

# @microscope

a fractal role-playing game of epic histories, by Ben Robbins



**WHAT IS MICROSCOPE?**

*Microscope works differently than some other role-playing games you might have played, so let's abandon some preconceptions:*

*You won't have your own character.*

*You won't play the game in chronological order. You may know all about the future, but be surprised by the past.*

*You'll build the story from the outside in. You'll decide the big picture, the grand scheme of history, and then burrow down and carve out the details.*

*It's fractal gaming.*

*So think big: you have a massive chunk of history to play around in.*

*Humanity spreads to the stars and forges a galactic civilization...*

*Fledgling nations arise from the ruins of the empire...*

*An ancient line of dragon-kings dies out as magic fades from the realm...*

These are all examples of Microscope games.

In Microscope, you build an epic history as you play. Want to play a game that spans the entire *Dune* series, the *Silmarillion*, or the rise and fall of Rome in an afternoon? That's Microscope.

But you don't play the history from start to finish, marching along in chronological order. Instead, you build your history from the outside in. You start off knowing the big picture, the grand scheme of what happens, then you dive in and explore what happened in between, the how and why that shaped events.

You are free to jump backwards or forwards, zooming in or out to look at whatever you want, defying limits of time and space. Want to leap a thousand years into the future and see how an institution shaped society? Want to jump back to the childhood of the king you just saw assassinated and find out what made him such a hated ruler? That's normal in Microscope.

You have vast creative authority. You can make whole empires rise and fall at will. Dream up a utopia or destroy one with nuclear fire. You have that power, but remember you're not alone: everyone else at the table can do it too.

You create independently, but not in isolation. Each facet you add to history builds on what other players built before you. You expand on their ideas, and they expand on yours. History might not turn out the way you expected. Be prepared to think on your feet.

When you zoom all the way in to a particular moment in time, all the players share the stage and role-play together to find out something we want to learn about the history. Did the crew of the *Icarus* know the aliens were on Titan? Did the rebels really fake the government crackdown? Do the knights remember the original meaning of their ritual vows? We role-play and see.

The more you play, the more your once simple summary becomes a detailed tapestry, full of meaning and surprises. History snowballs.

# Overview of Play

You should have already followed the steps in “Starting a New Game” to build the foundation of your history.

Decide which player will start: that player becomes the first **Lens**. If someone is teaching the game, they should be the first Lens. You can give the Lens a large and visible object to remind everyone at the table who it is.

- 1) Declare the Focus: The Lens declares the current **Focus** of the game, the part of history you’re going to explore right now.
- 2) Make History: Each player takes a turn creating either a Period, Event or Scene. The Lens goes first, then go around the table to the left. What you create *must* relate to the current Focus.

The Lens can choose to create two things on her turn, so long as they are nested inside each other: either a new Event plus a Scene inside that Event, or a new Period plus an Event inside that Period. This gives the Lens more power to get the Focus going.

- 3) Lens Finishes the Focus: After each player has taken a turn, the Lens gets to go again and add another Period, Event or Scene (or two nested things). This lets the Lens have the last word about the Focus.

After all players have addressed the Focus, we take a step back and examine **Legacies**, elements of the history we want to remember to explore later on:

- 4) Choose a New Legacy: The player to the right of the Lens picks something from play during this last Focus and makes it a Legacy.
- 5) Explore a Legacy: The same player creates an Event or dictated Scene that relates to one of the Legacies, either the one just created or one already in play.
- 6) New Lens: The player to the left of the Lens then becomes the new Lens and picks a new Focus. Repeat.

Before the new Lens starts, you may want to take a quick intermission and talk about how the game is going. Talk about what you’ve liked or what intrigues you, but don’t plan what’s going to happen next.

That’s the whole game in a nutshell. Each step is described in more detail in the rest of the book.

# Play Advice

These are some lessons we've learned from playing *Microscope*: things that work, things that don't, and ways to get the most out of your game.

## What's a Good Idea for a History?

Here are a few things to check to be sure your starting idea will make a good *Microscope* game:

Lots of room: *Microscope* is more fun when you have a lot of time and space to explore. If you have a concept that spans a very short of period of time or encompasses a very small physical area (like a single city), then the players are more limited in what they can create. Lots of room, in both space and time, is also a creative safety valve. If a player isn't interested in what's being explored here and now, they can jump to somewhere else. In a smaller history you lose that freedom. If the entire history takes place in one city, anything that happens to that city impacts the entire history: there's no escaping it.

No preconceptions: If you have an idea in your head of how the history is supposed to turn out, you are going to be frustrated when people create things that don't match your preconceptions. It's a core premise of the game that the players have the power to make whatever they want, not to be stuck trying to follow someone else's vision.

A preconceived starting point is fine, so long as you are willing to let it grow unexpectedly. Steal an idea from a story, movie, or real world history, but don't expect it to turn out a particular way. Preconceptions about how the history is supposed to look are doomed, and trying to get the other players to adhere to the outcome you had in mind is doomed *and* bad form.

No one owns the history: This is another facet of "no preconceptions." Sometimes a player comes to the table with a particular idea for a history they want to try. That's great, but it doesn't give them any special authority in the game. They don't get to say "But wait, that's not how I imagined it would be!" There's a danger that, even if the person who came up with the idea does nothing, other players may still defer to that person's authority on what it's "supposed" to be like. People may not even consciously recognize they're doing it. It leads to hesitant, timid play with the other players second-guessing their ideas because they don't want to add something that doesn't fit the unspoken ideal. It's worth repeating: no one owns anything in the history. Once it's on the table, everybody has equal authority.

---

### WHEN IN DOUBT:

Pick something simple, like "humanity settles the stars" or "the rise and fall of an empire." Don't worry if it seems boring or unoriginal: it will come to life as you play.

---

## Beware Time Travel & Immortality

Microscope lets you jump around and explore the past or the future at will, which lets you move away from topics that don't interest you and focus on ones that do. Because of that, anything that collapses time undermines the game. Time travel is a perfect example: if the characters within the fiction can move backward and forward in time, the ability of the players to jump backward and forward is meaningless. The game becomes linear again.

Immortality has similar problems. It can work if lots of characters are immortal (like pantheons of gods), but if immortality is a special trait of just one or a few characters, they may hog the spotlight ("not Doctor Lazarus again!"). Another good rule of thumb is never to have character lives span more than one Period since that starts to weld adjacent Periods together. Once you're thinking about lifespan, you start to estimate precisely how many years must have passed, which locks things down.

## Choosing Your Bookend Periods

Time continues before your start Period and after your end Period, but the boundaries you pick define what you agree to explore in play. You could take the same idea but change where you begin and end, and you would wind up with a completely different game. If you are making a post-apocalypse history, do you start after the dust is settled and survivors are scavenging for food, or do you include the days leading up to the boom, so you can play out how it happened? Either one works, but they will make very different histories.

## Number of Players

Microscope works best with three or four players. You can play with more or fewer, but there are different impacts on the game.

Two players: Work great, except that each Focus is very short. The Lens goes, the other player gets one turn, and then the Lens wraps up (AA-B-AA, since the Lens can make two nested things). The Lens makes most of the history related to the Focus, and the other player only gets to make a relatively minor contribution before moving on.

To give the other player more input to the Focus, extend each Focus and go around a second time, but without the Lens getting to make a nested thing on the middle turn (AA-B-A-B-AA). Extending the Focus also improves continuity, because it keeps the history on the same topic for longer.

Five players or more: Not recommended. Each player has less chance to contribute. Scenes are also likely to be too crowded. If you do play with five, some players should volunteer to play background characters or Time more often (as described under making Scenes).

## How Do I Make a Good Focus?

The Focus is a powerful tool to tune the pace of the game. Just like that little knob on the side of a real microscope, you can adjust the Focus to decide how closely you want to look at your history and how concentrated you want play to be. Stop and think about how the game is going:

- ♦ If play feels too dense or linear, a very broad Focus might help, like a place or institution that spans multiple Periods, because that lets players spread out and explore different parts of the history.
- ♦ If the history isn't engaging or it feels too remote or cerebral, a very tight Focus, like a person or a single incident, is a good way to build momentum and get people involved. Follow that up with Scenes with incriminating Questions (see "How Do I Make a Good Question?").

How tight does it need to be? That depends, but generally the tighter the Focus the better. Compare these ideas:

*"Jake Howlett, veteran of the Seven Days War"*

*"Jake Howlett's marriage"*

*"How Jake met his wife"*

*"The first thing Jake said to his wife"*

Even with an extremely tight Focus, the players still have a lot of latitude. "How Jake met his wife" is literally a very small moment in time, but you could still make a Scene on her deathbed thirty years later with the Question "Before she dies, does Jake's wife admit she knew he was an enemy deserter the moment she laid eyes on him?" It's decades later, but it still relates to the Focus because it's about how they met, and that's what matters. If the Focus is a particular soldier on the front lines of the war, the history you create may explore his death, his youth, or his memories of the war in old age, but all the players are still exploring different facets of the same tight idea.

An extremely broad Focus, like "Love", lets players roam all over the history. There's a constant theme, but each player could build on completely different times and places. That can be a nice change of pace, a "montage round" to let players explore, but usually a much tighter focus is better.

---

### WHEN IN DOUBT:

Pick a person or a specific incident, and make it the Focus. It can be something or someone already in the game or something you make up on the spot. Don't worry if you don't know anything about the Focus or why it's interesting: that will solve itself pretty quickly.

---



## How Do I Make a Good Question?

To be useful, a Question must do one thing: it must get all the players on the same page about what the Scene is about. The Question is the agenda for the Scene. It tells everyone what characters to pick and what they should be role-playing about.

The best Questions are extremely specific. Vague Questions are bad and lead to confusing or muddled Scenes. Open-ended Questions can work, but you will get much better Scenes out of very loaded or incriminating Questions.

There are generally two reasons you'll make a Scene:

- ♦ There's something specific you want to know about the history, so you have a particular Question in mind.
- ♦ You want to get the action rolling, do some role-playing, and immerse yourself in the setting.

When it comes to filling in the blanks of history, some of the best Questions are the obvious ones. Maybe there was a war, but no one ever said why it started. We've seen the tyrant but never saw how he seized power. Even if the answer isn't shocking, filling in those blanks gives all the players a firmer understanding of the history.

If you have an idea you want to explore, don't hesitate to stack the deck and make your Question more specific. A simple formula is to just add more conditions or "even though" twists to establish clear issues.

*"How does the Alliance beat the invaders?" is a good starting point, but that's a very open-ended Scene.*

*"How does the Alliance beat the invaders even though they're outnumbered and outgunned?" is more specific. We have a better idea of the situation.*

*"Is the Alliance willing to sacrifice the colony on Sigma VII to beat the invaders even though the colonists will get slaughtered in the process?" is better still because it gives us a clear situation, an obvious dilemma.*

If you just want to kick off some role-playing action, try asking a really personal question about a character, either someone already in the history or who you just made up. Think of something you would expect someone to do, then ask why they did or want to do the opposite.

*A teacher should impart knowledge, so we ask "Why does the teacher lie to his students?"*

*A doctor should save lives, so we ask "Why does the doctor let his patient die?"*

*A captain should be protective of his ship and crew, so we ask "Why is the captain secretly planning on blowing up his ship with everyone on board?"*

Those are incriminating, but pretty open: there could be a lot of answers. Again, make your Scenes better by adding more specifics:

*"Why does the teacher lie to his students about who founded the colony?"*

*"Does the doctor save his patient even though he realizes he's the secret police torturer who killed the doctor's wife a decade ago?"*

*"Why is the captain secretly planning to blow up his ship with everyone on board in the middle of the Victory Day celebration of the very war he was decorated for fighting in?"*

Those are all very personal Questions, but the answers can tell you a lot about the history, not just about the people in the Scenes. Maybe we find out the war was a horrible affair that left even the winners scarred. Maybe we find dark secrets about the colony's founders.

Avoid broad "what happens next?" Questions. If almost anything that happens can be considered a valid answer, it's a bad Question.

*"What do the prisoners do after they escape?" could be answered by almost anything happening in the Scene. There's no clear agenda.*

It may not immediately be clear why a Question is interesting. Don't be alarmed. Once you ask the Question, the other players get to jump in and run with it. They may have ideas you didn't even consider. So long as your Question gets everyone on the same page about the Scene, you're in good shape.

---

**WHEN IN DOUBT:**

Pick a character. Think of something you would expect them to do, then ask why they did or want to do the opposite.

*Why does the miser give away all his wealth?*

*Why does the professor teach his students lies?*

*Why do the peasants decide to burn down their own village?*

The character could be someone who's already in the history, but making someone up on the spot, someone no one at the table (including yourself) knows anything about, is a great way to get the ball rolling.

---

## Implied Incidents: Keeping Track of What's Not on the Table

Periods and Events can include descriptions of things that sound like they would be an Event or Scene (respectively), but if no one actually makes them, they're not on the table. They're just implied.

*A player makes an Event "a flying saucer lands at the capital." The Event can include all sorts of build-up and aftermath, but it's implied that at some moment a saucer actually lands. It sounds like an obvious Scene, but we could go through the whole game without making it.*

When you're making a Scene in an Event with an implied incident, make it clear when your Scene happens relative to that moment. Is it before the incident? After? Right when it is about to happen?

*The "flying saucer lands" Event has no Scenes yet, so you make a Scene with the Question "is the government open-minded or afraid of the unknown?" and describe it as the President meeting with his advisors. But where does this Scene fall relative to the saucer landing? Are they meeting because the saucer has been sitting on the lawn for days and they need to decide what to do? Is it just a normal daily briefing and they're going to be surprised with the news, or is it entirely before the saucer arrives and we're not even going to hear about it in this Scene? They all work, but the other players have to know which you intend, so everyone is playing the same Scene.*

As you can see from the example, there are shades of gray: maybe the saucer hasn't arrived, but the authorities have picked it up on radar, so they know there's a UFO. Maybe they got reports of *something* invading their air space but still think it's a foreign aircraft, rather than aliens.

The same applies to making Events inside of Periods. If the Period is "the World-serpent awakens, boiling oceans and smashing lands," but no one has made an Event showing the monster waking up, then when you make any other Event in that Period you need to be clear whether it's before that creature appears (just another sunny day at the beach...), right as it happens, or decades later as the cities of the world have been smashed beyond recognition.

The players have a god's-eye view of history: they always know more about the future than the characters living through it. So in order to play those characters well, to really get their point of view, you need to understand exactly what they *don't* know. When you're looking at the whole scope of time, understanding a moment in history is as much about defining what is still unknown as it is about defining what is known.

## Incomplete Ideas: Blind Man's Bluff

You can trip yourself up during Scenes by either having a complete idea, but only showing the other players a tiny hint and not telling them what you're really trying to make, or by making something that's intentionally incomplete because you want to let the other players fill in the blanks, but not making it clear that you intend them to join in.

The first usually happens when a player says something cryptic about something they have in mind, but the other players have no idea what it's supposed to mean. It's simple: if you don't tell the other players, they don't know, and it's not in the history.

*"My guy pulls back his hood and looks at the newcomer carefully. 'Did They send you?'" None of the other players know who 'They' are, or what the player is talking about. The players have nothing to work with, and it doesn't add much to the history, except uncertainty.*

Even if you want to introduce something which you don't want the other characters to understand, it's better to have the players know what's going on so they can play along. A good trick is having your character think outloud.

*"He says 'Did They send you?' and he's thinking about the news he got from his spies in the Scarlet Empire about the upstart necromancers from the East. He's afraid their power has reached this far." Much better. Now everybody has something to work with.*

If you are intentionally introducing something incomplete, make it clear to the other players what you're leaving out. When in doubt, just tell them what you're not specifying.

*"Yeah, I'm saying that blips appear on the scanner, and they're closing fast, but I'm not saying what they are—my character can't tell. Anyone can jump in if they want."*

You may be tempted to describe your character's reaction without describing what you perceive in the hopes that the other players will seamlessly get it and follow along. This can lead to confusion and hesitation as the other players try to guess what you're hinting at. Don't be coy. Don't hold your breath and hope the other players can read your mind. You must describe what it is your character is perceiving and a reaction, not just one or the other.

*Wrong: "The guard says 'Hey, did you feel that?'" Other players don't know what you're reacting to.*

*Wrong: "The guard feels a faint tremor shake the ground." Didn't describe a reaction.*

*Right: "The guard feels a faint tremor shake the ground. He says 'Hey, did you feel that?'" Describes both a perception and a reaction.*

*Right: "The guard feels a faint tremor shake the ground, but he doesn't think it's anything important." Describes both a perception and a reaction.*

*Wrong: "The guard feels a faint tremor shake the ground. It's a mole-man drilling machine boring to the surface!" (describes something the character isn't perceiving)*

## **World-Building & Spawning a New Game**

After a few games, the table can get pretty crowded with index cards. Perversely, the more you play, the more interesting your history becomes and the more you want to continue.

Sometimes you just become fascinated with a particular part of the history and want to really drill into it. One option is to spawn a new game by zooming in on one part of the history. You could take one Period, and then divide it into starting and ending Periods of a new history, or take two adjacent Periods and make them your new start and end. Take any Events in those Periods and place them accordingly.

You can also use Microscope to build settings for other game systems. Play one session, and you have a world that everyone at the table knows and likes. Make up some characters and go exploring.

## GAME SETUP

- 1) **Big Picture:** Pick a concept for your history, no more than a single sentence.
- 2) **Bookend History:** Make start and end Periods.
- 3) **Palette-Add or Ban Ingredients:** Each player can add or ban one thing from the **Palette**. Repeat until a player doesn't want to add or ban anything. Feel free to discuss—everyone should be happy with the Palette.
- Group decisions are now over.
- 4) **First Pass:** Each player makes a Period or Event, in any order.

## OVERVIEW OF PLAY

Decide who goes first. That player becomes the first **Lens**.

- 1) **Declare the Focus:** The Lens decides the current **Focus**.
- 2) **Make History:** Each player takes a turn and makes either a Period, Event or Scene. Start with the Lens and go around the table to the left. Lens is allowed to make two nested things (a Period with an Event inside it, or an Event with a Scene inside it).
- 3) **Lens Finishes the Focus:** After each player has taken a turn, the Lens gets to go again and Make History one more time, again making two nested things if desired.

After the Focus is finished, we examine **Legacies**:

- 4) Choose a Legacy: Player to the right of the current Lens picks something that appeared during this last Focus and makes it a Legacy.
- 5) Explore a Legacy: Same player creates an Event or Dictated Scene that relates to one of the Legacies.
- 6) **New Lens:** The player to the left of the Lens then becomes the new Lens and picks a new Focus (start again from step 1).

Before you start the next Focus, take a break. Talk about how the game is going, but don't discuss what you want to have happen later. Keep your ideas to yourself.

## MAKING HISTORY

On your turn, make either a Period, Event or Scene:

**Period:** Place between two Periods. Describe the Period and say whether it is Light or Dark.

**Event:** Place inside a Period. Describe the Event and say whether it is Light or Dark.

**Scene:** Place inside an Event. Choose whether to play or dictate the Scene.

What you make must relate to the Focus set by the Lens. Do not contradict what's already been said. Do not use anything from the No column of the Palette.

The Lens is allowed to create two things on each of their turns, so long as one is inside the other (an Event and a Scene inside it, or a Period and an Event inside it).



## STYLE OF PLAY

After setup, do not negotiate or discuss as a group (except to decide the Tone after a Scene). Do not ask for suggestions or give suggestions. Keep your ideas close to the vest.

Create clearly and boldly. When you're making history, you're in charge of creating reality. Pitch your vision. No one owns anything in the history. Create or destroy whatever you want.

Abandon your preconceptions. History will not turn out the way you expect. Think on your feet and work with what other players introduce.



PERIOD CARD



EVENT CARD



SCENE CARD

## MAKING A PLAYED SCENE

- 1) State the Question
- 2) Set the Stage: What do we already know from the history? Where is the Scene physically taking place? What is going on?
- 3) Choose Characters: List banned and required characters (max 2 each). All players pick characters (L). Choose a character that helps you answer the Question.
- 4) Reveal Thoughts (L)

Steps marked L go around the table to the right, opposite of the normal order, starting to the right of the player making the Scene.

## PLAYING A SCENE

Always move towards answering the **Question** of the Scene.

- Roleplay what your character does and thinks. If someone tries to do something to your character, you describe the outcome.
  - Shape the world by describing what your character perceives and how they react to it.
  - Introduce and play secondary characters, as needed.
- Don't say what someone else's character does or thinks.

## PUSH: CREATIVE CONFLICT

If, while playing a Scene, someone describes something about the world outside their character and you have a different idea you like better, you can Push to substitute your idea for theirs.

You cannot Push to change a player's starting character, except to change something they perceive or to decide what happens to them.

- 1) Proposal
- 2) Additional Proposals
- 3) Vote
- 4) Determine the Winner
- 5) Play the Results

## ENDING A SCENE

When the players know the answer to the Question, the Scene ends. Discuss what happened during the Scene to decide whether the Scene was Light or Dark.