

Companion Fever

A short rpg

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(c) 2005

Introduction

Companion Fever was written as an entry to the Game-Chef competition of 2005 (www.game-chef.com).

This competition is to design a tabletop roleplaying game within 9 days. As this game is an entry, it is targeted at readers who are familiar with the terminology and concept of role-playing games. You do not necessarily need any experience with actual role-playing - everyone has to start somewhere and this game is actually fairly light.

Rules details can be found behind the link, but for those not interested, the following restrictions were chosen to design this game with:

Historical period and place: somewhere between 1939 and 1941 (early WWII), a small island near Efate Island (Vanuatu, the Pacific theatre).

Key words used in design: Entomology (the scientific study of insects), Invincible, Companion and Accuser.

Rules limitations: There is no character sheet - and the characters are pre-made (no custom character generation). The game also flirts with the 'three pieces of information from a single roll' limitation and the importance of color.

In the following pages, this text will tell you about:

1. The setting
2. The player's roles
3. The player's actions
4. The Accusation Game and how things end
5. Notes

This role-playing game is played from start to finish within two hours. You'll need a cup, three differently colored six-sided dice, 40 chips or tokens of some sort, and possibly pen and paper.

The Setting

Muted light falls on a dull steel ladder and the smell of forgotten coffee, armpits and too many cigarettes falls down the companionway like a wet, rotting blanket. A man's shadow sits on the ladder, and the hushed tones of muted conversation can be heard.

The sound of approaching boots marching on the steel floor is shockingly clear in comparison - the shadow flits away.



A camouflaged USS Invincible, in better days

The USS Invincible, a US Navy Section Patrol Craft, has run aground on the beach of the Pacific island it was illicitly studying. A bad place to be for this thought-to-be-decommissioned cargo craft - and even worse for the seventy men on board.

In months, the region will erupt in flames - WW II.

But the problems do not end there. The engine room is in shambles. A part of the marine complement that is along to safeguard the mission has rebelled against their commanding officer. The Secret Serviceman that guides the mission accidentally made a broadcast at an unsafe moment. And to cap it off - the crew is struck hard by the virulent malaria strain that is the whole reason they are near the island in the first place.

The situation is going to hell in a handbasket. The crew is looking for a scapegoat. There are five obvious suspects, and the crew's more interested in venting their frustration of being cooped up in the damn ship than in detailed justice.

The Player Roles

Five characters on board USS Invincible are in the line of fire - they are people with a problem, the eye of the crew on them, a guilty secret, all looking to shift the blame.

The players of Companion Fever¹ each play one of these five characters. There is no Game Master.

During play, each player tries to remove the player to their left from the game by beating them at the Accusation Game². If a player manages to remove two players to their left, that player wins the game. There is also the possibility that no-one will win, and the ship and crew will meet a horrible fate.

Each character is connected to an aspect of the situation (which is mirrored in the Accusation Game): the aspects are the Invincible, Entomology, and Companion. Each aspect has its own associated (uniquely colored) die.

¹ The traditional 'Cabin' being replaced by 'Companion', a word with double meaning: a ship's companionway and the ship's crew. Likewise, 'Fever' is loaded as well.

² A modified version of the "Six-Six-Six" die game where in-character accusations and dealing complicate matters, explained further

The five characters, their secrets and connections are:

The Captain - son of an admiral, grandson of a president, wealthy, powerful, drunk, bitter. His dirty secret is that he was drunk while he ran the ship aground on the island. Connected to the Invincible.

The Chief Engineer - son of a convict, grandson of a lawman, greased, blunt, self-reliant, tough. His dirty secret is that he sold ship's parts on the black market before the voyage - and now it is a royal mess. Connected to the Invincible.

The Marine Commander - son of a miner, grandson of an immigrant, angry, volatile, party-animal, feverish, poor. His dirty secret is that his men are rebelling partly due to his own angry mismanagement of them. Connected to Entomology or Companion - player's choice.

The Lead Scientist - an orphan, brilliant, witty, a swimmer, chaotic. His dirty secret is that he's actually ill himself and didn't follow containment procedures. Connected to Entomology.

The Secret Serviceman - son of generations of shopkeepers, plain, calm, orderly, cut-throat. His dirty secret is that he sent an outgoing radio message at a time/position that was not safe. Connected to Companion.

Player Actions

Players choose the character they will represent, and the place they will sit in the following way:

1. Each player rolls a normal (six-sided) die. If there are any duplicate results, roll again, divide the result by ten, and add it to your previous result. Repeat until each player has a distinct result.
2. In order from high to low, each player may pick a character and then a place at the table. If two players are sitting next to each other (no seat in between), they must scoot over to accommodate you, but their relative position does not change.

Example: The order (of the characters) is Captain-Marine-Scientist. The next player picks the Secret Serviceman, and chooses to sit between the Captain and the Marine, making the order Captain-Secret Serviceman-Marine-Scientist.

3. Then, each player makes up a reason why their character accuses the character that is to the left of them. All the characters accuse another character to make sure the crew does not focus on them as the cause of all this trouble.

Example: If the order is Captain-Engineer-Marine-Scientist-Secret Serviceman, then the accusations might be (starting with the Captain accusing the Engineer): "The ship couldn't be steered because the Engineer's shoddy work broke the rudder!" - "The bloody marines smashed up the vital parts I needed!" - "My men were delirious from the malaria that this moron unleashed on us!" - "It was the Secret Serviceman's snooping that must have broken a sample vial!" - "The Captain ordered me to investigate everyone - while keeping me in the dark about vital information!".

This is the first official moment the players need to represent their characters. You are encouraged to liven this up as much as you like - slam your fist on the table, swear like a sailor, ham up your character's background - whatever you like.

4. Each player then gets 8 chips. Each chip represents a portion of the crew that believes in the character possessing the chip. After that, the Accusation Game starts. If you like to personalize things, you could use slips of paper with a crewmember's name and function instead of tokens.

The Accusation Game

The Accusation Game is played in a series of rounds, with three dice and a cup to roll them under. It is a-ok if you discuss tactics or strategy during the game - as long as you do so in the role and voice of the character you are representing.

The Roll

Each round starts with a player rolling the three dice under the cup, and taking a look. Start the first round with the Captain. The value of each roll is determined by ordering the dice from highest to lowest.

Example: Rolling a 5 and two 4's would make the result 544.
A 6, 1, and a 5 would be 651.

The exception to this are the rolls where all three numbers are the same, these are the "Fever". Any fever beats a non-fever, higher fevers beat lower fevers.

After a roll, you may move any number of dice from under the cup out into the open.

The Offer

You then call out (Offer) any possible value in the game, below, exactly at, or above the number you rolled. Together with this value, you describe the action your character tries to take to discredit your left-hand neighbor. Pass the cup and open dice to your neighbor, the accused.

He can choose to Accept this offer, or Challenge it, if he believes you are calling out a higher value than is actually there (bluffing).

Accepting the Offer

If the accused accepts the value, he may look under the cup and may roll any of the dice³ to try to get a higher value - because after each roll, the value a player offers must be higher than the previous - escalation due to the crew demanding ever more convincing arguments to find their scapegoat.

If a player accepts without looking underneath the cup, he may pass the dice on without re-rolling - but he still needs to increase the offer⁴. If a player does look under the cup, he must re-roll at least one of the dice that was there.

When a player accepts an offer, the attempt to discredit them as described by their accuser does not necessarily fail or succeed - it just does not matter to the crew at this point. There is no additional narration - the newly rolling player just makes a new accusation at their left-hand neighbor, and play moves on.

If a player accepts a fever, he gets three rolls to roll another fever from scratch. If he gets identical numbers on two dice, he is allowed to keep those two and just roll the third. If he succeeds, it counts as if he challenged a bluff from his accuser.

Challenging the Offer

If your accused Challenges and you were not bluffing, you get one of his chips and are allowed to narrate how your attempted action discredits him. He must - speaking as his character - admit a mistake, flaw, or weakness.

If you were bluffing, you must put one of your chips into the bank and the accused is allowed to narrate how you fail and how that makes you look bad. You - speaking as your character - must admit to a weakness. If anyone is reduced to zero chips, The Crew Turns on Them. After resolving a challenge, Things Also Come To Pass.

³ So he may roll 1, 2, or 3 dice, whether from under the cup or outside the cup. You roll all the dice you want to roll at once, inside the cup

⁴ Yes, there are cases where tactical underbidding makes a blind pass make sense

If the game has not ended after the crew turns and things come to pass, the next round is started by the loser of the challenge.

A Skillful Complication

After you pass the cup left, you gain a Reroll token, if you did not have one. As long as you have one of these tokens, you can use it to reroll your associated die - or you can spend your token at the request of another player so that he may reroll the associated die. Requesting the reroll from another player is a perfect moment for some in-character dialogue.

The Crew Turns

If a player is reduced to 0 chips, the crew has turned on their character and reduced their status and power to almost nothing, and that player neither rolls nor accuses any more. The successful accuser now gains the defeated player's left-hand neighbor as their new target to accuse - and also gains three chips from the bank as a reward.

If this is the second player that accuser has removed from the game, the crew becomes convinced of that character's rightness, they calm down, and under that character's leadership they eventually make their way home. That player wins! He is allowed to narrate his character's victory over the conditions.

A defeated player does not roll nor accuse, but he does regain his re-roll token at the moment he passes on the dice - as such, a defeated player still has some kingmaker influence.

Things Come to Pass

After each challenge, all three dice are rolled by the winner. For every 6 that comes up, the associated characters suffer a setback - for instance, the Secret Serviceman's snooping in the Companionways is spotted by some impartial crewmen, and this is bad for his reputation. Or, on a 6 on the Invincible die, more damage is found underneath the hull - bad for both the Captain and the Engineer. The player loses a chip. Every player that loses a ship is allowed to narrate how this happens.

If a 6 comes up on a die on which all associated players are defeated, something goes horribly wrong (malaria kills everyone, the engine explodes, enemy vessels sink the ship) and everyone loses. If a 666 is rolled, all the above happens, and the Allies lose the war as well. The player rolling these dice is allowed to narrate any of these effects.

Example of play

Chris, playing the captain, starts of and rolls strong: 6, 1, 6: 661. Still a roll that his accused will easily improve on, unfortunately. He narrates: "'Aughrr, my aching head!' I lurch for the intercom, press the button, and hoarsely bellow: 'Engineer! Report'. As no connection is made, I frown and mumble something about that layabout engineer, as three crewmen look on."

Chris moves the die with the 1 outside the cup, and moves it on, offering 661. Now, Ed, playing the engineer has it less easy! Rolling that 1 into something higher should be easy, but if he looks underneath the cup, he will have to roll at least one die from under the cup - likely making the roll worse. If he accepts and just rolls the 1, he might get a 1, which would make him lose as he passes it on, or it might be higher - but then he's at the mercy of there actually being 2 6's underneath the cup.

Ed does not look, and re-rolls the 1 into 4. Now he has another decision to make - either offer 664, which is hard to beat and will likely make his accusation work if the 6's are in the cup - or offer 662, because that will be easier to overcome for his accused, making it more likely that his offer will be accepted.

And this situation is before you take into account rerolls, preventing someone else from taking the win or everyone losing.

Notes

This game is a combination of gambling, bluffing, and luck, with a sauce of player narration. As such, the taste depends on the taste of the players - if the players are mostly interested in the 'game' part, they can keep the narration as light as they like.

They could also immerse themselves as deep as they like in the situation, do all the talking for the whole game in-character, use props, delve into the stress and their character's issues.

The tactical and strategic posturing caused by the interaction of rerolls, the goal to defeat your accused, and the potential for loss for all players leads to a game dynamic that is more complex than can be grokked from just reading the rules. Due to the rule of asking for re-rolls in-character, and also doing the deal-making in character, the more advanced strategies and interactions are available to those players willing to use their in-character options.