THE LAST QUESTION

GAMEPLAY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

The Last Question is a science fiction TTRPG that takes place in a colonized solar system, where large-scale actions are generally guided by the decisions of the powerful computer Multivac. The game is inspired by the initial setting in the short story of the same name by Isaac Asimov.

Human culture has adapted to support six main classes of people. Like any sociological structure, these are only an approximation. However, they provide the building blocks for characters developed within the game. The first three classes are accepted among polite society. The other three would be considered outcasts of some form or another.

> **Engineers** are a mix of capable and successful—often not both—executives in a bloated bureaucracy. It is a much more generic term than its origins may lead you to assume, characterized by those who aspire to greater power.

> **Houstons** have either shot for the glamor of Engineer status and failed to achieve it, or never aspired to play politics. They are often very capable within a specific discipline, and have a patient, if pedantic or naive, demeanor.

> **Solars** are technicians. They tinker, invent, and have deep domain knowledge that is drawn upon by others. Their aspirations are typically in line with Multivac's, and most are not naive enough to be pawns in the games of executives.

> **Chosen** live in the corners and shadows of smaller bases. They reject most of society, yet are cunning and experienced enough to live within it when necessary. Most often found in arrangements similar to cartels.

> **Naughts** make up most of the working class. Typically ignored by others who cross their paths, they tend to be strong of body and will. They can make fast friends anywhere, though long-term relationships are hard to come by.

> **Bound** are born on Earth, or recently descended from those who were. They have much pride in keeping their culture alive, including a knowledge of many practical natural facts that have been otherwise offloaded to computers.

While the above descriptions provide guiding characteristics and hint at certain cultural expectations each class may be familiar with, they are not comprehensive. Engineers and Chosen may have a reputation for being unkind, but it is not a rule. Just because a Solar does not have professional goals beyond their station, they may have other motivators within their personal lives that are worth exploring. Choose a class that is the best vehicle for the story you wish to tell.

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Gameplay

This game is built upon the Motif™ SRD. It is focused on asking questions to resolve non-trivial situations the characters find themselves in. It is not turn-based, so a series of actions tends to be determined by a single roll. Below, you will find mechanical rules and suggestions. Basic gameplay is outlined first, followed by information needed to build a character. Finally, story mechanics that may be hidden to players will be explained.

ROLLING

Rolls consist of an ordered set of 3 six-sided dice. Throughout this guide, we will assume the dice are arranged left to right. Rolls are prompted by a question, and the result of the roll guides the contents of the answer. Questions are not required to be binary in nature, but the system does lend itself to using them more frequently. Note that any roll can trigger certain events, such as an increase in XP, a change in Stress, or even adjustments to the storyline. The relevant sections contain more.

STANDARD ROLLS

Any roll that does not specifically pertain to resource or tool investigation is considered a standard roll. General investigation, action, setting details, even complicated plans, are all worked through by standard rolls.

As stated above, rolls are prompted by a question. For example:

- "Is this room empty?"

- "Can I climb this wall?"

- "Will using this weapon help me beat this enemy?"

- "Do I know how to drive this vehicle?"

Once a question is asked (and any relevant modifiers are discussed, see later), the dice are rolled and interpreted as follows.

Left Die: THE ACTION

1 or 2: The answer is "NO", or, there is a severe cost to this action that the player must accept.

3: The answer is "MAYBE", or, there is a modest cost to this action that the player must accept.

4: The answer is "MAYBE", or, there is a modest gain provided to the player by performing this action.

5 or 6: The answer is "YES", or, there is a strong gain provided to the player by performing this action.

Middle Die: THE IMPACT

1: The answer to this question has little or no impact on the world.

2 or 3: The answer to this question has a weak to moderate impact on the world.

4 or 5: The answer to this question has a notable, somewhat important impact on the world.

6: The answer to this question has an extreme impact on the world.

Right Die: THE FLAVOR

Flavors help to provide an additional opinionated dimension to the answer. By default, a roll's Flavor is *Benefit*. Other options for Flavor include *Curious* and *Understandable*.

A high roll in *Benefit* provides a net positive outcome for the player, while a low roll can hurt them in various ways.

A high roll in *Curious* means the answer contains interesting, novel, or unique information that is worth exploring more.

A low roll in *Understandable* means the answer, though it may be important, is veiled or provided in a way or timeframe that makes its full form unclear to the player.

Before rolling, a player should declare if they want to use a Flavor other than *Benefit*. Additional Flavors can be added at the discretion of the players and the GM.

In general, the breakdown of a flavor roll is as follows:

1 or 2: The answer is counter to the Flavor theme.

3 or 4: The answer is neutral regarding the Flavor theme.

5 or 6: The answer aligns with the Flavor theme.

Depending on the goal of the players, they may consult the GM to call for a roll that uses multiple Flavors instead of Impact. This is not expected to be a common choice, but could be useful, or simply increase tension, in key circumstances.

Note: Although arranging the dice left to right is standard, you could also use different colored dice, or any other method you prefer, to distinguish between the three characteristics of the roll.

RESOURCE ROLLS

When entering a new scene (as determined by the GM), or investigating specific items revealed to the players, you may use a Resource roll.

New scenes should always begin with a Resource roll, as this determines what Resource Points each player obtains from the new environment (see [Resources](#) below.)

When investigating specific items, players can choose to use only one of a Standard or Resource roll. A Standard roll may reveal more, or nuanced, information, but could have greater potential downside; a Resource roll is more sandboxed.

Prior to rolling, choose 3 characteristics of the scene, or object, assigning them to 3 dice. Then roll to determine how much each characteristic is present within the object. A low number means the characteristic is less prevalent.

As a game proceeds, the players and GM may choose to standardize on certain characteristics for certain items. Some suggestions are presented below.

Transportation: Efficiency, Maneuverability, Strength

Weapons: Damage, Resilience, Ease of Use

Informative Items: Depth, Breadth, Readability

Goods or Bartering Items: Value, Quantity, Familiarity

New scenes will be more context-dependent, but may include specific resources. If players are currently looking for more information when entering a scene, they may choose "Books" or "Storage" as a resource characteristic. However, a GM may disallow a particular characteristic, or modify the roll stats, if it does not align with the basic nature of the environment.

CHARACTER MECHANICS

This next section focuses on the game mechanics specifically present on a character sheet, shown below.

THE LAST QUESTION		CHARACTER SHEET	
NAME:	**TYPE:**	**XP:** 0	**STRESS:** 0/5

STATS: (-1, 0, 0, +1, +1)	XP?		RESOURCES		PLAYER MOVES (2 TO START)
ATHLETICS			COUNTER:	0	*Increase stat or add/improve 1 move, for every 6 XP. Moves are passive or active items or abilities.*
PERSUASION					
DARING					[Item-based move]
PLANNING					
CURIOSITY					

Unless a move applies, stats only affect flavor die when rolling.

Resources are temporary within an environment. Spend resource points to use them.

[Ability-based move]

ASKING QUESTIONS	Notable actions or missing information are resolved by asking a question. Choose a flavor; roll 3 d6, arranged left to right. The left die gives the rough answer: 1-2 "No", 3-4 "Maybe", 5-6 "Yes". The middle die gives the impact: 1, "~None", 2-3 "Minimal", 4-5 "Notable", 6 "Extreme". The right die gives the flavor: 1-2 "Against", 3-4 "Neutral", 5-6 "For". Default flavor is "Benefit", but others like "Curious" or "Understandable" are available. If stat or move applies, add modifier to all relevant dice.
TRIGGERS	Rolling any doubles gives +1XP. Rolling double 1s gives +1 Stress; double 6s gives -1 Stress. First two doubles with an odd third, or triples, will give a turn. Three turns will initiate a twist.
RESOURCE ROLLS	In a new environemnt, each player rolls for resource. Change resource counter to floor(avg(3 d6)). When investigating an object or area, player can ask question or roll for 3 properties.

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Name

The player's name. We recommend using some sort of name generator, such as [this](). Find one that suits your aesthetic.

TYPE

One of the six character classes described at the beginning of this document: Engineer, Houston, Solar, Chosen, Naught, Bound.

XP

A running measure of experience. Experience is primarily gained by chance: Each time a player rolls and doubles appear, they gain 1 XP. Rolling triples does not change the XP gained by the roll. In addition to rolling, the GM can hand out XP at their discretion.

Every 6 XP, a player moves up 1 level. Moving up 1 level allows them to adjust a stat, adjust a move, or add a new move. (See below for more information.)

STRESS

This is *The Last Question*'s way of managing health. Stress is dealt out both randomly and situationally, at the discretion of players and the GM. It can be used as a cost to perform an action, or as the direct result of a roll. It can represent both physical and mental concerns.

If double 1s are rolled by a player, they take +1 stress. If double 6s are rolled, they take -1 stress. The cause of either should be worked into the question's answer, and no stress should be dealt (or removed) to counteract this trigger. Note that rolling triples does not change the stress dealt.

STATS

Stats in *The Last Question* are used as roll modifiers, as applicable. To begin the game, players assign the modifiers -1, 0, 0, +1, +1 across the 5 stats. If a player's question is determined to be related to one of the stats, they must add their modifier to the flavor die in the roll (unless they have a move which adjusts this.)

Athletics: A question primarily focused around physical accomplishment.

Persuasion: A question primarily focused around convincing someone.

Daring: A question primarily focused around an unsafe plan.

Planning: A question primarily focused on preparing for the future.

Curiosity: A question primarily focused on investigating new knowledge.

Stats can also be modified temporarily based on player moves. As noted above, stats can be increased as players gain XP. However, no stat can be increased above +2.

Not all rolls are expected to have a relevant stat, but many will.

RESOURCES

Resources are scene-specific. When players enter a new scene, the resource counter will be temporarily reset to 0, and any named resources will be removed. To this end, resources are separate from the player's inventory of available items and tools that they may carry on their person. Resources are environmental factors, or permanent structures, discovered at the onset of a scene. Note that a scene is not a room; it is more general than that, and based on the scope of the story. So, when rolling for a scene, players should be careful about how specific they want to be.

After the basic elements of a new scene are described, players each perform a [Resource roll]. They should name 3 factors, characteristics, or categories of items they wish to see added to the scene. These should be written down in the table of Resources, below the Counter. The value of the relevant roll should be noted as well. This determines how many times that resource can be used by the players. If "Climbing structures" rolled as a 2, then the players can only use those twice between them all.

Then, take the floor of the average of the 3 dice. This is the player's value for the Resource Counter. This determines how many times a player can explicitly use a resource during the scene.

Each time a player uses a listed resource, they decrease their Resource Counter by 1, and whichever player has the listed resource on their sheet should decrease that resource's

value by 1 as well.

Players use resources to help with the answer to a question. When using a resource, they may add 1 to any die they choose before rolling to answer. The use of the resource should be worked into the answer.

Player Moves

Moves are special abilities or items that work within a specific context. Moves should be proposed by a player, and approved by the GM to make sure they are not too powerful. A move's power is a balance between its raw magnitude of effect, and the scenarios in which it can be used. A passive move that is always available—a piece of equipment always on hand, or a unique ability that is frequently relevant—should be overall weak. An active move that requires special conditions may be stronger.

To begin a game, players pick two moves: one should be ability-based, while the other should be item-based.

> **Ability-based**: These moves are focused on characterization. They may rely on a unique skill set or piece of background knowledge the player has. An explanation for the ability does not need to be provided right away; it can certainly be an avenue for exploration throughout the story.

> **Item-based**: These moves rely on novel equipment. These devices could be passively used, such as special eyewear to improve some aspect of perception. Or, they could be actively used, such as a harness or hook that boosts the Athletic check when it involves climbing.

Players are encouraged to be creative with how they define their moves. Boosting a stat is a simple way to go, but other options may include adding a value to a different die, being allowed to rearrange some number of dice, increasing resource levels, reducing susceptibility to stress, and so on.

When a player reaches a new XP level, they have the option to add a new move of a similar beginning strength, or to adjust an existing move to either change its focus, or increase its potency. As before, these additions or adjustments should be made in agreement with the other players and GM.

STORY MECHANICS

It is up to the group of players how they would like to handle storylines. It can be natural to allow a GM a large portion of the control, or it can be far more collaborative. In fact, this game is designed in such a way that it is not strictly necessary to have a GM, depending on the temperaments of the players.

However your group chooses to handle their game, it is important to clearly establish who is responsible for determining whether a question needs to be asked, and who is responsible for answering that question. Decide this early on, and tweak if necessary.

With that said, there is a final, optional mechanic to *The Last Question* designed to include drama and adjustments to the intended storyline of both a scene and campaign.

TWISTS AND TURNS

If you are looking for opportunities for a story to shift and sway at both local and global levels, we recommend using Twists and Turns. This can be done out in the open, or entirely secretly by the GM.

A Turn is a scene-specific shift in the story, such as a *deus ex machina* moment or sudden unforeseen obstacles. A Twist is a larger-scale change that may include adjustments to the entire plot line impacting boss-level characters, or major character revelations.

Generating Turns

Turns are caused by a standard roll that has doubles on the Answer and Impact die, and an odd number on the Flavor die. Look at the doubles number and reference the list below to determine the type of turn generated

1: A sudden turn in favor of the player characters and/or their interests.

2: Any useful progress or tools in the scene will be offset by obstacles.

3: A helpful non-player character arrives.

4: A hostile non-player character arrives.

5: A particularly unusual or well-hidden clue is revealed in the scene.

6: A sudden turn against the interests of the player characters.

Generating Twists

The GM should have a "Twist counter" available. Each time a Turn happens, add 1 to the Twist counter. When the counter hits 3, a Twist will be forthcoming. However, focus on resolving the immediate Turn, and the current scene, before addressing the Twist. The players and GM can decide whether a Twist should be immediately known, or

revealed gradually later on in the story. This can be decided at each moment if desired.

Once a scene is resolved, roll 2 six-sided dice determine the nature of the Twist. Doubles supersede all other rolls, otherwise the sum of the dice is used.

> **Doubles**: A new boss-level character or similar level of complication is introduced. This should not imply a desperate situation; it can provide new opportunities as well.

> **3 or 4**: The authorities target the players, or a major ally betrays them.

> **5 or 6**: Whatever approach players were taking to resolve a major issue is revealed to be incorrect or insufficient. Instead, clues or directions should be provided to nudge them in a better direction.

> **7**: An NPC with unclear motivation and desires appears. Players ask 3 questions to determine what they can about them.

> **8 or 9**: The approach players were taking to resolve a major issue is unexpectedly effective or lucky. They gain rapid progress, but are met with additional obstacles in their next step.

> **10 - 11**: Hostile authorities resolve their conflicts with the players, or a major enemy switches sides.

Twists and Turns can be a useful tool for those who want drama and tension to build throughout their campaign. It is flexible and fun; there is no need to follow the specific roll guidelines above. Adapt them to your needs and interests, using the context of your story as a waypoint. If power structures are not your focus, then having twists focused on authorities may not be a helpful framing device.

Ultimately, *The Last Question* is focused on story-based gameplay. Adjust what you need to tell the story that is most interesting to you.

conclusion

The Last Question, though initially inspired by the stories of Isaac Asimov, is not wedded to the scope of the world that Asimov was most well known for exploring. While androids and robots could exist, or political structures that are precursors to those found in *Foundation*, this document is certainly not meant to define the state of the world or its technology. The Introduction is the only piece of canon available.

This game is designed to allow players to tell stories of a world far enough in the future that they can allow themselves not to be concerned with the troubles of today, yet near enough that those troubles could still be addressed in novel ways. While Multivac is always prevalent, it works at such a high level that it can be readily ignored for all but flavor text. Choose a scope that intrigues and delights, then let the world build itself, guided both by the logical conclusions made by the group, and the chaos inherent to life imparted by the dice.

Despite the melancholy name, *The Last Question* encourages you to be confident that we are a long way off from humanity needing to ask it.

Then, just as the frightened technicians felt they could hold their breath no longer, there was a sudden springing to life of the teletype attached to that portion of Multivac. Five words were printed:

    INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER.