

# Nerves of Steel

*a film noir story game*



*By* Simon Pettersson  
*English adaptation by* Catherine Ramen

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Based on *Nerver av stål* by Simon Pettersson.

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Appendices Three and Four compiled by Catherine Ramen.

You can download this text for free (and see my other games!) at [www.aviatrixgames.com](http://www.aviatrixgames.com)

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*Most photos were cropped for space and had some color correction performed.*

# **Nerves of Steel**

**A film noir story game**

**By Simon Pettersson**

Adapted in English by Catherine Ramen

## Adapter's Introduction

*I suppose you'll call this a confession when you hear it. Well, I don't like the word 'confession.' I just want to set you right about something you couldn't see because it was smack up against your nose.*

—Double Indemnity (1944)

*Nerves of Steel* (*Nerver av stål*) is a game by the Swedish designer Simon Pettersson. He described the mechanics of the game [in a thread on the story-games.com forum](#) in August and September 2018. With his gracious permission I have attempted to combine that description and a condensed version of his original manuscript into a brief but playable ruleset.

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# Introduction

The clock was somewhere between far too late and far too early. I was sitting in my office with a chewed-up cigarette in my mouth, a glass of whiskey in front of me and two in my stomach.

I stared out over Center City. A thick, oily cloud cover was rolling in. It was as if God himself would rather not look down on the shady souls who crawled out of their horrors at this time. Honest shops had closed and the nests of sin lit their flashing neon signs. They promised forgetful and easy-going entertainment to the poor saps who populate the streets at night.

The cloud began to drain water like a bathtub that had overflowed. I looked down at the people who rushed around on the wet sidewalks looking for shelter from the rain. Thousands of wild and hungry souls that all wanted to pull themselves out of the gutter with the same oily rope trampled on each other's faces in the pursuit of light at the top, which was just another cheap neon sign with false promises.

I tried to light the cigarette, but my matchbox was soaked with blood and the matches refused to take the fire. I fumbled with it anyway. I drained the glass. I needed one more. I needed a drink, I needed a lot of life insurance, I needed a vacation, I needed a home in the country. What I had was a coat, a hat and a gun. I put them on and went out into the rain.

Center City is a city filled with fake hearts and cheap spirits. A city filled with dreams of gold and tongues of silver, of nerves of steel and bullets of lead. It's a city with thousands of stories, and mine was just one of them...

*Nerves of Steel* is a freeform story game that tells the same kind of stories you would find in film noir movies of the 1940s and 1950s. It is told from the point of view of a single character who is drawn into a mystery and tries to see it through to its sordid ending. Starting from a blank page, you'll end up with a tight, well-constructed tale of deception, betrayal, crime and maybe—just maybe—honor.

# **Part One: The Rules of the Game**

## **How to Play**

*It's a dirty job, enforcing the law, but it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?*  
—Touch of Evil (1958)

## Dark Shadows and False Women: Post-War Film Noir

*Ida: You never used to drink during the day.*

*Mildred: I never used to drink at all. It's just a little habit I picked up from men.*

—Mildred Pierce (1945)

This game is designed to create stories from the classic period of Film Noir—approximately the 1940s and 1950s. Later versions of noir films—the "neo noir" of the 1970s, stuff like *Sin City* or even *Chinatown* aren't really what this game is about. (But see Appendix Four.) If you need a quick reference, think Humphrey Bogart, especially *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) which has within it everything you need to know to understand this game.

### What you need to play

- At least three and at most four players.
- About three hours. You can take longer if you like complicated intrigue, or you can take a little less time if you are in a hurry. But you'll need at least two and a half hours.
- Pens, preferably one per player.
- A blank sheet of paper (A4 or letter sized is best).
- Printouts of the four role types that appear at the end of this text (Nerves of Steel, Golden Dreams, Silver Tongue, and City of Shadows).
- A deck of cards.
- A music playback device, like a cell phone and a Bluetooth speaker.
- A handful of smooth jazz songs, preferably with a lot of sax, and no fast sequences. Miles Davis is a gold mine. Four songs are enough, and have no more than a half dozen. There's a list of suggestions at the end of the rules

These films were made by men who had returned from the horrors of World War II, who brought back a cynical worldview and the techniques of German expressionism. They came home to a world where women had briefly been given more freedom than ever and now chafed at the boundaries that were re-imposed on them. They created an art full of cynical, brutal men scratching to reclaim their honor in a world that didn't want it, and willful, ambitious women willing to do anything to make their own place in a hostile world—the femme fatale, today a bit of a cliché but then a figure of liberation and power.

It was also an art form that was tightly constrained by the filmmaking code of the period and consequently had to use subtext, glimpses, shadowy images half guessed at that seemed more at home in the shadows. But we'll get to that.

If you're facilitating the game, now's the time to start playing one of your jazz songs and read the introductory text at the start of these rules. (Only play one song; when it's over, just keep talking. There's a reason for that which we'll talk about in a moment.) Speak a little about film noir (you can read the passage above as well) while setting out the sheets for the four roles. After everyone has chosen their role, explain how the special abilities work.



## The Four Roles

Each role represents an archetype, one of the fundamental components of a good film noir. Two of the roles—Nerves of Steel and Silver Tongue—always represent single characters.

### Nerves of Steel



*Emiliano Grusovin*

Nerves of Steel is the protagonist. In most of the films of the period he's male. Everything that happens in the game will be told from his point of view and he'll be in all the scenes. He's cynical but tries to do right by himself.

#### Special Ability

Nerves of Steel has three spade ♠ cards face-up in front of him. By flipping one of them over, he can make a conclusion that is absolutely and irrevocably true. If he says "I could see in his eyes he was an honest man", then that man can never be corrupted. If he says "That was an obvious lie", then regardless of what the person thought when they said it, it is now established to have been a lie. And so on.

### Silver Tongue



*Randy Kashka*

Silver Tongue is the femme fatale, usually female in these stories. She's got a history but is good at hiding it, and having other people help her.

#### Special Ability

Nerves of Steel and Golden Dreams both have a heart ♥ card face-up in front of them. As long as that card remains face-up, they have to be on Silver Tongue's side. They don't have to believe what she tells them, but they have to try to help her. They can at any time flip their card and switch allegiance/give up on her/see through her story. However, when they have a flipped hearts in front of them and Silver Tongue is in a conflict with them, she can decide to win the conflict by giving them a thumbs down. (We'll explain conflicts in a moment.)

## Golden Dreams



*Kristian Niemi*

Golden Dreams is the main bad guy, who can be male or female. They're the power in the shadows, the gangster boss, and act a lot through henchmen.

### Special Ability

Golden Dreams has three diamond ♦ cards face-up in front of them. At any time they can flip one of them to introduce someone working for them. Others can also work for them, of course, but people whom they've bought with a diamond are always played by them, unless they choose to have someone else play them. They can use this to buy a character that has been in many scenes already, played for example by the City of Shadows. Buying them reveals they've been working for Golden Dreams this entire time, and from now on they'll be playing that character. Golden Dreams can also use this ability on Nerves of Steel or Silver Tongue. In this case, they won't be playing those characters, of course, but Golden Dreams establishes that they have been working for them in the past. Or perhaps they still are. Perhaps even without knowing it!

## City of Shadows



*Emiliano Grusovin*

City of Shadows does not represent a single person. The role is a bit more like a GM in a traditional role-playing game. City of Shadows plays everyone besides characters controlled by the other three roles in the world of the game, and has the ability to add extra scenes even out of turn. When starting out, only include City of Shadows if there are four players.

### Special Ability

City of Shadows has three club ♣ cards face-up in front of them. The clubs can be flipped to take over a scene from someone else, or to set a scene out of turn. Basically, they get three extra scenes. That may sound a bit less fun than the others at first, but it gives them extra influence on the story. They can use their ability to do a short monologue, introduce something interesting, or even steer things in a way they'd like to see happen.

The first three roles represent single characters, although at the start we'll only know for sure who Nerves of Steel<sup>1</sup> is. As the game progresses we'll identify the other characters. This could happen right away or take a while. It may be the case that, for example, Nerves of Steel will mention a character that the player thinks would be a good Golden Dreams or Silver Tongue, but the players of those roles will end up creating different characters. If you don't have a player for City of Shadows, the other players can be drafted to play the minor characters in the game.

## Conflicts

*Lindsay Marriott: How would you like a swift punch on the nose?*

*Philip Marlowe: I tremble at the thought of such violence.*

—Murder My Sweet (1944)

When there's a conflict—two characters acting against each other, whether a fist fight, interrogation, bribe attempt, or other action—a player not involved in the conflict can give a player involved a thumbs up or thumbs down, declaring that things go well or badly for that person. The act of giving a thumbs up or down is what makes it a conflict, basically, so players should watch out for places that look like they should be a conflict. (You can't just shout out "Hey, that looks like a conflict!" for reasons we're about to go into.) You can't give thumbs if you're involved in the conflict yourself, unless you're Silver Tongue and have a conflict with someone with a face-down hearts

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, I will italicize *Nerves of Steel* when referring to the game; otherwise it refers to the role.

## I'm A Man Who Likes Talking To A Man Who Likes To Talk Rules For How to Speak During Scenes

*The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter!*

—The Maltese Falcon (1941)

In order to create a real mood resembling period film noir, we have to observe some rules about the way we talk. Doing so strictly may not seem natural at first, but the cumulative effect is a big part of what will make the experience so entertaining.

### **First: Everything said while playing a scene is part of the narrative**

That means you don't say things like "Haha, that was great!" or "I bet he'll turn out to be a bad guy." In between scenes all of those things can and should be said. But from the moment the scene starts until it is cut, only things that would be actual words in the book, if this was a book, are to be said. Narration and dialogue. That's it.

### **Second: Narration is done in first person past tense**



Joost Assink

The point of view of the narrator is *always* Nerves of Steel, even if it's another role who's doing the narration. So if you're Silver Tongue and you describe your character walking up to Nerves of Steel, you say something like "She walked up to me and looked me in the eyes without blinking. It was just for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity to me." So even though it's you speaking about your character, you're calling her "she" and calling Nerves of Steel "I". And it's all in the past tense. Got it? This does not apply to dialogue, obviously.

We do this because film noir is a visual medium—all deep silver nitrate blacks and grey halftones, with dramatic lighting and sharp contrasts. We can't translate those techniques easily into a role-playing game; after all, "it's a conversation, right?" So instead we borrow this technique from hard boiled literature for the same reason its authors did—to create immediacy, and limit the amount of information revealed to what can be seen in the moment.

This also means Nerves of Steel needs to be present in every scene, though sometimes he can be hidden and watching the scene. And if you're in a pinch, you can use the trick of "Here's what must have happened next. I only learned about it after the fact, but it must have gone something like this..."

Because of this, Nerves of Steel can't die (Mostly.) If he does have to die, it should be at the end of the movie. For extra bonus points, you can then have the last scene in the present tense, with Nerves of Steel talking into a tape recorder or writing on a typewriter as he's slowly bleeding to death.

### **Third: You cannot interrupt someone who's narrating**

If I'm going on about the neon signs reflecting in the wet pavement, you shut up and listen. Wait for me to finish, then you can say something. You can raise your hand to signal that you want to say something, and I can let you in by finishing my sentence and pausing, but that's up to me. Also, do leave pauses when speaking, to allow other players to say something, if they want to. If nobody says anything, you can keep speaking. This rule also obviously does not apply to dialogue.

Those are the rules on how to talk. They make the game pregnant with atmosphere. **Follow them scrupulously.**

## **It's Easy, You Just Pull The Trigger**

### **How To Do Scenes**

*When I start out to make a fool of myself, there's very little can stop me.*

—The Lady From Shanghai (1947)

Now let's talk a little bit about how all this comes together. We're going to play the game in a series of scenes. We'll take turns doing an opening monologue to the scene, setting up where Nerves of Steel is and what he is doing, and giving as much color and detail to the world as we like. Talk about neon reflecting off of the slick surface of rainy asphalt. Talk about the clouds of smoke and smell of desperation in a waterfront drinking hole. Talk about the faint scent of gardenias you smell from Silver Tongue's hair as you lean in to kiss her. That sort of thing.

Before you start the narration, however, pick one of the jazz songs you gathered for this game and start it. When you do that, everyone else shuts up, because the scene is starting. Let the music run for a few seconds, then start your monologue. Remember, nobody can interrupt you while you speak, so take as much or as little time as you need.

When doing the introductory monologue, you can control the actions of Nerves of Steel and NPCs (even if there's a City of Shadows player), but not dialogue. (You can slip around this a bit by saying something like, "I asked the clerk where I could find Eddie Mars and he told me he was in the back" but use this judiciously.) You can introduce other characters, saying where they are and what they're doing, but no more than that.

Note that this means Nerves of Steel has to give up some agency as other players get to tell him where he is, why, and sometimes even what he's doing. That's the price you pay for being the main protagonist.

Maybe you only want to do a monologue—Nerves of Steel gathering his thoughts as he trudges back to his miserable one-room apartment, hoping to get a few drinks in him and shake off his latest beating. That's fine! There's plenty of scenes like that in the source material; one chapter of *The Little Sister* consists of Philip Marlowe driving around Los Angeles, stopping for dinner and a drink and fighting traffic, all the while chewing over the case and repeating the refrain "You're not human tonight, Marlowe."

But most of the time you'll end your monologue and indicate that it's all right for the other players to start talking—make a gesture of opening up or the like. The music keeps running on in the background, but once it's finished, it should stop. Play only one song; don't keep going for the entire scene. You really need only four songs to choose from and that's plenty. If you start to recognize them, that's a bonus! You can even get some themes going, like using the song "Angel Eyes" when you set a scene for the Silver Tongue, so that hearing that intro later really builds some nice expectations. It's awesome.

Sometimes scenes are short and music is long, and then you have to cut it when you cut the scene. That's fine. Don't let it bleed into the between-scenes talking. The music is for fiction only!

Once you've done the opening monologue, you don't have any special powers over the scene except for one: you can decide when it's done (see below). Other players can contribute



*Mark Peers*

whenever they have the chance to. Also, remember that except in the opening monologue, you **should never** narrate the actions of another player's character. If that's the kind of thing that is going to happen, it should be a conflict. So if you're playing Nerves of Steel you can say that you walk up to Golden Dreams and grab her by the shoulders, but if you want to take a swing at her, don't say that she falls down and is knocked out until someone gives you the thumbs up. (If you're narrating and you'd like some direction on how to proceed, you can signal the other players with a gesture—holding your thumb out horizontally and wiggling it up and down is one way to do it.)

Usually Nerves of Steel will be eager to begin the narration, and that player should always be offered the chance to start the game; if they beg off, then let someone else start. Once you've started, take turns going clockwise around the table. If City of Shadows uses their special ability to create another scene, when that scene ends move on to the person who would have gone next. In other words, resume the normal turn order.

## I'm Ready For My Close-Up, Mr. DeMille! How and Why To Start and Stop Scenes

*Oh, I make it a point to never see pictures I write.*  
—In a Lonely Place (1950)

Once a scene begins everyone is expected to follow the rules for talking unless a scene is *cut*. Here, cut means we either pause the scene to fix something, or the scene ends. (If you like, you can use "cut" to pause a scene and "Print it!" to indicate that the scene is finished; that's how filmmaking jargon worked in the period.<sup>2</sup>) There are four reasons to cut a scene:

The first is because the scene is over. The one who set the scene gets to cut it when it's done. Just like many other games.

The second is because there might be a plot hole. If someone says something and you think "Hm, I'm not sure that agrees with what's been established", cut it. Cut it now, and stop the music if it's running. Then ask "Hey, so you said that woman is my sister, but in a previous scene I established I didn't have any siblings". Maybe it's fine. Maybe the other person says "Yeah, but this is actually your real sister that you didn't know you had!". Or maybe it's a small correction. "Huh, yeah, I



*Emiliano Grusovin*

I guess she's a friend from childhood instead, good?". Maybe it's even "Oh, crap, I need to rethink my scene. Hang on a minute." All of these are fine. What's not fine is you ignoring the plot hole and moving on and then the plot has a hole in it. This game needs a tight plot. Don't let it spring a leak, even with small stuff! Once you've talked it out, continue with the music if it was playing when you cut, and rewind a few moments and try again.

The third reason is because you regret what you just said and think you can do better. Cut the scene, rewind and try again. That's fine. It's obviously *not* fine to cut the scene and tell someone else they can do better; it has to be their call.

The final reason to cut the scene is because someone broke the Hays Code.

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<sup>2</sup> The Swedish original uses *bryt*, "break" instead of cut.



## A Man Named Hays

*Those are dirty words. You sound like a bunch of New York critics.*  
—Sunset Boulevard (1950)

### The Problematic Hays Code

For the purposes of playing the game, the most important part of the Hays Code to observe is that “crime cannot pay.” This rule shapes the end condition and serves as a balance to Silver Tongue’s special ability.

The Hays Code forbids things like swears, sex, illegal drugs, blood and gore and so on. But it also forbids things that are really problematic to forbid today, notably homosexuality and “race mixing.” One goal of using the Hays Code in the game is to encourage the kind of creativity shown by the classic noir directors, who were adept at including all of these things but with a veneer of plausible deniability

For example, we can use “damn” as a stand in for much more serious swear words with everyone understanding what we *really* mean. And we can show the girl combing her hair and the guy putting on his tie and there's only one bed in the room and it's unmade and we all know what they did, but we didn't show it so we can maybe get it by the censors. And these two guys? They're "partners" and we all know what that means.

However some players may find that these rules make it harder to have fun. That's fine! There is a checklist in the play materials where you can modify the Hays Code to your taste; you can even use that to create a “retro noir” feel, like in *Chinatown* which looks like a 1930s movie but has a very 1970s sensibility. The literature of the period was also freer in subject matter than the Hays Code would allow.

Between 1930 and 1968, Hollywood operated under The Motion Picture Production Code, a censor code also known as the Hays code after William H. Hays, President of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) from 1922 to 1945. This code was built to repair Hollywood's bad reputation and it made tough demands for morality and morality in films. The code consisted of a set of rules for what did not get displayed, as well as a number of categories that required extra caution. The code was not statutory, but it movies that did not follow the code could in practice not show their movies at theaters in the United States. A summary of the Hays Code is included with the rules summary and character sheets.

If someone breaks the code, we cut the scene, point it out, rewind, and then they have to redo it in a more subtle way.

There's one more thing that's important about the Hays Code. It says crime doesn't pay. So if someone commits a crime, they need to suffer for it. They can't get away scot free. This is why the femme fatale that we all love has to be punished in the end. But we all remember her for her life, not her tragic death/imprisonment. Sometimes this includes *Nerves of Steel*. If he did a crime, he can't have a happy ending (which is usually fine by film noir standards).

## **I'm Going In There Now To Look At The Picture**

### **How To Build A Mystery**

*That was all there was to it. Nothing had slipped, nothing had been overlooked, there was nothing to give us away. And yet, Keyes, as I was walking down the street to the drugstore, suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong.*

—Double Indemnity (1944)

The only part left to discuss is the plot. This is handled by the questions sheet, which is just a blank paper.

So you're setting the first scene. What you want is a scene that opens up a lot of unanswered questions. Here's a good first scene: Nerves of Steel is at his office. Looks like he's a private detective! Someone knocks on the door. A man is outside bleeding from a gunshot wound, delivers a package to our protagonist, and whispers "Please, you have to protect her. This should be enough as payment. Watch out for the Frenchman!" and falls dead to the floor. Nerves of Steel opens the package, finds an expensive diamond necklace and a picture of a woman, signed "J. Farinelli". Cut, print.

Mysterious, right? Loads of unanswered questions. After the scene, we write down the questions on the questions sheet. (You should also make notes of the characters and locations mentioned on the sheet, like a cast list for a movie.) Something like this:

Who is the man?

Who shot him?

Who's the woman?

Why is she in danger?

Who is the Frenchman?

Where does the necklace come from?

These are all questions that the audience wants to know the answer to. Here is a question we don't write: "Did anyone see the man visit Nerves of Steel?" This is a bad question, because we have no reason to believe there was. It's also a yes/no question, which is not that evocative. We don't use the questions to direct the game, only to document unanswered questions. A good question should be something that, if unanswered, will leave the audience dissatisfied.

The questions should be written from the audience's perspective. If there's a rustling in the bushes, and our protagonist shrugs and thinks "It was probably just the wind", you should absolutely write down the question "What was the noise in the bushes?" Because come on, of course it wasn't the wind, and as an audience, we will not be satisfied with that. Later in the story, it'll turn out that someone was in the bushes spying on him.

Now when someone starts a scene they can look at the questions sheet and think about whether they can answer some of these questions. For example, a scene where Nerves of Steel visits everyone called "J. Farinelli" in the phone book, until he finds the woman on the picture. She's a nightclub singer, and he speaks to her. When he shows her a picture of the dead man,

she goes pale, but then claims she has no idea who he is and asks Nerves of Steel to leave her alone. Nerves of Steel uses his ability to declare that she absolutely recognized the man in question, and that she looks deathly afraid. Cut scene.



*Dustin Jensen*

Now we can cross out the question "Who is the woman?" She's Jenny Farinelli, a nightclub singer. But we also have some new questions. How did the man and Farinelli know each other? Why did she pretend not to recognize him?

A question is crossed out once there is an answer that the audience would not find dissatisfying if there's no more info about it. Perhaps it will turn out that the woman's name isn't actually Jenny Farinelli. That's fine. But for the moment, we have an answer, so we cross out the question. We can always write it in again later.

It's important not to think too far ahead. You might have a great idea for how Golden Dreams will suddenly reveal himself but then Silver Tongue does something to make that impossible. It's your responsibility to roll with it and use the new information in the story. The more you stop planning and just use everybody's contributions, the better the story will be in the end. The questions will push the story to a satisfying conclusion as you answer them, so just trust the process and keep pushing into the shadows.

The other thing to keep in mind is that you shouldn't allow questions to linger too long unanswered as they will tend to become plot holes since the story has moved far away from when they were first introduced. You shouldn't try to answer everything right away, but if it's been a while since a question has been raised and no one has tackled it yet, think about trying to answer it in the next scene.

You should also not be afraid of cutting a scene if something said would push the plot in a way that make the story have to contort too much to fit it in. The idea is to make a well-constructed mystery, after all. That doesn't mean you should reject strange twists or sudden reversals—film noir was famous for these kind of plot turns—but you should trust your own instincts for when a story gets bent too far to continue to make sense. This is the only way to challenge Nerves of Steel's special ability to declare something true.

So that's the way it goes. Before each scene, you look at the sheet. Are there few questions listed? Make a scene where something strange happens, that raises new questions. Are there many open questions? Pick one or two and set a scene to answer them. Don't think about the whole story until when the movie is nearing its end and there are only a few questions left. Instead, just focus on answering a few of the questions and let others answer other questions. You'll end up with a satisfying mystery (since there are no loose threads) which is still surprising (since nobody knows how it all fits together. It's a wonderful thing to see this come together neatly when halfway through the game you're thinking "How in the heck will we tie all this together?")

## **The Battle's Finished, the Jungle Wins**

*You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that...You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now.*

—*The Big Sleep* (1939)

For the game to be able to end, there are two requirements:

1. All questions, or all except one, must have been answered. If you want, you can leave one question unanswered, to create an open ending, but only one.
2. All crimes must have been punished, as the Hays Code requires.

## **I Would Have Thought a Case Like That Took A Little Effort Some FAQs and Answers**

*Vivian: What will your first step be?*

*Marlowe: The usual one.*

*Vivian: I didn't know there was a usual one.*

*Marlowe: Oh sure there is. It comes complete with diagrams on page forty-seven of 'How to Be a Detective in Ten Easy Lessons' correspondence school textbook.*

—The Big Sleep (1946)

### **Can Nerves of Steel die?**

Well, maybe. Because we see the story from Nerves of Steel's perspective, having him die during the story should be the end of it. But there are a few ways to get around this. He can be fatally hurt and then run around in the knowledge that he is going to die. The whole movie *D.O.A.* (1950) works in this way. It is also possible to kill him in the end of the story. The whole story can be one "Flashback" where Nerves of Steel goes through the events that led to his death. Just look at that all those who commit crimes can get their punishment! With this kind of ending can you go use Nerves of Steel's fate as a framing device, like in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or *Double Indemnity* (1944).

### **What do I do about someone "talking wrong"?**

If someone begins to talk in the present tense or forgets to use "I" and show everything from Nerves of Steel's point of view, let it go the first couple of times and maybe remind them during the next break between scenes. Usually the player will correct themselves and it's not the end of the world to mess up once or twice. If this goes on for a while, it won't destroy the game to slightly break the rules and issue a soft correction, like "Went" or "She walked..." or using a signal of some kind like rapping on the table—but only do that if the person in question asks for a signal. It can take a while to get used to this way of speaking, especially if you're not well-read in the genre.

### **What if the story is standing still?**

This can happen in some types of stories: One mystery occurs and Nerves of Steel interrogates people, but only encounters mysteries, denials and refusal. It feels like the story is treading water.

It's important to realize that this is not necessarily a problem. It's only a problem if you or others feel that the story suffers from it. As long as new questions are asked and old questions are answered then the story goes forward, even if a certain question stubbornly refuses to be deleted. But if you feel it's problematic then there are a few ways to take care of it.

The first is to use the thumb, i.e. start making situations into Conflicts. When Nerves of Steel asks someone to cough up a lead, give him a big thumbs up. Hopefully this is enough for that make the person spill his beans. Another method is to set a scene yourself which answers some questions. You can do this without letting someone else have the opportunity to block you by refusing to answer. Either the question is answered with no dialogue (like Nerves of Steel finds a clue, receives a letter or searches his memory), or a dialogue summarized in the stage's introductory monologue. You can put a whole monologue scene where you summarize one conversation and what information came in the light. Be careful not to do this with other players' role characters! Finally, you can of course talk about it between scenes. Say "It feels like we're not moving forward. Isn't time for our hero to find some answers?"

## Can we modify and house rule this game?



Mark Kent

I would suggest that the first time you play, you play using the rules as written. Hopefully I have managed to convince you that all rules have a purpose and a thought behind them, and with some luck I have also managed to explain what that thought is. If you feel you have to change the rules for to play the game I have either failed, or maybe this is not the right game for you.

With that said I would like you to wait until you have played the game one or two times using the rules as written before you try to change, modify and try out new ideas. Role playing is a hobby of many creative minds and there are a lot of exciting things you can do by modifying a game.

The first and easiest is to change roles. Play with a female Nerves of Steel, for example. Play with two Golden Dreams. Tell someone else's perspective, vary perspective (everyone sets scenes from their own role's perspective), or do as in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and let a role be "you" (the movie's voiceover is a recorded message directed to another person). You can also delete the Hays code and play neo-noir: show prostitution, drug abuse and non-white people as more than servants or background. Try telling the kind of stories found in the French noir films of the 1950s, where the filmmakers didn't labor under the kind of censorship Americans had to adapt to. Check out movies like *Pépé le Moko* (1937), *Le Quai des Brumes* (1938), or *Rififi* (1955).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Rififi* is especially interesting for comparison as it was directed by the blacklisted American filmmaker Jules Dassin (*The Naked City*, *Night and the City*) who made precisely the kind of movie he was unable to make in Hollywood.

## Remember...

- When doing the introductory monologue, you can control the actions of Nerves of Steel and NPCs (even if there's a City of Shadows player), but not dialogue. You can introduce other characters, saying where they are and what they're doing, but no more than that.
- When not in introductory monologue, you cannot control the actions of other player characters (including characters bought by Golden Dreams and characters played by City of Shadows). You can, however, introduce them into the scene and then let their players take over (try to give some sort of hint as to why the character appears so as not to stump the player!).
- If there's no City of Shadows player, a player whose character is not in the scene plays NPCs, both actions and dialogue. If all three are in the scene, you'll just have to figure it out. Usually if all three colorful characters are in a scene, the NPC(s) will be in the back-ground anyway.
- If you're Nerves of Steel, you get some leeway when using your special ability. You can use it to say things like "I could see in his eyes that the second I was out the door, he'd be on the phone with Big Mike repeating every word of this conversation like a damn tape recorder" or "Through the thin fabric of the dress I could see the outline of a Colt Pocket Hammerless on her thigh. The dame was packing heat."

## Do you have any more tips?

It may be a good idea not to let Nerves of Steel have secrets to the audience. When someone says "Remember what happened in Tijuana", it's probably a good idea to relatively quickly establish what actually happened there, so there is not a gap of understanding between the main character and the audience. It's through Nerves of Steel you experience the story, and it usually works best if he detects the mystery at the same rate as the audience themselves. But this is no hard rule, and it can be great to play in other ways.

Also avoid blocking each other. Build on each other's ideas and when someone throws in something that does not fit in with your thinking, embrace this and build further on it. A big part of the charm of this game is the common construction of mystery.

In the same vein, try not to figure out how everything hangs together until the end. You only need to consider the questions on the list. You don't need and shouldn't have a complete picture. Let the mystery be created by hand and organically; the experience will be the best for everyone involved that way.

Finally, hold on to the mood. The game stands and falls with the noir atmosphere you manage to create, so make sure there's a little dark lighting, that the table is cleared from distractions, that people do not SMS or use their smartphone during play, and that the rules of how the talk is held is adhered to during scenes.

At the same time, do not have performance anxiety. Go for what feels natural and do not feel like you have to find the coolest or most original ideas and talk like a professional screenwriter. Please make an effort to find clever, tough, and snappy ways to describe the scenes, but don't let that make you hesitate and stress you out. Most of the language in film noir is quite straightforward with short sentences and simple words. Relax and have fun!

# **Part Two: Sources and Suggestions**

## **How to Make a World of Shadows**

*I don't know a lot about anything, but I know a little about practically everything.*

—Laura (1944)



## **Appendix One: Classic Film Noirs**

### **A Selection of the Golden Era's Best Films**

#### **The Maltese Falcon (1941)**

The archetypal noir, based on the novel of Dashiell Hammett. A cynical PI, a secretive woman, a greedy and mysterious gangster boss and a complicated plot full of turns and surprises. If you just see one movie as inspiration to play this game, this is the movie you should see.

#### **Casablanca (1942)**

The era's most celebrated film has over the years become legendary. You have probably already seen it, and if you haven't not, you should see it whether you play this game or not. The cynical Rick is an excellent Nerves of Steel and Captain Renault, or alternatively Major Strasser, is a delicious Golden Dreams. Ilsa, by contrast, is a kind of reverse classic Silver Tongue—she is not a femme fatale who attracts Rick—rather the opposite. Rick starts the movie with a face-down heart card, but turns it face-up when he realizes Ilsa's true feelings for him.

#### **Murder, My Sweet (1944)**

Based on Raymond Chandler's personal favorite of his novels, *Farewell My Lovely*, this story about archetypal PI Philip Marlowe is not the best movie on the list, but follows the template quite well. A private eye takes a case and becomes more and more personally involved while digging into the background story. The book is better than the movie, in my opinion, please read it instead.

#### **Mildred Pierce (1945)**

This movie is not quite typical, in many ways. It's not quite mystery driven, though the question of who killed Monte Beragon (who dies in the first scene) lies in the background throughout the rest of the movie, which is told in flashback. The film is, however, worth seeing because of its female protagonist and her male Silver Tongue. No real Golden Dreams role is in the movie, but one could classify the daughter Veda as a second Silver Tongue.

#### **Gilda (1946)**

Watch this one for the best film Silver Tongues, the titular Gilda. Maybe not a typical femme fatale, but Rita Hayworth's portrayal of the freedom-seeking, indomitable woman still catches a lot of Silver Tongue's innermost essence. Nerves of Steel and Golden Dreams are also clearly represented in the film. One of my favorites on this list.

#### **The Big Sleep (1946)**

Another adaptation of a Marlowe book. *The Big Sleep* is clearly better than *Murder, My Sweet*, and one of the absolute best noir movies made. It has a little more crowded cast of characters than tends to be the case in this game, but all elements are there. It is also an excellent example of how movie makers had to adapt to the Hays Code. In the original there is nudity,

pornography and homosexuality, while the movie forced to imply all this without showing it straight. Instead, it is "scandalous images" and "partner".

### **Dead Reckoning (1947)**

This could easily have been a round of *Nerves of Steel*. Humphrey Bogart plays Captain Murdoch and Lizabeth Scott is a very good Silver Tongue. The villain Martinelli is also a spot-on Golden Dreams. Murdoch digs into his brother-in-arms' mysterious disappearance and find a snake's nest of lies and false games. Definitely watch this one.

### **The Lady from Shanghai (1947)**

Orson Welles may have a bad Irish accent in this film, but there's nothing wrong with his direction of this well-made film. It also shows clearly that noir does not have to mean rainy streets. Here it is all Caribbean beaches and sailboats, but still is very suggestive of noir. The complicated plot almost ties itself into knots and it is not quite easy to keep up with the turns.

### **Out of the Past (1947)**

This is a movie that could have been a session of this game. A Man Without Future, A Woman With Baggage, and A Rich Gangster with long tentacles. Beautiful people, quick dialogue, murders, lies and double-crosses, just the way we like it. It contains extremely few scenes without the main character present. The way Silver Tongue is depicted in the film is a master class in how to play that role. When there are several people present she is silent and does not take any position, but as soon as she is alone with someone she swears loyalty forever. The movie also has one very clear moment when Nerves of Steel flips over his heart card, and one to when Golden Dreams does it. Completely according to the rulebook!

### **The Street with No Name (1948)**

This movie uses the trick "based on a true story". It also has an expired copyright and can be viewed on archive.org completely legally. Here the protagonist is a policeman who infiltrates a gangster organization. Despite the woman on the movie poster the movie more or less lacks a Silver Tongue, but the dance between Nerves of Steel and Golden Dreams make it clearly worth seeing, and the police play an important role, so a City of Shadows role could have been played in this game.

### **D.O.A. (1950)**

A man walks into a police station to report a murder—and the victim is himself! Like the above, it has an expired copyright and can be seen legally and free online.

### **Touch of Evil (1958)**

Orson Welles' classic noir masterpiece is often considered the last movie in the classic noir era. A Bomb is planted in a car in Mexico and explodes after it crosses the border to the United States, which causes serious problems with jurisdiction. Orson Welles plays the police captain Hank Quinlan in a role that acts like a male Silver Tongue.

## Appendix Two: Soundtrack Ideas

*After suggestions by Simon Pettersson*

You can find all of these songs by other artists on YouTube or other music sharing sites; I've included a couple of the more famous versions, concentrating on saxophone interpretations.

### **Angel Eyes** (Dennis and Brent)

Peppy, sultry, the perfect music for a jazz club. Dave Brubeck has a piano heavy version on his album of the same name; Ella Fitzgerald does a ripping sung version. Benny Carter and Chet Baker also do good takes.

### **Misty** (Erroll Garner)

The famous ballad originally was a piano song before having lyrics written for it. Stan Getz and Benny Carter do good sultry versions; Dexter Gordon may be my favorite version readily available.

### **Round Midnight** (Thelonious Monk)

The most famous composition by the idiosyncratic Monk; Miles Davis does a superb take on it on his *'Round About Midnight* album.

### **Générique** (Miles Davis)

Written for the film *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, this is another sultry Miles jam. The haunting opening riff is a perfect mood setter.

### **Blue in Green** (Miles Davis)

This is a lilting, slow moving piece of the superb *Kind of Blue* album featuring John Coltrane on saxophone and Bill Evans on piano.

### **In a Sentimental Mood** (Duke Ellington)

### **My Little Brown Book** (Billy Strayhorn)

Both on the great *Duke Ellington and John Coltrane* album. The mood shifts throughout both, starting off melancholy, picking up in energy, and then returning to the loneliness of the opening.

### **Love Theme From Chinatown** (Jerry Goldsmith)

*Chinatown* the movie is a little outside the scope of the basic rules of this game, but this opening number is written in a 1930s style and has everything you could want—a haunting opening, a wistful trumpet riff, and a dreamy mood that is a perfect session starter.

### **My Funny Valentine** (Chet Baker)

I like the version off of *The Very Best of Chet Baker*, nicely meditative and sultry.

# Appendix Three: Talking Noir

## A Reading List

While some of the great noirs on the film list include voice-over narration that can get you a long way toward learning to talk with the tough-guy, thoroughly American idiom of hard boiled crime stories, that voice came from the short stories and novels of the period's greatest writers. Here's a short list that will have you well on your way to sounding like Nerves of Steel.

### **"Red Wind"** (Raymond Chandler)

One of the best of Chandler's short stories features all four of our roles, a mystery that starts almost immediately, and a rather thoughtful ending.

### ***The Big Sleep*** (Raymond Chandler)

This is the big one, the first of the Philip Marlowe novels and probably the best. From the start you get the sardonic voice of Marlowe, a man smarter than he appears to be, who feels deeply and observes closely without ever giving away how many cards he holds. Also has one of the great Silver Tongues in literature. (Chandler's later *The Long Goodbye* plays around a lot with crossing the roles of Silver Tongue and Golden Dreams; if you like this novel, that's a strong recommend.)

### ***Red Harvest*** (Dashiell Hammett)

One of the novels about the unnamed narrator usually referred to as the Continental Op. Here the focus is less on a mystery and more about making sure some raw form of justice is handed out to all the guilty parties—which is everyone in the book. A good example of how to expand out of the pure investigation format. (Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* isn't in the first person but has plenty of his magic and makes an interesting contrast with the movie.)

### ***The Galton Case*** (Ross Macdonald)

Macdonald is one of the greatest of the post-golden age hard boiled writers; this is one of his best novels, filled with twists and turns, and Lew Archer's deeply felt, profoundly moral voice.

# Appendix Four: On Later Noir

*Notes and sources compiled by Catherine Ramen*

With a game as perfectly attuned to its source material as *Nerves of Steel*, I hesitate to give any advice on how to adapt the rules to handle the more ambivalent, murky, and explicit atmosphere of later noir pictures, particularly the Neo-Noir of the 1970s and 1980s. Here are a few thoughts.

## **Killing Mr. Hays**

The biggest single change is that the Hays code is altered or even obliterated. Depending on the era your noir is set, almost none of the restrictions of the code may apply. In the play materials you'll find a checklist for the Hays Code (with the approximate era each restriction was removed) as well as some suggestions for setting variant end conditions for the game.

## **Sliding Loyalties**

In *Chinatown* Jack Nicholson's Nerves of Steel doesn't firmly come over to the side of Faye Dunaway's Silver Tongue until the third act; John Huston's Golden Dreams is never really *on* Dunaway's side, but never exactly *against* her anyway (the damage had been done long ago). To simulate this, Silver Tongue gets three heart cards; she can pass these out (face up) whenever she wishes, even (especially) if the role she gives a card to has a face down heart card. If a role has no or only face down heart cards, Silver Tongue can decide a conflict even if it involves her; a role with any face up heart card must be on her side, creating an interesting dynamic where Silver Tongue has invulnerability when everyone is working against her and only can come to a tragic end when either or both Golden Dreams and Nerves of Steel takes her side. (This is the dynamic of Jean-Pierre Melville's fine downbeat noir *Un Flic*.)

## **Many Voices**

Later and more complex noirs tend to have multiple characters who can fit the role of Silver Tongue. In this variant Silver Tongue can turn over one of her three hearts cards to take control of a character in a similar way to how Golden Dreams operates. To compensate, allow Golden Dreams to still be able to take over those same characters later on using their special ability, creating the complex web of betrayal and divided loyalties characteristic of late noir.

## **Shadows Across The Schoolyard**

One fun thing to do with later noir is to use all the noir tropes but set the action in a location not usually associated with film noir. The 1970s noir revival started this by shooting more scenes in daylight (*Chinatown* especially makes excellent use of the flat white lighting of the California sun), but films like *Brick* (2005) do a traditional noir within the confines of a high school. Likewise, "Blaxploitation" films like *Shaft* (1971) are noirs with characters the Hays Code forbade, and *Army of Shadows* (1969) is a French Resistance noir. And of course sci-fi noir is practically its own genre, as seen in the two *Blade Runner* movies.

# Loneliness Has Followed Me My Whole Life

## A Short List of Neo-Noir Films

Compiled by Catherine Ramen

I've tried to keep this list to films that could more or less fill the roles of *Nerves of Steel*, which means that some fine films like *The Conversation* (1974), *Shaft* (1971) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) just miss the cut.

### **Chinatown (1974)**

This is probably the most important of the neo-noirs, the one that single-handedly vaulted the format back to prominence—and it remains one of the finest film noirs. All of the roles are represented well, and the Silver Tongue is a fascinating study in a different way to play the role—nervous, indecisive, but desperate to survive only to protect the person she loves most. City of Shadows gets some nice work in here as well, as the title neighborhood serves as a metaphor for the corruption of Watergate-era America. Both the film's biggest reveal and its devastating conclusion show how far neo-noir strayed from the Hays Code.

### **Taxi Driver (1976)**

The most stylish, decayed, overwhelming noir of the 1970s; everything that came after had to contend with its presence. The Nerves of Steel here is an unlikable man who creates most of the issues in the scenario; Silver Tongue is mirrored across a couple of characters, one seemingly innocent and in a dirty business, the other seemingly dirty but actually innocent. This is one film where City of Shadows is a main character all the way. Misogynistic, brash, ugly, it's a fascinating example of how to deconstruct noir into something with the depth of a Russian novel and the trashiness of a cheap comic.

### **McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971)**

There are a lot of revisionist Westerns that could fit under the Noir label (Clint Eastwood's 1992 film *Unforgiven* being an excellent example) but my favorite is this film, which to be fair is not usually called a film noir. But all the pieces are there, from Warren Beatty's Nerves of Steel to Julie Christie's Silver Tongue, with fine work for City of Shadows and befitting its 1970s origin, an impersonalized Golden Dreams. Christie definitely seems to be using the variant rule listed above! (If you like this film at all then check out director Robert Altman's homage/parody *The Long Goodbye* (1973) which is more enjoyable if you know the genre well.)

### **The Long Good Friday (1980)**

An interesting exercise in showing how much the roles of Golden Dreams and Nerves of Steel can blend into each other, and ultimately Golden Dreams uses their special ability after the death of their character to create the minions that bring the film to its downbeat conclusion.

Silver Tongue is almost always on Nerves of Steel's side here, but it's still a stylish and fascinating take on the character.

### **Blade Runner (1982)**

What more can be said about one of the most influential science fiction films of all time? That's it's also a damn fine noir, perhaps. Indeed, beneath the glitter and decay (*Taxi Driver* is an obvious influence) the story is a rock-solid noir with all the roles in full play, especially neon-lit, rainy City of Shadows.

### **The Grifters (1990)**

This stylish and well-acted classic is unusual in having two Silver Tongues, both competing over the affections and talents of Nerves of Steel. An interesting study in playing with duplicate roles.

### **Fargo (1996)**

A female (and pregnant) Nerves of Steel in this one, and an excellent male Silver Tongue. Golden Dreams never materializes as a single character, but the criminals nominally working for Silver Tongue are really pursuing their own dark dreams. The rare neo-noir that ends with the guilty punished.

### **Jackie Brown (1997)**

Elmore Leonard is one of the finest noir writers of the 20th century, and this adaptation of his work is a stylish, twisty gem. Our Silver Tongue really drives the story here, with Nerves of Steel accepting his fate as getting set up because of the honesty of his feelings. The truly guilty get punished, more or less, but the main character gets away with her crimes—a nice example of having your Hays cake and eating it too.

### **L.A. Confidential (1997)**

This fine, downbeat neo-noir based on a James Ellroy novel is another movie that plays games of doubling: two Nerves of Steel, two Silver Tongues (Kim Basinger and Kevin Spacey) and liberal use of Golden Dreams' special ability before the final reveal of who the real villain is.

# Nerves of Steel



## On your turn:

- Review the questions list and think about how to answer one or two
- Start playing a jazz track
- Begin narrating the scene. In your opening narration, you can control Nerves of Steel's actions somewhat (deciding where he is, what he's doing, etc.) but you can't speak for him unless you're Nerves of Steel
- Silently signal when others can begin to talk and narrate events
- You decide when the scene is over

## When it's not your turn:

- Contribute dialogue for characters you control (or are asked to play)
- Jump in with your own narration after the opening monologue.
- Decide conflicts you aren't part of
- Watch for Hays Code violations

## Remember...

- **Only** say things that happen in the story during scenes—no meta talk!
- **Always** speak in the first person, past tense from the point of view of Nerves of Steel ("The blonde girl smiled and slapped my face.")
- **Never** narrate the actions of a character controlled by a player!
- Don't interrupt anyone's narration!
- In between scenes, add new questions and cross out questions that have been answered

*I don't mind if you don't like my manners. I don't like them myself. They're pretty bad. I grieve over them long winter evenings. And I don't mind your ritzing me, or drinking your lunch out of a bottle, but don't waste your time trying to cross-examine me.*

—The Big Sleep (1946)

You can't help getting sucked into a mystery and you always want to get to the bottom of it. On the trip you meet people who will want your help. You try to be a fairly honorable person and help those who deserve it, but in a city like Center City, filled with the burden of lies and betrayal, it's not easy to know who, if anyone, deserves it, and you've developed a healthy cynicism to survive. In the end, it's the most important to save your own skin, and try to get out of this mess intact.

**Motives:** Curiosity, compassion, justice, lust.

**Means:** Quick tongue, hard fists, and a cynical world-weariness.

**Remember:** Information is vital. Find out the truth, do not reveal more than you have to, and always pretend to know more than you do.

**Special Ability:** You have three face-up Spade ♠ cards on the table in front of you. You can flip one of them at any time and use your narration to introduce clues into the scene. For example, you can see that someone is lying, note that someone is armed or conclude that what looks like an accident is actually a murder. The clues introduced by using the cards are always correct and can't be contradicted, and you can also control the thoughts and actions of others during the monologue.



# Silver Tongue



## On your turn:

- Review the questions list and think about how to answer one or two
- Start playing a jazz track
- Begin narrating the scene. In your opening narration, you can control Nerves of Steel's actions somewhat (deciding where he is, what he's doing, etc.) but you can't speak for him unless you're Nerves of Steel
- Silently signal when others can begin to talk and narrate events
- You decide when the scene is over

## When it's not your turn:

- Contribute dialogue for characters you control (or are asked to play)
- Jump in with your own narration after the opening monologue.
- Decide conflicts you aren't part of
- Watch for Hays Code violations

## Remember...

- **Only** say things that happen in the story during scenes—no meta talk!
- **Always** speak in the first person, past tense from the point of view of Nerves of Steel (“The blonde girl smiled and slapped my face.”)
- **Never** narrate the actions of a character controlled by a player!
- Don't interrupt anyone's narration!
- In between scenes, add new questions and cross out questions that have been answered

*...the lie was in the way I said it, not at all in what I said. It's my own fault if you can't believe me now.*

—The Maltese Falcon (1941)

You have a dark past that you do not want to resurface. You have been naughty but are the master of seeming to be kind and innocent. You know that the world is a hard place and there is no happy ending. You do not have money or power and you cannot win a fist fight, but you know that even the toughest fighter easily falls victim to a bullet in the back. Therefore, you use your charm to ensure that whoever is on top right now won't hurt you, and those who reveal your double-edged silver tongue must disappear as quickly as possible. You are incapable of trusting another person, but you are fully capable of falling in love yourself.

**Motives:** Power, love, fear, revenge.

**Means:** Charm, crocodile tears and a gun.

**Remember:** The best way to get good at lying is regular practice.

**Special Ability:** Nerves of Steel and Golden Dreams have both a face up heart ♥ card in front of them. As long as it's face up, they must help you. They don't have to believe in everything you say, but they must try to protect and help you. At any time, a player can flip over his heart card and see through you. When you are in a conflict with someone with a face-down heart card, you can decide the outcome. You cannot kill Nerves of Steel, but you can mortally wound him.

# Golden Dreams



## On your turn:

- Review the questions list and think about how to answer one or two
- Start playing a jazz track
- Begin narrating the scene. In your opening narration, you can control Nerves of Steel's actions somewhat (deciding where he is, what he's doing, etc.) but you can't speak for him unless you're Nerves of Steel
- Silently signal when others can begin to talk and narrate events
- You decide when the scene is over

## When it's not your turn:

- Contribute dialogue for characters you control (or are asked to play)
- Jump in with your own narration after the opening monologue.
- Decide conflicts you aren't part of
- Watch for Hays Code violations

## Remember...

- **Only** say things that happen in the story during scenes—no meta talk!
- **Always** speak in the first person, past tense from the point of view of Nerves of Steel ("The blonde girl smiled and slapped my face.")
- **Never** narrate the actions of a character controlled by a player!
- Don't interrupt anyone's narration!
- In between scenes, add new questions and cross out questions that have been answered

*Decency and integrity are fancy words, but they never kept anybody well fed. And I've got quite an appetite.*

—Shakedown (1950)

You are the spider in the net, the puppet master who holds all the wires. You are rich and powerful, but not enough. Never enough. There's something you want, and you're willing to do anything to get it. But you are a patient person and have learned to wait. You have also learned that it's dangerous to get dirt on your own hands, and you prefer to let your underlings do what is required. You are also probably the one who knows most about what's going on behind the scenes.

**Motives:** Greed, control, jealousy

**Means:** Henchmen, contacts, bribes and business deals

**Remember:** He who laughs last, laughs best. Don't act in undue haste; bide your time and set your traps.

**Special Ability:** You have three face up diamond ♦ cards that represent three people who work or have worked for you. You can flip over one of them to introduce an underling, which is then played by you. You can also flip over a card to take over an existing role that turns out to have worked for you all the time. Finally, you can play the card on one of the other players. This means that the character has worked for you in the past, maybe even until now. Of course, you cannot control the actions of other people's roles.

# City of Shadows



## On your turn:

- Review the questions list and think about how to answer one or two
- Start playing a jazz track
- Begin narrating the scene. In your opening narration, you can control Nerves of Steel's actions somewhat (deciding where he is, what he's doing, etc.) but you can't speak for him unless you're Nerves of Steel
- Silently signal when others can begin to talk and narrate events
- You decide when the scene is over

## When it's not your turn:

- Contribute dialogue for characters you control (or are asked to play)
- Jump in with your own narration after the opening monologue.
- Decide conflicts you aren't part of
- Watch for Hays Code violations

## Remember...

- **Only** say things that happen in the story during scenes—no meta talk!
- **Always** speak in the first person, past tense from the point of view of Nerves of Steel ("The blonde girl smiled and slapped my face.")
- **Never** narrate the actions of a character controlled by a player!
- Don't interrupt anyone's narration!
- In between scenes, add new questions and cross out questions that have been answered

*There are eight million stories in the naked city...*

—The Naked City (1948)

The world of film noir can be both idyllically beautiful and frighteningly evil. But even when it appears to be pure and beautiful, the shadows can always lurk in the background. The good-hearted girl is hopelessly naive and harmless and in the most beautiful of Caribbean suns a murder is planned. Your role is to shape this world, from both its best and worst sides. You play all roles in other than the three main roles. These may be policemen, bartenders, loyal spouses, coworkers or other people who interact with the main roles in the story. Try to reuse these roles and let them reappear during the story. Also show the guests at a party, the crowd in the street and the audience in the courtroom. Use the narrative voice when your roles are not in the scene, to introduce turns in the story or just describe how the neon signs reflect in the rainy pavement.

**Special Ability:** As compensation for not having your own role to play, you get some extra power to decide on the story and its direction. You have three face up club ♣ cards in front of you. You can turn over one of these to set a new scene, even if it's not your turn. You can even use it to cancel an ongoing scene to set a new one.

# Rules Summary

## Forbidden by the Hays Code

- Swearing (*1970s, 1980s*)
- Nudity (*1970s*)
- Illegal Drugs (*late 1950s, 1970s*)
- Queerness, “sexual perversion” (*1980s, 2000s*)
- Prostitution (*1960s*)
- Sexual illnesses (*1970s*)
- Childbirth (*1960s*)
- The mockery of the priesthood (*1970s*)
- Insults to a nation/race/belief (*1960s, 1970s*)
- Immoral and outrageous acts such as murder, maltreatment, rape, murder fire and others must not be described in unnecessary detail. (*1970s, 1980s*)
- No onscreen sex, and kisses and similar displays of affection should be kept “decent”, especially if one party is a “villain.” (*1960s, 1970s*)

## Ending the Game

For the game to end, you must have at most one question not crossed off **and** (pick at least one of the following)

- Crime must not pay.** If a murder or other form of major crime is committed against the victim, the offender must be punished before the game is over. (Original Hays Code; **default end condition**)
- The righteous must be punished.** Corruption greed always win; those who fight against it must lose, be discredited, or killed. (*1970s cynical neo-noir*)
- Somebody dies.** Either Silver Tongue, Golden Dreams, or Nerves of Steel—or more than one of them.
- Nothing else.** Solving the mystery is enough. This is how the novel *The Big Sleep* ends.

By default, all the themes listed to the left may not appear in the game, either in narrative, descriptions or dialogues. If they accidentally occur, it is the responsibility of the player to cut the scene and rewind to a previous point.

However, for a retro-noir feel—a movie from a later decade that recreates some of the tropes of Golden Age Noir, simply check off the parts of the Hays Code you will ignore; the decade these themes were generally first allowed is listed in parentheses. (Italicized dates indicate the very earliest you might find these themes.)

Take turns going around the table. On your turn:

- Start playing a jazz track. Everyone should stop talking.
- Begin your narration, explaining where Nerves of Steel is. You can talk as long as you like—you can even deliver a monologue and then go to the next turn.
- When you have finished your narration, silently indicate to the other players they can begin to talk.
- Everyone can contribute narration, either of their characters’ actions, or of some detail they find interesting.
- Always narrate things in the first person past tense, from the point of view of Nerves of Steel.
- Never speak for another person’s character.
- Never interrupt someone when they are *narrating*.
- After your turn ends, write down any questions that were raised during the scene. Questions are from the point of view of the audience, i.e. what would someone in the audience find unsatisfying if it wasn’t answered?
- Cross off any questions that were answered in your scene, then keep taking turns until the end condition you’ve chosen has occurred.

Men’s Names	Women’s Names	Surnames	Places	
Johnny	Ann	Hall	Hotel Belvedere	Le Pavillon
Bellamy	Jane	McVeigh	Anderson Mfg. Plant	Wakefield Mansion
Norman	Greta	Grant	Center City Gazette	Crimson Avenue
Vincent	Mildred	Sanders	Littlewood Park	Lakeview Terrace
Lou	Frances	Goldstein	5th Precinct	Copper Creek Road
Gregory	Mary	Patterson	Green Acres Sanatorium	Cameron Boulevard
Ernest	Dorothy	Flick	S/S Victoria	Tony’s Pawn Emporium
Humphrey	Helen	Farinelli	Frankie’s Bar	Union Station
Clarence	Gladys	Beauregard	Lazyfield Motel	Huck’s Auto Repairs