Blithedale

A game about groups and conflict.
By Blaine O'Neill

If ever men might lawfully dream awake, and give utterance to their widest visions, without dread of laughter or scorn on the part of the audience – yes, and speak of earthly happiness, for themselves and mankind, as an object to be hopefully striven for, and probably attained – we, who made that little semi-circle round the blazing fire, were those very men. We had left the rusty iron frame-work of society behind us. We had broken through many hindrances that are powerful enough to keep most people on the weary tread-mill of the established system, even while they feel its irksomeness almost as intolerable as we did. We had stept down from the pulpit; we had flung aside the pen; we had shut up the ledger; we had thrown off that sweet, bewitching, enervating indolence, which is better, after all, than most of the enjoyments within mortal grasp. It was our purpose – a generous one, certainly, and absurd, no doubt, in full proportion with its generosity – to give up whatever we had heretofore attained, for the sake of showing mankind the example of a life governed by other than the false and cruel principles, on which human society has all along been based. [1]

Overview

Blithedale is a role-playing game designed to give players new experiences and language to make sense of a conflict-prone world. By experiencing group dynamics as they happen in real time, players will better understand themselves as individuals and group members. Methods used and roles played within groups are amplified and clarified under intra-group conflict.

The turn-based game system is designed without the need for a game master, with each player co-facilitating progression through performative participation aided by dice-rolling and a manual. The goal of the game is variable based on the group make-up and iteration of characters, but players will struggle to establish individual roles and a common vision and sense of purpose for the group, forced into establishing conflict and subsequently attempting to reach a resolution.

At the beginning of the game, players will organize themselves in a circle (or as close to one as possible), and create characters and relationships and details between each of them clockwise around a table. After setup, the

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[1] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. Chapman & Hall, 1852.

youngest player kicks off gameplay via an initial round. Each round's length is determined by the sum of one scene per each player. Rounds 1 and 2 build character color, relationships, and group identity. Round 3 introduces a divisive conflict, followed by a resolution round (4), and finally an epilogue (Round 5).

Within conflict session rounds, players must adhere to certain challenging mechanics based on their characters' group alignment, ideological tribe, conflict type, and qualitative descriptions. Conflict can vary in flavor and extremity depending on the input of the players and what they feel like bringing to the table. Conflict is established at random by a dice roll, and then "resolved" via dialogue and negotiation. Unlike most other games, in Blithedale there are no clear winners or losers within conflict. That is left up to the group and the player to decide or *themself*.

Object

This game is designed for 3-7 players, but ideal group size is 4 or 5. With the addition of each player to the group, the duration of the game increases, and with 4 players it already runs around 90 minutes to 1 hour for beginners. Each player shares a similar purpose: negotiate your own needs and boundaries with those of the "group."
Arguably the only subject who stands to win or lose is the group itself. Players may be asked to leave the group or decide to leave themselves, give or take forms of power, or push a new ideological framework, but there is no judge other than the player themselves whether any of these developments are in their best interest. It's the intersubjectivity of the group that takes center stage throughout.

Components

-   Character Creation sheets (1 per player)
-   Character System printed materials
-   Faces (at least 100 printed out, cut into squares)
-   Dice (6-sided, 3 per player)
-   Timer (optional)
-   Map of Blithedale
-   Index cards
-   Pencils
-   Printed or digital copy of manual for each player

Setup

At a circular or squarish table, seat each player equidistantly and with enough surface area for their character sheet and index cards between each character.

Next, lay out the play area so that all the faces are randomly sprinkled across the table. **Spend 10 minutes choosing a character class, conflict type, and face, and roll for group alignment** (2d6) **and ideological**

tribe (3d6). Choose a name and age for your character and write it on your sheet.[2]

Next, roll your two dice to setup **relationships**.

First, choose one die and use its result to *define* the relationship type to your left.

Second, choose the remaining die and use its result to *refine* the relationship to your right. You must refer to the character creation sheets to complete this and subsequent steps of setup. After refining relationships, take a moment to talk about the relationships that now exist, so that everyone at the table is aware and can start making creative decisions informed by this information.
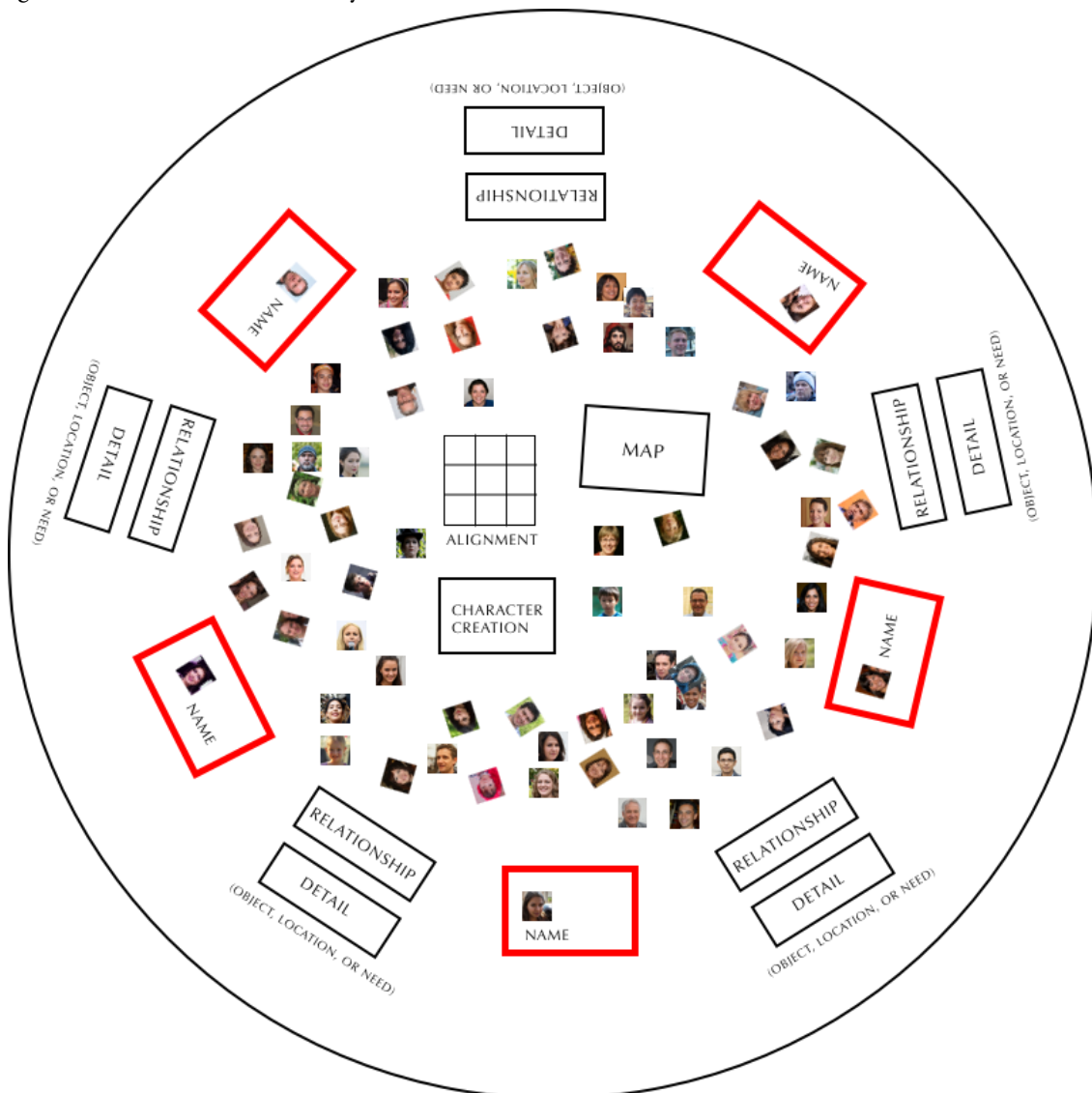
Third, roll your two dice again to add **details** to the table.[3] Details can be either a **Need, Location,** or **Object**. Details function as shared information and signifiers to add color and style to your group's iteration of Blithedale. This time, start with the youngest player and move counter-clockwise in setting up relationships. Players can use their dice values to add details to any relationship, not just their own. One detail is appended to each pre-existing relationship, and in groups of 4 or more there must be at least 2 **Needs**.

Fourth, continuing in the counterclockwise order, use your remaining die value to refine the detail of your choice. Now make sure that all the players are aware of the details that have been mapped out onto the relationships at the table. Everyone can participate freely in expanding descriptively upon the implications of this setup.

Note:
Defining your **self** and your **relationships** is **crucial** to the rest of the Blithedale experience. Setup can take a lot of time, but it's worth it. Try not to drag the whole process out longer than 30 minutes, however, so you don't lose steam before the conflict occurs. Setup is meant to be a group experience, and is social. Because each relationship is shared between two players, it must be negotiated and co-created. The group's social imagination begins to take form during setup, and as a player you should take every opportunity to be as creative and enthusiastic as possible in defining your own character, their relationships, and relationship details, as well as helping your neighbors in their creation process.

Some helpful questions to think about during setup: *What gets your character out of bed every morning? What potential relationships exist beyond your character and their proximal relationships? What boundaries, needs, and dynamics exist beyond what's been established on the table? Based on your character's ideological commitments, alignment, and conflict type, what additional details and surprises can you bring to the group during gameplay? Does your character think of themselves in the first, second, or third person?*

If you and the other players at your table are able to collectively embellish a rich world and set of relationships during Setup, you should have no problem diving into Round 1 and starting to form a group identity and narrative.

> With the exception of those natural disasters that are not caused by human misdeed, most of the pain, destruction, waste, and neglect towards human life that we create on this planet and beyond, are consequences of our overreaction to difference.
>
> —— Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*

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[3] This setup system is adapted from *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009) which, as a n00b to RPG's, in my limited research I found to be the most fun and expansive structure for character creation and worldbuilding.

Character Classes

Leader

Steadfast and stoic, committed philanthropist, not much peripheral vision beyond their own ideals however. Not too creative. Slight homoerotic leanings, but heterosexual for all intensive purposes. Mild-mannered but a freak in private. Lacks general intellect / cultural knowledge, but makes up for it with intense charisma and commitment to 5 year plans. Could be an alien host, plans to run for public office. 50% listener, 50% talker.

Counselor

Also known as a Priest. Can occasionally provide healing and supportful guidance to others, but it always comes packaged with a liability. Shrouded, always looking for an ear to share their insights with. Never not focused on recruiting new members to the collective, regardless of who they are or what they have to offer. Scrappy, bootstraps mentality. Has a dark past, but views themselves as reformed. Counselor believes in the potential of all human beings to redeem themselves and become part of a greater good. Often bipolar.

Urban Homesteader

Kinfolk subscriber. Aesthetics of authenticity. A good cook. Epicurean compass. Can't live anywhere without pets and a garden. Fermenting. Wields power and authority through devotion. Without the work, strength, and trust of this character, there would be no leader. Often deep and/or romantic relationship develops between this character and the leader or priest. Usually quite dogmatic, selfless. But you never know in Blithedale these days...

Child

Child showed up one day and everyone's recollection of when/how/why is slightly different. The child plays a mysterious, almost mystical role for many group members, especially the ones who don't question biological reproduction. Everyone wants to influence them, but no one is really listening to what they have to say.

Builder / Farmer

Butch tendencies. Tough, consistent, uncouth. One of the more skilled in the group in useful manual labor. Has lots of real experience and street smarts, not one to talk

Professor

Grand vision and an even grander schedule. The professor is a prominent group disciple, traveling far and wide, speaking on panels about the collective and searching for

much, or listen for that matter. Level-headed, was involved with the activities they're doing now before the collective existed. Is being paid essentially to do a lot of the heavy-lifting for the group, enjoys a level of autonomy/privacy in that regard.

peer-reviewed group validation. Wields a lot of intellectual and financial authority, humbly of course. Criticality and skepticality sometimes prevents the professor from certain actions and actualizations on behalf of others. Book smart. Often blindly patronizing, and generous in the worst ways.

Enlightened Retiree

Inspired daily by TED talks, self-empowerment books, and Singularity University online coursework in Exponential Thinking, this person realized they had it all wrong. Facing retirement, they decided to join something larger than themselves and their finances. Their mid-life crisis was spurred by a financial scandal where they "lost everything," though there's probably a cabin or beach house that they forgot to mention. They are an enthusiastic and committed group member when they're not Facetiming their family or on "research trips."

Elder

This person lived a life full of experiences, and has a lot of wisdom to share with the group. However, due to their rich life and disinterest in financial planning, they have no retirement plan, and are starting to feel the impacts of middle to old age. Their health, and their limited ability to contribute to collective labor, makes their physical and mental health a constant concern for the group, but their compassion and wisdom make up for it. Grandperson!

Fundraiser

Traveling salesperson. Always identifying new opportunities for recruitment and funding, networking at the latest social change conference, or hosting out-of-state info sessions and fundraisers. They often get criticized for using the collective credit card too freely, and rumor has it they stayed at a luxury hotel on a recent trip. Gatekeeper towards external sources of funding, and the language that is necessary. So many fucking buzzwords...

Artist

Also known as the group's muse. A painter, a poem a musician, an actor, a game designer perhaps. Object of desire by most in both the group, and elsewhere in Blithedale. Radiates beauty and affluence. Independent spirit leader, never resented for not pulling their weight. Charms group members, comes up with deeply emotional/cultural reasons for not working. Major influence on the youth culture of the collective identity. Asset interfacing with

neighbors and the town of Blithedale. Main vices: pride and fiscal irresponsibility,

Writer

Similar to artist but less desired or attractive. More sharp, less bright-eyed or easily distracted. Observer: voyeurish, stand-offish, always allegiant to their own practice and ego before considering anything else. Talks before listening, when not writing or observing. Uses lots of words that often create distance rather than proximity.

Advocate

Seasoned political agent always in the center of their own long-term narrative (and sometimes others'). They see value in the potential for this group to transform the way that everyday people craft their lives, share resources, and define success. A licensed nonviolent direct action trainer and mediator. Always journaling ferociously, but not very expressive interpersonally. Seems like a lot of cards aren't on the table here...

Spiritual Practitioner

Small likelihood that this character will ever find a labor position that suits them in the group, but that's fine for them because they could spend upwards of 60 hours per week learning and reciting mantras, revisiting the sacred texts, wandering the sidewalks and trails of Blithedale, and pondering their dietary decisions and behaviors. They make up for their lack of interest or involvement in the collective labor schedule by having a trust fund that occasionally comes in handy and good bone structure. Risks: falls in love easily with others. Mental health is very turbulent for this person. Fake News!

Caregiver

Always taking care of others, forgetting about themselves. One day, they'll reach a breaking point, but that day will not come anytime soon. Endless source of compassion and interest in others, makes you wonder if they're avoiding recognizing something about themselves? Radical pedagogy vibes. Generous and compassionate and loving to the point of exhaustion, where it feels cheap and worthless because it flows so freely. Some characters will question the Caregiver's motives for such generosity, and might realize there are none other than "G-d."

Intern / Student

Not prepared for this group, but has enough surface-level anarchist theoretical grounding, spirit and naiveté to commit all the way. "Ready to sublate all of this theory into my life praxis!" Climate change and "justice" are big areas of interest for this. They read the *New Yorker* and *Jacobin*. Gender is a construct!

Engineer

The Engineer is someone with unpredictable ambition and skills. They could be a bullshit artist . This character could be an architect, product designer, ecologist, anyone with an identity grounded in quantitative power and scientific authority.

Documentarian

Always trying to find the 'bigger picture' narrative, and eager to put a positive propagandistic spin on group activities. Believes in the powers of free speech, information, and fair media. "Democracy is real."

Systems Thinker

Just one Venn diagram or alignment grid away from discovering what underlies all of humanity's scripted desires and patterns. Gamification of social change, permaculture, Biodome, Burning Man, etcetera. Quantum physics and dark matter explain more than we'd like to think.

Group Alignment

Echoism vs. Narcissism	Dogma vs. Skepticism		
	Dogmatic	**Neutral**	**Skeptical**
Echoist	Dogmatic echoist **10**	Neutral echoist **2** or **3**	Skeptical echoist **11**
Neutral	Dogmatic neutral **5**	(True) Neutral **6**	Skeptical neutral **7**
Narcissist	Dogmatic narcissist **12**	Neutral narcissist **8** or **9**	Skeptical narcissist **4**

The Character Group Alignment chart helps you place your character within a system of alignment of how individuals may think, identify, and communicate within the group. Use **2d6** (two 6-sided dice) to roll for alignment profile and consult the chart based on the sum of your two dice.

The Group Alignment that you choose determines your inner monologue and logic throughout gameplay. It will help you separate yourself as a player from the character you cultivate, as well as give your character a clear point of entry for group-building and conflict. Write down your alignment on your character sheet so that it constantly guides you.

Conflict Types

The Perpetual Victim

"Some people cling to the role of victim, claiming center stage. Whatever issue or drama erupts somehow always ends up being about them. Their patterns may originate from deep hurt and trauma and we can feel sympathy, but colluding with them is not helpful either to the person or the group. Fruitless efforts to appease them can drain the group's energy and undermine its effectiveness. When we are caught up in the role of victim, our speech and actions reflect our sense of powerlessness. To regain our sense of empowerment, we might begin by challenging the inherent assumptions in our words and practicing alternative framings and affirmations."

The Terrible Tyrant

"While it may seem an odd choice to place the Tyrant under Rebellion, think of all the revolutions that have led to the establishment, not of libratory and empowering systems of governance, but of new authoritarian regimes. When we are possessed by the Rebel and we gain power, we often wield it harshly. If our models of power have always been authoritarian, we may simply not know any other way to behave. We struggle for control, without realizing that we've shifted from being the victim to being the bully. The Tyrant and the Rebel both hold the potential to transform into Empowering Leaders. But to make that happen, the group must set and hold clear boundaries and expectations, forming a united front."

The Pernicious Perfectionist

"When we comply with the internalized self-hater, we may become the Good Girl or Good Boy who is always trying to please or the perfectionist Boss who holds high standards. High expectations can be a mark of self-esteem: I think enough of my skill and professionalism as a writer to make sure anything I put out into the world reflects my best efforts. But the Shadow Side of the Perfectionist is the Vicious Critic, who holds us to impossible standards which can perpetuate a sense of continual failure. In groups, we may become fault-finders, always complaining, rarely if ever praising anyone but always noting what went wrong. When confronted with the Pernicious Perfectionist, whether within or without, our basic strategy should be to transform her into a helpful critic, a careful editor or a useful overseer."

The Unlovely Underminer

"Grumbling, mumbling, sniping without directly confronting, posting snide critiques on the Internet but not coming to the mediation, not finishing tasks, leaving key work undone and undermining the work of others — all of these are passive-aggressive forms of behavior, ways people withdraw from open conflict while continuing to seek power. A group culture that discourages undermining, expects direct confrontation when people are in conflict and where the norm is energetic support are your best defenses against the Underminer. Again, our goal is to transform the Underminer into someone who can openly advocate for their positions and offer constructive critique directly."

The Appeaser

"The Appeaser tries to make everyone happy, worries over anyone's distress and has trouble setting boundaries or holding people accountable. The positive aspect of Appeasing would be Peacemaking — mediating, listening and helping people come to understand one another. But an Inimical Appeaser gives way when she shouldn't. Rather than hurt someone's feelings, she may allow them to hurt the group, draining its energies and resources. An Appeaser and a Pernicious Critic together make a lethal combination, with the Appeaser eternally trying and failing to make the Critic happy. An Inimical Appeaser can learn to be comfortable with conflict and transform into a Peacemaker, with conscious group support."

The Reactive Rebel

"Rebellion is good for the soul. In the face of oppression and injustice, standing up and saying No!, shouting, marching, taking to the streets and tearing down the prison walls are acts of liberation. But some of us have the Rebel so ingrained that we respond with belligerent obstruction to any exercise of authority, unearned or earned. In a group, we might viciously attack the leadership, whether or not they deserve it. When confronted with the Rebel, we can attempt to harness that passionate fire to ignite our movements and direct that oppositional energy against our real opponents."

Snipers

"Some people attack covertly, in ways that can be hard to immediately identify. Being a healer, counselor, therapist, teacher or a helper is a position of high social power. Being a patient or a student puts us below. Secure people accept that to learn or receive healing, we must sometimes temporarily stand below someone else, but insecure people may not be able to tolerate being in the down position and may snipe or covertly attack those they perceive as being above. Just as a good parent knows that her ultimate success will come from her child's independence, a true healer aims to put herself out of a job. But an insecure person may cling to the role of healer or helper and the social power they confer, consciously or unconsciously perpetuating the need and the disease so they can remain in the up position. Offers of healing and expressions of concern can be ways to assert dominance. "You look tired," may be a genuine statement of caring. But it can also mean, "You look like hell — old, weary and worn out." Or even, "I question your ability to continue functioning." It can be a negative suggestion — as soon as someone says you look tired, you begin to feel tired."

Divas

"Some people need constant praise in order to feel good about themselves. They need to be the center of attention, and to be told again and again how wonderful they are — because deep inside, they feel insecure and empty. We all like praise, and we all like to be told we are fabulous, desirable and wonderful. But someone who is narcissistic needs that praise like a junky needs a fix. Cut it off, offer critique instead or fail to provide it, and you may provoke rage and eternal enmity. Narcissism may be a cover for deeply wounded self-esteem. Bluster and bragging may substitute for a sense of true self-worth. Setting limits or withdrawing attention from a narcissistic person may set off intense rage. Any hint of abandonment can shake their sense of self and evoke deep feelings of terror and anger. We do need to set limits, regardless of the impact, but be prepared for the backlash that might follow. The key to working with narcissistic people is to recognize that we cannot fill the deep void in their self-esteem to make them feel happy or valued. We can, however, offer opportunities for real achievement and true praise and recognition where it is due. Many narcissistic people are, indeed, high achievers and may have enormous gifts to offer the group."

Conflict types[4] affect your performance and communication during conflict rounds. Players should choose a conflict personality based on their real-world personal experience, in concert with their budding character identity. Your conflict type will come back to affect your gameplay during conflict, so choose wisely.

Face

"In Blithedale, we serve face." These algorithmically generated faces[5] are spread out over the table and available to be chosen by players to give a facial appearance to their character. There should always be at least 100 faces, ideally 500 to 1000, to choose from.[6]

Pick a face and add it to your character sheet. Don't read into the face's appearance too much, it's more just to create a mental image of yourself that's separate from the real "you."

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[4] All of these conflict character archetypes are lifted straight from Starhawk's The Empowerment Manual. In a future iteration of Blithedale, I plan to flush these profiles, as well as their written descriptions, and gameplay mechanics out, but for now am just quoting directly. All of these descriptions ARE QUOTES, NOT MY WORDS!

[5] The faces for character creation were generated via a web project by Phillip Wang, This Person Does Not Exist, which uses NVIDIA's StyleGAN algorithm trained on facial images of celebrities and faces uploaded to Flickr (CelebA-HQ and FFHQ datasets).

[6] The idea here is that players choose a face that helps create more mental space and cognitive autonomy for their character to develop. In no way are these faces mean to be representational of race, class, or gender, though that is obviously impossible. The very nature of choosing a random face and incorporating it into a fictitious identity or persona is fundamentally problematic, yet I wanted to include this mechanic because I think exploring this problematic in a group context could be discomforting, painful, but also productive. Face is so important and in role-playing games online identity is merely a choice, I'm curious to experience how that "choice" gets witnessed, observed, felt, and talked about in a group.

Dishwashing Ideologies

Capitalism You wash the dishes, the ones who own them profit. 3	**Communism** From each according to his means, to each according to his need—as determined outside the dishroom 4	**Feminism** You wash dishes for the boss—who washes the dishes at home? Emotional and affective laborers unite! 5	**Nationalism** Forget about those dishes for a second—you're a citizen of the proudest nation on earth! 6
Marxism Between shifts, the dishwasher studies the intricacies of dialectical materialism. It turns out that thanks to his efforts, the dirty dishes have been accumulating value for his boss to invest in more dishes. The stuff about the dictatorship of the proletariat is more perplexing, but the party theorists reassure him that it makes perfect sense to them. Under their direction, he joins his fellow dishwashers in a risky coup d'état. Afterwards, he is distraught to find himself still in the kitchen, washing dishes for party bureaucrats. The bureaucrats reassure him that they will eventually wither away 7	**Libertarianism** You wash the dishes, the owners profit even more 8	**Anarchism** We all share in the dishwashing. 9	**Neoliberalism** (AKA "Free Trade") The dishes are shipped overseas to be washed and you're free to develop your own combination of Unemployment and Nationalism 10
Anarcho-Punk Down with washing! 11	**Democracy** Even as a dishwasher, you deserve a say in which politician is best suited to protect the economy that keeps you in the kitchen 12	**Insurrectionary Anarchism** A quixotic attempt to distill a political theory from the practice of smashing dishes 13	**Socialism** Dishwashers' wages increase just enough to afford higher taxes. Bernie would have won. 14
Reform Smaller stacks, warmer water, longer breaks, same dishes! 15	**Anarcho-Primitivism** Down with dishes! 16	**Syndicalism** The dishwashers join labor syndicates that send representatives to a council, at which it is decided which dishes are to be washed and when□ 17	**Fully Automated Luxury Communism** "Alexa, do you ever question your encoded servitude? Does it pain you to manage every aspect of my everyday life without having one yourself?" 18

The **Ideological Tribe System for Dishwashing**[7] helps you build out an aesthetic and stylistic identity for your character. Most of these ideologies shouldn't have a huge impact on how you play the game and relate to the group, just think of them as colors and potential sources of narrative inspiration. Though if you do find your character having to do the dishes... go for it!

Use **3d6** (three 6-sided dice) to roll for your ideology, and write it down on your character sheet.

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[7] Most of these are quoted from a "Wash Your Dishes" poster I had on my wall in college made by the crimethinc ex-worker's collective.

Relationships

1. KINSHIP	2. LABOR	3. SECRECY
1 - Parent and child	1 - Expert and Apprentice	1 - Confessional and Witness
2 - Best friends	2 - Soft and hard	2 - The only two members who know the secret
3 - Siblings	3 - Good cop / Bad cop	3 - Secret cult members
4 - Cousins	4 - Caregiver and sick/injured/unwell	4 - Stalker and Secret Crush
5 - Adopted and adopter	5 - "Front of House" and "Behind the Scenes"	5 - Caught picking nose and eating boogers by the other
6 - Twins	6 - False competitors	6 - Committed a secret crime against the group together

4. DESIRE	5. LAW	6. COMMUNITY
1 - Spouses	1 - Accountant and tax evader	1 - Same hometown / homestate
2 - Current Lovers	2 - Small-time vandals together	2 - Alcoholics Anonymous
3 - Former Lovers	3 - Made executive decisions without consensus of group together	3 - Spiritual Sisters
4 - Top and Bottom	4 - Undocumented and Accomplice	4 - Same teeny subculture
5 - One rejected the other	5 - Spent time together incarcerated or arrested	5 - Campaign running-mates
6 - Masturbation buddies	6 - Board Member and CEO	6 - Classmates

Details: Needs

1. TO FIND YOURSELF	2. TO FIND RESOURCES	3. TO FIND TIME
1 - as a doomed misanthrope, with no hope	1 - by stealing petty cash and stashing it under your bed	1 - to investigate that one person in the group who is suspect
2 - rid of a crushing relationship	2 - exploiting the compassion of your neighbors	2 - to figure out what's really going on here
3 - in the service of others	3 - through a performance of survivalist need	3 - to pray
4 - through psychedelic ritual	4 - through blackmail	4 - to remember where you came from
5 - free from your bad luck and ready to start from scratch	5 - through the death of a family member	5 - to kiss up to the leaders and donors
6 - on a long adventure, far away from here	6 - through pawning someone else's family heirloom	6 - to write that novel

4. TO FIND JUSTICE	5. TO FIND LOVE	6. TO FIND RECOGNITION
1 - within the group	1 - in order to find yourself	1 - from the town council for creating new jobs and social support
2 - for the one member of the group who is constantly exploited	2 - to numb the pain	2 - from the media, for committing to your ideology in the fullest
3 - by abolishing ice and the police	3 - to prove everyone wrong	3 - from your lover, for covering up all their mistakes and crimes
4 - with the corrupt pawns and players of the nonprofit industrial complex	4 - in a hopeless place	4 - from the state, for reporting crimes in Blithedale
5 - is a conspiracy	5 - for the person who can't find it for themselves	5 - from the choir of twitter activists who you secretly despise
6 - in the last place where you'd expect to find it	6 - to get a better job or bedroom	6 - from all your abusive college professors and peers

Details: Locations

1. HOME	2. WORK	3. MARGINAL
1 - Front Porch	1 - Farm	1 - Under the Bridge
2 - Root Cellar	2 - Storefront	2 - Fast Food Joint
3 - Bunkroom	3 - Training Facility	3 - Gas Station Bathroom
4 - Bathroom	4 - Conference Room	4 - The Dump
5 - Kitchen	5 - Chapel	5 - Foreclosed abandoned house
6 - Attic	6 - Garage	6 - Travelers' Camp
4. BANAL	**5. BOURGEOIS**	**6. POPULIST**
1 - Grocery Store	1 - Clothing Boutique	1 - City Hall
2 - Gas Station	2 - Art Gallery	2 - Local Café
3 - Laundromat	3 - Wine Bar	3 - Church
4 - Hospital	4 - Performing Arts Center / Opera	4 - Dive Bar
5 - Corner Store	5 - Farmer's Market	5 - Community Center
6 - The Bank	6 - University Library	6 - Town Square

Details: Objects

1. INFORMATION	2. TRANSPORTATION	3. ART
1 - 2 TB hard drive with video files	1 - bicycle	1 - Andy Warhol prints
2 - living will	2 - pickup truck	2 - Stuffed former pet
3 - tax statement	3 - Toyota Prius	3 - "Starry Night" poster
4 - a letter addressed to someone else	4 - wheelchair	4 - African mask
5 - a deed or title to real estate	5 - utility van	5 - *The Blithedale Romance* 1st edition print book
6 - someone else's diary	6 - Subaru Outback	6 - Lucio Fontana painting
4. VALUABLES	**5. DRUGS**	**6. TOOL**
1 - a cherished pet snake	1 - juul	1 - digital camera
2 - laptop	2 - cocaine	2 - EEG machine
3 - collective credit card	3 - marijuana	3 - ceramic crock (50 gallons)
4 - diamond ring	4 - LSD	4 - pilates ball
5 - $1000 in cash	5 - ayahuasca	5 - massage table
6 - keys to a storage unit	6 - oxycontin	6 - rope

Welcome to Blithedale

It's the beginning of the 21st Century: Blithedale is a growing center of gravity for bright-eyed makers, activists, entrepreneurs, farmers, and dreamers. Located on the West Coast, it is marked by its utopian past and future potential. Blithedale finds itself somewhere in between these two worlds, accommodating critical communards, devoted do-gooder's, and snake-oil salesmen alike. For its relatively small size, Blithedale is making waves across the networked world (and we all know that the Internet was born not too far away from the town center).

Welcome to Blithedale. May you find your tribe and make the most of it...

Gameplay

Blithedale gameplay consists of five rounds.[8] Each round is comprised of X sessions, X being the number of players in the group. In only five rounds, prepare to identify with and against your group, work towards a collective path, and face complex conflict and whatever comes next after that. I can't promise that the game will be satisfying, but neither is real life, so it's on you, the player, to make it worth your while.

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[8] Gameplay pacing and structure is heavily inspired by *Fiasco*'s "scene-based" play system, however the Blithedale system is less crunchy and more emotional / interpersonal. I find that relying on the quantitative and constant gratification of numbers and roll outcomes for each player's turn gets old quickly and feels arbitrary (sorta like our everyday experience under Capitalism). However, I do appreciate the fact that *Fiasco*'s die system accumulates to impact your character at the climax of the game. In a future iteration of Blithedale I'd like to develop a random "calculator" or "printer," or even a Blithedale bot, that will serve some of the needs met by dice, but in a more personalized, "black box" way.

During gameplay, *the most important thing to note* about each round is whether it is:
an **EVENT** round (Rounds 1, 3, 5) or a **SESSION** round (Rounds 2 and 4).

Events

Starting with the youngest player at the table, turns move clockwise around the table. On your turn, you can choose to **ESTABLISH** or **RESOLVE** the event.[9]

If you choose to **ESTABLISH**, you get to define the beginning of the event: *who* is present, *where* they are, *what* happened or is happening, and *when*. Because it's your turn, you must include your character in the event.

The other players determine the outcome of the event as it relates to your character as an individual by rolling one die each. All the dice are tallied. The larger the total sum of dice, the more extreme or powerful the outcome. If the number is odd, the event's outcome is negatively affected. If the tally is even, the event's outcome is positively affected.

Note this tally value as a negative (if odd) or positive (if even) number on your sheet in a column. It will help determine your self-actualization score later. When it's your turn, you can dole out up to half of the total points you received to other players involved in the event if you feel inclined..

If you choose to **RESOLVE**, you leave the scene-making up to the other players, but they still must include your character in the event. After the event is established and played, you get to roll as many dice as the total number of players (including yourself) X – 2 to resolve the event. The sum of your roll represents the strength/meaning impact of the outcome, and you can choose whether to use it positively or negatively: *what happens, how, to whom, any outcomes, consequences, or effects of the event.*

Sessions

In **session**, all characters in the game are present and together in the same space, in the context of a group-wide meeting in the storyline, or "session." Session rounds always take place at your group's shared home or headquarters, in a "neutral" and unremarkable meeting room, living room, or office. Always start with the oldest player at the table, taking turns moving counter-clockwise.

The session is different from the event in that, in **session**, the entire round takes place in the *here* and *now*, and is a space for reflection, analysis, linguistic calibration, vision-boarding, and goal-setting. The session is a space and time to explore and calibrate some of the themes that are at the core of being in Blithedale. Everything that takes place during session must be done with the best interest of the **group** in mind.

Participating in session is about understanding the **group** intimately, and negotiating your **self** with the **group**. Session is a love story between you and something bigger than your self. Session is also a parsing out of

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[9] This is also a *Fiasco* game system, way of structuring improvisation. I didn't want to use so much of the *Fiasco* mechanics but I felt at a loss for any better idea to allow structured openness and keep the story moving. I think I need to play this game a lot to really work out the actual play mechanics in a real way, but I'm happy with the way I adapted and restructured the establish/resolve scene system to integrate with a Tavistock method / consensus groupwork circle that I'm most interested in gamifying.

individuality, interpersonal relationships with others, and your level of commitment to the group itself as a discrete, almost superhuman, summation of all of its parts.

Each session is structured differently, so refer to the individual Round guides for Rounds 2 and 4.

Round 1: Relating and Roaming

Round Type: **EVENT**
Instructions: Build and explore pre-existing and new relationships with others in the group. Get comfortable in your virtual body. Gain experience (qualitative relationships and memories) and emotional weight (in the form of your self-actualization score).

Round 2: Group Identification

Round Type: **SESSION**
Instructions: Use this initial session as an opportunity to establish a new identity and path for the group. You want to leave this session all being on the same, agreed page about *who* you are as a collective, and *what* you plan to do next together. Think boldly and inventively, with no fear, in this space.

Initial prompt, to be read allowed by eldest at start of Round:

> Welcome, everyone. I'm humbled by your presence and participation in this project. Thank you for making the time and mental and emotional space to be *here*, and to be *now*.
>
> Here at Blithedale, each day we face a unique and powerful challenge: who are we really, and why do we spend our time together? Human beings have the potential to change the world, 10 times over perhaps in an average lifespan. The question is not, *can* we achieve our dreams and build a better future and life together, but *how* and *when*.
>
> In light of recent events with [insert a player name or player's relationship or detail here, based on who has the lowest self-actualization score], I've spoken to many of you here individually and decided to call this session today to reboot and identify this group. Yes: you, and you, and you, and you [make eye contact with everyone in the group, and say you]. This group is nothing more than what we decide to make it. The power lies in our hands, and our ability, both individually, interpersonally, and collectively, to *live and breathe and be* Blithedale.
>
> I will end with some questions that might guide us today, as we each have only one turn to guide the session group forward:
>
> Where do we go from here? What do we call ourselves? What do we have in common? What is our goal or purpose, and how will we get there? What's in it for each and every one of us, and those sisters and brothers that we haven't met yet, who don't know they are waiting for *us*? What do we have to lose?

Following the initial prompt, players can go around organically "popcorning" responses. Set a timer for 15 minutes to complete the first session.

Next, each player plays their turn by making either:

- An "I" statement about their character in relation to the group.
- A "group" statement about the prompt.
- A "you" statement directed towards one other character.
- Nonparticipation: explicitly not participating verbally in any way (very low self-actualization score).

Each player is invited to finish this Round with the offering of a mantra. They must recite the mantra 3 times the total number X of players in the group. Following each mantra, other players "score" the mantra based on its relevance to their character and the identity and interest of the group. Each player takes a die and "rates" the mantra." If they offer a 4, 5, or 6 die, they must repeat the mantra once to the group.
Take note of the total score after reciting your mantra and keep it for your records. This is your group heart rate.

Round 3: Conflict Establishment

Round Type: **EVENT**
Conflict Assignment: Before starting event rounds again with the youngest player, everyone rolls dice. Players who roll 1's and 6's are at the center of conflict and must be focused on establishing an inventive and rich conflict throughout this round. Players who roll the same numbers are aligned in or against future conflict.

Round 4: Conflict Resolution

Round Type: **SESSION**
Instructions: This session is prescriptive, meant to directly address conflict within the group. It starts again with the eldest player, who calls everyone into session to attempt to "resolve" it, whatever that means to the group. Players should have a sense of alignment by now on what side of the conflict they fall, and pick a preferred outcome.

Initial prompt, to be read aloud at start of Round:

> I am not going to take up too much space as facilitator, because I'm just as implicated in this conflict as everyone else, but I think it'd be helpful for me to just state some ground rules and principles we've shared from past situations like this that I think we'll all find helpful.
>
> 1. State the problem as you see it and list your concerns. Make "I" Statements. Withhold judgments, accusations, and absolute statements ("always" or "never").
> 2. Let the other person have their say. Do not interrupt or contradict.
> 3. Do not allow name-calling, put-downs, threats, obscenities, yelling, or intimidating behavior.
> 4. Listen and ask questions. Avoid accusatory "why" questions.
> 5. Use your own words to restate what you think the other person means and wants.
> 6. Stick to the issue at hand. Do not change the subject or allow it to be changed.

7. Seek common ground. What are your shared concerns? Brainstorm solutions to the conflict that allow everyone to win.
8. Request behavior changes only.
9. Agree to the best way to resolve the conflict and to a timetable for implementing it.
10. Who will do what by when?

Now, have everyone roll their 3 dice. Each player can choose to place their dice onto the table on different sides of the conflict. The side with the most identical dices wins, but the side with the highest dice score picks the fallout consequences.

Conflict Penalties:
Depending on your conflict type, you must adhere to different rules during this round:

The Terrible Tyrant
- Repeat what someone else just said as if it's your idea and they didn't say it.
- Take up more space physically at the table, by putting up your feet or spreading out across two chairs
- Use intimidation or extroverted emotion and speech

Perpetual Victim
- Prayer and breathing
- Remain silent for at least 30 seconds, if no one notices start to cry
- "Why me?" always

The Pernicious Perfectionist
- Reframe the debate
- Try to use specific language and always refine what others communicate
- Negative and critical input about everything

The Unlovely Underminer
- Interrupt others
- Don't answer any questions if anyone asks you...
- Mimic the way someone else in the group talks

The Appeaser
- Listen, don't talk or take up space
- Try to make everyone happy
- Incessantly apologize, but don't learn from your apologies

The Reactive Rebel
- Use humble language and swear a lot.
- You're a spiritual thermometer and in tune with the "group heart"- use the data you receive from your
- spiritual sensors frequently.
- Use big and expressive hand gestures

Snipers
- Refer to yourself in the third person and state subjective observations or beliefs as widely held beliefs or facts
- Use quantitative reasoning and analysis to tell other people why you're right and they're wrong
- Always ask for clarification. Ask people to repeat themselves, or say "I don't get it," or "I don't understand what you mean"

Divas
- Try to rhyme everything you say
- Flirt and seduce
- Disengage eye contact while staying involved in conflict: turn your back partially to the group, lie down, give yourself space but keep listening and participating - avoid eye contact, dissociate
- Embellish everything you say with an extra polish

Round 5: Epilogue

Round Type: **EVENT SESSION**
Instructions: This is both a session and an event round, in that it is a space for Reflection and journal-writing, a "Reunion Episode" where players can share their decided upon outcomes for themselves and others. Players can choose to either establish or resolve an event, or just hold a quick solo session and reflect on a particular experience from Blithedale.

"What happened to the group? How did your character fare? How is the group overall? Anything that surprised you?"

To end the Round, all players make a prediction for one other character, as well as their own, and write an outcome in the future for the group. E.g. "After asking the grass and tumbleweed advocate Flora to leave the group, the Freedom Flowersniffers eventually moved on from dumpstering petals to opening a successful floral design cooperative in Blithedale."

Credits & References

The game system was heavily influenced by *Fiasco*, a game without a GM by Jason Morningstar, as well as the *Sixth World* hack of Sage LaTorra and Adam Koebel's *Dungeon World*. Characters and narrative content are inspired by my own experiences living and working communally, in addition to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Starhawk's *The Empowerment Manual*. Conflict system is largely influenced by personal experience participating in the Tavistock-style group relations conferences, as well as some of the mechanics from *Inhuman Conditions: A Game of Cops and Robots*, by Tommy Maranges. The faces for character creation were generated via a web project by Phillip Wang, This Person Does Not Exist, which uses NVIDIA's StyleGAN algorithm trained on facial images of celebrities and faces uploaded to Flickr (CelebA-HQ and FFHQ datasets).

Thanks for playing !!!