

# Fugue Hacking

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Notes on writing new content for James Wallis' *Fugue* system (as previously used for *Alas Vegas* and other content sets)

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# 1.0 Introduction

*Alas Vegas is basically a rules system and a campaign that are completely bonded together: the story can't be played without these rules, the rules won't make sense outside this story. It's not a 'story game' as the market understands them—when did I ever design something that fitted a pre-existing niche?—and although I'm building the game-story within a flexible framework to allow individual GMs to modify it, to make the game about the characters' journeys more than the setting's secrets, I'm afraid its replayability is likely to be low.*

(from comments on the [Alas Vegas Preview](#), Pelgrane Press, 2012)

In November 2015 James Wallis [published](#) the [Fugue rules](#) he developed for [Alas Vegas](#) under a Creative Commons license. The ruleset looks great, and I've several ideas for content of my own. But on [my first reading](#) I found the *Fugue* rules wanting in a couple of areas:

1. What do to with the Dealer's "persona" (PC) when it's their turn to run an act.
2. How to hand over between sessions.
3. How to weave flashbacks into the narrative.

4. How to hedge on facts as the Dealer, when you don't have enough objective information to provide the answers.
  
5. How to write Content Sets.

My interest is in number 5 but to get there we need to consider the preceding 4 items, which should influence how the content is written.

## 2.0 Weaving in Flashbacks with Triggers and Anchors

I'm going to refer to Triggers throughout. These are pieces of text written into the act that elicit a response from one or more characters. Because Fugue features amnesiac, emergent characters these cannot be written in advance for a specific persona — which may sound obvious, but consider how many times exactly this happens in scripted traditional RPGs, especially short-term convention games.

The role of a trigger is to provoke a response somehow. Triggers include but aren't limited to

- Flashbacks (per the 4th condition for flashbacks in the core rules)
- Prompted actions for the current Dealer's persona (in Game Character mode)

Triggers are written into each Act. It's the current Dealer's responsibility to make sure the Triggers happen. Some of them may be off-screen (e.g. a trigger is applied to the Dealer's persona, so they take certain action as a game-character) and some may be conditional (e.g. a flashback is only triggered if the party go to a certain location). A trigger should be

When the persona meets Saffron, trigger a flashback

When the persona walks onto Monument Hill, trigger a flashback

When the persona sees a tourist gunned down and turned into chip, trigger a flashback

The other concept is Anchors. These are also written into each Act, but rather than being something to provoke a response, they're a potential linkage to emerging narrative information (i.e. generated by the other Flashback mechanisms); they're a reason for the Flashback's output. They're relationships, past events, etc. Unlike triggers, you can't guarantee that they'll ever be used, but it may be nice to have them written in as a bit of GM support.

If a persona has a flashback here, maybe they have a relationship with Saffron

If a persona has a flashback, maybe it's related to the stash on Monument Hill

Etc.

## 3.0 Parking the Persona (and Eternal Champions)

Shared GMed games are not new. 20 years ago I played in a 4-session, 4-player, 4-GM shared game called *Eternal Champions* — we played Moorcockian heroes, each a representation of a cosmic force from their own realm, drawn together in a time of great need. That need was a very loosely defined existential threat to the entire multiverse, which would be addressed by the *GM du jour's* adventure which took place in their PC's world.

We used a macguffin for parking the current GM's PC. Since each world's Champion was part of a fine power balance in their own realm, they were unable to answer the threat themselves, and needed external agents in the form of the other characters. So the current GM withdrew their character and the other three players romped through the scenery tearing things up as only 500 point GURPS characters can do.

That macguffin may not work so well for a *Fugue* game owing to the single shared world. But actually James Wallis did write about this in the Dealer section of the *Alas Vegas* partial preview from September 2014:

*When it's your turn to referee a session, your persona remains a part of the group, though you must play them as a game-character. They cannot have flashbacks during this session, or give flashbacks to other personas. If their signifier comes up, nothing happens. You may want to use them as you would any game-character –*

*as a patsy, stool-pigeon, double-crosser, blackmail, blackmailee or enemy agent, whether willing or coerced.*

No spoilers, so I think it's OK to reproduce here. This isn't the only passage from the preview's Dealer section that should have been in the core *Fugue* rules. Also I like it because it establishes how the personas are "owned" by the game and how attached the players should be to them. Feelings of character ownership are non-trivial, and failing to get on the same page re: character ownership, autonomy and disposability leads to [inequity](#).

Now, this omission may have been an oversight, but there's another reason. *Fugue* as published is only half a game, and that seems to be a deliberate decision. The authors of the content sets will turn the *Fugue* rules into a complete game — so how to park the persona must be a consideration of the content set.

### 3.1 Content Set—Parking the Persona

1. When it's the player's turn to be Dealer, does their persona continue to be present in the game?
2. If not, what's the in-game rationale for their absence?
3. If they are, is the Dealer obliged to make their persona a turncoat, stooge, or other antagonist? What are the Triggers for this?

4. If the Dealer uses that persona to bring in other narrative elements, how should that be done?
  - Is there any latitude to bring in an external game character with a connection to that persona?  
Remember *Alas Vegas* is a closed world, and other *Fugue* games may be the same, and the personas are amnesiacs
  - If it is indeed a closed world, then the persona can only connect with the world as defined in the text. Do you need to write provision into each Act for this to happen? Are there any Triggers that apply?

On that last point: if you write in a trigger for the current Dealer's persona, tie it into an event, location or game character that will appear in that act.



## 4.0 Handover and Shared World Models

James Wallis had this to say about handover between Dealers (again from the *Alas Vegas* 2014 partial preview)

*To make this work you're going to have to remember the golden rule of improv work – which is all a lot of storytelling games are, really. That rule is: never reject or contradict. Take whatever is offered you and work it into the story. so if you've discovered that what you thought was a tale of hunting in the frozen tundra and you're started to get attached to your Inuit warrior, and suddenly you discover that it's all supposed to be going off in a hyperreal version of las Vegas, then the key rule is not to overrule anything that happened in the previous session.*

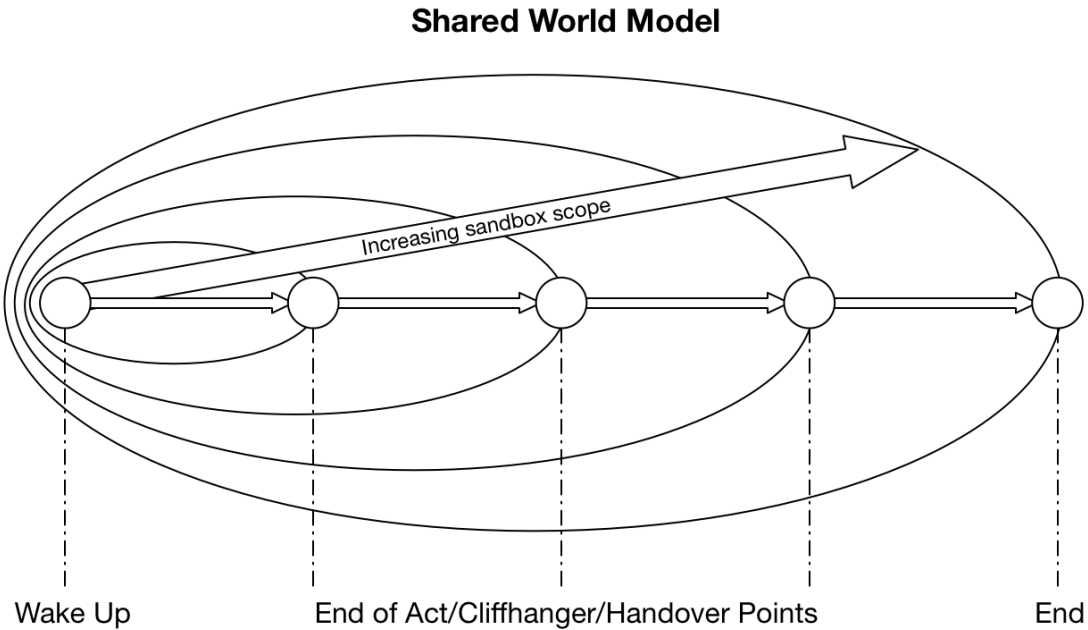
Wallis goes on to the second rule which is (in non-neutral language) to have it out with the previous Dealer for screwing things up in the first place. Well, OK, but there is a better solution: don't play with people who are going to be so obviously on a different page from you that they will wreck the game for everyone by bringing their act to an unrecoverable end-point (more on that later).

Going back to *Eternal Champions* and games like them, we needed no special conditions for handover. Trust goes a long, long way. But, the *Eternal Champions* game was not a single supposedly homogeneous world, but four separate ones. Also, like Moorcock's books, there was little enforced continuity between the worlds; what we were playing with were four different impressions of the same theme. We weren't restricted by anything as ambitious as a script, and each GM was free to create within a set of very

broad guidelines (the aforementioned undefined existential evil, the role of the Champion, etc.).

### 4.1 Models

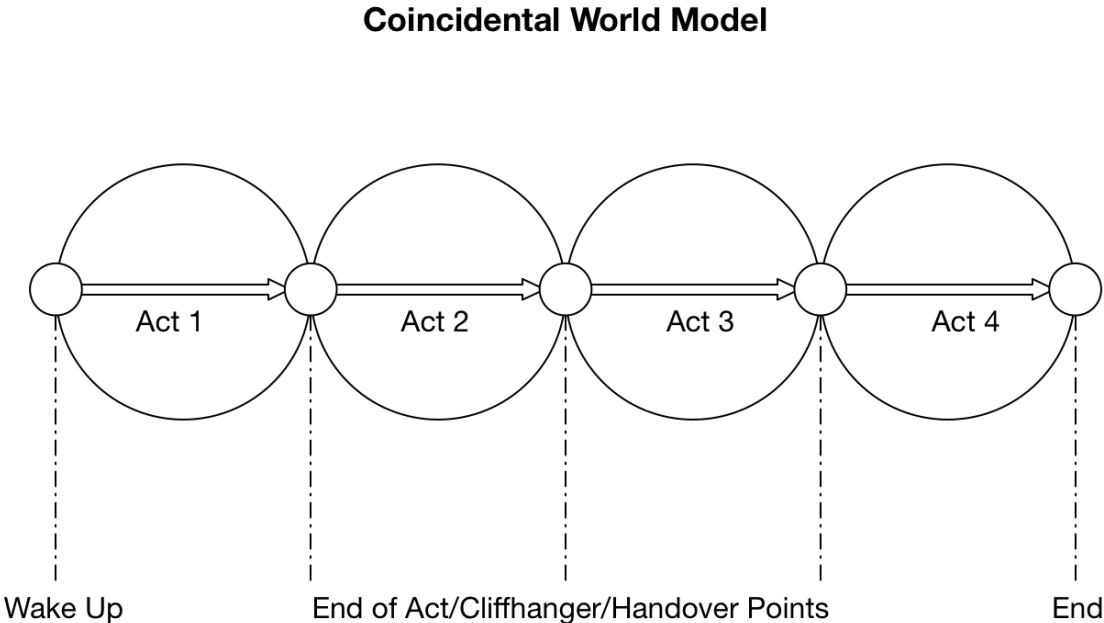
Consider a game like *Alas Vegas*, where the GM mantle is passed from one player to another, but there's a collective responsibility to one narrative and one group of characters. There are two ways to view this with the passing of time. One is a truly shared model:



The circles are the start/end points for each act (and handover); the ovals are the scope of the game world. You can see that the scope starts small but as each new GM pitches in

the scope gets bigger. This model assumes the improv rule of “accept and incorporate” and the scope of the previous act is *always a subset of the next*.

The alternative model is the coincidence model:



The universe in each successive act is a copy of the last. Any continuity is an illusion brought about by the goodwill of the players.

Which of these makes more sense for structuring your *Fugue* game? Intuitively it's the first, with a shared imagined space and those all-important rules of improve, especially *add, don't contradict*. The second model looks like a chaotic mess by comparison.

Here's a few reasons why the second is actually superior to the first.

1. The game world has a strong [tacit component](#), that cannot be articulated in full (i.e. made explicit) by the group. Even if it could, each player's version of the world is skewed by their own [heuristics and biases](#).
2. Each player will have a limit to their [working memory](#), such that minor details will be forgotten. Working memory is supplemented by writing things down, but since making things explicit is subject to limits too (q.v.) there will always be some detail that's lost in transition.
3. Given the themes (Lynch, Cronenberg, *The Prisoner*, *Fear and Loathing*) some ambiguity or contradiction may actually be good. The genre — and more generally horror — thrives on uncertainty.

So, this is my recommendation: don't think of it as a single shared world. Think of it as four copies of the same world, with the personas transitioning between them unawares. Where there is uncertainty, [worship the glitch](#).

## 4.2 Content Set—Facts and Reassurances

However, you still want to keep the players on the same page. Here's a couple of ideas.

Let's consider that *other* RPG about amnesia, [A Penny For My Thoughts](#). That game features a very neat orientation mechanism in the [Facts and Reassurances](#) sheet. If you look through the alternative playsets you'll see alternative Facts and Reassurances.

This sheet is your starting point to get the players on the same page regarding the world they're in. For the *Alas Vegas* preview it's the setting chapter (before the eyes-only chapters on each Act).

Write a Facts and Reassurances sheet (call it what you want) at the start. At the end of each written act write a Trigger for the Dealer to add to the Sheet before they pass it on to the next Dealer. This document stays in full view of all the players at all times; it represents shared knowledge.

Separate from the Facts and Reassurances sheet, you may want a Relationship map between game characters and personas. Draw this however you would like — on a big sheet of paper, on a cork-board with index cards, in a [C-Map](#), etc.

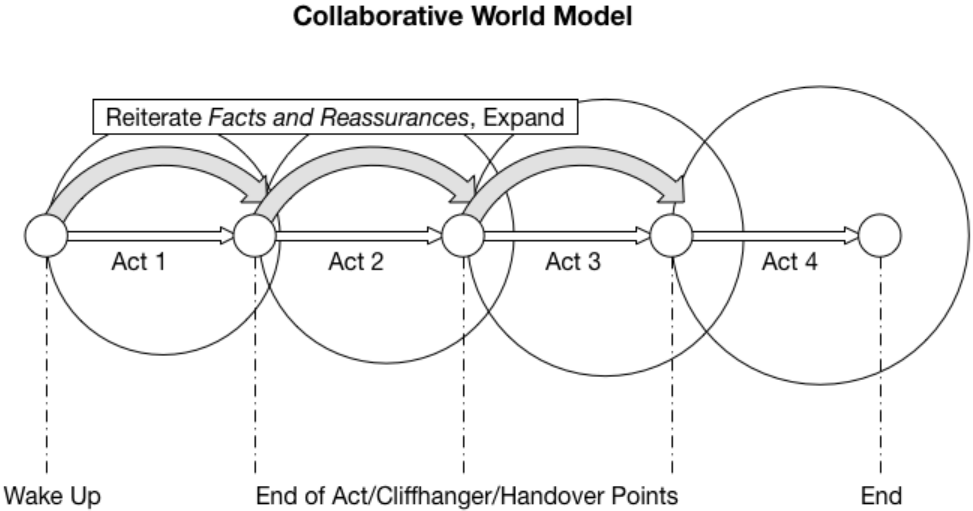
## The index card option

Not only does it allow you to pin, rearrange and pass around the individual cards, it also lets the incumbent Dealer *send secret messages to the new Dealer* by writing on the back of certain index cards. What messages? They could be questions like “what will Davey do when Saffron makes her move on his turf?” or they could be facts like “Saffron has a twin sister working in the penthouse of Capital Tower”. Whether you encourage this randomness in your content set is up to you. Bear in mind that any secret messages may

be ignored by the new Dealer, especially if they forget to look over each and every index card before it's their act, so they should be an optional extra.

I would suggest an index card for each game character, location, and maybe faction. These will form an add-on to your Facts and Reassurances. At no point do the index cards get flipped over for everyone to see. If the next Dealer down the line reads the back and does something with their predecessor's idea, cool. Otherwise, let them rest there.

In the end, your collaborative world model will look like this:



Each act is its own little bubble, but each is successively larger than the previous one, and there's overlap — the Venn diagram shows where the Facts and Reassurances are reiterated, expanded and inserted at the start of the next Act.

## 5.0 Building in Constraints

When authoring content, I need to choose which of these constraints to obey:

### 5.1 Structural Constraints

- 3-4 hour sessions
- limited number of acts
- Dealer rotation
- Amnesia
- deliberately limiting player knowledge
- use of the tarot deck
- flashback mechanics



## 5.2 Thematic constraints

- Tarot imagery in the game world
- In media res
- Start location is sparse (characters are naked in the desert, on the edge of civilisation)
- Closed world with restricted exploration and isolation
- A division between “tourists” and “locals”
- Various factions

The above are based on the perceived constraints in *Alas Vegas*.

## 5.3 Content Set—Choosing Your Constraints

Switching these constraints on or off raises some interesting questions. For example:

- I. What if the personas aren’t amnesiacs? They’re fleshed out characters but with a collective gap in their memory (say, over a specific time period)

2. What if the personas don't start *in media res*, but there's a well established mission briefing? How much of that briefing can they trust?
3. What if the boundaries of the world are never tested?
4. What if you don't limit the number of acts in your Fugue game? Just keep the Dealer role rotating (as one might do in say [Malandros](#))
5. What if you don't script out the game, just provide an initial premise? (this would make your game like an *Eternal Champion* game, for example)
6. What other constraints can you add?
7. What can you throw to the party right at the start? A map of the area? A list of names, some of which have been crossed out in red biro?
8. How can you play with the start location? What if amnesiac characters emerge from a lift in an unnamed office building, soaked in blood? Or 5 meters under water, swimming to the surface? Or in free fall? (I actually ran that last one about 5 years ago)

## 6.0 Blast Play, Handover and Unrecoverable Situations

*Alas Vegas is a 'blast'—longer than a one-shot game but not a standard open-ended RPG. It contains a set of rules and a single adventure that plays out over four sessions, for a group of 4-6 people. It's a neat format, and the rules and adventure complement each other perfectly to form a self-contained gaming unit unlike anything you've played before.*

(from the [Kickstarter](#))

So, one of the major constraints is the 4-act structure with around 3-4 hours per act. That's not far off a convention slot for a one-shot game.

Also like a con game, each act has to be a short story rather than a novel — not much space for meandering plots or misdirection, at least as far as the GM goes. Some con games are experimental and/or open ended but the majority try to resolve and they do so with defined end conditions, e.g.

- Mission success
- Escape with the treasure

- Achieving personal (on-the-sheet) goals

A con game is fire-and-forget — even games with very specific mission parameters can be left open-ended; they can result in objective “failure” (e.g. TPK); they don’t always satisfy all the players. But, the GM isn’t obliged to tidy up their game for the next GM, and they can just leave things hanging (or more likely wash up informally over a pint at the bar).

This isn’t a luxury you have if you’re handing over the GM mantle to the next player. Things at least have to make objective sense; more importantly the end state as written has to be communicated into an end state that all the players can see, so everyone knows where to pick up from.

As discussed above you can already get a long way with (a) trust, goodwill and a social contract and (b) some form of living shared Same Page document. But it should be noted that there’s no one mechanism or safety net built into *Fugue* that will deal with an *unrecoverable end point*. If the previous GM leaves the game in a spot which bears no relation to the next act, the world unrecognisable from the Facts and Reassurances, or with one or more personas dead, what can you do? It’s a bit late for “don’t play with those sorts of people”.

Here are two examples of unrecoverable situations and how a system can obviate them.

## 6.1 Example—Death

Death in-game makes it difficult for the player to continue to participate, but it's trivial to make that recoverable through game design:

- Send in the clones (Paranoia)
- Mechanical influence of resource tokens after death (Mountain Witch)
- Haunting the party, appearing in Flashbacks, changing the PC's sphere of influence, etc.

So, this is an example of I write a hard rule or boundary condition that obviates this situation. Job done.

## 6.2 Example—Running Out Of Clues

Usually when the players are looking lost the GM will chuck in some stimulus (an event, a NPC with vital information); again that's fine when you as GM are the sole arbiter of your game, but when you have a responsibility to the next player who will be GM, you need to be careful what you throw in off-the-cuff — which means that either

- new NPCs or prompts need to be written into the original script, or

- there's a mechanism for generating new NPCs so that they can be picked up by the next GM.

The GUMSHOE system addresses the old *Call of Cthulhu* problem of failed *Spot Hidden* rolls with readily discoverable clues; but in doing so that game requires a heavily scripted product. It's another example of your How to Host a Murder dinner party game, dressed up in RPG trade dress.

### 6.3 Content Set—Contingency

I'm not saying either of these are right, or even necessary — but since *Fugue* itself doesn't address this problem, if you think it could be a problem in your content set, you might want to think of special rules or conditions, particularly if you have no control over who plays your game. But if the “accept and incorporate; never contradict” improv maxim is enough for you and your players, you probably won't encounter this issue to begin with.

## 7.0 Summary and Remarks

Techniques to consider *in play*:

1. Use a *Facts and Reassurances* sheet, and some kind of relationship map or cork board to keep all the players on the same page. Consider using the index cards to write secret messages to the next Dealer.
2. Accept that this is one one homogeneous game world of expanding scope; it's a series of iterative and expanding copies, with similarities built from goodwill and rubber bands.

Techniques to consider when *authoring content*:

1. When writing your four-act content set, build in Triggers (to provoke Flashbacks) and Anchors (as potential linkages to Flashbacks).
2. Decide how the current Dealer's Persona is parked.
3. In your written content, remind the play group to review the Facts and Reassurances at the start of the act/session, and to add to it at the end of the act/session.

4. Look at the constraints of play, both practical and thematic. Which ones will you keep, which will you change, and which new ones will you introduce? How does that change the content set? These are potential levers.
5. If you *really* don't trust the players to take their turn as Dealers and not wreck everything, consider building in safety valves. But "accept, incorporate, don't contradict" should be enough for most people.

## 7.1 New Content

This document came about for self-serving reasons: *Fugue* looks like a great, simple system and I wanted to write my own content. But there's frustratingly little support in *Fugue* for writing a game like *Alas Vegas*; and so I started to second-guess how the other content set authors (*Yet Already*, *Remembering Cosmic Man*, *Warlock Kings*) had gone about writing their content. Without any examples for comparison — and with a moratorium on reading past *Alas Vegas*' first act if I don't want to be spoiled — I realise I'm contemplating my own navel. But there it is.

For my own content I have three ideas in the pipeline, although when I'll get the time to complete them who knows — I'm writing this with a four-week old slung across my chest as I type on the kitchen table. Moments to cherish, eh?



## Deep Season

A game of amnesia in rural England around that special season. I'm trading the David Lynch, *Fear and Loathing*, Americana feel of *Alas Vegas* for something closer to home. *The Prisoner* is still relevant, but there's a heavy dose of teatime BBCi young adult drama (think *Children of the Stones*, *Tomorrow People*, Russell T. Davies' *Century Falls*) and of course Susan Cooper's *Dark is Rising*.

## After The Poison Summer

Inspired by Greg Saunders' *Summerland*. The characters emerge from a bunker to a verdant apocalypse.

## Scanners Love In Vain

Former addicts emerging from indentured servitude, piecing their shattered memories back together which were destroyed by the drug they have been forced to cultivate.