THE PERSUADERS

A Narrative Game in the World of Advertising

by Bill White and Dave Petroski

A Consensus Game (DRAFT — January 24, 2007)

In this game, you play the role of an advertising professional who is trying to create effective advertising. In doing so, you must deal with the central tensions of your business, including the imperatives of profit and the constraints of conscience, creativity, and culture. The purpose of this game is frankly didactic: it is intended to teach players something about the complexity of the enterprise of advertising in a way that no amount of reading alone will do. That said, players benefit if they bring to the game a solid grounding in the literature of advertising; this will enable them to contribute more meaningfully in play.

The Persuaders is a narrative game, which means that it takes the form not of moving pawns on a game-board but of describing what happens to the fictional characters you'll create. The rules are there to help keep track of the various forces and factors at work in the fiction, and provide the “resistance” of the real world to the intentions and actions of the game's characters.

To play, you need these rules, three to six players, paper and pencil, a deck of cards, a handful of dice, and a set of differentiated tokens (poker chips in four colors work best). One player (in a classroom situation, probably the instructor) acts a moderator for the game, but it is designed so that a small group can play the game independently (and possibly competitively—that is, trying to achieve a “group score” that is higher than other groups in the same class playing the game).

PREPARING FOR PLAY

THE OFFICE

Draw cards to determine the hierarchy of the office. The highest card is the most senior member, the second highest is next senior, and so forth. Resolve ties in favor of the “higher” suit, ranked Spades, Hearts, Diamonds, and Clubs. Record the value of the card as the character's “rank,” with face cards having a value of 10 and Aces having a value of 1.

The player whose character has the highest rank is the “senior player”; he or she has special powers, privileges, and responsibilities over the course of the game. A player may lose or gain seniority over the course of the game, and thus who the senior player is at any given time may change as you play the game.
Organizational Values

Now come up with your advertising agency. This is the ad agency or marketing department around which the game-fiction revolves. Determine several things about your agency. Is it big (part of a multinational conglomerate), small (a handful of people working out of a rented office), or somewhere in between? Is it “full-service,” or does it specialize in creating ads for a particular medium or particular industry? Is it located in a major city or somewhere else?

Push for an agency that operates in an area that you yourself have some familiarity with; this will help in making sense of what's going on in the game. If you don't have any specific idea or strong preference, that's okay, too.

Once you've figured out your agency's general description, distribute 10 points among its four organizational values, which are Information, Persuasion, Culture, and Public Service. No score should be lower than 1 or higher than 4.

- **Information** is the degree to which the agency takes the position that advertising is fundamentally about giving reasonable people the information they need to make rational decisions. An agency with a high score here emphasizes “doing your homework” and “understanding the product” in its work practices, and produces advertising intended to showcase the features of the product.

- **Persuasion** is the extent to which the agency subscribes to the idea that advertising is at root an effort to convince people to buy an idea, service, or product. An agency with a high score here asks, “What's the product's competitive advantage?” and makes use of consumer psychology in its work practices. It produces advertising that tries to evoke an emotional response in the consumer.

- **Culture** is the agency's commitment to the idea that advertising is both an expression of individual creativity and a manifestation of the Zeitgeist or spirit of the times. An agency with a high score here focuses on ad itself as a cultural production, rather than on the product or the consumer per se. It produces advertising whose chief characteristic is its innovativeness and its aesthetic appeal.

- **Public Service** is how much the agency believes that advertising has a responsibility to society in general; that advertising, in other words, has an ethical commitment to serve the public interest. An agency with a high score here will produce many public service announcements (PSAs) and will shy away from taking on clients with little redeeming social value. Public Service can never be an agency's highest score (not even if it's tied with another score).

Now give your agency a name. Some possibilities:
• *Heartland Promotions Inc.* A mid-size direct-mail firm operating out of Kalamazoo with a heavy investment in technological wizardry that lets them identify and target potential consumers with a high level of need for or interest in a client's products. *Information 4, Persuasion 2, Culture 2, Public Service 2.*

• *Stilton Roche Worldwide.* An old-school Madison Avenue ad agency with hundreds of employees whose still-revered founder set the tone: figure out what will move the product, and move the product! *Persuasion 4, Information 3, Culture 2, Public Service 1.*

• *Buzz Ltd.* A boutique firm operating out of a downtown loft space in San Francisco, offering specialized design services for creating Web-based promotions for the music industry that have an avant-garde, cutting-edge feel. *Culture 4, Persuasion 3, Public Service 2, Information 1.*

You should establish all of these details by consensus if possible. To the extent that conflicts or disagreements arise, they can be resolved by voting or by allowing the senior player to suggest a means for making the decision, including possibly even making the decision himself or herself.

Record the agency's name and values on a piece of paper.

**CREATING A CHARACTER**

You are going to need an alter ego in the fiction of the game, someone to identify with as he or she faces the challenges of work and career. This alter ego is your *character*. He or she is an advertising professional in the advertising agency, working in the creative part of the business. To create a character, assign his or her *individual values*.

*Individual Values (Abilities)*

Each character has four *individual values* or abilities that affect how well he or she performs in the various activities that make up the functions of the ad agency. To determine your character's abilities, give each ability a score from 1 to 4, with 1 being low and 4 being high, such that the sum of the character's scores is equal to 10. One way of doing this is to rank the abilities, so that the most important score gets a 4, the next most important gets a 3, and so on (this will add up to 10). But as long as the total of all four scores is 10, the character is okay.

• **Savvy** (Diamonds/green) is a professional resource. It reflects the character's professional and business acumen, and his or her experience in the industry. Savvy comes into play when economic or business decisions need to be made.

• **Creativity** (Clubs/blue) is a creative resource. It reflects the character's talent for coming up with creative ideas in pursuit of an advertising assignment. Creativity comes into play when artistic decisions need to be made.
• **Identity** (Spades/white) is a creative, professional, and ethical resource. It signals the character's commitment to things outside his or her professional identity in advertising (family, hobbies, other outside interests). Identity comes into play when personal decisions need to be made.

• **Conscience** (Hearts/red) is an ethical resource. It reflects the character's commitment and sensitivity to moral issues and professional “best practice.” Conscience comes into play when ethical or moral decisions need to be made.

Your character's ability scores are also a measure of the relative weight or priority that your alter ego assigns each area, so that a character with high Savvy and low Conscience thinks that what matter are economically advantageous choices rather than morally right outcomes.

**TOKENS**

The agency starts with tokens (poker chips) in four different colors based on the scores you gave your office. This is the agency's “pool.”

- 1 green chip (economic token) for each point Information the office has;
- 1 blue chip (artistic token) for each point of Persuasion the office has;
- 1 white chip (personal token) for each point of Culture the office has; and
- 1 red chip (moral token) for each point of Public Service the office has.

Also take tokens depending on the characters' ability scores. Specifically:

- 1 green chip (economic token) for each point of Savvy a character has;
- 1 blue chip (artistic token) for each point of Creativity a character has;
- 1 white chip (personal token) for each point of Identity a character has; and,
- 1 red chip (moral token) for each point of Conscience a character has.

Add these chips to the agency's token pool as well.

**THE FIRST ACCOUNT**

Your agency starts off the game with one account. Deal out three cards to represent this account. During the regular course of play, you may have to “bring in new business” or develop a new account. The rules in this section tell you how do that, too.

For the first account, the whole agency gets to work together to determine these details. During regular play, only the players who've been assigned together to develop new accounts should work together. Right now, you and your colleagues have to come up with a description of the client and its product as well as one complication for the account.
Lucky for you, you don't have to make it up out of whole cloth. The suit and the value of the card constrain the range of its possible meanings. The two tables nearby show you how to read a card in order to come up a possible product or client. So, for example, if the cards associated with a particular account were the Nine of Diamonds and the Trey (Three) of Clubs, then the product would be “a utility item related to conflict, enmity, or fear,” which could quite naturally be read as “a home security system” while the client would have as its main interest projecting a message related to “a tradition of family life, childhood,” which in this context seems straightforward enough: the client wants to showcase how the product enables parents to monitor and supervise children throughout the day. If you were playing this game, you could imagine yourself creating jingles and slogans oriented around the phrase, “Spare the Ramrod Security System, and spoil your child's future.” Or maybe not.

When more than one player is developing an account, the most senior player working on it gets to resolve any disagreements or make any judgment calls.

In any event, once you've started to create an account, make note of it on an index card or other compact information storage system. You will need to be able to track the allocation of tokens to the account as characters “work” on it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products and Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card Value</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ace</td>
<td>mastery, ability, or prowess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>sexual fulfillment or the achievement of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>family life, childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>safety, security, order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>longing, sexual desire, or unrequited love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>aging, mortality, vanished youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>luck, good fortune, material well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>travel, movement, physical freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>conflict, enmity, fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>social belonging, acceptance, or conformity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>individuality, uniqueness of experience, singularity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>feminine beauty or grace; feminine qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>masculine beauty or power; masculine qualities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use this table of meanings to provide inspiration for describing what cards mean when you play them, especially when trying to come up with natures of the product and the client.
Complications

There is one complication associated with your first account. The junior player creates this complication. During the regular turn, you may introduce complications as a way of making it less expensive (in terms of tokens) to develop a new account.

Important: The person who creates the complication gains 1 token of the color of the complication card's suit at the beginning of each staff meeting that the complication exists until it has been dealt with. This token comes from the “bank” rather than from the agency pool.

First, decide at what level the complication will occur. There are three levels at which a complication can happen: micro, meso, and macro (or individual, organizational, and societal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suit</th>
<th>Micro</th>
<th>Meso</th>
<th>Macro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spade (white)</td>
<td>Crisis at Home</td>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Conflicts</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Legal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart (red)</td>
<td>Personal Problem</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond (green)</td>
<td>Money Trouble</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Economic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club (blue)</td>
<td>Creative Block</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- If the complication is micro-level, it applies to a specific character, chosen by the player who created the complication. A character with a complication pays one token at the beginning of each staff meeting the complication exists until it is dealt with. If the character has no tokens, the loss is taken from the agency pool.
- If the complication is macro-level, it suggests broader, “big picture” kinds of concerns. The agency loses 1 token at the beginning of any staff meeting that the complication exists until it has been dealt with.
- If the complication is meso-level, it either applies to a specific account or a campaign, or can be treated as a micro or macro depending on how it's defined. If it applies to an account, decide whether the account (a) can't be pitched until the complication is dealt with, or (b) is harder to close, so that the highest die rolled during the pitch is ignored. Otherwise, treat it as a micro-level or macro-level complication.

Once you've determined the level of the complication, its exact nature is shaped by the suit and value of the card just like the product and the client are.

So, for example, if someone played the Queen of Hearts as a complication at the macro level, it would have something to do with a legal issue emerging from or associated with feminine beauty or grace. Applied to the completed Ramrod Home Security System campaign, the complication
could be read as, “A competitor claims that our ad uses an actress who strongly resembles the actress they use in their work, and they think it's an infringement on their intellectual property.”

The agency loses 1 red (moral) token each turn, or 2 of any other colors. Played at the meso level, it could be read as, “John Fortune has been making sexually suggestive ‘jokes’ to an entry-level production assistant, who happens to be an attractive young woman, in contravention of the company's policy on sexual harassment” and treated either as affected the agency as a whole or John Fortune as an individual. Fortune's player loses a token of any kind each turn. At the micro level, it could be read as, “Josh Williams likes Sandy in Accounting, but she's dating some guy who drives an expensive BMW.” Josh Williams's player has to be given a white token each turn, because he's working on winning over Sandy instead of getting his work done, and Josh has to spend a white token (or 2 of any other kind) each turn.

**PLAYING THE GAME**

Each “game-turn” consists of three phases: the staff meeting, the work-week, and the pitch session.

The goal of the game is to accumulate the most tokens.

**THE STAFF MEETING**

At the beginning of the staff meeting, tokens are gained and lost for complications (see above).

Next, the senior player gives each other players their assignments for the work phase. The senior player gives each player a token of a certain color in order to direct him or her to do one of the following things:

(1) Develop a new account. The senior player gives the player a green (economic) token.
(2) Work on an existing account. The senior player gives the player a blue (creative) token.
(3) Deal with a complication. The senior player gives the player a red (moral) token.
(4) Take the day off. The senior player gives the player a white (personal) token. The player doesn't participate in the work-week, but may participate in the pitch session.

The senior player must take one token of any kind from the agency pool that he or she wants, and may assist any of the other players in their tasks, but may not take on an individual task himself or herself.

Once everyone has their assigned tasks, the work-week begins.

**THE WORK-WEEK**

The senior player times the “work-week,” which lasts up to 10 minutes. At the end of 10 minutes (or 5 minutes in the “expert” game), the senior player calls for reports.
**Developing A New Account.** To develop a new account, draw two cards from the top of the deck. The first card is the client card and the second card is the product card. Use the rules from above to come up with an appropriate client and product.

Record the client information on an index card or other piece of paper.

When the senior player calls for reports, tell him or her what you came up with. If you're still working on it, let him know. If the senior player tells you the account is okay, take one token of your choice from the agency pool.

If you successfully develop a new account and want to increase your rank, roll your Savvy or less on one die.

**Working on a Campaign.** To work on a campaign, move a token of any color to the account you want the campaign to be for. Describe some aspect of the advertising campaign, depending on the color of the token. It helps to write down what you say, recording it on an index card for the account.

- Green (economic token). Describe some aspect of the placement of the ad campaign in the media, its packaging, or its use of promotion-type features (e.g., coupons or other giveaways). For example, "Make buys for air time during Oprah."
- Blue (artistic token). Create a slogan, visual image, design motif, jingle lyric, or other possible element of advertising content relevant to the product. For example: "one of those no-nonsense British nanny types, a little bit smug but with a lot on the ball."
- White (personal token). Specify some demographic or psychographic (i.e., cultural) characteristic of the "typical user" or "ideal customer" for the campaign or product. For example: "A middle-class homeowner who's worried about his or her latchkey kids."
- Red (moral token). Identify a desired characteristic or element of the "brand identity," corporate persona, or manufacturer's public image to be created or reinforced by the campaign. For example: "Regular, reliable folks with a common sense attitude and a lot of concern for kids."

You may move any number of tokens to the account while you're working on the campaign, but each must correspond to an appropriate descriptive element.

When the senior player calls for reports, tell him or her what moves you made. If the senior player says the campaign is ready to be pitched to the client, take one token of your choice from the agency pool.

If you successfully create the campaign and want to increase your rank, roll your Creativity or less on one die.

**Dealing With Complications.** Come up with a reasonable course of action that would overcome
or alleviate the complication. Discuss this with the player who created the complication, who may suggest a cost to the agency or to an individual for resolving the complication (e.g., “John has to work late if he's going to overcome his creative block, so he has to give up two white tokens representing his free time”). If you're not willing to pay the cost, you can try to roll for it. Roll one die, with the player who created the complication watching you. If the value on the die is equal to or less than your ability score corresponding to the suit of the complication, your solution works. Otherwise, it fails, and the complication persists until next turn.

If the complication is Diamonds, roll vs. Savvy.
If the complication is Clubs, roll vs. Creativity.
If the complication is Spades, roll vs. Identity.
If the complication is Hearts, roll vs. Conscience.

The nature of the complication will suggest ways of ultimately resolving it.

When the senior player calls for reports, tell him or her what you did. If you haven't worked it out yet, let him or her know that. If the senior player says he or she is happy with your solution, take 1 token of your choice from the agency pool.

If you successfully deal with the complication and want to increase your rank, roll your Conscience or less on one die.

**Taking the Day Off.** If you get told to take the day off, you can help other players, but you don't have a chance to gain any tokens for the work-week.

**THE PITCH SESSION**

If there are any campaigns ready to be pitched, the senior player can designate another player to pitch the campaign. You make the pitch by taking the campaign elements that have been described during previous work-week (by yourself or other players) and weaving them together to form a coherent whole: “This campaign will feature a no-nonsense British nanny type who will talk about Ramrod as a bunch of reliable folks who care about kids to parents worried about leaving their kids alone at home. We'll air the commercials during Oprah.” As you include previously established elements, pick up a token from the account.

You get one die for each token you've picked up. But any other player can challenge your use of a particular element (“But will parents of latchkey kids be watching Oprah? Shouldn't we rely on direct mail instead?”) In that case, you lose a die. Once picked up, tokens are discarded.

Add one die if your description included at least one campaign element of each type (green, blue, white, and red).

Roll the dice and add up their value. If the sum of the dice is equal to or greater than the sum of
the product and client cards (with face cards counting as 10 and Aces as 1), then you've closed the account. Take one token of your choice from the agency pool. Otherwise, the pitch was unsuccessful, but the account remains open. But cross off one of the elements that you've picked; the client didn't like it. You can't reintroduce that one in your next pitch.

If you make the pitch successfully, the agency gains a number of tokens equal to the sum of the greatest match among the dice. For example, if you roll five dice and they come up 1, 2, 2, 5, 6, then the agency gains four tokens (because the sum of 2 and 2 is 4). If they'd come up 3, 3, 3, 5, 5, the agency would have gained 9 tokens, because the three 3s are a “bigger” (more extensive) match.

Take an approximately equal number of tokens of each color, with the player who made the pitch determining the color of the remainder. For example, in the case where the agency gained 9 tokens, the player who made the pitch could say that agency picked up two of red, white, and green and three of blue, or any other similar combination.

**SCORING**

The senior player gets 1 point for each token in the agency pool. Each other player gets 2 points for each token of the color that matches his or her highest ability, 1 point for tokens of “complementary” colors, and 0 points for tokens of the “opposite” color. Use the following chart to figure out how to score your tokens:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Highest Ability</th>
<th>...2 Points For</th>
<th>1 Point For</th>
<th>0 Points For</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Savvy</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Blue, White</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Green, Red</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Green, Red</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscience</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Blue, White</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that any tokens the senior player has taken for himself or herself personally (perhaps in case of being unseated) don't count toward his or her score. The player with the highest score wins.

The group score for your agency is the size of the agency's pool at the end of the game — i.e., the senior player's score.