

Prelude

a Meeting Before the Show

a Freeform Role-Playing Game
for six Players and a GM

Game design, concept art
and layout by

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Synopsis

Prelude is a freeform role-playing game about physical and psychological exhaustion. The game is set in a backstage where a relatively successful band on a long and consuming tour is having a preshow meeting. The game emphasizes relationships, dramatic conflict and character immersion. The game is optimized for six players and a GM (game master) or for six players, one of whom acts as a GM. Optionally, the game can be played with fewer (minimum of three) or more players (suggested maximum of eight; additional characters not provided). Character creation, game and debriefing lasts about 2-3 hours.

“The excitement is long since gone. There is absolutely no glamour in the endless backstages lacking all comfort; shitty gigs in the middle of nowhere; having to share everything with a group of retards; longing for my home, my family. When I was new to this I thought there would be fame, money, respect and creativity. We got none of them. This is a menial job at its best.

And what about our fucked up band? On our first record we were authentic, ambitious and fresh. After that we just sold ourselves to the label. Producer composed too much of our record, we played along like puppets. Some in the band no longer give a rat’s ass about our music, others are so fucking cocky because ‘they are rock stars now’. What have we become? I am on the edge – I am ready to quit this whole thing.”



Running the Game – A Guide for the GM

This chapter contains no secrets. All the players are free to read this chapter, whereas the GM is required to read it before running the game. In Prelude the game master's role is especially important before the game. **Before the game** the game master is responsible for preparing the game room, explaining the game setting and mechanics to the players, and creating characters with the players. **During the game** the game master follows the game; plays NPCs (non-player-characters) as needed and makes sure the game ends at a good moment. **After the game** the game master holds a debriefing.

Theme and Atmosphere

The game is set in a backstage, where the band is meeting before an important show. The band is on a ten month tour through Europe (or any other continent) – ten long months away from home. The tour is now about 50-60% done – a long way behind, but nowhere near its end. The band is the headline act and a warm-up band is performing on the stage at the moment. The game lasts for the duration of the warm-up show and ends when the band is about to enter the stage.

The game is about being both emotionally and physically exhausted; being totally pissed off at everyone else and just looking for an excuse to throw in the towel.

The game does not need any major props. However, simple measures can be taken in order to enhance the game experience. The warm-up band is playing for the duration of the game. Warm-up band is of the same music genre as the main band. The background music should be a tad too loud: the backstage is immediately behind the stage. Live recordings create an especially engaging atmosphere. The lights should be dimmed. There should be a lot of (alcohol free) beer available. Optimally, the game room is either too warm or too cold.

Game Mechanics

The game is played here-and-now. The game focuses on the conflict at hand. You can use time altering metatechniques as long as they build the drama in game. The scenes in the expansion happen either simultaneously or in the past. During this time, the main story is “on hold”. It is important to distinguish that the characters may not be aware of the incidents in the second scene, but the players are.

The players are their characters. This game is played as more of a larp than a table-top role-playing game. The players should talk in first person, they are encouraged to move, act, shout, walk, sit, stand and so forth.

The players are encouraged to improvise. For instance, the players should make up events, make accusations, talk about NPCs (non-player-characters) and refer to previous conversations. Importantly, whatever players bring up is true in-game, part of the narrative. There is no need to ask for game master's guidance or acceptance: the players have control over the game content.

For example, you are free to accuse the guitarist of being totally wasted on the last gig; the drummer of breaking his tom-tom; the singer of fucking your sister; the bassist of working on his solo project; the percussionist of doing too much coke or the pianist of not giving a shit about anything. You can also make up characters and discuss with them in-game face to face (e.g. manager, tourbus driver) or via phone or skype (e.g. father, daughter, imam). The issues players are dealt (see below) should be interpreted widely: for instance the object of addiction could be anything (e.g. music, attention, money) or disturbance could be interpreted as being disturbed by someone for some reason or as disturbing someone in some way.

The game is about conflicts. When the game ends one of the players quits the band. It is important to note that every character is totally fed up with touring and is extremely pissed off about everything. Everyone has one key issue they are most angry about (see below). Even though anyone can shout a lot, only one character is serious about leaving the band. Players may threaten to leave the band, but they should remember that only the first one to step up at the end of the game is the one who actually leaves the band – others were just talking.

The end of the game is decided: “Fateplay”. The game ending is prewritten, but the length of the game is not set in stone. The game master, whether playing or not, should pay close attention to the flow of the game and find a good moment to end the game. Suggested playing time is about 1–2 hours. The game should end before the players get bored. When the GM finds a good moment for ending the game, he stops the back-ground music after the current song. The GM may choose to announce this: “You know that this is the last song of the warm-up band”. When the last song ends one of the characters announces that he/she quits the band. If no one steps up, GM should enforce the game rule: “Someone steps up and quits the band now!”

A Step by Step Guide for the GM

- **Before the players arrive:**
 - Read the game materials.
 - Bring along: printed character sheets, music and dice.
 - Prepare the game space.
- **When the players arrive:**
 - Explain what the game is about: this is covered in the chapter “Theme and Atmosphere”.
 - Explain all the rules covered in the chapter “Game Mechanics”.
 - Use your favourite warm up and team building exercises (or look up my game Mikodine XA for a complete warm up schedule) to encourage creative and safe atmosphere.
- **Build the band:** Which music genre? What is the name of the band? What instruments are played?
- **Create the Characters:** randomise the relationships and issues the character is fed up about.
 - Create characters to the scenes in the Expansion: have the players come up with short concepts and gather them in a bowl to be distributed.
- **Run the game**
 - Use the scenes from the Expansion as you see fit.
- **End the game at an appropriate moment.**
- **Debriefing: discussion with the players:**
 - What was good about the game? What did it feel like?
 - What should be improved?
- **Optionally, contact the author** with debriefing information and for further discussion.

About the Game Design

Thematically this game has been written to encourage conflict. Rock n' roll was chosen as it is usually rather easily approachable theme for most players. Should the GM so wish, the theme of the game can be altered without major revisions to the core game. Suitable environments might include company boards, family crisis meetings or even fantasy worlds or science fiction.

The game was designed considering four key things: ease of play, replayability, character-role dichotomy and unilateral relationships. **Ease of play** in Prelude means that the scenario should be both easily approachable for new players and on the other hand playable without any major props and with little to no preparation from the players. **Replayability** in Prelude comes from many factors: firstly, the game is radically different when the group dynamic is changed even by one or two players; secondly, the diegetical relationships are randomised in order to facilitate different play experiences. **Character and role dichotomy** refers to the two meanings of a role: a person's role in relationship and an actor's part in creative performance. Characters in Prelude are comprised of many roles, relations to other players, as opposed to personality traits. For further discussion see Lukka (2011, *The Dual-Faceted Role*, In T. D. Henriksen, C. Bierlich, K. F. Hansen & V. Kølle. *Think LARP*, Academic Writings from KP2011). Typically role-playing games have reciprocal relationships, in which both parties agree on the quality of the relationship. **Unilateral relationships**, however, attempt to break this mutual relationship. One-sided relations support interpersonal conflicts and provide a new way of seeing relationships. In brief, how I see you is not the way you see me.

Acknowledgements, Feedback and Copyright

The author would like to thank all those who have played the Finnish version of Prelude (Esinäytös) and provided their feedback, all the models in the photographs and the proofreaders, and Marinka Copier and Martijn Postma for their input and their excellent medieval adaptation. Should you run a game of Prelude, the author would greatly appreciate feedback. When and where was the game played? How was the game? Are there any improvement ideas? Feel free to contact the author at

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Rock on!



Character Creation

- Before character creation, build the band.
 - Decide the music genre, name of the band, their label and their albums
 - For additional fun: have the players draw or paint the band logo as a warm-up exercise
 - Have the players pose for a band photo which can also be used as a document for the game
- Deal out the characters found on pages 9 – 11. The player's can either use the name and instrument on the character or come up with their own. The sheets can be folded, so that the player sees the keywords, while others see the character concept art.
- Each character has a key issue. You can use the complete list of issues can be found on the page 8 and dice to randomise the issues or you can print them out using pages 12 – 13 and make a deck of cards to randomize them. Each player should get to pick from two issues, more if needed. The players write the issue on their character sheet.
- Then each character randomizes their relationship towards every other character – including themselves! You can use the complete list of issues on the page 8 or you can print the cards on pages 14 – 15. The players write the issue on their character sheet.
- In order to reduce the pre-game time, the game master can do these steps before the game. However, the players usually find the process of character creation rather amusing and exciting.
- Finally, the players should pair up with other members of the band to discuss and flesh out their relationship. The players should be given a minute or two to discuss their relationship with other players, then have them change pairs. The players should be encouraged to create tension and conflict during this discussion.

Instrument	Male	Female
Vocalist	Zakk	Zoe
Solo guitar	Chris	Cassie
Rhythm guitar	Tim	Teri
Bass	Ricky	Rain
Drums	Hank	Heaven
Synthesiser	Curtis	Coral

Medieval version

The game has also been run in medieval setting. Here are alternative instruments and names for such an environment:

Medieval instruments: vocals, back-up vocals, guitar, bass, drums/percussion, tamburin, keyboard, flute/whistles, violin, celtic harp, bagpipe, digeridoo, dance, fireshow

Medieval themed names: Storm, Avalon, Poison, Loki, Thunder, Cat, Viper, Gaia, Osiris, Morrighan, Raven, Wodan, Freyja, Lillith, Bast.

Expansion: Fool's Gold

Prelude, as presented above, is a game that emphasizes atmosphere and improvisation. This expansion can be used to spice up the game. The key element in the game remains the same: the characters are built bottom-up, from the behaviour and attitudes to personality, rather than top-down, from personal characteristics to behaviour. The main theme of the game, exhaustion, remains as well. However, a new theme is added.

The new mechanics aim to strengthen the theme and atmosphere while giving the players a chance to take a short break from the fighting. This is done by clarifying that the glamour of rock'n'roll is only superficial, fool's gold. Inside remains a harsh and ruthless world of prejudices, money and abuse. The people outside the band have a narrow and stereotypical view to the music industry and the tour life that is contrasted by the fatigue of the band waiting the show.

The game master can use some or all of the scenes in any order during the game. The game master can just "jump" into a scene in another location and time as he sees fit. The scenes should last only a couple minutes (2 – 15) and focus on creating even more tension to the background meeting. The players are given simple, new characters for that scene. The game master should choose the scenes before the game and write, or have the players come up with, short descriptions of the new characters – an adjective and a noun suffices. You can find examples below.

Scene 1: The Loved Ones

The friends and family of the band members have gathered in a local pub or a private residence to enjoy the show via live-stream. *Character concepts*: envious cousin, proud mother, loyal childhood friend, bitter spouse etc.

Scene 2: The Record Label

Various personnel of the record label have gathered in a meeting to discuss the future of the band. *Character concepts*: greedy director, arrogant statistician, self-conscious brand manager, bored producer etc.

Scene 3: The Music School

A prestigious academic music school has decided to analyse the latest record of the band in a discussion group. *Character concepts*: empathic multi-talent, political activist, disapproving teacher, know-it-all first year student etc.

Scene 4: The Fans

The fans stayed up all night in the queue just to get to the first row. They are discussing the future show – maybe while the warm-up band plays. *Character concepts*: "I liked the band before it was cool", wanna-be guitar player, the one who is in love with the singer, the music lover etc.

Scene 5: The First Rehearsal

The band members still remember the first time they started to practice together. It was fresh and magical – it was all about the music, about being together, about conveying a message. *Character concepts*: The band members play themselves as positive, excited, devoted and optimistic about the future of the band.

Scene 6: Your scene here

Charts for Relationships and issues:**Issue (d6 + d20)**

roll d6: if even d20; if odd: d20 + 20

Towards whom? About what?
Why? What has happened?

1. Inequality
2. Rock bottom
3. Something has come to an end
4. Mental illness
5. Quality of music
6. Scene
7. Society and/or economy
8. Politics
9. Piratism
10. I want something else
11. Family
12. Religion / Beliefs
13. Lyrics
14. Warm-up band
15. Manager
16. Addiction
17. Another band
18. Professionalism of band
19. Musical skills
20. Love
21. Underground
22. Sentence / Court order
23. Social status
24. Attention
25. Critics
26. Terrible mess
27. Zakk / Zoe
28. Tim / Teri
29. Chris / Cassie
30. Hank / Heaven
31. Ricky / Rain
32. Curtis / Coral
33. Feelings
34. Art
35. Tour bus / Transportation
36. Vanity
37. Asia / Africa
38. Science
39. Respect
40. Anonymity

Relationship (d6 + d20):

roll d6: if even d20, if odd: d20 + 20

What does it mean in practise?
How does it affect you? What has happened?

1. Authority
2. Respect
3. Jealousy
4. Hate
5. Love
6. Pride
7. Faith
8. Thankfulness
9. Surprise
10. Inferiority
11. Superiority
12. Admiration
13. Compassion
14. Hope
15. Hopelessness
16. Determination
17. Defiance
18. Underestimation
19. Disturbance
20. Frustration
21. Ignorance
22. Grief
23. Isolation
24. Fear
25. Despise
26. Embarrassment
27. Vengefulness
28. Guilt
29. Doubt
30. Disappointment
31. Devastation
32. Competitiveness
33. Trust
34. Kinship / Brotherhood
35. Shyness
36. Nervousness
37. Approval
38. Disapproval
39. Enrage
40. Independence

Zakk / Zoe

Vocals

Relationship

Zakk / Zoe (vocalist) _____

Chris / Cassie (solo guitar) _____

Tim / Teri (rhythm guitar) _____

Ricky / Rain (bass) _____

Hank / Heaven (drums) _____

Curtis / Coral (synthesiser) _____

Issue: _____



Chris / Cassie

Solo guitar

Relationship

Zakk / Zoe (vocalist) _____

Chris / Cassie (solo guitar) _____

Tim / Teri (rhythm guitar) _____

Ricky / Rain (bass) _____

Hank / Heaven (drums) _____

Curtis / Coral (synthesiser) _____

Issue: _____



Tim / Teri

Rhythm guitar

Relationship

Zakk / Zoe (vocalist) _____

Chris / Cassie (solo guitar) _____

Tim / Teri (rhythm guitar) _____

Ricky / Rain (bass) _____

Hank / Heaven (drums) _____

Curtis / Coral (synthesiser) _____

Issue: _____



Ricky / Rain

Bass

Relationship

Zakk / Zoe (vocalist) _____

Chris / Cassie (solo guitar) _____

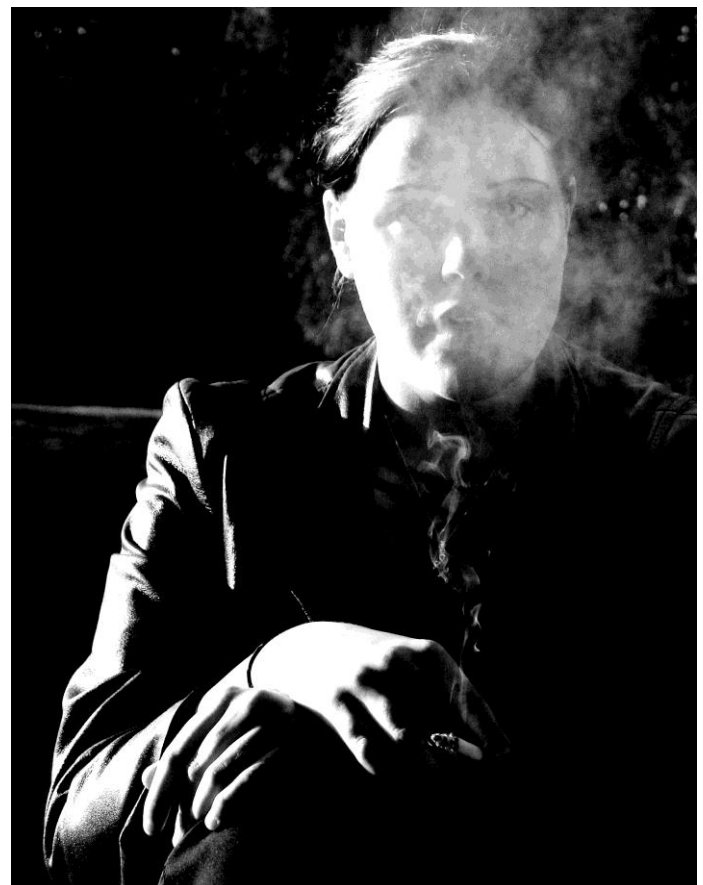
Tim / Teri (rhythm guitar) _____

Ricky / Rain (bass) _____

Hank / Heaven (drums) _____

Curtis / Coral (synthesiser) _____

Issue: _____



Hank / Heaven

Drums

Relationship

Zakk / Zoe (vocalist) _____

Chris / Cassie (solo guitar) _____

Tim / Teri (rhythm guitar) _____

Ricky / Rain (bass) _____

Hank / Heaven (drums) _____

Curtis / Coral (synthesiser) _____

Issue: _____



Curtis / Coral

Synthesiser

Relationship

Zakk / Zoe (vocalist) _____

Chris / Cassie (solo guitar) _____

Tim / Teri (rhythm guitar) _____

Ricky / Rain (bass) _____

Hank / Heaven (drums) _____

Curtis / Coral (synthesiser) _____

Issue: _____



You have troubles with dangerous people.

You have lost all hope.

You are obsessed with your musical skills.

You are feeling guilty.

You can't stop the beat.

You are doing anything to please the critics.

You are demanding respect.

You are expecting a baby.

You are obsessed with your looks.

You care strongly about the environment.

You are mentally instable.

You have mental problems.

You are active in animal right protests

You are a poser.

You are searched by the government.

You are obsessed with new found religion

You are stalked by an obsessive fan.

You have a hurtful strain which hinders your performance.

**You are having
your birthday, that
everyone forgot.**

**You are high
on drugs.**

You are home sick.

**You are bothered
by the band's
audience.**

You are drunk.

**You are having a
relationship crisis.**

You are nervous.

**You are stalked
by an obsessive
fan.**

**You are having
doubts about
your career.**

**You have been
asked to join
another band.**

**You are fighting
off an addiction.**

**You are fed up by
the band's lack of
professionalism.**

**You are sick of
all that pagan
mambojambo.**

**You want to
be admired.**

**You are insecure
about your
musical talent**

**You have hit
rock bottom.**

**You have an
argument with
the festival
organisation.**

**You are bothered
by the way the
band management.**

**You are very
jealous
of ...**

**You are
irritated by
the behaviour of ...**

**You suspect
theft of your
possessions by ...**

**You are very
dependant
on ...**

**... always plays
out of tune.**

**... has broken one
of your favourite
instruments.**

**You seek constant
recognition
from ...**

**You know a
humiliating
secret of ...**

**You have
strong musical
differences
with ...**

**... always asks
cigarettes/beer
from you.**

**You strongly
admire ...**

**You are
bothered by the
world-view of ...**

**... has once
stolen your
former lover.**

... snores.

**You strongly
admire ...**

**You have a
huge crush on ...**

You hate ...

**You are
embarrassed by
the behaviour of ...**

**... does not belong
in a pagan band.**

... does not fit in.

**... should manage
the band.**

**... has puked over
you when he/she
was drunk.**

... is a poser.

**... is getting too
much attention
by the fans.**

**You are
competing with ...**

**... should show
more gratefulness
towards you.**

**You feel inferior
when you are
around ...**

**You don't
trust...**

**... makes a mess
of the tourbus.**

**... is not acting
rational.**

**... should
grow up.**

**... has much
nicer stuff.**

**... is bossing
you around.**

**... is making a fool
of him/herself
on stage**

**you had a
spritual dream
about...**

**You want to
be closer to ...**