

**Station One:  
We're on the Air**

*"Radio is the theater of the mind; television is the theater of the mindless."*

*-Steve Allen*

## Introduction

Close your eyes for a moment, if you will, and imagine a simpler time; a time in which families gathered in their living rooms around the world, listening to their favorite programs on their wooden console radios. Picture it in your head. Mom and Dad sit in their comfy chairs while the kids find a spot on the floor. All eyes are fixated on the ornate modern miracle that acts as the room's centerpiece, even though the entertainment it provides is not visual; it has them captivated and mesmerized. Mother shushes the chatty kids as the dramatic organ music signals the beginning of the broadcast in earnest, the announcer's voiceover whisks everyone in the room away to the world of radio drama for the next 30 minutes.

Is the vision becoming clear yet? Can you hear the crackle-and-pop of the static coming through the speakers?

Can you feel the family's sense of anticipation as their favorite program goes...

... On the Air?

The book you're reading now is a storytelling roleplaying game that will allow you and a friend (or possibly a few friends) to emulate the kind of stories told on the radio shows like the one the family in your mind's eye was listening to. It's your

chance to transport yourself back to the 1930s and '40s, in a sense, and bring Old Time Radio (often called OTR) to life... right at your dining room table.

While the game could be used to recreate any genre of radio programs, the focus is on the more dramatic end of the spectrum, including action/adventure, crime, science fiction and mystery.

## Preparation

To participate in *On the Air*, you'll need to gather a few things.

First and foremost, you won't get far without participants. One participant acts as the Director and is usually the one who has the best grasp of the game rules and an idea for a series. One to three other participants can be involved as well; they are called players and each one takes on the persona of a single fictional character. We'll go more into the dynamics in the *About Roleplaying Games* section.

You'll need as many 6-sided dice (d6s) as you can get your hands on, as well as two 4-sided dice and two 8-sided dice. Also required is a collection of beads, counters or other trinkets to use as Airwave Tokens. Lastly, you'll have to have this book, some character sheets and pencils.



## Roleplaying Games

The roleplaying game is, at its core, an exercise in interactive storytelling for you and your friends to engage in. You gather around a table (or other convenient space), consume snack foods, roll some dice and enjoy each other's company while working together to tell a story, using the game rules found in this book as a guide.

To put it in a way that ties more closely to the source material, when you play *On the Air*, you and your group effectively collaborate on the creation of a dramatic radio series, one episode at a time. This is done verbally. Unlike with actual radio shows, however, you don't have to follow a rigid, pre-set script. It's mostly improvised, which means there's practically no limit to what can happen.

This probably sounds pretty vague, so let's reel it in a bit and get specific.

The Director is like the creator, director and producer of an actual radio series, all rolled into one. Their job is to create the basics of the story, set the scene, govern the flow of the action and control the supporting characters (called supporting characters or SCs).

The rest of the participants are called players. Each player steps into the role of one of the story's central heroes (called primary characters or PCs). It is their tale that will be told as the game unfolds. The most direct comparison is to the actors portraying the main protagonists of a television show. They get to experience the story vicariously through their characters. The players aren't just going along for the ride, though. The choices they make regarding their characters' actions can shape and alter the very course of the story. That's what makes roleplaying games so different than other types of games.

So far, it sounds like there's no real need for the game rules at all, but while the story can progress quite far without

using the rules, there will come a time when the success of the characters will be in doubt. That's when it's time to pick up the dice and bring the rules into the picture. And this is where RPGs differ from radio programs. In those programs of yesteryear, there's no wiggle room for what's going to happen; whatever the writer says is going to happen will happen. It's set in stone. This is not the case in a roleplaying game. The Director may know what's going on in a general sense, but the decisions made by the players and the way the dice roll may send the story off into directions they had never even considered. That's what makes the game fun for Directors! They have to go with the flow and keep the story rolling forward, adapting to those decisions and rolls along the way.

You now know the basics of how roleplaying games function. However, it will become much clearer with an example of play, which is exactly what you'll find below. For purposes of this brief example, all references to the game rules have been generalized, since you don't yet know what they mean. When you see text in quotation marks, it represents the participant speaking as their character.

For purposes of this example, the series being played is *The Adventures of Max Norton*, a program about a cynical private detective. So far in this episode, the titular character has been trying to solve the murder of an aspiring actress named Lyla Bailey. He has been told that about a week ago, a man calling himself Stitch Swenson was at Sam's Tavern (a hole-in-the-wall dockside bar), bragging about having killed her. Such a lead was hard to pass up, so Max wasted no time following up on it. David is the Director and Jack is the player taking on the role of Max Norton himself.

**David:** *[taking on a voice that sounds like an old time radio narrator]* As you enter Sam's Tavern, the smell of cheap cigars and strong whiskey assaults Max's senses. This was the right place, all right. The joint is crowded with all the usual types one would imagine to be hanging out in a place like this—seedy, shifty and not too keen on hygiene.

**Jack:** “Looks like a rough crowd. *[makes footstep sounds]* Hey, bartender. You ever hear of a fella by the name of Stitch Swenson? Six-foot-five and about as wide as he is tall. A thick head of curly red locks. Never seen without a stogie in his yapper. Know him?”

**David:** *[in a gruff voice]* “Ain't heard'a no Stitch Swenson. Now scram, will ya? I got work t'do.”

**Jack:** Can I make an Intention to get some information out of this bartender?

**David:** Sure. Why not?

*[Jack rolls some dice and gets a successful result, which allows him to narrate the results of his actions]*

**Jack:** “Look, pal, you can either make with the details or I can talk to the police and see if they'd be interested in coming here and doing some digging. I'm sure an upright citizen like you wouldn't have anything to hide from the cops, eh?” *[switches to the gruff voice the Director used for the bartender]* *[makes an exaggerated gulp sound]* “Heh, heh... what I meant to say was that I haven't seen Stitch in a few days, which is kinda odd for him. He's usually in here every night. Stitch lives in one'a those cabins down on Evans Street if y'wanna talk to him so bad. Cabin 4.” *[goes back to Max's voice]* “Aren't you a peach? Thanks, mister. I'll be running along now.” *[makes footstep sounds, followed by the sound of a creaky door closing]*

**David:** Is Max going to the cabins? They aren't but a few blocks from here.

**Jack:** You bet.

**David:** *[affecting the narrator voice again]* The night is dark as pitch as our hero makes his way down the docks, toward the cabins. *[makes the sound of water lapping up against the shore as well as a tugboat sound]* He sees not a single person out and around at this hour, though he can't help but feel as if he's being watched.

**Jack:** *[in a quiet voice so no one else can hear him]* “I just can't shake the feeling that someone's following me. I'd better play it nonchalantly. Perhaps whoever is tailing me will provide a clue. But if they think I know they're in the shadows somewhere, they won't be of any use to me. Just keep walking, Max ol' boy.”

**David:** *[in the narrator voice]* Max arrives at the tiny, ramshackle cabin and it looks as if the old wooden screen door is open and swinging in the night's wind. *[makes wind and irregular “clacking” noises]*

**Jack:** “Either he doesn't live here anymore or someone broke into the place. Either way, it looks like I'm going in to check things out.”

**David:** *[in the narrator voice]* When the brave private dick enters the cabin, it's clear the place has been ransacked. More importantly, perhaps, Max's eyes come to rest on what looks like... a body. *[cues up dramatic organ music on his audio device to add emphasis]* The darkness prevents Max from seeing whose body it is.

**Jack:** “If I were a betting man, I'd say that corpse belongs to none other than Stitch Swenson. I'd better get a closer look to make sure, though.”

**David:** *[in the narrator voice]* Max's intuition is right as usual. Stitch Swenson bought the farm. Kicked the bucket. Went the way of all flesh. Hopped the twig. That's right, he's counting worms, thanks to a bullet in the head. *[switches to his normal voice]* I need you to make an Intention.

*[Jack rolls the dice and gets an unsuccessful result, which means that something bad happens and the Director gets to narrate the outcome]*

**David:** *[in the narrator voice]* Despite knowing that someone had been shadowing him, Max is distracted by the corpse and fails to hear someone enter the house. That is, until the man speaks. *[makes the sound of a pistol cocking and pantomimes aiming the gun]* *[using a creepily calm and low voice]* "Your curiosity has spelled your own doom, gumshoe. You should have walked away from this case when you had the chance. But it's too late now. Get ready to meet your maker."

**Jack:** That's not good!

**David:** *[cues up more dramatic organ music]* *[in the narrator voice]* Will Max be gunned down like a rat by this mysterious figure? Or will he cheat death by his wits or his fists? Tune in tomorrow for the action-packed conclusion, brought to you by Daisy Fresh, the hand soap that cleans you more thoroughly than any other soap in America.

## Old Time Radio

Long before the advent of television, the world's primary means of home entertainment was radio. While radio first came into common usage in households during the 1920s with the availability of crystal sets, it wasn't until the 1930s that it became a staple in homes the world over. During that period, the Great Depression was in full swing and people craved inexpensive forms of entertainment to keep their weary minds

off of the problems that besieged them from all sides. Radio was foremost among those forms. As the Great Depression gave way to America's involvement in World War II the following decade, radio became our fastest means of finding out about the latest developments of the war effort.

Those two decades are considered to be the Golden Age of radio... and for good reason. Radio programs of every stripe and every genre could be listened to in fifteen-minute or half-hour doses, between one and three times per week. From soap operas and dramas to comedies and adventure, the radio certainly had something for everyone to enjoy.

By the 1950s, television had replaced radio in the hearts and minds of families, but there was still something magical about those halcyon days of listening to shows such as *The Shadow* or *Boston Blackie* and letting your imagination conjure up the visuals. This game hopes to celebrate that magic and perhaps even draw new people into the world of Old Time Radio, which can be listened to online in various formats. Just search for "Old Time Radio" and prepare to be transported back to a more innocent era for a while. Who knows what exciting programs you'll find in your quest for radio programs of a bygone era? The Shadow knows...

## Exploring Old Time Radio

Old Time Radio is not as familiar to the average person as many other sources of entertainment. While most have certainly heard of *The Shadow*, *Little Orphan Annie* or *The Lone Ranger*, they most likely have heard of them from other sources, such as movies, comics and television. For this reason, we will discuss the most important hallmarks and tropes of OTR programs. Think of it as a crash course in 1930s to '40s era radio.

### **Overacting**

Due to the audience not being able to see the performers' facial expressions, the actors had to convey as much emotion as possible in their delivery of their lines. By today's standards, it sounds hammy and even silly, but it was a necessary means to an end during the radio days.

### **Stating the Obvious**

Once again stemming from the lack of visuals, characters on the old radio programs were required to state the obvious in order to let the listeners know what they were experiencing. If a character spotted a group of enemies, they might've said, "Uh-oh! It's pirates!" After all, we as listeners couldn't have otherwise known what they saw.

### **Sound Effects**

Sound effects are still an important part of modern entertainment such as movies and television. However, they were far more essential to Old Time Radio. They were used in conjunction with dialogue to paint a mental image of the scenes in any given episode. Shows had sound effect specialists known as Foley artists who crafted audio proxies for practically every possibility.

### **The Sponsor**

Each series had a sponsor. Okay, that wasn't always true... some shows went years without one. Most of them did, though, and that sponsor kept the show going financially in return for on-air advertising before, during or after the show. Sometimes, the sponsor required several commercial spots, some on which were delivered by the characters themselves right in the middle of the story.

### **Radio Premiums**

Radio premiums were essentially trinkets or souvenirs that could be obtained by sending proofs-of-purchases of the sponsoring agencies' products through the mail.

These knickknacks were most common on programs geared for children, but many "adult" shows offered them as well. They ranged from decoder rings and sundial watches to signaling devices and magic tricks.

### **Social Responsibility**

The powers-that-be leaned toward shows that offered some kind of socially responsible message. Such messages tended to be placed at the beginning or end of an episode. All genres were prone to having to preach their respective message, but it was most common in crime-based series, where the message was usually that crime didn't pay.

### **The Summation**

At the end of an episode, the protagonist would explain to another character (thus spelling it out for listeners) how the antagonist committed or tried to commit whatever nefarious deed the story revolved around. "Your scheme was ingenious... and it almost worked, too. While we were occupied with tracking down a supposed accomplice of yours, you kidnaped Anna Marie and brought her to the warehouse, where you knew we'd end up after following your fake clues. But you didn't count on me having a friend keep an eye on Anna Marie from afar, reporting to me if something developed."

### **Plot Holes**

The old radio programs featured plots that had more holes in them than a hunk of Swiss cheese, particularly in the shows aimed at kids. Perhaps they didn't think children would notice. The truth is that if anyone noticed, they didn't seem to care. We as a society weren't as cynical as we are in modern times, so listeners at the time simply overlooked these lapses of logic and enjoyed the shows for what they were.



### **Coincidence**

There's an old saying about everything happening for a reason. This was certainly true in Old Time Radio... and that reason was to speed up the stories in order to fit in the show's allotted time slot. Using unlikely coincidence as a plot device saved a great deal of time for the characters. "Say, I was about to start looking for that suspect and whaddayaknow... he just happened to be right across the street from my apartment. Talk about luck!" It's not luck, dear hero. It's just a plot device.

### **Politically Incorrect**

The thing to remember when listening to Old Time Radio is that these programs were a product of their time, which means that there tended to be varying amounts of casual racism, male chauvinism, offensive stereotypes, and other things that make modern audiences uncomfortable. This is one aspect of the old shows that we recommend doing away with, even at the expense of authenticity. We're not saying that your games should be squeaky clean, absolutely sanitized affairs, but there's never a good reason to blatantly offend others in your group.

## For Your Listening Pleasure

At one time, it was challenging to get your hands on OTR recordings. There were mail order companies and a handful of cassettes could be found in stores for those fortunate enough to stumble across them. So, it wasn't impossible by any stretch, but to say these old shows were readily available to virtually anyone would be abjectly false. Today, however, thousands of episodes are right at your fingertips, thanks to the Internet. There's practically no series that can't be found with ease.

The only issue is that with so many programs available, figuring out where to start may be a daunting task. Fortunately, we have compiled a list of shows we recommend for newcomers to check out.

**The Shadow:** This iconic program focused on a menacing, vigilante-style crimefighter who could cloud men's minds to make himself invisible to them.

**Boston Blackie:** Described as an "enemy to those who make him an enemy, friend to those who have no friend," this private investigator always managed to find trouble.

**Little Orphan Annie:** This kids' show followed the adventures of the adorable but plucky orphan, her dog Sandy and her benefactor, Daddy Warbucks.

**The Lone Ranger:** The Old West came to life in this show about a former Texas Ranger who donned a mask and battled evil with his Native American sidekick, Tonto.

**The Green Hornet:** A kid-oriented series about a masked vigilante and his partner, Kato. Together, they fought "public enemies who try to destroy our America!"

**Dragnet:** Los Angeles police detective Sergeant Joe Friday and his partners hit the streets in this realistic, "just the facts" take on procedural crime stories.

**Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar:** "The transcribed adventures of the man with the action-packed expense account — America's fabulous freelance insurance investigator." The tagline pretty much said it all.

**The War of the Worlds:** In actuality, this was simply an episode of *The Mercury Theater on the Air*, but its historical significance alone warrants its inclusion on this list. When it aired on October 30th, 1938, many listeners heard only a portion of it and believed a Martian attack was actually underway, prompting a mass panic.

**Flash Gordon:** Two different series aired about this handsome athlete who, along with his companions Dr. Zarkov and Dale Arden, comes into conflict with the ruler of the planet Mongo, Ming the Merciless.

**I Love a Mystery:** Straddling the genres of mystery, adventure and supernatural horror, this show featured the exploits of three friends who ran a detective agency and traveled the world in search of the unknown.

## Other Swell Programs

- Gang Busters
- Richard Diamond
- Gunsmoke
- The Adventures of Phillip Marlowe
- Casey, Crime Photographer
- The Adventures of Superman
- Pat Novak, for Hire
- Paul Temple
- The Man Called X
- The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes
- Captain Midnight
- Challenge of the Yukon
- The Adventures of Sam Spade
- Bulldog Drummond
- Dick Tracy
- Chandu the Magician
- Dan Dunn