

Background:

Inspired by the Stanislaw Lem novel Chain of Chance (Katar is the original title), a private detective has come to a dead end with regard to pursuing a case. In a desperate bid to get new leads or a fresh perspective, his ally, a college professor is hosting a party with the most brilliant of his academic colleagues so that the detective can pick their brains.

The Rub: The case is unsolvable. A handful of young men have inexplicably committed suicide (the family of one of them has hired the detective). The solution is that it's an accidental combination of several chemicals that only in combination create a devastating hallucinatory episode combined with self destructive tendencies. An example of the level of complexity the combo could be: a particular allergy medication, pesticide contaminated almonds from a popular food truck, an off-brand hair styling gel. The key point is that the variables are so random and that the details that the young men have in common are so miniscule and coincidental that all attempts to model their discovery based on motive or agenda cannot succeed; the private detective is trying to find out who is responsible and why this happened, and the truth is that no one is responsible, and it happened by chance.

The Game: The academics are status conscious, and cannot admit to any lack of knowledge in front of their peers.

Number of Players: 7-14

Playtime: 1 Hour. If the number of Profs is in excess of 10, game length should be extended to 1 and ½ hours.

Setup: One player must be the Detective (the game's Facilitator role), who will carry a notebook and writing implement, as well as track the advancement of time. The rest will play the brilliant academics and college professors. It's recommended that the brilliant academics represent fields of study that the players either know enough about to sound erudite, or comfortable/confident enough to fake it. Duplication of fields of study is perfectly acceptable, inventing a ridiculous or preposterous field of study can also work. For transparency's sake, the Profs must at least be told that the case is not solvable so that attempts to solve the case do not appear to be a secret win condition.

Phase 1: Introduction. The Profs will have five minutes to indulge in boring, self indulgent party chat to help get into character. At the five minute mark, the Detective joins the party. The profs must introduce themselves and their field of study to the detective whenever the Detective either greets them or if they make eye contact, writing down their names and fields in the notebook. The profs are ranked in status based on the reverse order of whom the detective spoke to, making the highest status Prof the one who introduces himself last. The party should still feel warm and friendly and this point, and the rivalry amongst the Profs will remain subtext and covert.

Phase 2: Interrogation. The detective spells out the conditions of the strange case. The exposition can be improvised but improvised details cannot suddenly make the case solvable. (In the above example case, the suicidal young men do not all regularly use allergy meds, but one elected to take some as a general anti-histamine as an impulsive decision.) The professors should want to find a pattern among the case details, but the case details, as we know, are random, and continue to resist the imposition of a pattern upon them. The profs find the case fascinating, an interesting puzzle at this stage, and willingly engage in discussion with each other about the case. No one can admit to being baffled by it though.

Phase 3. Interrogation. If the discussion stalls or the moment feels right, the Detective can begin Phase 3 by starting to ask direct questions of the Profs about what they think might be the cause, motive, method etc. Profs must evade as best they can by diversionary tactics or trying to redirect questions at colleagues. If a Prof admits a lack of knowledge, or feeling baffled, the Prof is humiliated and must retreat from the party for five minutes (time-out), with the Detective making note of their failure. The dismay at being caught out and humiliated should become more overt in this phase, and the stalling tactics become more desperate and farcical. After any Prof's five minute time out, they can return to the party now in support of the Detective, posing questions of their own to the unhumiliated professors, "helping" the Detective humiliate their colleagues.

Phase 4. Sudden Death. At ten minutes left of gametime, all Profs in time-out return the party. The Detective may now use the meta technique of stating "Listen to me", where they can pose direct questions to unhumiliated Profs that must be directly answered. Tension should be high, Profs should be defensive and irritable.

Phase 5. Last One Standing. If at any point only one unhumiliated Prof remains, if they can last the remaining time of the game without losing composure or admitting to a lack of knowledge, they've "won". If every Prof has been humiliated, or if several remain "standing" at the end of the final minutes, the Detective must judiciously determine which of the Profs appear to be the most knowledgeable and respectable, and give that Prof a special thank you dedication in the book the Detective will publish about the case.

Aftermath: Each participant should briefly talk about why they felt it was time to admit to the lack of knowledge on their turn. If someone felt the need to play-to-lose, they should describe how they felt the time was right. The Detective should try to explain how they made the call if they had to pick a "winner."

Subversiveness: Gendered prejudice with regard to perceived knowledge, methods of argumentation, and what kinds of prevarication can be used by whom should become exposed over the course of gameplay, along with other cases of implicit bias. Without overt prompting, the players will also hopefully discover their implicit biases upon reflection.