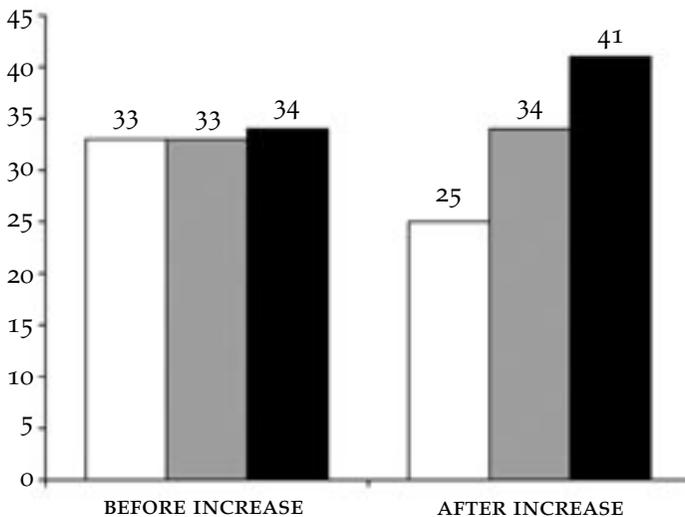
### — ADJUSTING INFLUENCE RATINGS —

After any passion check, you'll have to adjust your character's influence ratings to reflect his new passion score. Passion is always rising. As a result, because passion represents the difference between a character's high and low ratings, you'll have to manipulate your influence ratings toward the extremes. Remember that your ratings should always add up to 100. As your character progresses, one score will spiral upwards to 100, while the other two will spiral downwards to zero.

John's monk character has rolled three passion checks. After adding the results of the three checks, he knows that he must raise his passion by 15 points. Let's say that the monk's influence ratings are still the same as they were after character

creation, or [Hero 33/Conscience 33/Blood 34]. Passion sits at 1 because the high rating is 34 and the low 33 ( $34 - 33 = 1$ ). After a triplet of passion checks, John now has to increase the monk's passion from 1, by 15, to 16. Simply noting the increase, however, is not enough. He must also manipulate his influence ratings to accurately reflect the new passion score, so that the highest rating minus the lowest equals 16 and the total of all three remains 100.

When you adjust your character's ratings, you may manipulate the three numbers in any way you like so long as the total is equal to 100 and the highest score minus the lowest is exactly equal to your character's passion score. Said another way, when you alter your influence ratings, you do not have to limit yourself to the influence involved in the initial check. Any passion increase is the result of, but nevertheless independent from, a conflict check.



Here, the graph on the left represents John's monk before the passion increase. The graph on the right represents the same character, but adjusted to accommodate a 15-point passion increase. The white bar represents Hero; the grey, Conscience; and the black, Blood. You can see that John simply moved points from his Hero influence to his

When you roll doubles on a passion check your character has a **breakdown**. There comes a time when your character won't be able to handle the pressures of making choices or dealing with his life. Instead of handling a situation calmly, or even intelligently, the character will simply lose it. He'll lose control. He'll lose his cool. He'll make enemies and surprise those around him. Sometimes, a person needs to let out all that is pent up within him.

After you roll doubles, all action halts. Everyone stops rolling dice. Everyone stops describing their character's actions. All passion checks are halted. For the time being, only what has already been rolled matters. Worry about the rest later. If anyone has passion checks to finish, resolve them after you narrate your character's breakdown.

When working cooperatively or against each other, only one character may have a breakdown per conflict check. If more than one character rolls doubles on the same round, only one character has a breakdown. Priority is given to the player whose character's overall passion score is highest; and then to the player who rolled a higher set of doubles if a further tiebreaker is needed. The second player simply increases his passion score and proceeds to roll any remaining passion checks as if he hadn't rolled doubles.

When your character has a breakdown, narration rights pass to you immediately. You will narrate the outcome of any conflict check yet unresolved. You will determine your own success and failure for the scene. Exactly what you describe, though, is open-ended. A breakdown is largely a personal event. The way your character handles the situation will therefore be unique. He might throw a tantrum, scream at the top of his lungs, develop bloodshot eyes and become a raging violent banshee, or even calmly lie down and weep. What about the others who witness the event? How does the scene affect their actions? What does your character do to them, or with them? A breakdown is a show-stopper. It's a major scene and all of the action and dialogue revolves around your character. Take advantage of the opportunity to emphasize your character's fear. Let out a vicarious primal scream if you have to.

On the other hand, don't ignore the other players whose characters may have something at stake. Even though you gain tremendous power during a breakdown, you are still restricted by any express agreements made during the pre-roll discussion, along with the successes and failures rolled by any other players. And don't play in a bubble. It's your character, but that does not mean that others won't have an emotional investment in him. Listen to suggestions. Enjoy the collaboration. Nevertheless, remember that a breakdown is ultimately your time.

### — CONNECTIONS —

No character is an island. In fact, connections ensure that each character you play will have a chance to develop relationships with not only people, but places and objects as well. More than anything, a connection is a reminder of why an influence is so important to your character. They are also, however, catalysts for action. A connection is a motivation that actively supports and represents the influence under which it is categorized.

Connections are the tangible representatives of an influence. While the character will often suffer internally, he expresses his anxiety through his connections. So when a new scene is needed after the action has lulled, look to your connections and to the connections of your fellow players. The most important NPCs in the game are probably those that are connections. An important or personal sanctuary can often emerge as a powerful stage. Even relics can take on lives of their own and stand as symbols for larger issues troubling the PCs. Connections are the hooks that attach abstract influences to reality.

During a conflict check in which you initially roll a failure, so long as your character has a single connection under any influence, you may choose to make less than three passion checks. Doing so gives you the right to narrate, but it also imposes on you the obligation to involve the chosen connection in your narration. Depending on the type of connection you choose to involve, and the location of that connection at the time of the conflict, you have considerable leeway to involve the connection as you please. Typically, though, you should strive to involve a connection directly. If the connection is a