

CAPE'S LITE

Capes is a radical departure from many roleplaying games. For many groups, it provides the tools to create better stories and enjoy the process more. But it's genuinely not right for every group. This document should help you get some idea of what it's about, and run your group through a quick session of the game.

This document assumes that you're familiar with more traditional forms of roleplaying already. If you've somehow happened upon this document without ever having played another game then what follows may sound a bit nonsensical.

WHERE'S THE GM?

In Capes there is no Game-Master. There are players, and they each take on different characters for each different scene. They pursue two agendas (at least) at the same time: They want to advance the plans and hopes of their own characters, and they also want to be good antagonists for the characters of other players. It's natural for a Capes player to choose to play a super-villain, in order to go oppose the heroes with cruelty and malice, and hopefully be thwarted in the end. This is just the same sort of thing your GM has been doing all along. Capes just recognizes that everyone can and should contribute to the adversity and conflict that makes a story great.

The absence of the Game Master highlights a simple fact: Stories in roleplaying games are not told by one person alone. The common misconception that "the Game Master tells the story, and the players play roles in that story" takes a big smack on the nose in Capes. Everyone contributes to telling the story. That means that you'll always be involved but never be in control. If you've got a great idea then maybe people will get excited and help you tell it. Or maybe they'll like some other idea, by someone else, better... and suddenly your preparation will be twisted in order to feed into the more popular story.

I HIT HIM... WHAT DO YOU MEAN "WHY DO YOU HIT HIM?"

The final major departure is what the rules define in the imagined world. Many roleplaying games have rules that govern what a character can do: How high they can jump, how much they can lift, whether they can fly to the moon or not. Each player uses those answers as tools to negotiate achieving what they want: If a hero wants to impress his girlfriend, maybe he flies her to the moon. And then the GM decides (often without any rules to assist him) whether that succeeds in impressing her, or whether it freaks her out, or something else.

Capes starts with the question of "What do you want to achieve?", and the rules deal explicitly with that. In the example above, the player would declare a Goal of "Impress Girlfriend". He could then use his "Fly " power to help roll dice on that, by flying to the moon or by flying to africa to pick fresh lilies or just by hovering in the air. The dice will never tell whether he can fly that fast, or that far. They will only tell whether he impresses his girlfriend. What he does is just his excuse for rolling dice to get closer to that goal.

The natural consequence of this is that you need to know what you're trying to achieve. If you don't know that then you need to take a few moments and figure it out, because there's no room in the system for just doing something, then having somebody else tell you what it achieves.

WHY WOULD I USE DICE TO JUST TALK?

It's not all about cooperation, though. In fact, there's rarely any selfless cooperation at all. Instead there is a structure of rules that gives each player free rein to compete cold-heartedly within the game system, without having that competition undermine the group's common purpose of telling an evocative story.

In order for such competition to work well, the rules are referenced constantly. This is another departure from many styles of roleplaying, in which the rules are avoided wherever possible for fear that they will ruin the cooperative goodness of freeform roleplay.

Capes is a roleplaying **game**. You don't stop playing the game when you decide to roleplay. You do them both at the same time.

HOW DOES IT FIT TOGETHER?

Once you've got all these ideas firmly in mind (which can take a while), the structure of Capes is simple. The story is told in Scenes, which are arbitrary divisions of "Let's do something here, with these characters, for a while". For instance, a scene at a bank, with some heroes and some villains, is probably a robbery. Every player gets at least one character in each scene. Sometimes they play heroes, sometimes they play villains, sometimes they play bystanders.

In each Scene there are Goals on the table: "Break into the vault", "Hurt Hostages", "Arrest Magnetron", "Impress Ace Reporter Sheila Star" and so on. Each Goal has two sets of dice, one in favor of it succeeding, one in favor of it failing. When the Goal resolves, whichever side has the highest total on their dice triumphs. Either the Goal succeeds or it fails.

But, of course, people want to change the values on those dice. They get Actions in order to do this. The Actions are organized into Pages. So a Scene is split up into Pages, and every Page each character gets an Action. They may use this Action to declare a new Goal ("Hey, I just realized that I'm trying to convince Taurus to turn on his heroic allies and join us villains! Let's make that a Goal!") Or, if they would rather, they may use one of their Abilities (like "Super-strength", "Escape without a Scratch", or "Obnoxious") to roll one of the dice that are out on the Goals. This lets them drive the values on their preferred side up, or drive the values on the opposing side down.

I CAN'T LET HIM KILL PEGGY-SUE... I JUST *CAN'T!*

Taken as a whole, players actions let them gain control of the Goals that mean most to them, often at the expense of Goals that matter less. In the bank robbery example above, for instance, the heroes have to decide whether it's more important to succeed in arresting the villain, or to thwart his plan to harm the hostages. They may very well not get to do both.

Players show what is important to them and their characters by deciding what to act on. They also show what is important by Staking Debt for or against Goals. Debt is a resource (measured in chips or other tokens) that the characters gain each time they use their super-powers. It is, in essence, their moral responsibility to prove that they are worthy of their powers. As such it is both a resource and a penalty. Staking it on a Goal makes it much easier to win that Goal (since heroes and villains are always more powerful when acting in accord with their principles). But having too much will make it hard to be effective (as the character is assailed with self-doubt).

Actions and Stakes together make it easy to tell when a Goal is grabbing the interest of the play group. An interesting Goal will have piles of debt, and high dice totals. An uninteresting one will have no debt, and a low total. And, again, there is no Game Master. Players are rewarded for taking on that role by earning Story Tokens (useful for lots of things later in the game) whenever they are on the losing side of a Goal that is important to other players. In short, players get rewarded for being defeated by a morally vested character. So they are encouraged to challenge other characters in ways that play to their moral stature.

LET'S GIVE IT A WHIRL

So you've read the first two pages, and decided you want to introduce your group of players to Capes? Great! That's the only solid way to see whether it will really work for your group. The patterns that make Capes what it is emerge in play, so what you need to do is to get them playing, even before you're done explaining the rules.

This will put you in a position that's unknown in long-term Capes play. There is no Game Master in the Capes rules, no single player who is privileged over any others. But for the sake of getting your group playing quickly you will take the lead on imparting the rules and providing adversity. You will, in short, be doing many of the things that a Game Master does in other games, until the other players learn enough to take an equal part in doing so.

So this document is written to give you the tools to boss people around and tell them what to do. And if you want to call the shots, you have to do some preparatory work. Gather the equipment in the box to the right.

And last, but certainly not least, you need to cut out a whole batch of Click And Lock modules. Go to the Downloads section of the Capes website:

<http://www.museoffire.com/Games/>

A package of 3x5 cards, for writing and tracking Goals

A lot of dice, the six-sided sugar-cube variety, in two distinct colors (assumed to be "red" and "blue" for the rest of this document)

A bunch of poker chips, or some other appropriate "token" for Debt.

Pencils or pens

... and start printing. You can either print the entire Click and Lock PDF, or you can use the Flash character generator to create sheets with just the modules you think will be most interesting to the players in your game. But you should have enough for every player to make several characters. Cut them out along the curvy, hard-to-cut lines, and then you're ready to play.

HEROES ARE MADE, NOT BORN

Once you have your players gathered together, you start the game, using the shpiel at right. Keep it snappy, and keep the players moving. If they start getting bogged down asking questions right now you'll waste a huge amount of time explaining rules that are easier to see in context.

2 First, let's figure out roughly who's on which side. I can only play one villain, and we don't want them too terribly outnumbered in this first scene. Hands up who else is going to play a villain, or panicking bystander, or other source of trouble for our stalwart heroes?

If your group is four or more people (including yourself) then you'll also need to use the shpiel at left, to get a decent balance of antagonists in order to make the first scene interesting. Once folks see the system in action they should get accustomed to providing that balance themselves (or not, which can make for more dramatic scenes, once people have the rules acumen to survive being outnumbered).

Now that you've got everyone thinking about creating characters for the scene at hand, you give them the tools to do so. Use the shpiel at right. Again, keep things snappy and don't give people too much opportunity to agonize over their options.

1 Okay, folks, the game is played in Scenes. I create the first one, and it's an armed robbery at Nova Labs, the premiere developer of cutting-edge super-technology. You'll need a character in order to play, so let's make some. They'll need some reason for being there, like they're trying to steal something, or they're trying to save hostages, or they are a hostage.

3 You'll need a Persona, so when these get to you pick one and pass them on. <Pick up the personae and pass them to your right> And you'll need either super-powers or some mundane skills, so pick one and pass them on. <Pick up the powers and skills, and pass them to your left> Let's get those around the table quickly, and then I'll show you how to combine them and fill them in.

ASSEMBLING A CHARACTER

Choose Powers

GODLING		Casually overpower mortals <input type="checkbox"/>
Super-strength <input type="checkbox"/>	Inspire Awe <input type="checkbox"/>	
Super-speed <input type="checkbox"/>		
Invulnerability <input type="checkbox"/>		
Laser Eye-beams <input type="checkbox"/>	Divert large flying objects <input type="checkbox"/>	
Flight <input type="checkbox"/>		

Choose Persona

SEDUCER		
Pout <input type="checkbox"/>	Sensual <input type="checkbox"/>	
"You know you want to" <input type="checkbox"/>	Understanding <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Vindictive <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Sly <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Greedy <input type="checkbox"/>	

Combine

GODLING		Casually overpower mortals <input type="checkbox"/>	SEDUCER	
Super-strength <input type="checkbox"/>	Pout <input type="checkbox"/>	Sensual <input type="checkbox"/>		
Super-speed <input type="checkbox"/>	Inspire Awe <input type="checkbox"/>	Understanding <input type="checkbox"/>		
Invulnerability <input type="checkbox"/>	"You know you want to" <input type="checkbox"/>	Vindictive <input type="checkbox"/>		
Laser Eye-beams <input type="checkbox"/>	Divert large flying objects <input type="checkbox"/>	Sly <input type="checkbox"/>		
Flight <input type="checkbox"/>		Greedy <input type="checkbox"/>		

Cross out three

GODLING		Casually overpower mortals <input type="checkbox"/>	SEDUCER	
Super-strength <input type="checkbox"/>	Pout <input type="checkbox"/>	Sensual <input type="checkbox"/>		
Super-speed <input type="checkbox"/>	Inspire Awe <input type="checkbox"/>	Understanding <input type="checkbox"/>		
Invulnerability <input type="checkbox"/>	"You know you want to" <input type="checkbox"/>	Vindictive <input type="checkbox"/>		
Laser Eye-beams <input type="checkbox"/>	Divert large flying objects <input type="checkbox"/>	Sly <input type="checkbox"/>		
Flight <input type="checkbox"/>		Greedy <input type="checkbox"/>		

Number

GODLING		Casually overpower mortals <input type="checkbox"/>	SEDUCER	
Super-strength <input type="checkbox"/>	Pout <input type="checkbox"/>	Sensual <input type="checkbox"/>		
Super-speed <input type="checkbox"/>	Inspire Awe <input type="checkbox"/>	Understanding <input type="checkbox"/>		
Invulnerability <input type="checkbox"/>	"You know you want to" <input type="checkbox"/>	Vindictive <input type="checkbox"/>		
Laser Eye-beams <input type="checkbox"/>	Divert large flying objects <input type="checkbox"/>	Sly <input type="checkbox"/>		
Flight <input type="checkbox"/>		Greedy <input type="checkbox"/>		

4 So they click together like this, see? Now you have fifteen abilities in three columns. The first thing you do is pick the three of those fifteen that you like least, and just cross them off. Other characters with these modules might have those abilities, but you don't. <Ostentatiously cross of three things at random> Now you number each column, starting from one and going up to as many abilities as you have left in the column. It doesn't really matter how you number them. <Off-handedly number your columns, starting from the bottom and proceeding straight up> 1... 2... 3... 4... and so on. Pencils down when you're done. <Put your pencil down and look around expectantly>

START THINGS OFF WITH A BANG!

5

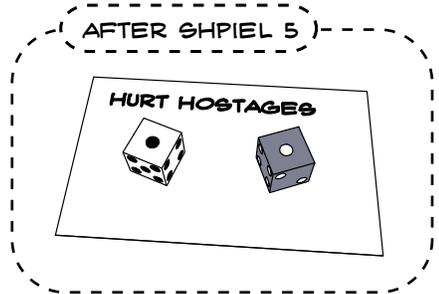
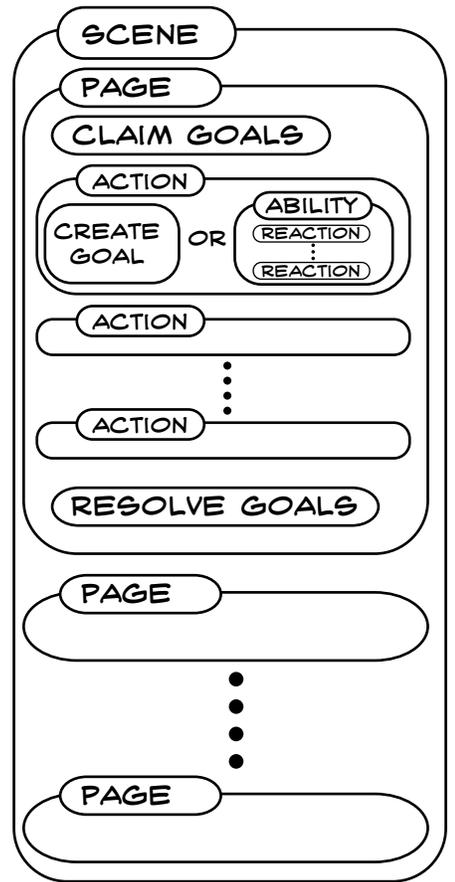
Okay, each of us gets an Action. On your Action you can do one of two things. I'll do the first thing, which is to create a Goal. <Take a 3x5 card and write "Kill Hostages" on it> This is something my villain wants to do. Here's a die for him. <Place a red die on the card, with "1" facing up> Some of you heroes may want to stop him. Here's a die for you. <Place a blue die on the card, with "1" facing up> Eventually this will resolve, and when it does, whoever has the higher value on their side will get to narrate whether the hostages live or die. Until then, nobody can narrate anything that would resolve the conflict. I can't kill hostages, and you heroes can't save all of them. That's my Action. Now I get to narrate what it means in the game-world. <Narrate, establishing your villain or villain-group's raid on the lab, and their heartless disregard for innocent life (but short of killing anyone)>

Once everyone has a character, you'll get into the first Scene. This will probably be the first place where people start really giving you strange looks about how the system works. Again, playtests have shown that the easiest way to get people over their initial discomfort is to move them through and to provide a good example of using the system.

Capes is closer in structure to a card or board-game than to many traditional roleplaying games. It provides an explicit turn order, with players acting one after the other. And it makes clear who is allowed to be narrating the happenings of the game. As you guide players through the first scene, you'll have to shepherd them through this structure as well.

In essence, the structure of play is a series of repeating loops, each nested within the next. You play a Scene. Each Scene is made of Pages. Each Page starts with Claiming Goals, then has Actions (one for each character, generally), and ends with Resolving Goals. Each Action either creates a Goal, or uses an Ability. If it uses an Ability then the Action may also have Reactions (up to one per player). See the diagram at right.

Happily, it's fairly easy to get people into this immediately. You'll teach them Actions, then Reactions (as applicable), then show them how Actions are grouped together in Pages, and how Pages form a Scene. Start with shpiel 5 at left. When you're done you should have something that looks like the figure at right.



ABILITIES BEYOND THOSE OF MORTAL MEN

6

I said you could do one of two things with your Action. Now you <to player at left> can create a new Goal if you want. Or, you can do the second thing, which is to use one of your character's abilities to try to sieze control of an existing Goal.

You've teased people with the fact that Actions can do one of two things. Before the next player takes their action, describe what the other thing is, using shpiel 6 to left.

If players keep making up new Goals, just handle them the same way you did the first one. They write something on an index card, and put a blue and red die, starting at one. Eventually, however, someone is going to want to control some Conflicts. Use shpiel 7 to right.

If they pick an ability with a check-box next to it, use shpiel 8a at left. Otherwise use shpiel 8b below.

8A

See this check box? That means this ability can only be used once in the Scene. Those other abilities, they're super-powers. They can be used over and over, but each time you use them you take a Debt Token. If you have more than five it's bad, but it's easy and useful to get rid of them.

8B

This ability doesn't have any check box. That means that you can use it over and over, but each time you use it you have to take a Debt Token. If you have more than five, you'll be in trouble, but it's easy and useful to get rid of them. These other ones have check-boxes. You can use them for free, but you can only use each one once in this Scene.

7

Okay, when you use an Ability you roll a die. Generally you can roll any die, and choose whether to accept the new value or turn it back to the old one. That means you can either roll your own die hoping to raise it, or an opposing die hoping to lower it. Right now, all the dice are ones. You can't drive the opposing side any lower, so you'll want to roll the die on your own side, hoping to roll higher than a one and keep it. Generally you need to use an Ability that is of value equal to or greater than the current value of the die you're rolling. Right now that die is a one, so any ability will do. So pick an ability, and roll the die.

ACTION AND REACTION

As soon as a player rolls a die that is not a six, go on to explaining Reactions. If the die is four or five, use shpiel 9a, bottom left, otherwise use shpiel 9b, bottom right.

9A

Now every player has a chance to React on this Ability roll. Reacting is just using another ability on the same die. It doesn't cost you your action. A round of reactions is part of every ability roll that gets accepted. Now you <point to the player who rolled> probably don't want to reroll this. Your odds of getting much higher than you've already rolled aren't terribly good. But your opposition could certainly reroll it, trying to lower it. They'll need an ability equal to or greater than your roll though, so that can be tough to achieve. Anyone want to react?

9B

Now every player has one chance to React on this Ability roll. Reacting is just using another ability on the same die. It doesn't cost you your action. A round of reactions is part of every ability roll that gets accepted. Now you <point to the player who rolled> get the first opportunity, and you may well want to take it. You've got decent odds of raising your die. Or any of your team-mates might want to react, to help you. Your opposition probably doesn't want to react yet, trying to knock the die down. Their odds aren't very good right now. Anyone want to react?

FILLING IN THE DETAILS

Once you've got those rules in place, you can probably sit back and play for a little bit. Your next "Rules-teaching" episode will happen when one of two situations occurs.

First, when somebody gets a second Debt token. Read the monstrous shpiel 10 to the right, to introduce them to the concept of Stakes.

Second, the turn will eventually come back around to you (i.e. all players have had their Action). When that happens, use shpiel 11 to the right to introduce them to the concept of Pages.

Continue asking around the table until somebody expresses an interest in resolving a Goal. Then use shpiel 12 to the right to introduce them to the concept of Claiming.

And that's that about Claiming, until you get to the end of Page 2. At the end of Page 2, it is very likely that there will be some Goals ready to be resolved. Use shpiel 13 at right, to introduce them to the basic concept of Resolving.

Once they're done with their narration, use shpiel 14 at right, to discuss Inspirations.

If there was any Debt staked on the losing side, use shpiel 15a at right, to explain how that gets dealt with.

If there was any Debt staked on the winning side, use shpiel 15b at right, to explain how that gets dealt with.

10

You've got two Debt Tokens now. You can make good use of those, and here's how. To get rid of Debt Tokens, you Stake them on your side of a Goal. You, personally, can Stake up to three tokens on any given Goal. That's gambling that you'll be able to make that goal go your way. If your side eventually resolves the goal then you don't have to take those Debt Tokens back. But if the other side resolves it, then you'll have to take back twice as many. With me so far? <Look around to make sure people have caught on to the gambling aspect> Okay, here's the advantage of being invested in a Goal. If there are more tokens bet on your side than it has dice... so in this case, two... you can take a die and split its value, as evenly as you can, over two dice. So you could take this four <or whatever> and split it into two twos <or whatever>. And then you still can only roll one die per action, but your sides total is the total of the dice. So if lots of people are rolling them, you can get as much as a twelve total. Which will obviously beat anything that the other side could roll on only one die. Make sense?

11

Everyone has had an Action. That means Page number 1 is over. I started Page 1, so he/she <pointing to the player to your left> starts Page 2. He'll get first Action, and then around the circle again, until it finally gets back to me. But first! At the start of Page 2, we get to determine which Goals may resolve at the end of Page 2. We didn't do that for Page 1, because there weren't any Goals on the table to choose from. <Look at player to your left> Is there any Goal that you'd particularly like to narrate the end of? Like, do you want to have a chance to tell whether the Hostages live or die and how?

12

You get dibs on your side of this Goal. You've Claimed it, for resolution purposes. You can only Claim one a Page. Nobody else can take it away from you, though somebody may choose to Claim the opposing side as well. Now if your side controls the Goal at the end of this page, you'll be in charge of resolving it. If nobody has claimed the side that controls a Goal then it doesn't resolve this page.

13

That's the end of Page 2. Now we have some Goals to Resolve. See, you claimed this side of this Goal, and that side is controlling it. So you get to narrate how it all works out. Now. Go! What happens?

14

You also have to decide who gets Inspirations, and sometimes choose how much. They'll be useful in later Goals. You match dice on your side against dice on the opposing side. If your die is more than a point higher you get an Inspiration of yours, minus theirs. If their die is more than a point higher, you choose someone on the opposition to get an Inspiration of theirs minus yours. So in this case your choices are <describe choices, if any>

15a

You <point to the staking character> Staked Debt on this and lost. So you get back twice as much Debt. Good for you!

15b

You <point to a staking character> Staked Debt on this and won. Now it's no longer Debt. These are Story Tokens. You choose who, of the people who opposed you, did a good job as opposition. Reward them accordingly, by giving them the Story Tokens. No, you can't keep them for yourself.

AS THE PAGES TURN

Once all the resolution is done, you'll presumably be segueing directly into Page 3. This is a good time to discuss Story Tokens. Use shpiel 16 at right.

16

Now you <point> have Story Tokens. They can do one of two things. First, at the beginning of a page... like now... you can start playing another character. You just make them up, or grab one from a previous scene, when we have previous scenes, and go. You'll get an Action for each character, so that's a lot of extra leverage. The other thing you can do is after everyone else has acted, you can spend a Story Token to take another Action on one of your characters. So taking a character now lets you get more actions long-term, but saving your Story Tokens lets you get an action when it really counts, right before Resolving Goals. Or, of course, you can hold them for later scenes. It's entirely up to you.

You may also need to explain the Overdraw rules (if any player has more than five Debt Tokens that they haven't Staked). If so, use shpiel 17 at right.

17

You <point> have more than five Debt Tokens. This is not a big deal, but it is a drag on your position. We take the highest die your character is allied with, and roll it. If it's higher, we turn it back to what it was. If it's lower, we leave it. It's a recurring penalty that's particularly painful when you're doing well.

Claims happen again, and then Actions, and eventually someone who is about to take an Action will be holding an Inspiration. Use shpiel 18 at right, to inform them what they can do with their Inspiration.

18

Before you jump into your action, let me point out what you can do with your Inspiration. Before or after the rest of your Action, you can spend that Inspiration to turn a die up to its value. So you can turn a one up to <whatever>, but you can't turn a six down to <whatever>. Particularly, if you want to combine that with Debt, you could Stake, split a die into two small dice, raise one with an Inspiration and roll the other one higher, all on your one Action. Make sense?

Home stretch! You have one (yes, only one!) more shpiel to deliver. When a Page ends, and every single Goal on the table gets resolved, that's the end of the Scene. Use the shpiel at bottom, and you will have taught them all the rules of Capes Lite. Congratulations!

19

Well, that's the last of the Goals. Our first scene is over. Nicely played! Now you <turn to player at your left> tell us where the next scene is, and we all decide what characters we want to play for that. You can play the one from this scene, or make up a new one, or take a character someone else was playing, or whatever. If you have Story Tokens you can start out immediately playing two or more characters. Now, where is the scene located? <turn to the player at your left and stare pointedly until they come up with something>