

# Role-Playing the Caper-Gone-Wrong Film in Fiasco

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Like mainstream role-playing games, many indie RPGs situate themselves in relation to familiar genres and settings from other cultural forms: Tolkienian fantasy in *Burning Wheel* (2002), post-apocalyptic fiction in *Apocalypse World* (2010), silver age superheroes in *ICONS* (2010), and so forth.<sup>1</sup> A handful of these games go one step further, however, simulating not only the kinds of stories told in other media, but also the narrative form of those stories. Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2009) is one RPG that succeeds at this approach. The game simulates the kind of blackly comic, often excessively violent caper-gone-wrong films – or what J.P. Telotte calls “fatal capers” – associated especially with the Coen brothers, but also with Quentin Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction*, 1994), Guy Ritchie (*Snatch*, 2000) and others.<sup>2</sup> “The typical Coenian narrative,” R. Barton Palmer argues, “focuses either on pathetic losers whose attempts to make a ‘big score’ of some kind spectacularly misfire, or on those of more virtue or purer heart who in their cunning or simplicity persevere to transcendence of some kind.”<sup>3</sup> The text of *Fiasco* describes the material of the game itself in similar terms:

*“Fiasco is inspired by cinematic tales of small-time capers gone disastrously wrong – particularly films like Blood Simple, Fargo, The Way of the Gun, Burn After Reading, and A Simple Plan. You’ll play ordinary people with powerful ambition and poor impulse control. There will be big dreams and flawed execution. It won’t go well for them, to put it mildly, and in the end it will probably collapse into a glorious heap of jealousy, murder, and recrimination. Lives and reputations will be lost,*

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Film Studies Association of Canada in 2012. [https://www.academia.edu/4530327/The\\_Set-Up\\_the\\_Tilt\\_and\\_the\\_Aftermath\\_Role-playing\\_the\\_Caper-Gone-Wrong\\_Film\\_in\\_Fiasco](https://www.academia.edu/4530327/The_Set-Up_the_Tilt_and_the_Aftermath_Role-playing_the_Caper-Gone-Wrong_Film_in_Fiasco).

2. J. P. Telotte. “Fatal Capers: Strategy and Enigma in Film Noir.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23.4 (1996), pp. 163-71.

3. R. Barton Palmer. Joel and Ethan Coen. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p. 54.

*painful wisdom will be gained, and if you are really lucky, your guy just might end up back where he started.*<sup>4</sup>

*Fiasco* can be seen as a sort of colloquial, playable form of film criticism: the game must establish certain theoretical premises about caper-gone-wrong films and how they work in order to simulate the sub-genre in terms of a system of game rules. Because it produces a simulation, this game system is selective and simplified. Nevertheless, simulations are value-laden and never neutral, always highlighting and de-emphasizing aspects of the source system.<sup>5</sup> To say that *Fiasco* simulates the Coenian caper film means that the game presents a specific conception or interpretation of the forms and conventions of the films that inspired it.

I will not rehearse the rules and gameplay of *Fiasco* here. The rulebook is concise and very readable, and “actual play” accounts of *Fiasco* sessions can be found elsewhere, such as the full session featured in the popular webseries *Tabletop*.

In the execution of its gameplay mechanics, *Fiasco* simulates – with surprising reliability and verisimilitude – Coen brothers-style fatal caper films. Rather than adapting any one film or story – although who would not play *Fargo: The Game?* – the game is instead grounded in general themes and principles that are presumed to guide this kind of filmic narrative. Joris Dormans argues that the rules of a role-playing game suggest a certain style of play, and are conducive to certain kinds of stories.<sup>6</sup> The rules of *Fiasco* – like many indie RPGs – are specifically designed to “match” its subject matter as closely as possible. As indicated by the terminology used in the rulebook – setups, scenes and acts, flashbacks, montages, and so on – *Fiasco* actively encourages players to imagine the story in the form of a film playing out.<sup>7</sup> The paratextual presentation of the game helps reinforce this cinematic framing. The rulebook and playsets are designed in the style of Saul Bass movie posters (and in particular, the Bass-inspired poster for the Coens’ *Burn After Reading*, 2008), and

4. Jason Morningstar. *Fiasco*. Chapel Hill, NC: Bully Pulpit Games and Amusements, 2010, p. 8.

5. Ian Bogost. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, pp. 98–99.

6. Joris Dormans. “On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules.” *Game Studies* 6.1 (2006). <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>.

7. Other RPGs that notably use cinematic framing devices include James Bond 007 (1983) and Feng Shui (1996). *Primetime Adventures* (2004), similarly, uses the language of ensemble television series, dividing the action into scenes, episodes, and seasons, presided over by a Producer.

the text is peppered with no less than 56 movie quotes and references, ranging from canonical to obscure.



Poster for Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) designed by Saul Bass. Original copyright held by Columbia Pictures, 1959.

In addition to a paragraph of “flavor text” to be read aloud to establish the setting and mood, each playset comes with a handful of “Movie Night” suggestions suited to the specific setting or genre – the Transatlantic ocean liner playset lists *Bitter Moon* (1992), *Legend of 1900* (1998), *Titanic* (1997), *Duck Soup* (1933), *The Impostors* (1998), *The Love Boat* (1976), *Poseidon Adventure* (2005), and *Deep Rising* (1998).

As noted above, simulations are not direct or simple copies of their objects. Rather, they translate, adapt, interpret, and represent the source material in



A comparison between respective Saul Bass emulations: the *Fiasco* RPG (left) and the *Burn After Reading* poster (right). *Fiasco* Cover by John Harper, 2009. Art direction for *Burn After Reading* poster by David Swayze, 2008, Copyright Working Title Films.

terms of another system. Cinematic conventions can be expressed through the rule-based system of a game and – in order to be generative of dynamic play situations – these rules need to produce a specific range of genre-appropriate possibilities. It is in this sense that I contend that *Fiasco* is a form of criticism that presents a cinematic account of a caper-gone-wrong. The game’s conception of cinematic narrative is fairly structural and formulaic, with plot elements divided neatly into different categories that interact in various ways. *Fiasco* conceives of the caper-gone-wrong film not so much as a sub-genre, but as a *sur-genre*, a narrative pattern that can be identified and mapped onto many different kinds of films. *Fiasco*, through its rules and textual framing, pragmatically constructs a category – what might be called the “fiasco film” – making it both sensible and playable. This simulation is based on three over-arching themes or concerns that *Fiasco* positions as central to the caper-gone-wrong film: black humor, fate, and chaotic breakdown.

While nothing in *Fiasco* necessarily guarantees that it will generate a darkly humorous story every time – the game could be played “straight” to tell a cold,

serious story along the lines of, say, *Mystic River* (2003) or *Heat* (1995)– the paratextual framing and the plot elements included in most playsets certainly encourage an ironic approach.<sup>8</sup> Palmer points to the Coens' use of "farcical violence and regional stereotypes" as a primary source of humor, to which I would add genre stereotypes and Hollywood clichés, particularly in films like *Burn After Reading* and *The Ladykillers* (2004).<sup>9</sup> In the supplementary rulebook *The Fiasco Companion*, this kind of over-the-top black comedy is referred to as "gonzo": "Shooting drug dealers inside a tornado is gonzo," for example.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the more outrageous moments in films like *Pulp Fiction* or *Snatch* rely on precisely their farcical absurdity to make the audience cringe and laugh. Even when the game is played with more restraint and grounding in realism, however, perverse irony and dark humor almost inevitably seeps into the narrative. Telotte explores the links between the post-modern fatal caper and film noir, arguing that the sarcasm and irony that pervades *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) represents both an intensification of the shadowy, violent visions of film noir and an ironic distancing from its bleak subject matter.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Leitch contends that, far more than other genres of film comedy, the films of the Coen brothers depend on their "ruthlessly stylized visuals" – and the detachment they engender – for humor.<sup>12</sup>

While *Fiasco* does not have visual imagery in the filmic sense, Michael Ryan Skolnik has argued that the peculiar aesthetics of tabletop role-playing games, contrary to popular discourses of immersion in a fictional world, skew closer to the anti-immersive, defamiliarizing drama of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal with their disjunctive flow and self-reflexive performativity.<sup>13</sup> *Fiasco's* system of rules takes advantage of the distancing inherent in the medium. The game emphasizes archetypal characters and settings, literally random (and often absurd) plot elements ("Forty chickens in eighty cages"), with its overall tone and presentation encouraging the kind

8. For more on paratextual framing in RPGs, see David Jara. "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games." *International Journal of Role-playing* 4 (2013). <http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue4/IJRPissue4jara.pdf>

9. Palmer, p. 95.

10. Jason Morningstar and Steve Segedy. *The Fiasco Companion*. Chapel Hill, NC: Bully Pulpit Games and Amusements, 2011, p. 17.

11. Telotte, p. 164.

12. Thomas Leitch. *Crime Films*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 279.

13. Michael Ryan Skolnik. "The Anti-Immersive Theatre of Role-Playing Games." *Proceedings of the International Conference for Meaningful Play*. East Lansing, MI: Meaningful Play, 2008. Online. [http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2008/mp2008\\_paper\\_90.pdf](http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2008/mp2008_paper_90.pdf)

of ironic distance produced by the Coens' visual style. Leitch goes on to say that "ambiguity and irresolution are at the heart of *Fargo's* comedy, which [...] works by systematically depriving viewers of any single privileged perspective from which to interpret its outrageous events."<sup>14</sup> In *Fiasco*, the constant shifting from viewpoint to viewpoint, the shared control over the setting, plot and characters, and the jarring mid-game Tilt phase – which introduces new, destabilizing narrative elements – ensure that the story is never simple or linear. Palmer claims that "To laugh, we must withdraw from what we witness. Black humor is always, for this reason, a joke on us as well."<sup>15</sup> Playing *Fiasco* is as much about telling bleakly funny and violent stories as it is about implicating each other in the joke, as players try to cajole and one-up one another into more and more gonzo plot developments, and still-darker and more startlingly graphic fates for their characters.

"That the caper might end in death, then, is hardly a surprise," Telotte writes of the fatal caper film, pointing to another inheritance of film noir: the inevitability and unpredictability of its ambiguous world.<sup>16</sup> The sense of "relentless causality" in these stories is paired with a profoundly enigmatic sense of contingency; fate is inexorable and chance is cruel and vindictive.<sup>17</sup> The fatalistic undertones of the caper-gone-wrong are highlighted right from the set-up in *Fiasco*, in which every character begins not as an individual, but a node in a randomly-generated network of relationships, needs, locations, and objects. These plot elements in many ways have more agency than the characters derived from them, as they act upon the characters through the players, determining the range of possible identities available to them, and constituting their roles in the story. As Palmer is quick to point out, however:

*"none of these films imagines a strictly deterministic universe, whose inhabitants are crushed by both random mischance and the unreliability of what knowledge they manage to attain. If their plans fail, and they always do, it is as much the result of their bungling, irresolution, or venality."*<sup>18</sup>

Like it says in the rules, "poor impulse control" characterizes most of the protagonists in a caper-gone-wrong film, and much of the fun of *Fiasco* is in making and playing out terrible choices for them. The game is structured

14. Leitch, p. 283.

15. Palmer, p. 101.

16. Telotte, p. 164.

17. Palmer, p. 100.

18. Palmer, p. 80.

such that, by the time the Tilt comes around, the players should already have made a series of increasingly poor decisions. If they have not, the escalating Tilt elements will ensure that they start very soon. As Leitch suggests, the characters in caper-gone-wrong films are willfully ignorant of “what must seem to most viewers blindingly obvious generic cues,” choosing instead to continue along their doomed paths.<sup>19</sup>

The most direct way *Fiasco* simulates this narrative combination of foolishness, determinism, and contingency is the Fate Dice mechanic, whereby players amass dice that chart the downward spirals (or unexpected good fortunes) of their characters, ultimately deciding their fate. The Fate Dice are simultaneously representative of the players’ choices and decisions, as well as out of the players’ control, since the Tilt table or a low roll in the conclusive Aftermath phase can thwart even the most well-laid plans.

In the end, it all falls apart, and in many ways this is the aspect of the caper-gone-wrong film upon which *Fiasco* places the greatest emphasis. The game’s entire system is focused on what Telotte describes as the inevitable catastrophic breakdown of social action and planning in favor of individual aims and survival.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the classical noir, in which the status quo is ultimately reasserted (however tenuously), the fatal caper presents a deeply enigmatic and futile conclusion.<sup>21</sup> The facade of normalcy in the settings established by the core *Fiasco* playsets – a nice Southern town, flyover country USA, etc. – is violently shattered by the resulting fiasco. The probabilities of the final Aftermath dice roll ensure that most characters end up somewhere in the middle, with merely sad or pathetic outcomes, and one or two faced with a truly horrible fate. If a player does end up with a lucky high roll, it often translates in the fiction into a *deus ex machina* that brings them unexpected success, salvation or wealth. While in other kinds of narratives this would be frustrating, in the caper-gone-wrong it delightfully reinforces the themes of inexorability and ambiguity, not to mention the ironic distancing described above. As Palmer says of the Coen brothers’ protagonists: “They become reconciled to dissatisfaction. Capable, at best, only of ironized victories.”<sup>22</sup> In *Fiasco*, these victories are not earned or even intended, and almost always come at the expense of others.

The central mechanics of *Fiasco*, the overall structure of gameplay, and the

19. Leitch, p. 284.

20. Telotte, p. 167.

21. Telotte, p. 164.

22. Palmer, p. 39.

specific kinds of plot elements that the game deploys work in tandem with the Saul Bass-style presentation of the game and references to films that inspired it in order to help players produce a shared, imaginary caper-gone-wrong movie, scene by scene. The rules and gameplay of *Fiasco* offer not only a satisfying, hilarious, and highly enjoyable simulation of the fatal caper film, but also a compelling, workable and surprisingly nuanced account of the sub-genre that resonates strongly with critical and academic interpretations. Palmer argues that the power of the Coen brothers' films lies in their "postmodern doubleness," which allows them to tell the truth "about fiction with fiction."<sup>23</sup> These stories function as grimly funny, deeply ironic depictions of human frailty and failure, but also as serious commentary on cinematic stories and the mechanisms of storytelling.<sup>24</sup> By the same token, those strange, intermedial texts that occupy the intersections between different cultural forms, such as *Fiasco*, perform a double function as both enthusiastic tributes and critical interrogations. Just as caper-gone-wrong tropes circulate outside of cinema, the *idea* of cinema as a medium circulates in and through other cultural forms, and *Fiasco* invites players to thoughtfully and playfully explore the complex processes at work in cinematic genre narratives.

23. Palmer, p. 102.

24. Palmer, pp. 81, 102.