
Cirque Noir Documentation

Release 24h

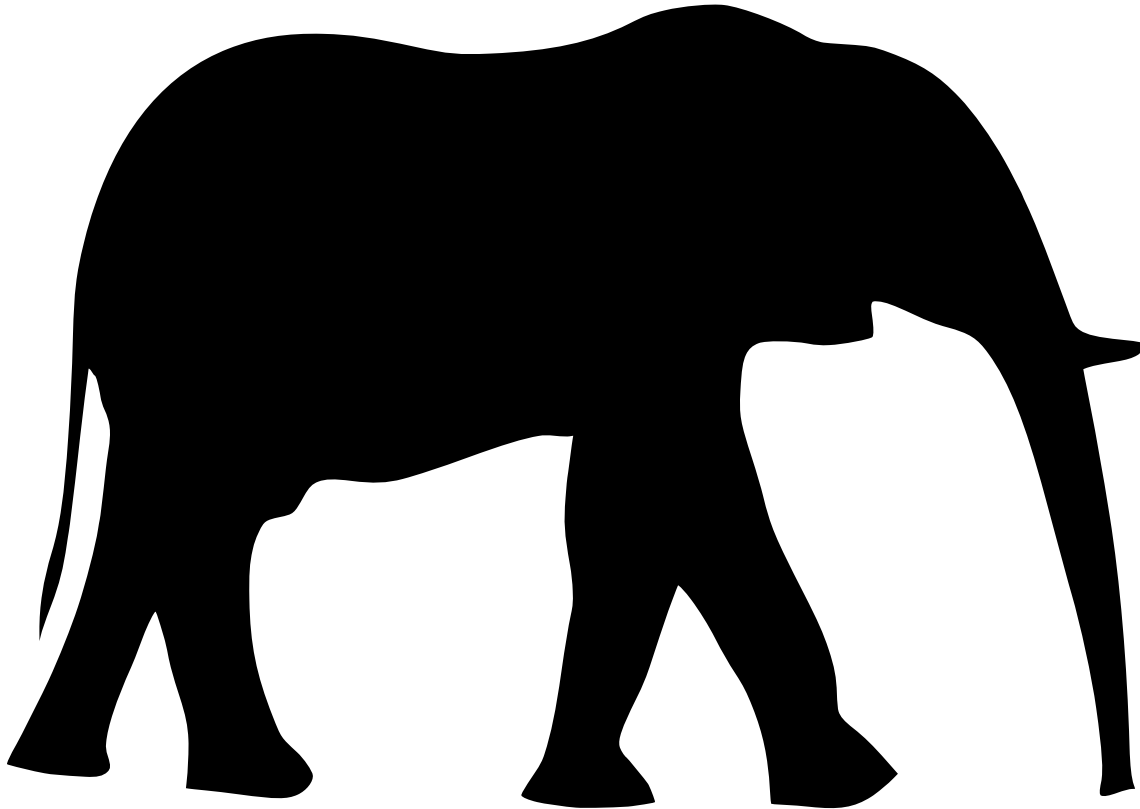
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October 06, 2015

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A spectacularly mysterious murder mystery in a literal and figurative underground circus



Contents:

WHERE?

Not long ago, this country, *your* country, was a place of anarchy, chaos and lesser amusements. People actually thought that anyone and everyone could actually be an individualist. It makes me doubt the so-called human common sense. At last, some ten years ago, reason took over. Now, everyone is equal. The same clothes, the same entertainment, the same newsfeeds, the same colors, the same housings, the same food, the same transportation. You name it. Individualism now lies in the tasks that people complete on their jobs. Even though we did our best to normalize factories, services and raw production.

Of course, some people are more equal than others. This will always hold true. These do not belong to the normalized caste, but rather to the prime caste. It's natural. Any living organization has leaders and workers. Men, women and others in the prime caste still keep a normalized facade. However, there are options to make their life more interesting.



Not everyone is satisfied to be entertained by running, soccer, trideo and the press.

Fortunately, there are other forms of entertainment. Some humans have slipped through the grasp of the normalized government. If a prime wants the most wild of entertainments, they will visit the Cirque Noir.

Cirque Noir is an underground circus, run and staffed by the unregistered caste. Performers show all kinds of entertainment: juggling, acrobatics, feats of strength, dancing, stunts. They have wild animals, unbeknownst to normalized society. They perform deadly stunts on fuel-driven cars, which they control by hand. They provide displays of unenclosed fire. They throw knives around the outlines of their fellows. They don't even wear normalized clothing, instead they wear barely anything, in bright colors ornamented with glitter. They don't even talk normalized, instead they shout in weird accents, using unknown or even sanctioned words.

Cirque Noir is the antithesis to normalized society. That is why they are located deep down in the darkest depths of an abandoned underground facility. Fortunately, no-one that ever visited will snitch on Cirque Noir. This place is so surreal that Normalizers will put you in reconfiguration facilities if you would tell such weird stories.

But the few primes that make it to each show do not provide sufficient audience to the Cirque performers. So they let a crowd of norms fill the lower ranks.



Each week, there is a show in the Cirque Noir, for a few primes and a horde of norms, gasping for this most unnor-
malized entertainment.

Unfortunately, this week a murder occurred.

WHAT?

Cirque Noir is a narrative game about circus performers solving a crime in their enclosed circus arena.

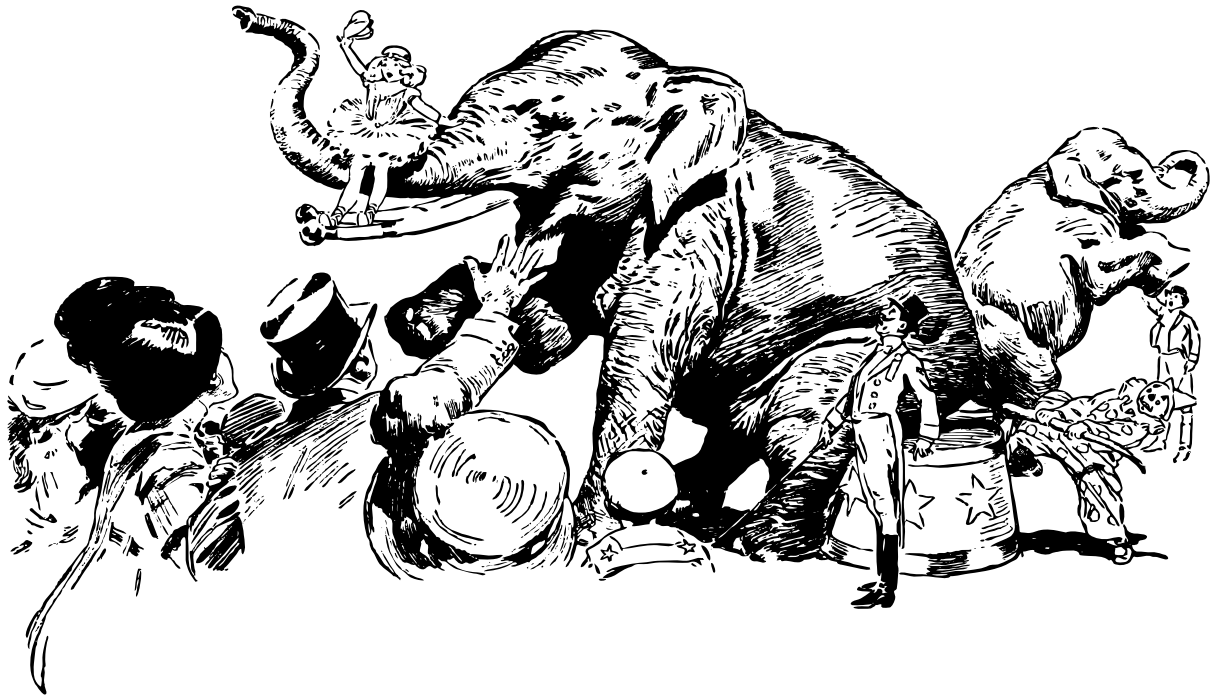
Each player takes control of a circus performer of the name-sake Cirque Noir, an underground circus in your country after it has been normalized. The performers are some of the few people left that are unregistered and do not follow the grey-samish lifestyle of the norms. Each performer has a few Feats, an Acquaintance, a Grudge and their own Drive for being in the Cirque.

During the last show, someone was murdered. At least for one player-controlled character, there is no way that this was an accident. They lock down the facility and no-one may leave. There are a few primes present and a whole crowd of grey, nameless norms. They cannot call the Normalizers, of course, so the performers have to investigate the murder themselves.

During the course of the investigation, performers will find clues to what happened and why and whodunnit. There will also be action sequences and of course questioning of suspects. Possibly, there will also be quarrels between the performers.

In this game, there is no game master or similar facilitator. Instead, the actions of the players will determine which of the suspects is the murderer. The game resolves when the murderer is found and either is held accountable for their crime(s) or makes their escape.

Your will (probably) need at least three players, as many sheets of paper, a pen and a stack of index cards to play this game properly.



HOW?

This chapter details the rules of the game.

3.1 Structure

The game is structured in the following way:

1. creation of the performers
2. opening scene and murder
3. investigative phase
 - find a clue
 - interview a suspect
 - action scene
 - deliberate
4. resolution and finale

3.2 Creation of the performers

Before the actual play begins, each player will create their Performer.

To create your performer, think of your last visit to the circus. Which feats did you like the most? Pick these and make them the center of your Performer.

Take a sheet of paper and write down the feats that they are able to perform. Here are some inspirations:

- breathing and eating fire
- horse acrobatics
- predator handling
- dancing
- knife throwing
- juggling
- escapism
- lifting

- rope dancing
- clowning
- whip tricks
- magic
- driving
- contortionism
- shooting
- music
- acrobatics

You can surely think of all the feats that I missed.

Pick up to three broad areas that your Performer is proficient in. Write them down under the title Feats. These Feats are the special abilities that your character possesses.

We definitely want a magician. Then something more dangerous: predator handling.

If you took less than three Feats, think of all the background work that needs to be done for a circus:

- attendant
- announcer
- technician
- animal handler
- worker
- bouncer
- manager

Fill up the remaining Feats with these jobs until you have a grand total of three. Write them down under Feats. These jobs get far too little glamour.

Our character will also be an attendant.

Now, give your Performer a name at the top of your sheet and give him a title for the announcer.

Here comes lovely Selene, master magician and tiger trainer!

Now, who on the circus does your Performer not get along with? Feel free to pick one of the Performers of your fellow players.

Pick one person that your Performer holds a grudge against and name the reason why. Write this down under Grudge on your sheet.

Selene does not get along well with Philipe, the ridiculous acrobat, because he constantly makes fun of her, even when talking about serious subjects.

Your Performer also knows one person in the audience personally. One of their prime acquaintances is present at the show when the murder occurs.

Who is this person? What is their name and their apparent role in society? What is your Performers relation to this person?

Write all of this down on your sheet under Acquaintance.

Selene knows Lars Hendriksson, a wealthy fabric factory owner, who she almost fell in love with a while ago and who personally oversees production of her dresses.

Now, give them some distinguishing feature. This may be any of:

- an accent or other distinguishing speech patterns
- striking physical appearance (beautiful, athletic and similar do not count!)
- characteristic movements or stances
- extravagant world views which they frequently vocalize

When you play your character, be sure to reincorporate this feature. Note it down.

The finalizing step for your character will be his motivation, his Drive to perform in the circus. Are they doing it ...

- for fun?
- for money?
- for their heritage?
- for their lover?
- for their family?
- for lack of options?
- to take revenge?
- for darker reasons?

Any reason you can think of is fine. Be sure to note it down under Drive.

And now, that your Performers are ready, let the show begin!



3.3 Opening scene and murder

Starting with you, each player will briefly describe a Performance in the Cirque Noir, going round-robin. You will start with the announcer, introducing tonight's programme, and then continue with various artists. Each player gets to describe – briefly: take less than 2 minutes – what astonishing feats are on display for the audience tonight. Don't forget to show how the audience reacts and what the scenery in the Cirque looks like! Be brief!

The other players should feel free to narrate the reactions of their Performer's acquaintance, to vaguely flesh out their character.

After everyone has taken a turn, you decide who of the Cirque Noir staff will be murdered. This may not be any of the Performers or the Acquaintances. However, feel free to murder a staff member that a player Performer holds a grudge against. This will make for a nice twist in the investigation.

Do not murder a norm, for no-one cares about them. Do not murder a prime, for they will not let unregistered people meddle with their affairs.

Going round-robin, every player may add a detail to the murder. Details may include:

- How is the victim found?
- What wounds does he have, if any?
- Who is doing what on stage, right now?
- What machines are running or malfunctioning at the time?
- How does the audience react?

These should all be obvious facts.

After the murder, the investigations begin. The players' Performers quickly band together to find out, who killed their colleague, even if some may hold Grudges against each other.

3.4 Investigative phase

In the investigative phase, the Performers try to find out, who murdered their fellow performer and how and why. To this end, Performers will search for clues, interview suspects, try to catch suspects and prevent further murders and deliberate on their findings so far.

3.4.1 Suspects

For the entire investigation, only the player's Performers and their Acquaintances are valid Suspects. This means that, initially, there are twice as many Suspects in the game as there are players.

Selene, Philipe and Lars Hendriksson are all Suspects, as are Philipe's Acquaintance Lanny X. In a two-player game, these would be all the Suspects.

3.4.2 Clues

A Clue is any information that increases the Performers' knowledge about the murder. Some Clues may lead in false directions. Each Clue has a short description and affects two Suspects.

Whenever the Performers find a Clue, it should be noted on a separate index card per Clue. Note down the description, the Clue number and the two affected Suspects. The player whose Performer found the Clue should announce the

description and the Suspects and lay it face down in front of himself. A player may never find a Clue that affects his own Performer.

When a player assigns Suspects to a Clue, it should be thinkable that these two have something to do with it. It does not have to be likely or plausible, even though it can be. Things are often more complicated than that.

When creating a Clue, keep previous Clues in mind. Develop a theory of your own on how the murder went down and what the motives are. You do not have to be consistent, but it's a nice touch.

3.4.3 Performing Feats

Whenever a Performer interviews a Suspect or takes place in an action sequence, they will be required to Perform a Feat. When they Perform a Feat, their skill is tested. They may succeed, usually taking the investigation in their general direction

When a Performer performs a Feat, their player has to announce what they are trying to do. They then explain, how their Feats help them. If a Performer does not have a fitting Feat, they cannot Perform a Feat. Any Feat that is used, should be adequately mentioned in the description of the Feat.

Do not push the limits of your Performer's Feats. If you have to explain it or even argue, then do not use it.

Note, how many Feats are used in the Performance.

Then, the player chooses another player to facilitate the Performance. On the mark of "Encore. Une. Fois.", the player of the Performer shows a number of one, two or three fingers on their hand. The other player will also show a number of one, two or three fingers. Don't make any arrangements on the number of fingers. Don't cheat. And be polite with your fingers.

Player	Facilitator	Result
1	1	2
1	2	3
1	3	1
2	1	3
2	2	1
2	3	2
3	1	1
3	2	2
3	3	3

Now, add up the number of fingers from both players. If the resulting number is higher than 3: subtract three. This will leave you with a number between one and three. Add the number of used Feats.

If the result lies below four (two or three), the Performer failed and does not achieve their goal. Let the facilitating player narrate the outcome in an appropriate fashion.

If the result lies at four or above (four, five or six), the Performer succeeds, achieving his goal. At a result of five or six, the Performer is not only successful, but also "incredible". At a result of six, they are also "spectacular".



3.4.4 Scene types

Players take turns creating a scene. Their Performer will most likely be present in the scene. Other Performers and Suspects may be present, as well as minor characters like other Cirque staff and norms. While each player should represent their own Performer, feel free to distribute the other characters among players as the situation demands.

The Scene Master, who creates the scene, should give a concise introduction into the scene, adding a little flavor and setting everything up for the main part of the scene. Other players are invited to contribute. Feel free to roleplay brief segments, if you like. This is, however, not mandatory.

There are four types of available scenes:

- find a clue
- interview a suspect
- action scene
- deliberate

In *find a clue*, one or more of the Performers find a Clue towards solving the murder case. In *interview a suspect*, one or more of the Performers interrogate a Suspect (another Performer or an Acquaintance) to find a Clue. An *action scene* takes place when one or more suspects take an action that the other Performers have to react to urgently. This may result in another Clue or the death of an Acquaintance. Lastly, in *deliberate*, Performers may find a Clue when piecing their knowledge together. Alternatively, they may decide to have all the evidence to frame the murderer.

Find a clue

Find a clue scenes are the simplest scenes in the investigate phase. A player describes their Performer looking for a Clue in some part of the Cirque:

- on stage
- in the audience
- on top of the scaffolding
- in the entrance area
- the back area

- near technical apparatuses

Or anywhere they desire.

Mechanically, the Performer will search for the Clue by performing a Feat relating to their whereabouts. If they are successful, the Performer will find a Clue that hints at any two Suspects except themselves. Should they be unsuccessful, nothing happens.

Interview a suspect

When the Performers *Interview a suspect*, they single one Suspect – a Performer or Acquaintance – out and try to get information from them. This may be done by:

- threats
- fast-talking
- tricks
- lies
- provocation
- honest questions
- confrontation with Clues
- flirting

Or any other method that seems appropriate. A suitable player – whose Performer does not lead the interrogation – should play the role of the Suspect.

When tension has built up in the conversation, the Performer will Perform a Feat. If he is successful, he gains a Clue. Should he fail, the player playing the interrogated Suspect gains a Clue which affects the interviewing Performer. The interviewee knows some incriminating details about the interviewer and the other Performers get to know it.

Action scene

Sometimes, an Acquaintance or a minor character will take action to change the situation. This threat includes but is in no way limited to:

- someone tries to get away
- someone tries to hide or destroy evidence
- someone tries to kill someone else
- someone acts in panic
- someone tries to take advantage of the situation
- someone sabotages the equipment or lets predators free

The Scene Master describes how the tension in the situation rises and the threat unfolds. He then calls for the other players to take action against it with their Performers. The other players get a chance to describe the intervention of their Performer. Be sure not to resolve the action, but only raise the stakes and show their Performers take on the situation. Be sure to make it dramatic; you are playing circus performers after all!

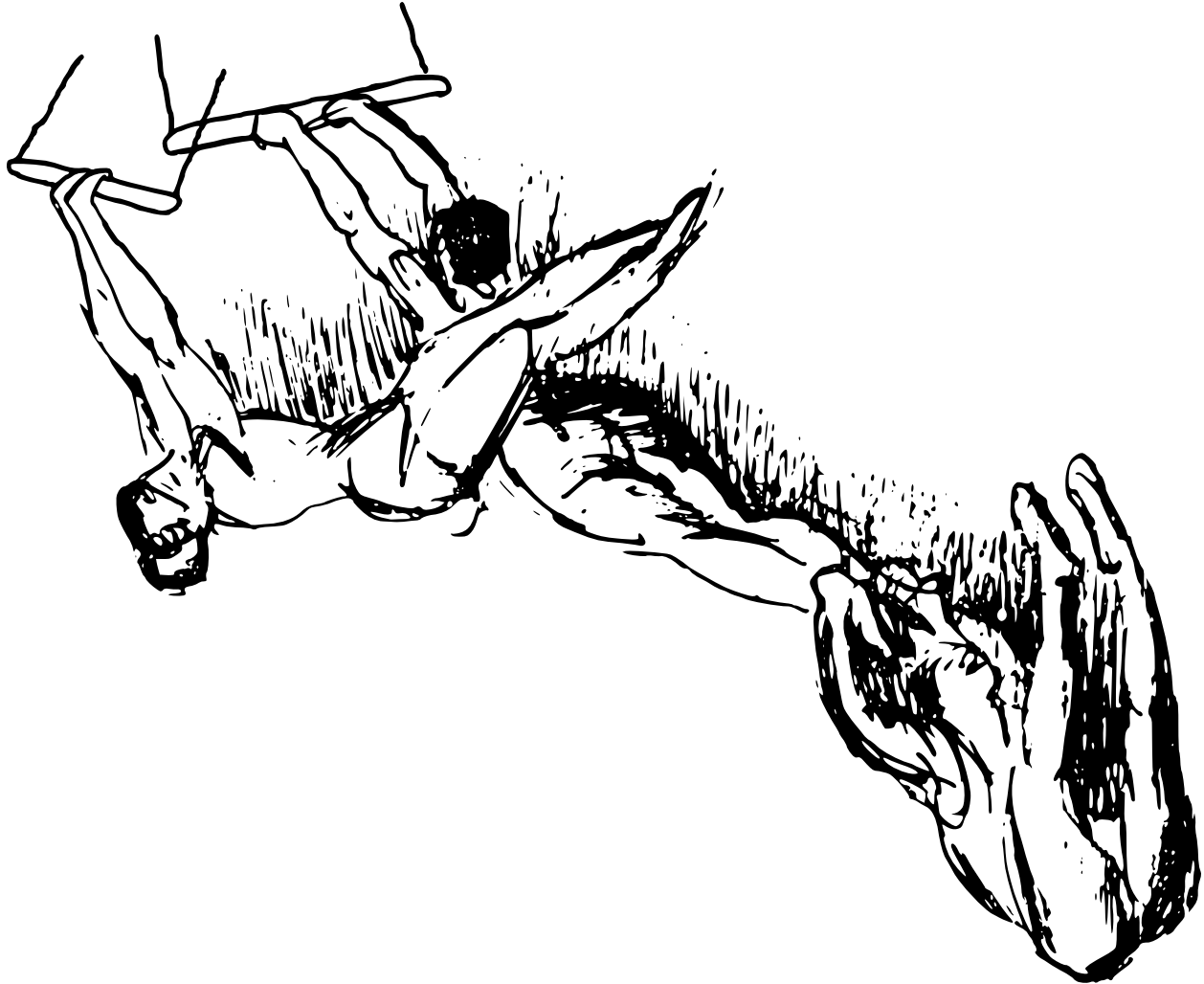
The Scene Master selects the Performer with the most tense description of the action to Perform a Feat.

If the Performer is successful, he will gain a Clue with no restrictions on affected Suspects. Be sure to narrate, why these are suspicious from the course of action. If the Performer is unsuccessful, he may either eliminate an Acquaintance or yield a Clue to the Scene Master.

If an Acquaintance is eliminated, they are no longer a Suspect. They cannot have done it. This move is especially useful in large playing groups in which a plethora of Suspects make the investigations confusing. A few convenient deaths both clean up the field and raise the stakes.

The Action scene follows a typical three-act structure:

1. Act I; exposition: Scene Master describes what is at stake
2. Act II; rising tension: players describe their Performers' approach
3. Act III; finale: most exhilarating Performer performs a Feat and resolves the situation



Deliberate

In the *Deliberate* scene, the Scene Master in the person of his Performer calls a group of Performers together to review the Clues so far. This group may include all Performers, but it does not have to. There should be at least two Performers in the group, obviously.

This group now deliberates on what follows from these Clues. They can include background knowledge of the Suspects, which can politely be invented on the spot to foster a made point. The Scene Master then takes the essence of the discussion and creates a new Clue from that. If more than one Performer vetos the conclusion, a corresponding Clue cannot be created.

If no consensus can be found in reasonable time, transition into an action scene in the most direct way possible, dear Scene Master.

Alternatively, the Scene Master can gather all Performers to formulate a Suspicion. Their Performer should detail out, why a particular Suspect has to be the murderer. Performers then vote. If a majority of Performers votes guilty, the game transitions into Resolution and nears its end. Else, the scene is ended without action.

3.5 Resolution and finale

As soon as a successful Suspicion was made, the finale of the game begins. The player who controls the accused Suspect (be it their Performer or the Acquaintance of their Performer) quickly starts an action scene as Scene Master.

If the Performer fails their Feat, eliminate any Suspect (Acquaintance or Performer!) and start a new action scene. This continues until the accused Suspect is caught or all other Performers are dead.

If all other Performers are dead. The accused Suspect will get away, regardless of them being the murderer or not. Let their player narrate this. If the accused Suspect is caught, they will see punishment. Let the catching Performer's player narrate this.

Now, all is well. Or is it?

It is time to reveal your Clues. Ignore all eliminated Acquaintances. For all remaining Suspects, total up the number of their occurrences on all Clue cards. You guessed it, the Suspect with the most occurrences is the actual murderer.

Together, you review their preparations, their actions and their reactions to the investigative efforts. Did they get caught? If they did get away: congratulations!



WHY?

This game was created for the

2015 RPG Geek 24-hour RPG contest!

which is an awesome competition that only gives you 24 hours from beginning to finishing work on your project. Kudos to Stelio for putting up with it.



4.1 Ideas

This game was inspired by me writing on a noir detective radio play and by me going to the circus, recently. Admittedly, it still took a day until the idea of an underground circus with a murder mystery was born. Actually, it's quite natural, I think.

Various parts of the mechanics are drawn from my own unfinished games, from my own finished games and from other people's games. Also, the accuse-punish mechanic was drawn from our personal werewolves/mafia variant.

The potential death of many of the protagonists in the last scene is inspired by Walter Moers' Zamonien book series. Which you should totally read.

4.2 Images

All used images were retrieved from [openclipart](#) which is a great source for free artwork to use in rapidly fabricated RPGs.

- elephant silhouet by molumen
- circus scene by johnny_automatic
- Cincinnati Skyline by johnny_automatic
- lion by johnny_automatic
- box seats at the opera by johnny_automatic
- skull with top hat and cigar by johnny_automatic

- [card trick](#) by johnny_automatic
- [famous clowns](#) by johnny_automatic
- [trapeze artists](#) by j4p4n

4.3 Tools

This document was typeset in [ReStructured Text](#) using everyone’s favorite editor [vim](#). I used [Sphinx](#) to compile it into EPUB and PDF. All software is run under Ubuntu Linux.

