



# Creative Play

TRACY ATTEBERRY & DAVID PARR

## Ezekiel's Wheels

The man sitting at the kitchen table seems unaware of the mildly musty smell that's common to rural homes of a certain age. As he writes in his notebook, the latest in a very long series of notebooks, he appears to be talking to himself. Nearby, on the table, is something that looks a bit like the "spinner" that sometimes accompanies board games.

The place is Aberystwyth, a little house in Courtright, Ontario. The man is Stewart James. And he's busy inventing something.

Stewart James was one of the world's most prolific inventors of magic, and he was also a whiz at inventing ways to invent. He created at least 21 different tools for invention and was using them years before the current gurus of creativity were even born.

Magic offers plenty of opportunities for creative expression, and they're not always about creating new tricks or methods. Creativity can be applied to writing scripts, set and lighting design, choreography, prop construction, marketing and promotion — the list goes on and on. And let's not forget the creativity of interpretation. Actors who don't change a word of a script can give very different and creative interpretations of the author's original work.

We believe that creativity, like the piano, can be learned and that it can be learned through play. You might or might not become a virtuoso pianist, but you can certainly learn the basics and then become better at it through practice and by making new discoveries. In each installment of this column, we'll provide a different creative game for you to play. We hope you'll give them a try, find some approaches that appeal to you, and that you'll use them to create something awesome.

Your first creative game is something Stewart James called Ezekiel's Wheels. He described it in *Stewart James In Print* as a method that helped him "break through the imagination barrier" and create new magic effects. At first, Ezekiel's Wheels consisted of three concentric paper discs, each divided into twelve sections or spokes. Later, he reduced the spokes to seven. Then he discarded the paper discs and switched to using three piles of cards. Each pile represented one of three categories, with seven cards in each pile. Most of the cards had words written on the face, but one card in each packet was blank. Here are the categories and items represented in Stewart's 21 cards:

Object: Money, Rope, Ring, Ball, Card, Silk, blank  
Effect: Vanish, Produce, Change, Reversal, Restoration, Penetration, blank  
Method: Steal, Ditch, Prepared, Duplicate, Gimmick, Move, blank

Here's how the game was played. Each of the three packets was shuffled and placed face down on the table, then the top card of each pile was turned over to reveal three items. The blank cards were like wild cards that the player could define on the spur of the moment. For instance, if a blank card turned up in the Effect pile, the player might name it the Transposition card. The three items were then contemplated to see if the combination would spark an idea for a magic effect. Imagination played a key role here, because each item could be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, the Ring card could represent a finger ring, a Linking Ring, rings of

rope, or even smoke rings. If no ideas came to mind, the three items were discarded, and the next three cards were turned face up.

When Stewart James was writing up his description of Ezekiel's Wheels, he turned over these three cards: Silk, Change, and Prepared. His first impulse was to discard these items and turn over three new cards. Instead, he took more time to consider the combination that was in front of him, and he came up with an effect called Watch The Swatch, which was published in the next volume of *Stewart James In Print*.

You can play this game exactly as Stewart described it or you can change it up as desired. For example, you could change the items in the categories or even the categories themselves.

We'll take this one step further and apply this method to a common creative challenge: finding a new presentation for an effect in your repertoire or perhaps for a newly purchased effect. The basic setup remains the same as above — three piles, seven cards in each — but with the following categories and items:

Theme: Money, Love, Travel, Relationship, Career, Leisure, blank  
Interest: Golf, Board Games, Origami, Baseball, Birdwatching, Movies & TV, blank  
Conflict: Magician vs. Magician, Magician vs. Machine, Magician vs. Audience, Magician vs. Supernatural, Magician vs. Game, Magician vs. Props, blank

Let's say that I'm seeking new ideas for how to present Any Card at Any Number. The three items that turn up are Money,



Birdwatching, and Magician vs. Magician. Based on that combination, I might imagine the following scenario. *A friend and I were walking through the park one day, on our way to lunch, when we spotted an unusual bird. Can you guess what bird it was? That's right! Taking out my field guide, I proposed that if my friend could guess the page on which that particular bird appeared, I'd buy lunch. Can you guess what page number he said? That's right! And he was right, too. I should've known not to bet against another magician.*

If you want to change things up even more, you could try something crazy like replacing the Conflict category with the Seven Dwarfs or the Seven Deadly Sins. Why not? A strange or surprising combination of items might jog your mind into coming up with a new idea.

When playing the game of Ezekiel's Wheels or any other creative game, it's important to remember that much of what you come up with will probably never see the light of a public performance, and that's okay. The goal is to generate many ideas, because one of those ideas might prove to be promising and useful. So don't give up after just one round of Ezekiel's Wheels. Turn up three more cards and see what happens. You might be surprised!

We'd love to know about your experiences with playing this creative game. Send us email at [creativeplay@magicbydesign.com](mailto:creativeplay@magicbydesign.com). **M**

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## Scamper

In 1968, a fifteen-year-old boy named Jacobus bought a trick called Wild Card from a magic dealer. He thought the handling was confusing and the method was rather transparent, so the item was almost immediately relegated to his “lousy trick drawer.” Years later, a different version of the trick renewed his interest and he began working on his own improvements. He continued to improve the trick, again and again, over the course of years. Eventually he released his version, The Tamed Card, which was published under his stage name, Tommy Wonder.

In most cases, the creative process can be described as less of a quantum leap, and more of a gradual series of small but significant refinements. For instance, long ago, magicians who did the Ashes on Arm effect began their preparation by writing on their skin with a quill pen dipped in urine. (Seriously. That’s the setup described in J. Prevost’s *Clever & Pleasant Inventions*, published in 1584.) Subsequent performers chose to use a dampened piece of soap or, more recently, a bit of lip balm secretly applied to the arm. Hooray for progress!

One method that can help produce new improvements on old ideas is the checklist. We might be accustomed to thinking of checklists as mundane reminders of tasks to do or items to obtain, but a well-written checklist can be a powerful catalyst for creative thinking. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is Alex Osborn’s list of 73 Idea-Spurring Questions. This month’s creative game is based on a simplified version of Osborn’s checklist, a version known as SCAMPER.

The SCAMPER acronym was created by Bob Eberle, and it provides an easy

way to remember the items in this list:

- Substitute something
- Combine it with something else
- Adapt something to it
- Modify or Magnify it
- Put it to some other use
- Eliminate something
- Reverse or Rearrange it

Here’s how the game is played. Grab a pad of paper and write down the name of a magic effect or routine. It can be a favorite of yours, or one that you think is lacking in some way. Now, start at the top of the SCAMPER list, phrasing the first item as a question: *In what ways can I... substitute something?* The question can be applied to the method, the presentation, the props — every element of the routine is fair game. Write down any ideas that occur to you, no matter how outlandish or impractical. The goal here is to generate a bunch of ideas, so resist the temptation to edit yourself. Record everything. When the stream of ideas runs dry, or if it doesn’t seem as if the question applies to the subject you’ve chosen, move on to the next item in the SCAMPER list: *In what ways can I... combine it with something else?*

Continue through the items, recording all of your ideas. The letter *A* in SCAMPER might lead you to consider whether a device or technique from outside the world of magic could be adapted to accomplishing the effect. The *M* might suggest magnifying the physical size of the effect, or it might encourage you to emphasize or play up an aspect of your presentation. And the letter *P* might inspire you to think about using a familiar prop in an unconventional way.

Don’t worry about whether an idea might fit better in one category or another; just keep the ideas flowing until you’ve reached the end of the checklist. You’ll probably be surprised by what you’ve come up with!

In a recent play-through of this creative game, we began by writing “Torn & Restored Cigarette Paper” on the notepad. We’re both fond of the clarity of this effect, but we aren’t fond of the associations with tobacco and smoking. Here are some of the ideas we jotted down:

*Substitute something.* The cigarette paper could be replaced with a gum wrapper, a fortune from a fortune cookie, a Post-it note, or a receipt.

*Combine it with something else.* If we were to use the gum wrapper, as suggested above, we could precede the torn-and-restored effect with manipulations that are similar to the ones normally performed with cigarettes. The balled-up paper could also be combined with a Chop Cup or the “two in the hand, one in the pocket” effect, or the pieces could be used for the papers-on-knife effect.

*Adapt something to it.* Other items that might be adapted for use in this effect include flash paper, a paper shredder, or scissors. Also, a “sucker” exposé presentation could be adapted to this effect, à la Leipzig.

*Modify or Magnify it.* The aspect of tearing could be magnified by turning the paper into confetti. We could also start with a much larger item, such as a map.

*Put it to some other use.* The paper could be used for making an origami figure, an IOU, or a prediction. It could be used to demonstrate static electricity or to make an impromptu kazoo. Soaking up a bit of water with a balled-up piece of the




paper would allow a performance of the “weeping” coin effect.

*Eliminate something.* One of our goals is to eliminate associations with cigarettes.

*Reverse or Rearrange it.* Role reversal might lead to a routine in which the spectator performs the restoration. Or perhaps the reversal could involve a hidden action becoming an exposed action, which leads us back to Leipzig’s sucker presentation.

When we reached the end of the SCAMPER list, we took some time to look over our page of scribbled notes. It occurred to us that some of the ideas had probably been thought of and explored by other magicians, which is okay. The time for editing and crediting will come later. What was also apparent to us is that creative games sometimes result in tangential or divergent ideas — ideas that lead away from the original subject. And that’s okay too, because some of those tangents might be worth pursuing.

After discussing our notes, we came up with the following outline for a magic routine. A large map is fed into a paper shredder. Some of the pieces are retrieved — just a pinch — and rolled into a little ball. The ball is then unrolled to reveal that the pieces have been restored into a miniature version of the original map.

We’d love to hear about some of the ideas you come up with. You can email us at [creativeplay@magicbydesign.com](mailto:creativeplay@magicbydesign.com). Happy SCAMPERing! 

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## Collectors

One evening, Tracy and David were chatting while walking toward a train station in Chicago's Loop. As they walked and talked, David became aware that Tracy was not looking in their direction of travel. He was looking down, staring intently into the gutter that ran along the curb. Before David could comment on this, Tracy suddenly bent down and picked up something. Grinning triumphantly, he announced: "It's a bristle from a street sweeper!" In his hand was a narrow, flat piece of metal about nine inches long. He placed this treasure in his jacket pocket and continued walking.

When David asked what that strange interlude was all about, Tracy explained that he was working on a project that required a narrow, flat piece of metal, and the street sweeper bristle would be a perfect fit.

Thanks to Tracy and his project, David's awareness has expanded. Now, whenever he walks down a city street, he sees these metal bristles all over the place. They were there all along — little pieces of the story of how a city functions, scattered everywhere, in plain sight — but he hadn't been paying attention enough to notice them, much less collect them.

Ideas and inspiration are a bit like bristles from a street sweeper. They can be found all over the place, but first we have to open our awareness and really perceive what's around us. The search for useful information — information that might lead to a new idea — begins with having a keen awareness of our environment.

So let's say we notice some information that might be useful. Next, the challenge is to *retain* that information. Thoughts are fleeting. Moments of inspiration happen and then vanish. We can save those fleeting thoughts and moments if we learn to become idea collectors.

If you were to walk into Jeff McBride's office, you'd see a shelf full of notebooks above the computer desk. The notebooks are categorized and labeled and stuffed with pages of ideas. You'd see something similar on the shelves of Joshua Jay, Ascanio, Beethoven, Richard Branson, Thomas Edison, Mark Twain, George Lucas, Benjamin Franklin, Larry David, Isaac Newton, Peter Jennings, Leonardo da Vinci, Picasso, and many, many others. Most of these artists, thinkers, and innovators carry or carried a notebook and a pen with them to capture their thoughts.

Not everyone uses notebooks, of course. Some use individual scraps of paper, index cards, or voice recorders. These days, many people have a phone that can be used to type a brief note, record a voice memo, or snap a quick photo. Rarely does someone rely on a single system for collecting ideas and inspiration. And rarest of all is the highly creative person who uses no system whatsoever.

Although we can't determine which ways of recording ideas will work best for you, we believe that good systems share the following qualities:

**Easy input.** A good system allows you to capture ideas quickly and fluidly in a wide variety of situations. And a good system will be there for you whenever you need it, so you can get in the habit of collecting anything that sparks an idea or inspires you.

**Reasonable search.** Without sacrificing ease of input, a good system will allow you to find a stored piece of information within a reasonable time. You should be confident that your ideas will not be lost. One simple way to organize your notebooks, for example, is to index them by jotting a few keywords in a corner of the pages.

**It works for you.** Whatever system you come up with can be as simple or complex, mundane or quirky as you want it to be. The most important thing is that it works for you.

So how do you find a system that works for you? Perhaps the simplest way is to implement a bunch of different methods and see which ones work best. This month's creative game will provide an opportunity for you to test out ways of recording tidbits of information and inspi-

ration. It's an exercise in idea collecting.

The game begins with selecting a creative challenge that you'd like to work on for a week, and stating that challenge simply and clearly. Here are some examples:

In what ways might I market or promote my magic show?

In what ways might I more efficiently carry my props for walk-around magic?

In what ways might I make better use of lighting in my act?

The next step is to make sure that you're prepared to collect ideas and information. Carry a pocket notebook and a pen with

"Write a lot. Those who write learn quickly, and quickly move on to the advanced stages of their career."  
— *Ascanio*



you. Perhaps keep a voice recorder in your car. Put a few index cards in your jacket pocket. Download the Catch app from Catch.com. Put as many potential methods into play as you can.

Then, go about your day and pay attention to your environment. Whenever you encounter an idea or inspiration that might be related to your creative challenge, record it with whichever tool is most convenient at the time. Resist the temptation to rely on memory or to reject an idea too early.

We chose to work with the marketing challenge stated above. These are some of the observations and ideas we recorded:

On the train today, I found an advertising bookmark — and I used it.

Saw a chalked web address on the sidewalk.

Did the insurance gecko just try to pitch me a diamond ring? Advertising partnerships.

Passed by a guy dressed as Lady Liberty and twirling a sign for tax services.

At the end of the week, review what you've collected. Notice which ways of collecting information worked best for you. Find ways in which the information could be used to address your creative challenge. See if you can uncover hidden connections between ideas. When you're finished reading through your notes and considering what possibilities they might offer, store them in some form so you can revisit them later.

Now, choose a new creative challenge and play again!

We'd love to know what systems you use for collecting ideas and inspiration. You can reach us at [creativeplay@magicbydesign.com](mailto:creativeplay@magicbydesign.com). **M**

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## Word Shuffle

Consider one of the great influences on Western thought in the 20th century: Monty Python's Flying Circus. The creative chemistry within the group was established before they even began working together on their seminal BBC comedy show. John Cleese and Graham Chapman were already writing partners, as were Terry Jones and Michael Palin. Eric Idle and Terry Gilliam were the wild cards, the solo writers.

Chapman and Cleese usually met in the mornings. Their goal was simple: to write something funny by lunchtime. "But quite frequently," said Chapman, "lunchtime got very close before anything had been achieved at all."

Cleese was the note-taker during writing sessions. But sometimes, the notepad remained stubbornly blank. A creative jolt was needed. "In moments of real desperation," Chapman explained, "any sort of reference book would be taken out and thumbed through, in the hope that something would spark off an idea." And fortunately for comedy fans, this approach often worked! A random word from a thesaurus or dictionary gave the writers a direction to explore, allowing them to move forward.

The random word technique can be very effective when you need a fresh perspective on a creative problem. Maybe you're staring at a blank page and don't know where to start, or maybe you're halfway into a project when you reach a creative bottleneck and don't know how to squeeze past it. To get "unstuck," a bit of randomness might be just what you need.

The keys to success in using this technique are: 1) really choosing a word at random and not just picking one that seems appealing, and 2) playing with that word long enough to generate several new connections and ideas. Ignoring these basic

rules will severely reduce the effectiveness of this type of creative play.

After a random word is chosen, the goal is to make connections from that word to your problem. The human brain excels at making connections. Coming up with new connections should lead to new ideas, more connections and, with a bit of luck, a satisfying solution to your problem.

In a pinch, your source of random words can be a dictionary, a book off the shelf, or any other handy text. However, your odds of success might improve if you use a specially curated list of words that are evocative or open to multiple interpreta-

tions. You'll find such a list included with our game below.

This month, we'll play a creative game of random words, a game we call Word Shuffle. Here's how it's played. As always, this game begins with stating the creative problem in clear terms. Next, grab a deck of playing cards. We'll use the deck as way of generating a two-digit number. This is accomplished by drawing two cards from the shuffled deck, ignoring any face cards. Counting any ten as a zero, the values of the two cards map directly to the digits of a random word in the list below.

- |              |               |              |               |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| 00. rear     | 25. gravy     | 50. staff    | 75. time      |
| 01. lead     | 26. mask      | 51. mean     | 76. hunger    |
| 02. spring   | 27. list      | 52. spy      | 77. mint      |
| 03. sin      | 28. scales    | 53. palm     | 78. tire      |
| 04. season   | 29. cast      | 54. shell    | 79. block     |
| 05. top      | 30. light     | 55. picture  | 80. file      |
| 06. lap      | 31. rock      | 56. deck     | 81. pilot     |
| 07. contest  | 32. store     | 57. count    | 82. pine      |
| 08. stall    | 33. counter   | 58. lemon    | 83. curry     |
| 09. sign     | 34. donut     | 59. hat      | 84. alien     |
| 10. doctor   | 35. mug       | 60. pupil    | 85. Rome      |
| 11. shot     | 36. candle    | 61. park     | 86. hubcap    |
| 12. heart    | 37. lock      | 62. stem     | 87. zipper    |
| 13. express  | 38. pin       | 63. stalk    | 88. peer      |
| 14. fair     | 39. book      | 64. air      | 89. hammer    |
| 15. scrap    | 40. stunt     | 65. roast    | 90. plumber   |
| 16. entrance | 41. organ     | 66. press    | 91. salt      |
| 17. shed     | 42. bath      | 67. trip     | 92. steak     |
| 18. jet      | 43. spell     | 68. state    | 93. fire      |
| 19. fence    | 44. mosquito  | 69. quarters | 94. owl       |
| 20. digest   | 45. snowflake | 70. refuse   | 95. court     |
| 21. squirrel | 46. bridge    | 71. ribbon   | 96. key       |
| 22. kid      | 47. page      | 72. lean     | 97. lawyer    |
| 23. finance  | 48. tree      | 73. tip      | 98. direction |
| 24. airplane | 49. rook      | 74. fish     | 99. pyramid   |



Our creative problem was to come up with a fresh way to present a classic effect, invented by an unknown Chicago magician in the 1800s: the Card through Handkerchief. This is an effect that we performed when we were kids, but we never had much of a presentation for it.

In this round of Word Shuffle, we drew a Nine and a Three, which brought us to random word 93: *fire*. Interpretations of this word include “to terminate employment,” “a flame,” “to shoot” — and those are just a few potential meanings. Then there are the idioms and common phrases, such as “fight fire with fire,” “playing with fire,” “set the world on fire,” “crossfire,” “fired up,” and so on. For us, the first phrase that came to mind was “firing squad,” which we connected to the idea of a blindfold, which we connected to a handkerchief, which eventually led to the following outline for a routine:

A card is selected and then returned to the deck. The pack of cards is now “interrogated” about the identity of the chosen card. When that produces no results, “enhanced interrogation” is used. The deck is roughed up (shuffled), blindfolded (wrapped in the handkerchief), and shaken up and down until it gives up the information — a single card that penetrates through the handkerchief. But it’s the wrong card! The performer decides to comply with the Geneva Conventions of card handling. The deck is carefully spread on the table, and the chosen card is discovered face up in the center of the pack. **M**

*If you’d like to play an online version of Word Shuffle or Ezekiel’s Wheel [March 2013], visit [MagicByDesign.com](http://MagicByDesign.com).*

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## WW\_D?

A young Andrew Carnegie, not yet a teenager, stands outside his uncle's house on a moonless night. Two paths lead toward home: he can take the main streets, well lit by street lamps, or he can walk down the road that leads past the silent churchyard with its many tombs, where there are no lights at all. He tries to imagine what his hero William Wallace would do. Then, taking a deep breath, he turns toward the darkened road, still imagining how Wallace would respond if faced with "any force, natural or supernatural."

Although we're expected to forsake our imaginary friends when we become adults, there are some advantages to having an invisible council of advisors, especially when it comes to creative thinking. How is a council of imaginary friends useful? Well, their advice might replace old voices of resistance or fear that tell us what we cannot do or limit us from seeing multiple possibilities.

"Hold it," says an imaginary reader. "Are you suggesting that relying on imaginary people for creative advice is better than talking with *real* people, such as a group of trusted friends who can provide opinions and fresh perspectives?"

No, it's not better. It's just different. And in the game of creativity, it's good to explore many different ways of generating new ideas. Seeking the advice of flesh-and-blood friends — magicians *and* non-magicians — can be a great way to get an outside point of view on our work. And conferring with an invisible council of advisors can be a great way to unlock new insights and ideas that come from our own imagination.

So how do you form your own invisible council of advisors? Start by making

a list of, say, a dozen individuals who appeal to you for one reason or another. They can be living or dead, real, archetypal, or completely made up. What's important is that you should have a fairly clear idea of how they think, what their point of view is. One way to accomplish this is by reading everything you can about them. Another handy technique is to collect quotes that represent their individual personality traits and how they might approach solving a problem. BrainyQuotes, Wikipedia, and Bartleby.com are good places to begin your search.

It's okay to include a few magicians among your list of potential advisors, but the council shouldn't be composed entirely of magicians. The goal is to gather a wide range of perspectives on your creative challenge. Stewart James, for example, used several different groups of imaginary advisors. His favorite council was composed of four archetypal characters: Faxton, a general fact checker; Khardova, a card specialist; Rigonally, who had boundless imagination; and Figgerhead Smith, a gambler and mathematician. He had at least two other lists of advisors he consulted in this manner. According to James, this technique is most effective when you avoid limiting the list to only magicians and, instead, consider the entire world of occupations.

This month, the creative game involves calling an imaginary meeting with four individuals from your list of potential advisors. Here's how the game is played.

You'll need a dozen slips of paper. On each one, write the name of a potential advisor from your list, along with a quotation or personality note for that individual. Toss all twelve names into a hat.

Next, write down a creative challenge that you'd like to work on. Summarize it as clearly as you can.

Now, randomly pick four names from the hat. These four individuals will make up your invisible council of advisors for this meeting. They will offer advice and perspective on your creative challenge. Resist the temptation to cherry-pick names that seem directly connected to your challenge. What you're looking for here is *unexpected* insight.

When we played this game, our creative challenge was to introduce a new effect into a preexisting show, a show with a gambling theme. And we deliberately chose an effect that wouldn't be an obvious fit with such a show: Scarf through Neck.

Our invisible council of advisors — Einstein, Dr. Seuss, MacGyver, and Houdini — gathers to discuss how each individual would approach our challenge.

Einstein is very fond of elegant simplicity. He dislikes complications. We imagine that he makes the following suggestion: "You play cards, and you meet a lovely woman who wears a long scarf. She sits close to you. The scarf, she puts around your neck, 'for luck.' Her perfume is on the scarf. The allure of this woman causes you to make mistakes, to lose the game. You wrestle with the scarf, pull it through your neck, and cast it away. This is a game that is best played without distraction."

Dr. Seuss's work is whimsical and fun, but it sometimes has an undercurrent of strange menace. He suggests: "What if this boa was a boa *constrictor*? And what if it tickled as it tried to restrict her?"

MacGyver is known for coming up with an almost magical solution when all hope seems lost. MacGyver says: "The cards



you're holding are lousy. You need to change the odds. You palm out a card and spring it so it lands under the chair of the guy across from you. The player next to him spots the card and accuses the guy of cheating. There's a scuffle. One player tries to strangle the other with his necktie. You snap your fingers — and the necktie pulls free. 'Can we get back to the game?' you ask. That shift in focus provided more than enough time to switch out your cards for a winning hand."

Houdini has amazing self-confidence and a talent for self-promotion. He says: "Boys, I don't see what all this has to do with me. Don't you know I'm a verb now? *Houdinize*. Look it up. Let me spell that for you..."

Us: Thanks to Einstein for his solution, but we don't want to immediately reject the element that we're trying to add to the show. Thanks to Dr. Seuss for providing an idea that we'll definitely put in our notebooks for a children's show. Thanks to Mr. Houdini for taking time out of his schedule to be here with us. You're dismissed. And finally, Mr. MacGyver, we'd like to talk about your idea a little more. Would you stick around for a while?

Of course, if you want a bit more advice, you can always call another meeting and allow a new council of advisors to contribute their suggestions. And if you'd like to play an online version of WW\_D? (or games from earlier months), visit our website at [MagicByDesign.com](http://MagicByDesign.com). **M**

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## Axercise

Far from home and fighting for her life, Warrant Officer Ripley scrambles through the twisting tunnels and corridors of the commercial towing vessel *Nostromo*. The rest of the crew is dead, and the hostile alien that killed them is still aboard. Ripley's only hope of survival is to abandon ship immediately. As she makes her way toward the salvation of the shuttle, she stumbles across a horrifying discovery. She finds the ship's captain, disfigured but still conscious, cocooned as part of the alien's breeding cycle. He begs Ripley to kill him. After hesitating, she uses a flamethrower to put Captain Dallas out of his misery.

Fans of the 1979 film *Alien* will recognize this as the "cocoon sequence," a scene that did not appear in the theatrical release of the movie. The scene can be found online with a quick search. It's well acted and well photographed, both heart-rending and gut-wrenching, and it conveys some intriguing information about the alien life form. So why isn't it in the movie? Director Ridley Scott and editor Terry Rawlings had a tough choice to make: provide a strong emotional moment for two main characters or maintain the urgency of Ripley's need to escape from the ship. In the end, Scott and Rawlings felt that the sense of urgency took precedence. The pace of the film, building toward a climactic showdown, had to be maintained. So, the scene was cut.

In any creative endeavor, the time will arrive when you have to choose what to take out and what to leave in, what is essential and what is unnecessary. Maybe you've just completed the first draft of a script, and now it would benefit from some tightening. Or maybe your act or show has to fit into a particular time slot, so you need to pick an effect to remove from the set list. Or maybe you're testing out a multiphase routine, and you find that the audience's responsiveness seems to fade during the last phases. In all of these

circumstances, it's time to get out the ax and do some cutting.

And here's where a problem arises. Creative, expressive people tend to become attached to the things they do and create, which makes it difficult to consider parting with any of them. But many wise artists have advised that revision and refinement are vital components in the creative process. And sometimes they involve removing what is unneeded, until what is left cannot be improved by adding anything or taking anything away.

This month's creative game is a fun little exercise that's intended to help strengthen your editing muscles. We call the game Axercise, and it's played like this:

1. Select two random words.
2. Argue why one should be removed from the dictionary and the other kept.
3. Record your choices and arguments.
4. Repeat the above steps at least nine times.

For the purposes of this game, some sources of random words might be better than others. A dictionary is probably the best, because it provides a wide range of unrelated words. Or you can use the handy dual word generator on the Axercise page at [MagicByDesign.com](http://MagicByDesign.com).

Here's how our game of Axercise turned out:

Removed	Kept	Arguments
microfiche	cheerfulness	remove dated word
jocular	picture	remove dated word
parasol	batch	remove dated word
scraps	fireworks	remove word with more synonyms
joyrider	voice	keep because of more common use
lag	lichen	keep more specific word
belie	contestant	keep because of more common use
exhausted	popular	remove word with more synonyms
sympathy	brow	keep more specific word
colossal	nomination	remove word with more synonyms

After playing ten rounds, we started to notice patterns in our arguments. For instance, we favored words that were simple, easy to pronounce, and commonly used. Also, we discarded words that seemed outdated or overly complicated. As play continued, more categories arose and our criteria evolved. We began to develop a set of our own personal standards that could be used to decide what to keep and what to discard. To take this a step further, we might choose to consult other players to find out how they developed their own criteria.

This awareness and development of a set of standards is the muscle that can be applied in the real world when we need to edit our scripts, our movements, our wardrobe, the pace and content of our show, or even when we consider the types of gigs we might accept. And if we're ever trapped on a spaceship with a hostile alien, we'll know not to shilly-shally around, chatting with the captain. **M**

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## Snoit P. Mussa

Poynton, England; West Palm Beach, Florida; Drachten, the Netherlands; Bohmte, Germany — separate places with a shared problem: horrendous traffic. The seemingly endless, intractable tangle of automobiles made conditions hazardous for drivers and pedestrians alike. Accidents happened frequently. Frustrating delays were an everyday reality. Behind the wheel or on foot, everyone was trapped in a bad situation.

How could public safety and traffic flow be improved? Conventional wisdom might suggest installing more traffic signals and hazard signs, maybe a concrete barrier or two. Adding lanes and making roads wider might accommodate more vehicles and allow faster travel. But as it turns out, the conventional approach doesn't necessarily solve the problem. It can even make the situation worse.

The aforementioned cities and towns managed to find a solution by reversing common assumptions — that is, by considering the opposite of conventional wisdom. Traffic lights were removed, roadways were narrowed, curbs were eliminated, signs were taken down. And an odd thing happened: fewer accidents, better traffic flow, happier pedestrians and drivers.

Finding a counterintuitive or unexpected solution can be very satisfying. One great way to get there is by making a list of your assumptions and then reversing each of them. Reversing your assumptions can help lead to a creative solution by interrupting your normal thinking patterns, eliminating mental barriers and freeing information to come together in new ways.

This month's creative game begins in the familiar way: write down your creative challenge, stating it as clearly as you can. For instance, let's say you'd like to create a new magic show. Next, make a list of

assumptions about your chosen subject. Write down every assumption you can think of, no matter how obvious it seems. We came up with the following list of common assumptions about magic shows:

A. The star of a magic show is a guy who looks like a magician.

B. This guy presents tricks or puzzles that he understands and you can't figure out.

C. If he's good, you might experience a real moment of wonder.

D. Being singled out to help is embarrassing and should be avoided.

E. A magic show is childish, and being forced to sit through it is a waste of time.

F. People buy tickets online or at the door.

G. The show takes place in a theater or at the customer's venue.

Next, go through your list and reverse each assumption. You might find more than one way to reverse an assumption, so be sure to write down all the reversals you come up with. And remember, at this point, your ideas exist in "play space," not in the real world. The goal here is to upend conventional wisdom and defy expectations, so don't dismiss ideas that seem silly or outlandish. Here's part of our list of reversals:

A. The star of a magic show is a guy who looks like a magician.

1. The star is two women, one woman, two guys, a dog, or a puppet.
2. The star looks like an accountant, a cheerleader, a doctor, or a zookeeper.

B. This guy presents tricks or puzzles that he understands and you can't figure out.

1. The star helps you figure out how the tricks are done.
2. The star presents transparent, easy-to-figure-out tricks.
3. The star presents tricks that even he (or she or it) doesn't understand.

C. If he's good, you might experience a real moment of wonder.

1. There is no wonder, but you are impressed by the performer's skill.
2. You experience continuous wonder.

D. Being singled out to help is embarrassing and should be avoided.

1. People compete for a chance to help out.
2. There are no audience assistants.
3. Everyone helps out.

E. A magic show is childish, and being forced to sit through it is a waste of time.

1. Your time is rewarded with questions and wonder.
2. The show is surprisingly grown-up and entertaining.
3. You actually want to see the show again.

F. People buy tickets online or at the door.

1. No tickets are sold. People donate after the show.
2. Tickets are free as part of a cross-promotion.

G. The show takes place in a theater or at the customer's venue.

1. The show takes place in a commuter train car.
2. The show takes place in an abandoned warehouse.
3. The show takes place at a funeral home.



Now, choose one or two of your reversals and think of ways that they could be implemented in your creative challenge. We picked several reversals from our list and came up with the following ways to implement them:

A2. A person in a gorilla suit walks onstage. Over the gorilla suit, this person wears a black-and-white striped shirt and a beret. That's right, this is a gorilla mime, and it's a silent act.

D3. Everyone selects a card or word, and the star names them all rapid-fire.

E3. Helpers get two tickets to a future show.

G5. Funeral homes have great seating spaces that often go unused. Partner with one to host a tasteful but bizarre magic show.

Listing the attributes of your challenge and reversing them isn't the only type of reversal you can employ. For example, it's often productive to challenge the challenge statement itself. In our example above, instead of asking how we might create a new magic show, we could ask how we could perform an *old* magic show or how we could allow the *audience* to create the show. And maybe it doesn't even have to be a *show*.

Assumption reversals can be applied to many different creative challenges. If the challenge is to create a new magic effect, we might list several assumptions about the way the world works — gravity makes things fall down, thoughts are private, chickens can't fly — and then reverse each one.

Many practical problems have been solved by questioning key assumptions. Don't underestimate the power of this creative game. It can help you become a happier driver on the road of creative problem-solving! **M**

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## Beginner's Mind

If you play a musical instrument, you probably remember when you first started to learn. In the beginning, it was difficult to get that silly thing to cooperate with your intentions. Oh, the teacher's instructions seemed reasonable enough. But later, at home, they seemed impossible to follow, and your efforts to wrestle the instrument into submission were frustrating to you and painful to all within earshot. Yet there are few feelings as exhilarating as when you make a key discovery and things start to go right. This is beginner's mind, a state of openness, discovery, and curiosity — and yes, sometimes frustration, but also excitement.

Sadly, that state of mind doesn't last. We eventually become "experts." We think we know what we're doing, so we stop thinking about what we're doing. This can lead to a closed state of mind, a mind that operates on autopilot, making growth and improvement difficult to achieve.

Fortunately, there are plenty of simple games we can play to invoke beginner's mind again, giving us the chance to see our work from a fresh perspective and make new discoveries and advances.

**Turn the world upside down.** This is a quick and easy game for altering your perceptions (without chemical assistance). Using your favorite handheld electronic device, watch a video of your magic performance all the way through. Now, place the device on the table. Rotate the device so the video is upside down. Watch the video again. Your brain will have to concentrate harder to make sense of the upside-down images, and you might find that you notice details that you weren't aware of the first time around.

**The little things.** Place a magic prop on the table. Examine the prop very closely without

touching it, taking note of details of color and shape. View it from different perspectives. Now pick up the prop and close your eyes. Turn the prop in your hands, running your fingers over the surfaces. Closely examining a pull, for example, might bring about the realization that the flesh-colored container is attached to a black piece of elastic, and that using flesh-colored elastic would keep it from flashing if seen against the arm.

**The big things.** Do the opposite of the previous game. Place the prop on the table and then back away from it. Note how your perception of the object changes. This might be useful in discovering that, from a distance, four white cards coalesce into a single white blob, and that putting black borders on the cards would allow the audience to discern one card from another. If you're trying to solve a problem in a particular routine, try widening your frame of reference from a single trick to the big picture of the entire show. Perhaps you have a running theme or gag in the larger context of the show that can help you solve the problem in the smaller context of the routine. For instance, let's say you're looking for a clean way to ditch a coin shell during your standing close-up show. Considering the entire show, you recall that a small toy rabbit is part of a recurring theme that knits the show together. This leads to a solution involving a shimmed shell, along with a magnet hidden in the rabbit.

**Limit yourself.** Try to perform a magic effect with only one hand. Reduce a script to just three words. Perform a sleight with your non-dominant hand. Do a magic effect without speaking or with your eyes closed. Imposing a temporary limitation can help stimulate creative problem-solving. It can also help you focus your attention on one thing at a time. For instance, closing your eyes while practicing

ing a pass or a second deal might allow you to concentrate on the *feel* of the move.

**Pay attention to mistakes.** Silly Putty, Teflon, Post-it Notes — all of these familiar items were the unintended byproduct of mistakes. A mistake in reading the instructions of a bottom placement once led to a handling that at least one card expert claimed was impossible.

**Be curious.** Who invented this technique or prop? How was it invented? What did magicians do before this was invented? Do current magicians have different approaches? What could be done in the future? Why does that change bag have a handle on it? Questions like these might produce useful innovations.

**Intentional ignorance.** When you buy a new effect, put aside the instructions. Examine the props carefully. Try to intuit their function. When viewing an instructional video, don't skip straight to the explanations. Make an effort to figure things out. You might make an unexpected discovery that leads to the creation of a new method.

**Forget about the magic.** When watching a magic performance, including your own, try paying attention to everything except the tricks. Concentrate on theatrical elements such as transitions, entrances and exits, lighting and sound, set and setting, the performer's relationship with the audience, the performer's relationship with the props, and so on. Magicians tend to focus on magic to the exclusion of all other elements of a show. By blocking out the magic, we can concentrate on finding ways to use those other elements to improve the overall experience of our shows.

**Ask a child.** Hand a child an object. Let's say it's a plastic fly. Tell him or her that the



fly has magical powers and then ask the child to describe what kind of adventures the fly might have. If you do not have access to a small child, a certain kind of drunk or stoned person — you know the kind — may be substituted.

**Try something new.** This one might seem obvious, but learning something completely new is great way to invoke beginner's mind and, at the same time, gain new experiences for thinking by analogy. Try learning a piece of magic in a category that's totally unfamiliar to you. If you primarily do card magic, try learning a rope trick. To take this a step further, you could extend this game and take up cooking, photography, tai chi, or banjo playing — any of which might provide insights that could be applied to magic.

During a recent creative session, we played the game of limitations by trying to perform a Poker Deal routine using only our left hand. We're right handed, so it was really two limitations for the price of one. And we deliberately chose a routine that involved a second deal at a crucial moment. It went pretty smoothly until we reached the crucial move — the second deal — which we found extremely difficult to do with one hand. So we came up with the following approach. Deal a single card. Then, while dealing the next card, "accidentally" drop two cards to the table. Immediately notice the mistake and retrieve the top card of the fallen two. Mischief managed. This might be an approach we'd take if we were to do this routine with a borrowed deck that was in poor condition, which would make performing a second deal problematic.

Make your own choice from the above list and get creative! And please drop us a line at [creativeplay@magicbydesign.com](mailto:creativeplay@magicbydesign.com) to let us know how those banjo lessons are coming along. **M**

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## Building Blocks

In 1983, Howard Lyons wrote a letter to Stewart James and repeated a request he'd been making since at least 1955. Knowing that James had developed a number of tools for creative problem-solving and innovation in magic, Lyons asked if James would share the details of his creative process in an upcoming book, *Stewart James In Print*. James replied in much the same way he had for almost three decades: he said he'd think about it. And think about it he did, for five more years. Then, at long last, James relented and agreed to give readers a glimpse into his creative process — actually, more than one glimpse. But there was a catch. He insisted that his writings on this subject should be scattered throughout the nearly 2,600 pages of *Stewart James In Print* and *The James Files*.

Why was Stewart James, a man who was very generous about sharing his magical inventions, so reluctant to share the tools that helped him invent? James admitted that he was worried about whether other magicians might find the descriptions of his creative process to be boring, bewildering, or even a bit crazy. In a way, his concerns were valid, because the creative process is a personal reflection of our individual quirks, habits, and preferences. What works for one person might not work for someone else. Similarly, what works well for tackling a particular creative challenge might not be well suited to working on a different one, which is probably why Stewart James developed and collected a great variety

of creative tools. (For two examples, see “Ezekiel’s Wheels” in our March 2013 installment, and “WW\_D?” from August 2013.)

In the “Creative Play” series, we too have provided a variety of approaches, so you can experiment with them and use the ones you find most appealing. We’ve presented these creative tools in the form of games because we think it’s important to remember that the creative process can be fun!

In this final installment of our series, we’ll describe a set of creative “building blocks” — based on the work of James Webb Young and others — that you can use to construct a creative process that works for you. The building blocks are:

What works well for tackling a particular creative challenge might not be well suited to working on a different one.

openness of mind is necessary for getting good results from creative play. We shared some useful brain-training games in our “Aexercise” and “Beginner’s Mind” articles (September and December 2013, respectively).

**Define your challenge.** Having a clear, straightforward idea of what you’re trying to accomplish is a critical step in working through the creative process. That’s why so many of the creative games in this series have included the instruction, “State your creative challenge as simply and clearly as you

can.” The creative challenge can be anything you want new ideas for, such as routining, marketing, negotiating a contract, and so on. Defining your creative challenge clears the playing field of distractions and brings focus to the game.

**Gather information.** This is about acquiring information about your specific creative challenge — what might be called “immersing yourself” in a particular subject. For instance, in preparation for developing interactive magic that can be performed on a website, you might gather all the published phone/TV/radio tricks and methods you can find. (See our “Collectors” installment, May 2013, for more on the subject of retaining and organizing information and ideas.)

**Generate lots of ideas.** Most of the games we’ve shared in this column have focused on coming up with ideas — not just one idea, but enough to quickly fill up a page in a notebook. At this phase in the creative process, it doesn’t matter if the ideas are practical or outlandish. What matters is that there’s a bunch of them, because somewhere in that bunch might be one or two ideas that have real potential. Idea-generating games that we’ve described here have included “Scamper” (April 2013), “Word Shuffle” (June 2013), and “Snoit P. Mussa” (October 2013).

**Evaluate and develop the ideas.** Nobel Prize-winning chemist Linus Pauling said that “The trick to coming up with good ideas is to think up a great many ideas and then get rid of the bad ones.” This step involves the second half of Pauling’s advice: carefully considering each idea in the bunch and choosing which ones merit working on. Then, after selecting ideas that seem promising, the task is to develop them from scribbles in a notebook into fully





formed concepts and workable plans. At this stage, getting stuck is a common problem. One technique for getting unstuck is to simply walk away from the problem for awhile. Given the proliferation of half-baked, one-trick DVDs, this step often seems like the most unexplored part of the creative process.

**Put your ideas into action.** You can fill boxes and notebooks with ideas, but if you never put any of them into action, all you have are boxes and notebooks full of ideas. There are many productivity methods that can help you implement your ideas — Pomodoro, Getting Things Done, Don't Break the Chain, and Personal Kanban, to name a few. They all have their advantages and disadvantages, so our advice is to look into as many productivity systems as you can, and put together a combination that works for you.

We hope this series has shown that creativity is not a mystical quality bestowed on a select few; it's a skill set accessible to anyone who has the curiosity and willingness to dive in and try new things. If you've enjoyed taking a playful approach to the creative process and want to continue exploring such avenues, we recommend checking out the books *Thinkertoys* by Michael Michalko, and *A Whack on the Side of the Head* by Roger von Oech. And feel free to contact us at [creative-play@magicbydesign.com](mailto:creative-play@magicbydesign.com) with questions or to let us know how your creative exploration is going and what you've discovered along the way. We wish you many happy and productive hours of creative play! **M**

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