

Rewind: Temporal Tales

The dragon's wing smashed into Robert's shield and sent it flying. He watched as it clattered against the far wall, which is why he was too slow to react to the tail as it whipped around and broke his neck. With a jolt he woke-up; he was back in the stable wearing his filthy peasant clothes... again. **sigh** It was going to be that kind of day.

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You've seen the show or read the book, the protagonist, usually someone with limited skill or knowledge, is gifted or cursed with re-living some point in their life. Now, it is your turn to stand in those boots, explore the future and re-live it. Solve the mystery, win the day, or die trying... again.

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Rewind: Temporal Tales is a frame work and light role playing game for solo or single player game play. Yes, just one player. The complexity of time travel stories gets really tricky when you have a group. Additionally, our inspiration from books and movies almost always focuses on a single character. There might be other people present, but they are usually not part of the time travel mechanic.

In a single player game, one person assumes the role of the character and the other person is the game master. In a solo game, the player assumes both roles and uses tools and tables to introduce some randomness and challenge into the story.

Time travel is fantasy, rewinding is even more so. Not only does the player's character travel backwards in time, they somehow retain their memories. It's a

mystery to be solved, but probably not with science. That doesn't mean that there are no rules. Rewinding usually has a trigger and may have several; death, sleep, a fixed amount of time, or an at-will ability are all possibilities.

Stories about time travel, even ones that specifically involve temporal loops can cover a lot ground. They can be stories set in the past, present, or future (or all three!) Just about any genre or setting can be played as well. Are you a ghost re-living that fateful day? Trapped, you always return to that wizard's pentagram. Or, perhaps you never make it past high noon in that dusty town.

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Who – What – Where – Why - When?

That's our starting point, not all the details will be known; even who, if you start with amnesia.

Who can be nearly any person, real or fictional. In general, our protagonist is not one of the movers and shakers of the world. They have something to learn, goals to reach, and wrongs to right - even if one of those wrongs is themselves. This is usually the Hero's Journey from humble beginnings to great prowess.

What is the goal? Rescue the princess, win the war, become a better person, or solve your own murder are all options that I have seen done. It's also possible you don't know what that goal may be and you have to discover it during play. More often than not, time loop tales have one or more mysteries going on. The protagonist is frequently caught up in the schemes of others and must figure out where they stand.

Where does the main part of the story take place? You could have a full story inside of a single apartment building or it might be a globe spanning adventure. Genre will also influence this. In most time loop stories, there is a single place where the character keeps returning to. This is usually before a turning point in their life, or where they got caught up in all this temporal chaos, or perhaps the day begins when they wake up.

Why is your character looping through time? This isn't always a known thing at the beginning. (Ground hog wish magic, anyone?) It could be a wish (cruelly granted), the results of a scientific experiment, perhaps it is a character's super power. Optionally, time travel may not even exist within the story. In the movie, *Next*, Cris Johnson (Nicolas Cage) uses precognition to see possible future events. You could also model a video game where there are save points and your character's life is inside of a computer game or simulation.

When goes hand in hand with the **Where** for the most part. But, it also can define some past or future event that is pivotal to the story; twenty four hours before a nuclear war, right after a fateful lab experiment, or maybe the day you died (for the first time.)

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To begin play, you need a character. It helps to write the details down on a piece of paper or you can use your favorite note taking app. When making a character, our protagonist is going to be made up of several parts:

- Name: Name, nickname, alias, or model number.
- Details: A quick line or two about your character's look, gender, height, weight, tattoos, etc.
- History: Your job (if you have one), education, and something about where you grew up.
- Skills: These are things that you are competent at and can be expected to perform well even under stressful situations.
- Mastery: These are skills that you are really good at and set you apart from your peers.
- Stuff: Equipment and gear that you start with at the beginning of a time loop. Stuff comes and goes and is usually tracked as part of the time line since you can't keep it.

A note about skills and mastery, most people have everyday skills and knowledge that they can employ in non-stressful situations. Skills are those things that are above and beyond that. It's the difference between driving to work and taking an advanced driving course required by bodyguards and police officers. Mastery is an even higher level of skill and knowledge usually backed with some experience. If you are skilled, you do not take a penalty to your dice roll. If you have mastery in a skill, you get a bonus to the roll.

How many skills and mastery items should your starting character have? Well, it depends on the story. If you're just a kid, you might have some skill like Agility, but no

mastery. A professional might have a single mastery. Want several mastery skills at the start? Consider taken a disadvantage at well such as old, wounded, hated, etc.

Sample characters:

Name: Grace "Lucky" Strickland
Details: Grace is in pretty good shape, she still runs at the gym, she keeps her red hair short
History: Communications major and news reporter
Skills: Library research, talking to people
Mastery: none
Stuff: Stylish clothes, wireless professional microphone, can of mace in her purse, smart phone

Name: Major Gordon "Blackjack" Moss
Details: Gordon has been flying a desk for too long and probably fills out his old flight suit in unflattering ways. His black hair is always closely cropped and his nose and teeth are slightly crooked.
History: USAF Officer with a Meteorology degree
Skills: Piloting, bluffing
Mastery: casino games
Stuff: USAF uniform, keys to a 2009 Volvo, leather wallet with \$98, older model iPhone

These characters are just the tip of the iceberg. The goal isn't to create some uber hero. You'll have a lot more fun with a character that has room to grow. There's one more part; Rewind Points. Everyone starts off with zero of these. You gain them through play.

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You might have noticed that there are no detailed numbers present like you might see in other role playing games. That's intentional. Rewind uses a system of advantages and disadvantages that affect a single roll of the dice. If the outcome is not in doubt or there is no risk or time pressure, the action succeeds automatically. You don't have to roll dice to cross the street, well unless there are gun toting motorcycle ninjas. That's what the next section is for.

Any time the outcome of an action is in doubt, you can roll two regular six sided dice, add the results of the dice together plus any advantages/disadvantages, and check the Time Table (because "What-Happens-This- Time?" table is a bit of a mouthful.)

Time Table

3 or less	No, and (something terrible/annoying)
4-5	No
6	No, but
7	Delayed
8	Yes, but
9-10	Yes
11 or more	Yes, and (something great/special)

Disadvantages subtract from the total of the dice while advantages add to the total. These stack and can cancel each other out. A maximum of -3 or +3 can be applied to any single throw of the dice. For example, being unskilled is a -1. Having mastery is a +1. (And by default, being skilled is no penalty.) Conditions such as darkness or rain can cause a disadvantage. You can also have an advantage such as preparedness or surprise on an opponent. A character's history might give them an advantage, if their knowledge would be really helpful.

Let's walk through the seven possible results. In our example, Robert is throwing a dagger at a fleeing bandit after a failed ambush.

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|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No, and | You failed to hit your target and your favorite dagger goes 'ploomp' in the swamp, never to be seen again. |
| No | A simple failure, the dagger does not connect with the target. |
| No, but | You failed to kill the bandit, but maybe your hit knocked him off balance and he fell. |
| Delayed | Trees and brush get in the way of a clean shot. This isn't failure unless timing is an issue. For example, the bandit is getting on a horse and will have an advantage soon. Crossing swords would be a delay. |
| Yes, but | You succeed, but at cost. Perhaps the bandit yelled out before he died. |
| Yes | A solid success, you achieved your stated goals without a problem. |
| Yes, and | Not only does the bandit fall, he accidentally reveals the name of the bandit boss, "Red Hand Sam will avenge me!" |

The Time Table is designed to be loose in its results. There's no way that any table can cover all outcomes. The results here are to guide the story forward.

Rewinding offers a benefit of 20/20 hindsight (or is that foresight?) When you revisit a decision point, if you do not change your actions, you can follow the path. However, you can use your fore-knowledge to create advantages such as having the right tool, inside information, or perhaps just being warned in advance of a surprise.

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For our time traveling heroes and heroines, time is like a tree that branches at significant points. You'll need a pack of index cards or an app that does something like sticky notes.

The first step is to create your zero card. Write a zero in the corner and a one in the other. Now write down your **Where** and **When** info inside the card. Each card is a node and represents a way point in one or several time-lines. As part of your character's history you might know exactly what you need to do. At other times, you'll have to discover that through play. It's possible that your character may not even know that time is more flexible than they thought at the start of play.

Explore your future through role play either with a game master or via an oracle (a table of random story elements or images ala tarot cards or story dice) until you reach a decision point. This is something more important than "wheat or white toast"; things like trying to breaking up a fight, running across a busy street to stop a blind man, or defending yourself from a bandit attack. Pull out a new index card, write down the new node number in the corner and the next number node in other corner, and add details about this point in time. If you survive the encounter, role-play to the next node, chaining them together as one time line.

Eventually you'll fail. You might succeed on the first pass through the story, if you're super lucky. But, you can bet that there's probably some nasty surprise/plot twist waiting for you at the end. After all, this is a game about time loops. Mark the last card with a black dot and give the player a Rewind Point.

Start back at the zero node. If you make the same decisions, walk on down the chain of nodes until you get to a point where you want to change the future (or is that the past?) For example, if you're in node 2 and you want to try something different and create a new branch, pull out a new index card (let's say it is node 7) on card 2, write a 7 next to the 3. Now node 2 can branch to node 3 or node 7. On the node 7 card, write down the number and the details of the new encounter. If you survive/succeed, connect that to node 8.

Another example, in node 3 Robert leaves town to rescue the Princess in Peril. And, he promptly runs into and gets slaughtered by bandits (-2 to the roll for being ambushed and unarmed.) Black dot, end of the line and the player gets a Rewind Point. So, the second time around, the player decides to branch off of node 2 before leaving town. In node 4, he manages to sneak into the blacksmith's shop and steal a sword. When Robert goes to leave town (node 5 in the current time line), the player describes how Robert uses his foreknowledge to create an advantage that counters the ambush and even turn the tables on them. Does the sword give him an advantage? Probably not, the first time around Robert was unarmed and at a disadvantage. Having a sword cancels that out. He's on par and not better off than they are.

While duplicate events can happen like the bandit ambush, they are treated as separate nodes since time lines fork and do not flow back together. Primarily it is to keep the time lines neat and tidy, but it is also because the events are slightly different. The character has new knowledge, may have prepared in advance, or has better equipment and allies.

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So, you're collecting these Rewind Points. But, what are they and what can you do with them. Rewind Points represent the character's ability to learn. Sometimes this is a fast lesson, other times it is because they failed at the same loop a dozen times (even if we only play through it once.) The character can permanently learn from their mistakes and improve on their skills. For two points you can go from unskilled to skilled. Or, you take a something skilled to mastery for two more points. Going from unskilled to mastery would take a total of four Rewind Points. What's to prevent you character from making lots of dumb moves and collecting the Rewind Points? Remember the black dot on the card? Each node can only reward one Rewind Point. You can fail all you want on a given obstacle, but the valuable lesson is only learned the first time. It's still possible to 'game' the system and go crazy with making a lot of nodes and failing, if that's the story you want to tell.

Can you learn from positive experiences? Maybe, remember the "Yes, and" result on the Time Table? You could say that one of the 'and' possibilities is that you learned something critical about the situation and earned a Rewind Point. This is usually something major like the true nature of the enemy, critical limitations on your ability to rewind, or maybe finding out that you're not the only time traveler around. It shouldn't happen every

time you get a great result. Punching a goon in the jaw is not going to reveal the secrets of the universe. Also, remember to put a black dot on that node.

For example, Grace sneaks around to listen to some shady characters. She gets a result of "Yes, and" and realizes that she's trapped in the middle of some kind of alien invasion from another dimension. She knows that if she doesn't stop them, they'll take over the Earth and destroy her time line (and all of humanity in it.) That's a pretty major plot point and worth a Rewind Point.

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So, we have a character that can do stuff, a node map that they can walk to explore the future, but where does all that node info come from? Node zero is based on our starting questions. Each node after that should be part of a (theoretically) logical progression.

If you're playing lone wolf and you have a game master across the table from the player, you can collaboratively build the world and your encounters together. The GM's job will be to challenge the character and reveal their idea of what's going on in the story. The amount of preparation that the GM needs to do is a matter of style. Some GM's will create a lot of notes, plot points, non-player characters to interact with, maybe even craft some maps. Other GM's like to play it by ear, do zero prep, and improvise as they go along. Either style or somewhere in between is fine. Collaboration means that it is perfectly 'fair' for the GM to share narrative control with the player and lets them create some of the scenes and actions.

If the GM is stuck for ideas or if you're playing Rewind as a solo game, there are a number of tools that you can

use to fuel your imagination. The first one is the Time Table itself. Ask a question, figure out if there are any advantages or disadvantages, and roll the dice.

As an example, Blackjack Moss is trying to break into the armory. The first question that comes to mind, "Is the door guarded?" Remember, a Yes result would be bad for the character, so any advantages for the enemy would make it worse. Let's assume that we have previously established that the enemy are professionals and the base is at high alert, not good for the Major. Rolling a 9 with +2 gets us an 11 or "Yes, and". So, not only is the door guarded but it is worse, perhaps there's a guard dog as well and it is looking right at Blackjack.

While consulting the Time Table is quick and easy, we still needed to come up with some details out of thin air. Oracles and random image tools can help with that. Oracles are not something new. The first ones go all the way back to the dawn of role playing games, only then they were called wandering monster tables. They have evolved a little bit from that time. Most oracles consist of evocative phrases that are open to a number of interpretations, like fortune cookies or your daily horoscope. One big advantage to oracles is that they can be easily customized and updated. An oracle for a Lovecraft inspired setting is going to be different from one for space opera or a slasher flick.

Another favorite source for inspiration is the use of random images. This can be something like random pictures fetched via Google and from other sites, custom props like Rory's Story Cubes or Plot Twist cards, online tools like my own Zero Dice, or the tarot cards. My favorite deck is the Osho Zen Tarot, a non-traditional set with many colorful and emotion themed cards.

Here a few random generators that I made:

http://www.tangent-zero.com/zero_dice/zero_dice.html

http://www.tangent-zero.com/zero_tarot/zero_tarot.html

To use the previous example with Major Moss trying to break into the armory, we'll roll three Story Cubes to give us some details to play with. On the roll we get icons for a turtle, a dog, and some Z's. Let's call that a "Yes, the door is guarded. There's a guard in one of those rounded helmets that looks like a turtle shell. But, he's leaning against the door and obviously sleeping. The real guard is the German Shepard at his feet."

Here are a few themed Oracles using playing cards. To use them, just pull a card from the deck. For example, The Family is an organized crime themed oracle.

Drawing the Five of Hearts is a prompt for bring in the victims of this powerful gang. Interestingly, it is a heart so the victim may not be an intentional target. Perhaps it is a lieutenant's wife who is feeling neglected and comes to your character for some advice or (dangerous ground here) companionship.

In a Dragon's Eye:

Hearts	- true love and unending hate
Clubs	- it's a rough place with tough people
Diamonds	- greed and serfdom
Spades	- royalty, magic, and power
Ace	- the King's Sheriff shows up
Two	- it's easy to get lost, perhaps intentionally
Three	- three's company or a witness
Four	- what's going on in the square?
Five	- the system is built on a serf's back
Six	- there's more taking than giving going on
Seven	- it's an honest offer
Eight	- the Church has its own agenda
Nine	- might doesn't always mean right
Ten	- anything nice is guarded or hidden
Jack	- it's one of the King's men
Queen	- the Queen has her own agents
King	- big trouble comes to town whether it is mailed or scaled

The Family:

Hearts - romance and duty
Clubs - gang violence/police
Diamonds - greed and business
Spades - betrayal/dirty deeds

Ace - the FBI gets involved
Two - two people in private
Three - it looks like a drug deal
Four - revenge but why?
Five - about victims of crime
Six - they fell off a truck
Seven - it seems legitimate
Eight - a secret deal
Nine - that's a lot of thugs
Ten - there's a really nice car
Jack - a 'loyal' Lieutenant
Queen - she's always trouble
King - It's the Boss!

Cyber Jack of Hearts:

Hearts - love and emo stuff
Clubs - social activities
Diamonds - corporate scheming
Spades - cyberspace/cyborgs

Ace - a foreign power
Two - a contact has some info
Three - it looks like a stand off
Four - looking for payback
Five - infrastructure collapses
Six - everyone has needs
Seven - right time - right place
Eight - things get crazy fast
Nine - that's a lot of muscle
Ten - it's all ones and zeroes
Jack - jacked/hacked/broken
Queen - music makes a play
King - the Corporation acts

Just another War Story:

Hearts - morale and loyalty
Clubs - mission time
Diamonds - logistics/black market
Spades - it's a shit detail

Ace - HQ gets involved
Two - crap, LT has an idea
Three - who's got your back?
Four - war victims
Five - an inspection or drill
Six - military intelligence
Seven - you catch a lucky break
Eight - it's a full on assault
Nine - ambush/surprise
Ten - that's some nice gear...
Jack - unexpected support
Queen - it's a 'rescue' mission
King - Officer on deck!

Notes and other stuff:

Any reference to real or fictional people that might be offended by this game is accidental. That also applies to people that may or may not exist in the future or in other dimensions. Also, no challenges are intended or implied on anyone's property (intellectual or otherwise.) Relax. We'll get it right on the next time line.

Inspiration:

A few time loop movies: Groundhog Day, Timecop, Christmas Every Day, Camp Slaughter (also known as Camp Daze), Christmas Do-Over, Salvage, The Last Day of Summer, Timecrimes, Repeaters, 12 Dates of Christmas, Source Code, Mine Games, About Time, Edge of Tomorrow, Project Almanac, I Do! I Do! I Do! Precognition: The Dead Zone, Next. Video Games: Just about any RPG game with an unlimited save feature essentially allows you to rewind time.

Designer Ideas:

Want to expand the single player experience? Have the Rewind trigger be a fixed point in time. For example, every 24 hours everyone Rewinds no matter what they were doing. If you died before the timer ended, your character would now show back up at the zero point. Oh, bring a lot more (or bigger) index cards. :-)

Winning and losing: At the heart of every role playing game, the play is the thing, enjoy the journey. Rewind is a little different in that in the course of play you might lose your ability to rewind. If that happens, the character plays out that time line they are on and death is very permanent.

Generic Oracle Template:

Hearts	- emotional theme
Clubs	- obstacle theme
Diamonds	- object theme
Spades	- adversary theme
Ace	- authority
Two	- meetings
Three	- personal dynamics
Four	- motives
Five	- repercussions
Six	- acquisitions
Seven	- luck
Eight	- bad luck/chaos
Nine	- threat
Ten	- treasure
Jack	- agents/antagonists
Queen	- complications
King	- major opposition/plot element

Credits:

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