

# ***ACTION CITY!***

## ***SPECIAL FEATURES***

A collection of clarifications, errata, and new ideas for *Action City!*

by [Mike Olson](#)

Many thanks to the playtesters of RPG-SanDiego.org for the conversation that sparked these ideas.

### **What is this?**

The first playtest of *Action City!*, though brief, revealed quite a few gaps in the rules – not as intended, necessarily, but certainly as written. *Action City!: Special Features*, then, is an attempt to fill those gaps instead of relying on telepathic players able to read my mind from a great distance.

### **A F.A.Q. of Sorts**

*Should there be a random table for movie premises determined by playing cards?*

That naturally appeals to me, although I was kinda expecting this to come out of the Badguy generation process. The premise is stopping him from doing whatever it is he's trying to do. If you're talking about the premise from the Hero's point of view, I suppose it'd be possible to randomly generate the Hero's Edge and Hang-Up, but it doesn't really seem necessary to me.

So it needs to be said explicitly: The premise of the story is largely established by the Opposition according to the Badguy's randomly generated details. A Cutscene in the First Act is therefore a pretty vital thing to have, just for the sake of introducing the antagonist to the story, in case it hasn't happened in a Personal scene.

*Is there a way to determine the movie's rating?*

It's R.

*What are the immediate mechanical consequences or benefits to using Clichés?*

There are none – it's a stick, not a carrot. Every unused Cliché means another Edge for the Opposition later on. While I want players to want to incorporate the Clichés, I don't want to be too heavy-handed about it.

*In the event of multiple Heroes or Friends in the same scene, on which player character does the Opposition base his dicepool?*

There are two answers to this.

If it's a Personal scene, only the active Hero or Friend – the one who declared the scene in the first place – matters, mechanically speaking. Any other characters who happen to be in it are there for flavor, or because it's reasonable, or because the active player wants them there.

If it's a Setpiece, then the answer is each Hero or Friend, one at a time. So if there are three protagonists in a scene where a tanker truck full of gasoline slams into a another tanker truck full of milk and there's a big explosion, *and* the Opposition calls for a roll based on that event (how intact will the protagonists be after this milk-fueled explosion?), each player in the scene sets his own difficulty and rolls against the Opposition in a separate roll.

Which leads to this bit of errata: **It's not one roll per Setpiece, but one roll per Hero or Friend *in* that Setpiece.**

*What's the advantage of high dicepools if the Opposition gets to start with a dicepool close to yours? Why not make the dicepool non-variable, with set values – say, 4/6/8?*

The trouble with this is that 4D isn't going to be equally easy for everyone. If you're only rolling 4D yourself, then the easiest difficulty is equivalent to a Close One, not a Cakewalk.

The bigger your dice pool, the greater your chance of getting multiple sets and adding to the Arsenal. Plus, because the second tie breaker depends on the size of the pools in question (whoever has the smaller pool wins), choosing Cakewalk entails a slight risk that Skin of Your Teeth doesn't.

The main idea behind players setting their own task difficulties relative to their own abilities is the reinforcement of the idea that the Hero and his Friends are the center of the story. In action movies, the script doesn't typically ask the protagonists to do things they aren't capable of doing. The threats and challenges they face are scaled to their level of competence. I mean, Jack Burton's no great fast-talker, but he still manages to bluff his way into Lo Pan's HQ – because the story *requires* him to be able to do it.

*Why playing cards? They seem rather... nonessential.*

Well, it's a pre-game setup thing. In play, they aren't used. I just needed a way to randomize those Cliches, and when I figured out I could probably come up with 52 of them, I went with cards. Using only d6s, it would've been harder to randomly generate them – and much harder to insure that you didn't get the same one twice. If it were practical to just print up Cliché cards, I would, but it isn't, so... playing cards. It might be possible to do something more with the cards for Badguy generation, like making the numbers actually mean something, but that's not really a priority right now.

### **A Brief Rundown of How Acts Should Generally Proceed**

The Hero's first Personal scene should establish his status quo and introduce either his Sub-Plot or Hang-Up. That's the thing he's struggling with as the story opens, and what he perceives to be the thing that's messing up his life.

Then the Badguy comes along and *really* gives him something to cry about in the first Setpiece. Whatever happens there drastically alters the status quo for the Hero. This is the *inciting incident*, the thing that seriously changes his life and gives him a new focus that lasts throughout the story. By the end of the First Act, the Hero's life has been pointed in a new direction – toward the Badguy.

The Second Act is where the Hero takes more direct action against the Badguy. This is where the Sub-Plot or Hang-Up may be a little more difficult to integrate into the Hero's pursuit of the Badguy – it's probably going to be more subtext than anything else. Remember, Personal scenes can be flashbacks, which should really open things up. For example, while the Hero's busy trying to hack the Badguy's corporate mainframe, he could be reminded of an incident that ties into his Sub-Plot or Hang-Up. Maybe he had an argument with his estranged wife about work vs. family, and now she's in the Badguy's clutches. No, she's *dating* the Badguy, unaware that he's a Badguy! That's better. Anyway, the actual dice roll would take place within the flashback, since that's where the Sub-Plot element is coming into play in this scene that's supposed to be about your Sub-Plot.

Technically, according to conventional screenwriting wisdom, in the Second Act Setpiece the Hero should fail or suffer a serious setback – this should be the nadir of the story's arc, where things take a turn for the even worse. But I hesitate to mandate that for fear of invalidating the whole concept of

rolling dice. I guess it could just be about failing forward – all “no but” vs. “no and” – but I don’t know if I like the idea of essentially changing what Cakewalk, Close One, and Skin of Your Teeth mean for that one Act.

So the Third Act begins when things are at their worst. It looks bad for the Hero – he has a lot of adversity to overcome. Maybe one friend’s been captured, maybe another’s betrayed him. The Badguy’s plans are about to come to fruition. Etc. It’s an uphill climb, but naturally the Hero comes out on top. This is where Personal scenes get that much more personal, and the Setpiece is the big explosive climax. (Usually, anyway – *Die Hard*’s climax doesn’t involve an explosion at all, for instance. Just Hans Gruber falling to his death.)

(Pretty much all instances of the word “Hero” above can be replaced with “Friend” and still make sense. The only real difference between the two in play is that the Hero has a more involved Sub-Plot, and therefore gets to declare more Personal scenes. I.e., he gets more screen time. Also, any mention of screenwriting techniques is a pretty shallow simplification of ideas from people like Robert McKee, but it’s close enough for what we’re doing here.)

### **More on How Personal Scenes Work**

Whoever declares the Personal scene is the one who’ll make a roll re: their Sub-Plot/Hang-Up. Nobody else gets to try to make progress in that regard in that scene – it’s all about the active player who declared it.

When you declare a Personal scene, you should go into it knowing what it is you want to tackle, your Sub-Plot or your Hang-Up. That’s your priority. If anything, you’ll shoehorn “the plot” into your Sub-Plot, or look at it through the lens of your Sub-Plot, if that makes sense. As intended, your Sub-Plot *cannot* be inconsequential in your Personal scenes, because you’re explicitly framing those scenes *around* your Sub-Plot. The scene is about your Sub-Plot, with a guest appearance by the A-story if it makes sense. The flashback thing I mentioned earlier should make it possible to work in your Sub-Plot without too much trouble.

### **More on How Setpieces Work**

I guess I saw it happening like this:

1. Opposition declares and frames a Setpiece.
2. Other players react.
3. Roleplaying happens.
4. Eventually the Opposition decides he’s had enough and calls for a roll.
5. Repeat steps 3 and 4 until every Hero or Friend has had a roll.
6. End the scene.

However, having Setpieces work like Personal scenes in reverse, with the non-Opposition players taking on what’s usually the Opposition role, is an attractive idea. The symmetry is appealing, as is the idea of the other players essentially turning the tables on the Opposition. But whereas the Opposition has incentive to take those Personal scenes as far as possible before calling for a roll (so as to make their lives/situations as difficult as possible before ending the scene), it seems to me the reverse is not true. That is, the other players have no incentive to let the Opposition make their situation worse by drawing out the scene, and every incentive to put a stop to the scene as quickly as possible. Plus, which player

calls for that roll?

If the Opposition declares/frames the scene and the other players act against him as if *they* were the Opposition *but* the Opposition is still the one who calls for rolls, then he can react to each Hero/Friend individually and still get to push his agenda in the process.

*For example:*

*The Opposition declares the act's Setpiece. Based on what's gone on in previous scenes, he proposes that the Hero's investigation has led to a sprawling junkyard. He has his love interest Friend with him, and let's say the other Friend too – the love interest's brother – just for the sake of having them all together. Finally, the scene takes place right after the last Personal scene, in which the Hero and his love interest infiltrated the Badguy's files or something, culminating in a trip to the ol' junkyard. (The scene's subtext was actually about the Friend working through her Hang-Up, which, for the sake of argument, has something to do with confidence.)*

*I'm getting kinda far afield, but the important thing is we have our four scene-framing questions answered:*

- 1. Where is it?** *The junkyard.*
- 2. Who's there?** *All the other players.*
- 3. When is it?** *Pretty much right after the last scene, in the present.*
- 4. What's it about?** *Well, it's a Setpiece, so it's going to be about the Badguy advancing toward his goal, which in this case will be, I dunno, meeting with some foreign arms dealers to buy a high-tech railgun or something.*

*So the Opposition's framed the scene. Now the other players start in with what they're doing.*

*The Hero says he's looking for evidence of the Badguy and this meeting they (apparently) know he's having. Now, the Hero's player can say he finds whatever he wants, within reason, but he knows that if he gives himself too much the Opposition will call for a roll, and he doesn't want to roll in a Setpiece unless he absolutely has to (since failure carries a lasting consequence). So he just says he sees their meeting, but can't hear what they're saying. The Opposition is cool with that for now.*

*This having been established, the Friend says he's going to sneak down closer to get a better look. The Opposition knows that this Setpiece has to get violent and explosively eventually, and this Friend could help get us there. So the Opposition calls for a roll, with a failure condition of "Your clumsy sneaking alerts them, and they immediately open fire on you and your buddies before you get close enough to hear anything important." Failure will also mean getting a Condition of Pissed Off. The Friend's victory condition is "I get close enough to hear the whole transaction and get an idea of what's going on." Dice are rolled, the Opposition wins, and bullets start flying.*

*Because it's only the First Act (let's say – this all sounds like First-Act stuff), none of the PCs can be killed, so the victory and failure conditions all have to take that into account. Plus, the Badguy and Hero have to make it to the Third Act Setpiece, so putting either of them in the hospital right now isn't really an option. If someone's shooting at the Badguy, success can't mean "I kill him" or "I put him in a coma," and ditto for anyone attacking the Hero or his Friends.*

*The Goons shoot at the love interest; her player says she immediately takes cover and they all miss. The Opposition wants to make it harder than that on her, though, so he calls for a roll. The player doesn't want to risk her getting hurt, so he makes it a cakewalk and makes it through the scene unscathed.*

*The Hero whips out his .45 and returns fire. He decides that success will mean that he hits a gas tank, and the ensuing explosion takes out one or more Goons. This will eventually give them more data on the Badguy's story when they're able to search the bodies. (He can target but not kill the Badguy, so he's going after the NPCs instead.) The Opposition says that failure will mean he kills a Goon but loses his gun when the Badguy flips on the giant magnet-crane-thing hanging over the Hero's head. The Hero makes it a Close One and succeeds, so an explosion happens and some Goons are killed.*

*The rest of the Goons, along with the Badguy, flee the scene. Everyone's had a roll, so there probably needs to be something in place that says that once every protagonist has rolled for something in a Setpiece, the Opposition narrates how the scene ends with regard to the Badguy. So in this case, he can say that the Badguy gets away, but he can't also say that a mountain of wreckage falls on the love interest and crushes her to death, because that's not about the Badguy. Also, once everyone's rolled, the Badguy can't continue to take harmful action against them – he can only move on to the next scene.*

So let's call that out as errata: **Once everyone's rolled, the Badguy can't continue to take harmful action against them – he can only move on to the next scene.**