

POSTHUMAN'S PROGRESS



AN AMERICAN FREEFORM GAME

BASED ON *LOLA RENNT* (1998)

FOR FASTAVAL 2013

BY EVAN TORNER

Legal Crap

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If you have any comments or questions about this game, you may feel free to contact me at evan.torner@gmail.com.

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Games that inspired this one are plenty in number, and include: *Playing with Intent*, *Kagematsu*, *Tales of the Fisherman's Wife*, *Shooting the Moon*, *Murderous Ghosts*, *Apocalypse World* and every jeepform I've ever played.

“Is there a [woman] whose judgment clear
Can others teach the course to steer
Yet runs [herself] life’s mad career
Wild as the wave?”

John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678)

“The ball is round.
A game lasts 90 minutes.
Everything else is pure theory.”

Tom Tykwer, *Lola rennt* (1998)

The Game

Posthuman's Progress is a freeform live-action role-playing game for 5 players plus one facilitator. It has been conceived as a game in which not all characters are created equal, but every player nevertheless holds power over the narrative. It is a game about conceiving different outcomes to events that take place over a very short period of time, and what the long-term effects of those events might be. At the same time, this is not a contemplative game by any stretch of the imagination. It should be **fast-paced**, **improvisatory**, and seriously **playful**.

One player plays the **posthuman**. A posthuman is a human with latent abilities beyond those of a normal human, but only triggers them during moments of extreme stress. In this game, the posthuman is a woman who desperately needs to save her lover from certain harm. One player plays the the posthuman's **lover**, who has gotten him/herself into a jam and will do something stupid in about 20 minutes that will prevent them from having a future. The rest of the players play **humans** the posthuman and the lover encounter in their desperate journey. The posthuman is so powerful that she can alter the flow of time: the first implementation of her plan to save her lover won't work, nor will the second, but the third one **will** work ... and against all odds. What that looks like and how it manifests, however, is up to the game's players.

Who Should Play

Players should be able to improvise and think quickly on a meta-fictional level. They should understand how to lead a lighter moment into a serious one, and vice versa. They can convincingly explore a character's options despite the outcome seeming pre-determined. They are comfortable with playing either a main protagonist or a by-stander with equal precision.

Facilitators and organizers should be able to improvise. They can introduce rules and guidelines before or during a scene with minimal disruption of that scene's overall flow. They can actively engage most of the players most of the time.

Materials

The facilitator will need a readily accessible copy of this rule text. Otherwise, the game can be played in an open room with lots of space to maneuver, maybe with a few convenient props on a table nearby. Some chairs to move around would not hurt either, nor would a music-playing device that can play pumping techno music during the different Runs (or at least the Third Run). Players should wear comfortable clothes, maybe even the same clothes they would wear to the gym.

Setting

The present day in a modern city, terrain across which one might run.

Guidelines

Posthuman's Progress is a fast-paced, scene-based game with a lot of meta-play elements: players must think about story arcs and narrative form while they are playing their characters. In addition, players have roles that they can play to help the game along. But too much discussion about narrative elements will impede fluid play, and encourage prejudice against certain kinds of emergent ideas over others. If you are facilitating the game, make sure the players acknowledge the following guidelines:

- Stay in the moment, but don't lose sight of the big picture.
- Simple, straightforward answers are better than convoluted, circular ones.
- Act your way through a scene as it is framed and played, and don't waste more than 2-3 sentences worth of breath on it in advance.
- Your characters are pawns of the story, the system and the world. Feel what they feel, and then mercilessly subject them to forces beyond themselves.
- The authority of selected players over **scene-framing**, **setting up a scene**, **obstructing the posthuman**, **arbitrating conflicts**, or **editing scenes** is absolute. Each person fulfills their role by making decisions quickly and with an eye on the mood and preferences of the group. Debate about scenes and rules can be saved until after this short game is over.
- You don't have to be funny. Straight-laced characters are always needed.
- You will only look good if you make your fellow players look good.

Warm-Up

To get into the creative space needed by this game, try these improv exercises:

1. **Count to 20 as a Group:** A theater classic. Everyone stands in a circle. The group must collectively count up to 20 without two individuals saying the same number aloud. If two people happen to do that, take a deep breath and start over again from 1.
2. **The Machine:** You're all parts of a machine making... something. One person mimes out a repetitive, machine-like process in the air. Another person takes the imaginary "product" produced and transforms it somehow via a repetitive machine-like process. A third person transforms that product, and so forth, until everyone is one big Machine. Making appropriate noises is encouraged.
3. **Loss and Gain:** Pair off into couples, including the facilitator. Each player should look the other player in the eyes and narrate a story of personal loss for no longer than 30 seconds. The other player then states "No, I won't let that happen." Then they narrate for 30 seconds how they use superhuman powers (i.e., flight, resetting time, etc.) to save them from their loss, no matter what it is. Then switch roles.

Set-Up

Bring some props of everyday objects – cell phones, plates, paper money, etc. – and assemble them on a table off to the side, if one is available. If you're using music, set up the sound system, make sure it works and set the volume.

Next comes the pivotal question: **Who will play the posthuman?**

The posthuman is always a woman. If a man plays her, then his character is a woman. The posthuman is strong-willed, and will get whatever she wants in the end. To cast her, ask the women players first for volunteers. The most enthusiastic gets the job. It's going to take a lot of energy to save her lover.

Initiate the Posthuman

Once the posthuman has been initiated, the rest of the players form a semi-circle around her. Pass this sheet around and have each player look the posthuman in the eyes and say one of these lines.

- You are the posthuman.
- You are powerful and determined.
- When the ones you love are threatened, you act.
- When you act, the world must pay attention.
- You will win in the end.

Flesh Out the Posthuman

Now that the posthuman knows who she is, now we need to know a bit more about her, though her answers ought not to make our heads spin. Pass this sheet around and have each player ask the posthuman one of these questions. The posthuman answers with the response that **feels right** for her character. This will help generate some of the fiction required by the rest of the game.

- You have a name. It is...
- You live somewhere with other people. It looks like...
- You have an ultimate desire, which is...
- Something makes you vulnerable and that is...
- You have a characteristic that distinguishes you from other people, which is...
- You have chosen one of the other players to play your lover, and that is...

Once the posthuman is sufficiently established, she can be left alone to contemplate how awesome she is.



Everybody Else: The Humans

Now it's time for the rest of the players (**except for the lover**) to generate their own characters: the humans. The human players gather together to decide a few things about the characters the posthuman will encounter in her desperate dash to save her lover. Players play multiple humans, and they all share the same disposition. Since these characters don't yet know where or how they will fit into the narrative, the main aspect they must determine right now is their characters' respective **dispositions** when they encounter the posthuman. No two human characters can share the same disposition.

Here's a list of some sample **dispositions**:

- Grumpy
- Cheeky
- Pleasant
- Sagacious
- Anxious
- Distraught
- Depressed
- Amorous

The human characters will certainly have professions or activities they regularly perform, but these will be determined over the course of play. Leave them open for now. After selecting a disposition, figure out what **unresolved issue** each human has lurking in their private life. They should all be prefaced by the phrase "I can't..."

Here's a list of some sample **unresolved issues**:

- I can't meet and marry a girl.
- I can't get a divorce from my husband, though I want to.
- I can't find someone who likes the same sex fetishes as me.
- I can't pay my rent.
- I can't change my appearance.
- I can't interest others in my insightful board game.
- I can't stop contemplating suicide.
- I can't rest until the corrupt financial elite is overthrown from power.

The Lover

The human player playing the lover will always have “Panicked” as their **disposition**, but can choose their **unresolved issue** on their own. Once the humans each have their disposition and their issue, the posthuman(s) may come forward and the game may begin.



Before We Continue

Now you have a posthuman, a group of humans of various dispositions with various unresolved issues, and a panicked lover who is still unsure as to why he is panicked. This may feel very open-ended to all the players.

It is time to remind them of the following main points.

- The open-ended traits are there to help encourage emergent narrative.
- Thus major holes in your characters will be filled later in play, through fast improvisation and confident interaction with other players.
- The narrative itself is simple: the posthuman fails to save her lover, so she resets time to try again – only to fail again – so she resets time again and then succeeds despite all odds. The players’ efforts should be directed toward making these three attempts as vivid and interesting as possible.

Game Roles: Self-Regulation

Posthuman's Progress dispenses with the traditional gamemaster role in favor of players regulating their own play. The facilitator is there as the mediator of these rules, and gets the first pick of the various roles available. Otherwise, each player gets a **role** that helps them move the game and the narrative along as quickly as possible. The posthuman is beyond even such roles, and therefore need not pick one.

- The **Framer**, whose job it is to *frame scenes*.
- The **Coordinator**, whose job it is to *coordinate set-up of a particular location*.
- The **Obstructor**, whose job it is to *throw minor obstacles* in the posthuman's way.
- The **Arbitrator**, whose job it is to *settle outcomes of conflicts*.
- The **Editor**, whose job it is to *cut scenes if they're too long*.

To reiterate: each human player, including the lover and the facilitator, can pick one of these roles, and gets absolute authority to implement it as they see fit (in line with the group's overall vibe). Some of them overlap in responsibilities. You're adults: come to quick settlements and move it along.

Framing scenes means that it is your responsibility to describe the present situation to the posthuman and make it feel tense, like a movie.

Sample Framer sentences include:

- You exit your smelly apartment building into the ally where the bums sleep. One of them eyes you up and down.
- You dash in and out of traffic on your way to the bank. Cars honk angrily as you pass.
- When you enter the bank, everyone turns to look at you.

Coordinating set-up of a particular location means that you assign professions to characters and create a nuanced environment for the posthuman to encounter. If you know the posthuman is headed to the bank, the convenience store, or wherever, it will need to feel like a real place to them. Heck, establish complicated relationships between the characters who are present. Arrange chairs and other players to suit the situation, and give players background extra roles if you'd like. [Continued on next page.]

Just remember that you are either frozen or setting up drama in this space until the posthuman arrives. Nothing huge can be resolved until they enter. The Framer will then start from where the Coordinator leaves off.

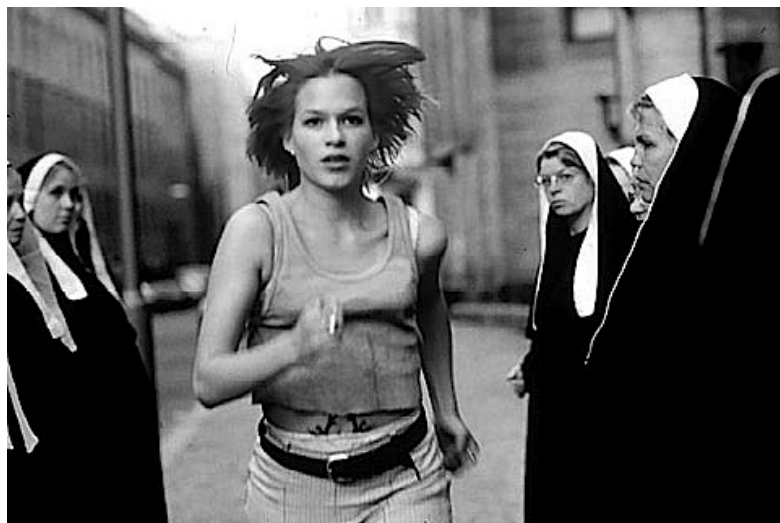
Sample Coordinator actions include:

- [Arrange chairs as if in a therapy circle. All the humans sit down.]
You walk in on a silent church prayer group.
- [Some humans play passengers, others play walls.] You're in a tight elevator heading up to your father's office.
- [Set up a bank teller standing behind a table, a customer in line and a security guard.] You enter the bank.

Minor obstacles are cursory challenges that slow down a posthuman: dogs, curbs, nuns, cars, babies – almost anything can be turned into an obstacle. Every time the posthuman starts running, consider breaking into the action between scenes and injecting one of these. The posthuman should have a different means of dealing with this obstacle in each successive Run.

Sample Obstructor actions include:

- The bum reaches up and grabs your ankle. What do you do?
- A motorcycle weaves in and out of traffic, heading straight for you.
What do you do?
- You can either run through that group of orphans or that group of nuns.
What do you do?



Settling outcomes means stepping in when there seems to be a player disagreement about what should happen in a scene. Should the posthuman get their way or not? If it's the First Run or Second Run, they will either substantively fail or succeed only provisionally (i.e., "Yes, you get what you want, but..."). In the Third Run, they will succeed, but in ways that might even surprise them as the posthuman. It is this player's job above all to keep track of what's going on in the fiction and maintain its spirit through their judgments.

Sample Arbitrator actions include:

- [1st Run] Your bet at the casino goes bust as your blackjack hand goes to 22. Too bad!
- [2nd Run] You win \$5,000 at blackjack at the casino, but they can only pay you in heavy amounts of small bills.
- [3rd Run] You win \$50,000 at the casino, but what crazy involuntary thing do you do? [The posthuman player responds by screaming very loudly]

Cutting a scene means having the authority to say "Cut" if a scene is going on too long. This is clearly a facilitator's favored role. In case of a "cut," the Arbitrator quickly decides what the outcome is and the posthuman resumes running to save her lover. The Editor also gets to decide how many minutes are left in the posthuman's ticking clock. The posthuman has a total of 20 minutes. Time in this framework is fully arbitrary, but is necessary to preserve a tense atmosphere. Force the posthuman into certain decisions because she's running out of time. One may be generous or cruel with time as one sees fit.

Before We Continue

The assigning of roles ends the phase of the game before the players begin to establish fiction through role-playing. Keep in mind that the roles are there to keep the facilitator from being the hierarchical authority over what does and does not happen. The freedom of being in charge over some aspect of the event itself is, of course, saddled with responsibilities. While it is up to the facilitator to keep the game running smoothly, it's also the job of each **player** to do the same. Sometimes the roles will get confused during play. Sorting them out is less worth your time than coming to a quick conclusion that most of the group agrees upon and moving on.

Initiate the Game: The Crowd

Let the play begin. The posthuman goes to her room in the city, and begins to do some trivial work there. All the rest of the humans face the ground and jostle together as a crowd. Each of the humans should walk around and act preoccupied as their human self. They should be thinking about their issue, but all the while maintaining their disposition. They should be weaving around each other in a directionless mass, simulating the chaotic urban environment of the city. Continue this for about 30 seconds, or until the Editor cuts the scene.

Initiate the Plot: The Call

The lover calls the posthuman. He/she has an urgent problem, and it will become a matter of life-and-death for him in about 20 minutes. Through an intense conversation, we will learn the following:

- What the problem is.
- Why he thinks the posthuman is partially blame for the problem.
- What the circumstances were that led up to the problem.
- What stupid thing the lover's about ready to do to solve the problem if the posthuman doesn't do something.

The fellow human players are encouraged to pitch in with advice as to what the nature of the problem is, but authority ultimately rests on the lover in this matter. A good problem involves a **ticking clock** (i.e., a suspenseful timeframe), a **nearly impossible task**, and a potential for **immoral behavior**.

Some examples of problems:

- The lover accidentally shot a cop during a robbery and is trying to resuscitate him. He'll die in 20 minutes.
- The lover misplaced the huge pile of money he needs to pay off a drug dealer in 20 minutes. He'll rob a store to get the money otherwise.
- The lover pissed off the wrong mob boss and assassins are coming to kill him in 20 minutes.
- The lover has lost his kitty, given up hope and will strap a bomb on himself in 20 minutes.

After the Call: Action!

After this intense phone conversation, which stops because someone's phone battery inevitably runs out, the posthuman now has to come up with a **3-5 step plan** to remedy the situation. It doesn't have to be a good one, and won't be the one that winds up actually solving the problem. She should put her hands on her head and think out loud for the group until the plan crystallizes.

Here are some example plans (corresponding to the problems):

- Steal a car. Drive to pick up lover. Drive to drop the cop off anonymously at the hospital.
- Run to father's bank. Get 100,000 marks from him. Run to lover.
- Run to get brother's pistol. Run to lover's apartment. Shoot assassins.
- Run to area where kitty was lost. Find kitty. Present kitty to lover.
Disable bomb.

The game will unfold with the varied implementations of this plan through 3 Runs – after the posthuman resets time.

There are two **important rules** to note however:

- However the situation may be resolved in the First Run and Second Run, **it cannot present the couple with a future.**
- The Third Run will resolve not only the problem, but also **give the couple a future by satisfying the posthuman's ultimate desire.**

Once the phone call is over and the plan is made, it is time for the posthuman to do the first thing required by any of her desperate plans:

RUN!

First Run: The Failure

The posthuman hangs up the phone and begins to **act**. She assumes the default stance – **running**, preferably in place or around the room and states that she is off to do the first part of the plan. The Editor states she has 20 minutes to do this. The posthuman wants to fulfill her objective, but doesn't know what dangers and pitfalls are in store for her. The humans' objective in the First Run is to establish the playing field for the successful Third Run without letting her succeed this time, nor the next time. They also have a more prosaic objective: make sure that all of the characters they have created for themselves appear at some point in the posthuman's path.

Here's how the game works from here:

- The humans ask the running posthuman to describe where she's running.
- The Framer describes the initial path out of their home out into the world.
- The Obstructor steps up and throws one or two minor obstacles in the posthuman's path.
- The Coordinator meanwhile sets up the destination, in terms of characters and textures.
- After the posthuman narrates how they deal with 1-2 obstacles, the Framer brings her into the 1st location with a sentence.
- The posthuman interacts with the humans to try and get what she wants.
- The humans can respond by *flashing forward* or *obstructing*.
- After some role-playing and the conflict comes to a head, the Arbitrator helps decide the outcome, if it is at all in doubt.
- The Cutter cuts the scene and decides how many minutes are left, keeping in mind how many scenes remain.
- The number of scenes remaining is based on how many human players haven't yet been at the center of a scene.
- Cut quickly to the lover and portray how close he is to doing the stupid thing.
- The cycle resets: The posthuman resumes running, the Framer/Obstructor intervene, etc.

Humans: Center, Flash-Forward, Obstruct

Humans are extras in the posthuman's story. But they also have their own disposition and unresolved issues, as we determined earlier. These attributes are attached to **any** human a player might play – it could be a truck driver, then an old maid, then a casino employee – rather than one character. This is confusing, and very meta! It works because, in any scene, only one human takes center stage to either **flash-forward** themselves or **obstruct** the posthuman. The Run isn't over until every player's human has been the Center of a scene, so it is up to the posthuman to interact with each player in some capacity each Run.

Humans that encounter the posthuman have two options beyond just role-playing their character: **flash-forward** or **obstructing**. A character flashing-forward stops the game and assumes a third-person narrator position stance to describe what three major events happen in their lives as an indirect result of their encounter with the posthuman. They face outward and say "And then..." three times, following each with a narration of a major event.

Here are some examples of **flash-forwarding**:

- And then I got pregnant. And then I had an abortion. And then I had more money.
- And then I won the lottery. And then I was on the cover of *Forbes* Magazine. And then I had an expensive funeral.
- And then I got angry at my husband. And then I poisoned him. And then I wound up in jail.
- And then I lost my job. And then I found my true calling as a sky-diver. And then I found God in the air.

These are there for the character to explore their **unresolved issues** in terms of the future, and they should think of good, bad, and arbitrary outcomes for these issues to make for an interesting mix of what life might hold. For the Second Run and Third Run, these stories may have the same issue, but will shift to radically different outcomes. [Continued on next page]

The humans that **obstruct** can insist on their own character's reality. That is to say, they cannot be easily pushed aside by the posthuman. The posthuman must choose to either abandon the route of action involving this human or take an unusually desperate action in order to bypass the obstruction. The Editor can correspondingly reduce the time remaining due to this action's extremity. (A good set of humans provides a mix of flash-forwarding and obstructing.)

Here are some examples of **obstruction**:

- The shop clerk counts out each individual bill very slowly, so the posthuman has to decide whether or not she has to grab all the cash without knowing how much.
- The old man waiting in line pulls her aside and gives her a humiliating lecture on good manners, posing the possibility of her having to get violent with him.
- The young man tries to ask her out while selling her a bicycle.

Ending the First Run

Once the humans run out of characters to introduce, it is appropriate to let the timer run out, and introduce the posthuman into a scene with her lover. In the First Run she is **TOO LATE**. The lover does his stupid thing, and she has to put up with the consequences. The posthuman and Arbitrator must agree how dire these consequences are, and how catastrophic the failure is.

Nevertheless, the posthuman can transcend the situation by **resetting time**.

Any point after the disaster with her lover is revealed, the posthuman can yell **"STOP."**

Cut to the interlude scene.



The First Interlude Scene

The posthuman and lover are in an intimate and/or romantic situation. They are talking about their relationship. In this scene, the posthuman doubts the seriousness of the relationship. The lover somehow convinces her at least that he's serious about the relationship.

The Cutter can start the Second Run after the scene has concluded.

The Second Run: The Educated Failure

Proceed as in the First Run, but with the following differences:

- Though the posthuman appears not to remember what happened in the First Run, there are a few mistakes she quite consciously avoids, or has knowledge that is carried over from the First Run. The Arbitrator must acknowledge this.
- All of the humans from the First Run must be encountered in some fashion, but not in the same fashion as in the First Run.
- Humans will have different flash forwards and obstruct in a different fashion from earlier.
- Whatever happens, the posthuman will no longer be **TOO LATE**.
- Instead she will be **ON TIME, BUT A CALAMITY OCCURS THAT PREVENTS THE FUTURE**.

Any point after the calamity with her lover is revealed, the posthuman can yell "STOP." Cut to the interlude scene.

The Second Interlude Scene

The posthuman and lover are in an intimate and/or romantic situation. They are talking about their relationship. In this scene, the lover doubts the seriousness of the relationship. The posthuman somehow convinces him at least that she's serious about it.

The Editor can start the Third Run after sufficient time as elapsed.

The Third Run: The Improbable Success

Proceed as in the First Run and the Second Run, but crank the music (if you're using it), and insert the following differences as a group:

- The obstructions will all be overcome by the posthuman with surprising results. It may not come easy, but it'll come.
- The lover, meanwhile, gets the same agency as the posthuman, and begins to solve his own problem.
- The flash-forwards get increasingly extreme, and humans obstructing the posthuman can get increasingly insistent, but will lose in the end. (The Arbitrator will ensure this).
- Nevertheless, the Framer will continue to make the scenes seem suspenseful.
- At one point, there's a risk of losing everything, and the posthuman must ask the World to help.
- All of the humans join together to come up with the World's solution to her short-term problem.
- The World solving the posthuman's problem is the final scene before she meets her lover.
- She meets up with her lover. He may or may not have already solved his problem, but she's definitely *also* solved it as well. They both did, and can take equal credit somehow.
- The ending must give the couple a future - they won't have major legal consequences, etc.
- Conclude the game with the posthuman and the lover walking away from the playspace, hand in hand, toward the future.



So That's It?

Yes. But then, that would be too easy, wouldn't it?

From playtesting, it's important to consider the following points throughout the different Runs:

- The Framer and Coordinator should be working in concert to make the scene a real one for the posthuman to encounter.
- When the scene begins, the posthuman will blow into the space, desperate. The first human she encounters will likely become the Center, to flash-forward and obstruct as they see fit. This means that the player of that human will make sure to bring the human back in subsequent runs if possible, and will back out of the way for the other scenes.
- The Failure/Educated Failure/Improbable Success order should not be seen as absolutely foretold. Take the story where the actions of the characters seem to be taking it.
- Don't forget about the lover. Cut back to the lover whenever it seems like the posthuman's in a fix or at a good stopping point. The lover's opposition is **also** played by the facilitator and the other players. Their story will be likely as interesting as the posthuman's, but without all the superpowers.
- If you forget rules, roles, or even what character you're supposed to be, **don't sweat it**. This is a light, fast-paced game that chews up characters and scenes like none other. You'll likely be in the next scene, and you can pick up from where you left off there.