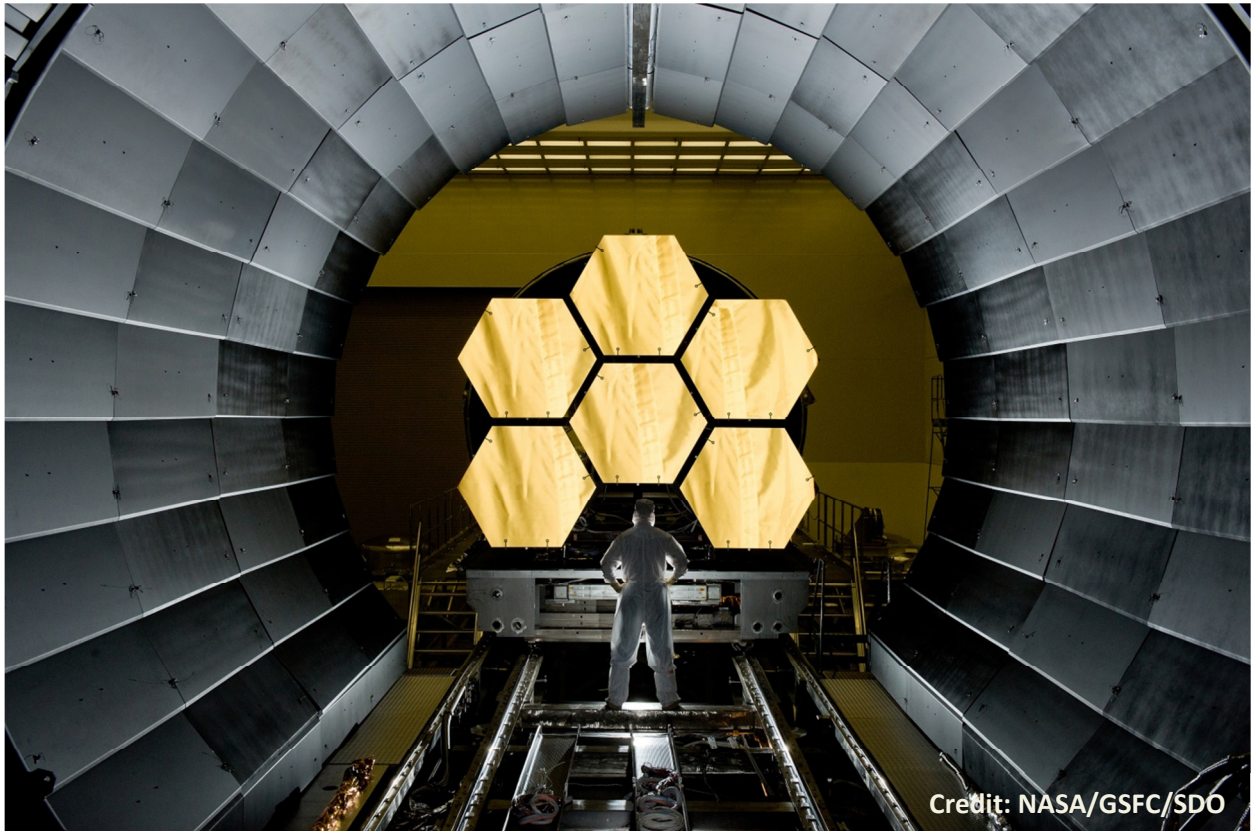


# FUTURES

# PAST



Credit: NASA/GSFC/SDO

A quick sci-fi RPG about how our memories shape us

A game by Will Emigh  
will@studiocypher.com  
www.studiocypher.com

## MATERIALS

Before you begin, you'll need:

- 1.5-2 hours (including 15-30 minutes of preparation)
- 3-8 players (no experience necessary)
- Index cards (or slips of paper)
- Pencils or pens
- These rules

## SETTING

*Welcome to the far-flung future. Four of you—a Captain, a Negotiator, a Science Officer, and a Security Officer—are on a secret but vital mission to negotiate peace with a hostile alien race. However, moments before entering the target system, your Science Officer realizes that you have all been infected with a virus that shares and shuffles memories. You're pretty sure who you are, but you now share memories that belong to the rest of the crew — including one planning an assassination!*

Tonally, this game is set up like a Star Trek episode. Bad things may happen, but they're generally not permanent and they get resolved by the end. If your group wants something different, decide that now. For example, you can make it sillier (like *Galaxy Quest*), darker (*Firefly*), or very dark (*Battlestar Galactica*). The tone may change some over the course of the game as well, so treat this as a general guideline rather than a concrete rule.

## OVERVIEW

In this game, you are primarily the ill-fated, memory-addled crew attempting to secure a lasting peace. This takes place over three roughly-defined scenes (landing, meeting the aliens, and negotiating) book-ended by an introduction and a debriefing. During all sections of the game, you will play your primary character by describing what they're doing or acting it out. You may also take on secondary roles to flesh out the other humans and aliens you encounter.

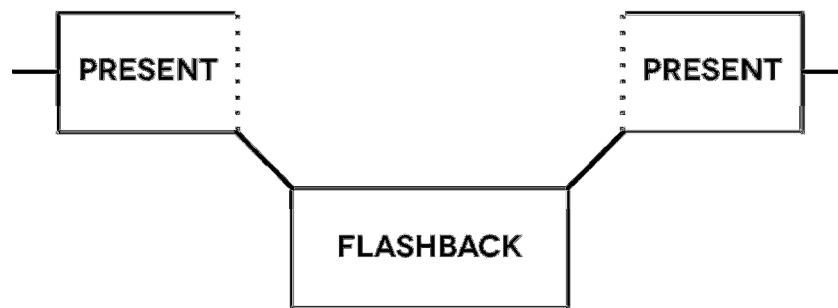
You are all well-trained (or lucky!) spacefarers, so you will succeed at anything you put your mind to (unless you decide it would be better to dramatically fail). However, to accomplish something difficult, you must trigger a flashback which will give your character the motivation or knowledge necessary to succeed.

In the third scene (negotiating), one of the crew is revealed as an assassin. Once you've resolved this attempt, whatever it is, each member of the crew will have to defend their actions to their superior officers.

## TECHNIQUES

If you're not familiar with freeform RPG techniques, take a few minutes now to practice the following. Choose some familiar fictional characters and a setting and try each of these to make sure you understand how they work in practice.

1. **Flashback** – During a scene, one player triggers a flashback by stopping the action and announcing their intent. At this point, *someone else* should take up the role of the younger version of that character and begin another scene set in the past. When the triggering player feels like the flashback has given them what they need in the original scene, they stop the flashback and return to the present scene. If they like, they can narrate a cut (ex: "After days of preparation, I was able to put my plan into motion...").



To make it easier to keep track of who's in the present and who's in the past, have present players sit and past players stand or have one area designated for the present and another for the past. The player who triggered the flashback *can* participate in the flashback as long as they portray a different character. No player should ever play both the past and present versions of a single character.

2. **Internal Monologue** – An internal monologue can be a good way to let other players know what your character is thinking. As with a normal monologue, speak directly with your character's voice. To indicate that this is an *internal* monologue (and the other *characters* won't hear this), put two fingers to the side of your head as if you were speaking telepathically.
3. **Hotseat** – When a player chooses to use this technique, they announce it and sit down where everyone can see them. Everyone else takes turns asking questions about the character. These questions may be related to the character's motivation, plans, past actions, or anything else. When nobody has any more questions, the hotseat is over and the previous scene can continue. Remember that although the *players* know this information, your *characters* don't.
4. **Bird in Ear** – When players are struggling with a scene, a non-active player may whisper a suggestion into an active player's ear (ex: "Maybe you're angry that he's challenging your authority"). They don't have to accept the suggestion, but it may kick start their creativity.

The hotseat and internal monologue in particular are good techniques to help create dramatic irony or foreshadowing, since the players will know much more about the character's motivations than their characters do.

## LET'S PLAY!

Now that you know the techniques, you're ready to get started. Make sure that everyone has a writing utensil and some blank index cards.

## MEMORIES

An alien virus has muddled your mind, so you now have a pool of memories that everyone vaguely remembers. During the game, these memories will burst forth, triggering flashbacks and enhancing your characters. At this point, your group is going to create these memories and flesh out the world that your characters inhabit.

1. Using one index card per memory, write down a possible memory for a person in your world, tied to a strong emotion (jealousy, love, pride, anger, fear, etc.). Keep it vague enough that it could apply to any of the characters. One sentence should be plenty. For example, "feeling a blade slip between my shoulders during a barroom brawl" or "as a child, seeing a ship take off from the surface of my home planet".
2. Continue writing memories until the group has about 16. If you're on a roll, more is fine. It doesn't matter if some people write more memories than others. Not all of the memories will appear during the game, so it's okay if they don't all mesh thematically.
3. Take turns reading your memories out loud and then placing them face-up in the center. You should end up with a big pile of face-up memories. You'll be using these later.
4. Write "Planning an assassination attempt to take place during the negotiation" on an index card and add it to the pile in the middle. This is the Assassination Memory will be used in scene 3, An Assassination Attempt.

If you run low on memories during the game, take a break between scenes to add more.

## INTRODUCTION (CHARACTER CREATION)

Now that you have a shared pool of memories, it's time to begin fleshing out your characters. There are four crew members on the ship: the **Captain**, the **Negotiator**, the **Security Officer**, and the **Science Officer**. With fewer than four players, the extra crew member can be played by anyone as appropriate. With more than four, some players will have characters exclusively in the present and some exclusively in the past. Any player, past or present, who isn't already active in a scene can play third-party roles like any aliens that you encounter or crew roles that haven't been assigned.

1. Decide who will be playing in the present and who will be playing in the past. You should have at least 3 players in the present.
2. Write down a young version of each role (Past Captain, Past Negotiator, Past Security Officer, Past Science Officer) on a different index card. Let the past players (if any) choose one each to be their primary character. If there are other past characters left over, that's okay. Anyone who isn't actively participating in a scene can play them by holding the card up in front of them.

3. Now, write each present-day role (Captain, Negotiator, Security Officer, Science Officer) onto their own index cards.
4. If you only have 3 players in the present, set aside the Science Officer card. Then, shuffle the remaining roles cards and hand one, face-down, to each present player. This will NOT be your primary role, but you should look at the card. During the next section, you'll be using your card to assign that role to someone else.

## Setting the Scene

To start the introductory scene, the player with the most roleplaying experience should begin by describing the setting and starting to act in character. They are the Scene Leader for the Introduction. The other present-day players should enter when it makes sense.

When the game begins, the crew is on the ship in whatever passes for the medical bay. Everyone vaguely remembers everything in the memory pile as if it happened to them, but they also have a sense of their "true" identity. At least one of the characters recognizes these as the symptoms of an alien virus that shares and scrambles memories and may wish to share that information with the group.

At the beginning of the scene, each present-day player has a role card in front of them. When another character exhibits the traits of the role on your card (in your opinion), hand them the card, face-up. This is now their role for the game and everyone knows it. As soon as the last role is assigned (or if someone is left with their own hidden role), begin the first scene, A Hostile Welcome, immediately!

**Reminder: as you play, you want to find someone to take your role card. Once the last role card is assigned (or someone is left with their own role), immediately interrupt the action to begin the first scene.**

## THE SCENES

The three scenes below provide the structure for your negotiation attempt. Each scene has an assigned Scene Leader. The player with that role begins the scene by describing the setting and any intermediate action between it and the previous scene.

### Example:

*After defeating the guardian at the bottom of the mountain, we climbed a steep staircase for what seemed like hours. Suddenly, a valley opened out in front of us with a pagoda in the center. This is obviously the arranged rendezvous.*

Each scene has a main conflict, but the Scene Leader is in charge of making sure that the crew completes at least two major challenges (that may or may not be connected) while facing that conflict. They can do this by introducing new characters ("a gruff alien appears and demands to know what you're doing with his cattle!"), providing a twist ("the cavern that you're in begins to move; it's alive!"), or anything else that seems difficult. Often, players will introduce their own challenges, making the Scene Leader's job easier!

Finally, the scene leader makes sure that flashbacks are triggered whenever a player wants to accomplish something difficult (control their emotions, figure out how to keep the engine from going critical, convince an alien of your good intentions, defeat a wild beast in hand-to-hand-combat, etc.). When a scene leader identifies an action as difficult, the player attempting the action must trigger a flashback by following the instructions in the next section.

If the scene leader is actively involved in the scene, they may miss a difficult action, in which case anyone else can bring it up by saying something like “That sounds like a flashback!” to remind them.

Begin play by having the Captain narrate the setup for A Hostile Welcome and roleplay together until someone wants to attempt something difficult. At that point, refer to the Flashbacks section for resolution.

**Example:**

*As we begin arguing about whose fault this is, the proximity alert sounds and we scramble to the bridge. Once there, we discover that an unknown alien is hailing us. I put the alien on the main screen. “Hail, fellow traveler! I am the Captain of the spacecraft Dauntless.” The alien replies, “I do not care who you are. Leave, at once!”*

This sets up the conflict. At this point, one of the other players (past players first, if you have any) will roleplay the alien and the present players will continue to roleplay their characters as they engage with the scene.

The following scenes should be played in order, moving from one to the other as each conflict is resolved in some fashion. Once the third scene is complete, jump to the Tribunal section to end the game.

**1. A Hostile Welcome**

**Scene Leader: Captain**

**Conflict:** Can't land on the planet (ex: military blockade, solar flares make landing impossible, a religious festival prevents landing, a medical quarantine)

As soon as the last role is assigned, you are hailed by aliens.

**2. A Perilous Journey**

**Scene Leader: Security Officer**

**Conflict:** Difficulty getting to the rendezvous point (ex: bad weather, wildlife attacks, alien sabotage)

You are on the planet, but not yet to the designated rendezvous point

**3. An Assassination Attempt**

**Scene Leader: Negotiator**

**Conflict:** The aliens refuse to negotiate

Negotiations are going well until... one of your crew attempts an assassination! **One player MUST trigger the assassination memory during this scene.**

## FLASHBACKS

By triggering a flashback, your character is guaranteed to gain the motivation or knowledge needed to accomplish whatever they're attempting. Once you've used a flashback, you can convince anyone of anything, perform incredible feats of derring-do, or immediately solve impossible technical problems.

To indicate that you are attempting something difficult (or if someone else says that what you're doing seems difficult), say that you're triggering a flashback and pick up the set of memories that you created at the beginning of the game. Choose one that seems relevant and read it to the group. If nobody adopted the past version of your character at the beginning of the game, assign someone else (a past player, if you have any) to be the past version of your character. They also set the scene as if they were a Scene Leader. This scene may not have a direct conflict, nor can you trigger additional Flashbacks, but introduce new characters as needed.

The triggering player can roleplay these characters, just not the past version of their own character.

**Example:** The characters are described by their roles, with the player names in parentheses.

1. The Captain (Andy) is speaking to an unknown presence (Betsy). Andy wants to figure out where the voice is coming from, so he stops speaking and picks up a memory of his choice from the pile.
2. Andy reads that memory to the rest of the group: "Getting lost while hunting with my father."
3. Since nobody chose Past Captain as their primary character, Andy chooses Chelsea to play the Past Captain.
4. Chelsea begins by talking to her father (Andy steps in to take this role). The two speak for a while before the father leaves the Past Captain. An alien appears (Betsy decides to play this alien as well) who helps the Past Captain find his father.
5. This seems like a good stopping point, so Andy indicates that the flashback is over.

Andy isn't allowed to play the Past Captain, since he's playing the Captain, but everyone else can choose which role they'd like to play, excluding any primary characters assigned at the beginning of the game. Each flashback should be self-contained, so you shouldn't need to have another flashback to resolve any challenges (this isn't Inception!).

Once the triggering player is satisfied and ends the flashback, focus returns to the present where they narrate how much time has passed. Often, the flashback will be instantaneous, but sometimes you'll want to expand the length of a scene (ex: "The next morning, when I woke up, I had a new plan...").

### Examples:

*I remember a trick my father showed me to see hidden things.*

*Aliens killed my parents. There's no way I'm going to give in now!*

*Let me talk to them. I was raised in their culture.*

When playing a scene in the past, remember to indicate that it's not in the present by standing up or moving to the designated "flashback" area. After finishing a flashback, keep the memory card next to your role card so that you can refer to it later if necessary.

Also, remember that you've all been infected with an alien virus so your memories are unreliable. If the past needs to change for your story to make sense, do it! You may even realize as you play that you're not who you think you are...

## The Assassination Memory

The flashback associated with the assassination memory is a little different from the others:

1. This memory is played out as a hotseat, where the other players (past and present) ask the assassin questions.
2. Upon returning to the present, the assassin gives a monologue (internal or external based on their preferences) before taking any action.
3. The assassination is not guaranteed to succeed, although the assassin *is* guaranteed to be able to set their plan into motion.

### Do not pick the assassination memory until scene 3: An Assassination Attempt!

This means that you don't know for sure who the assassin will be until sometime in the 3<sup>rd</sup> scene. The assassin may trigger the memory immediately before they attempt the assassination or earlier in preparation for it, but it must be triggered in the 3<sup>rd</sup> scene.

Remember, your *characters* won't inherently know what's said in an internal monologue or during the hotseat, although they might remember pieces based on the shared memory of planning the assassination.

## THE TRIBUNAL

This is the final scene of the game. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, your crew has to explain themselves to a higher power. Starting with the Captain, each of the four crew members takes 1-2 minutes to narrate a "captain's log." In general, treat this as a monologue, although it may make sense for other characters to participate as well.

During the log, briefly summarize how your character felt about the mission as a whole and then narrate what happened to you after the assassination attempt. Think about the memories in front of you; those will generally map to the most important story moments for your character.

Once everyone has given their statement, the tribunal begins. Every player (including past players) acts as the tribunal and asks **one** crew member an open-ended but pointed question.

### Examples:

*After you escaped the assassination attempt, why did you join the rebels?*

*What did you do after your demotion?*



## QUICK REFERENCE

### Memories

Everyone writes down memories that they think people in the future might have, one per index card. Once you have at least 16, everyone reads them out and puts them face-up in an easily-accessible pile.

### SCENES

#### Introduction

#### Scene Leader: the most experienced roleplayer

Your characters begin the game with the realization that some of their memories are shared and uncertain. Everyone has a role card hidden in front of them. During this scene, they give their role card to someone who is exemplifying that role. Once all role cards have been assigned (or the last player is left with their own role card), immediately begin the first main scene.

There are no flashbacks in this scene.

#### 1. A Hostile Welcome

Scene Leader: Captain

**Conflict:** Can't land on the planet

#### 2. A Perilous Journey

Scene Leader: Security Officer

**Conflict:** Difficulty getting to the rendezvous point

#### 3. An Assassination Attempt

Scene Leader: Negotiator

**Conflict:** The aliens refuse to negotiate

### Flashbacks

Trigger a flashback by announcing your intention to try something difficult. Choose one of the unused memories and trigger a flashback where someone else plays the younger version of your character. When the flashback seems complete, return to the main scene and narrate the amount of time that's passed as well as the result of the difficult action that you attempted.

#### The Assassination Memory

This must be triggered in scene 3. When it is, the assassin participates in a hotseat and then gives a monologue (internal or external). This plan is set into motion but may fail.

### The Tribunal

Starting with the Captain, each crew member narrates 1-2 minutes about their experience and what happened after the last scene was resolved.

Then, each player (past and present) takes on the role of the tribunal and asks one crew member an open-ended but pointed question.