

i'm sorry did you say street magic

a city-building story game



by Caro Asercion



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An archipelago-based fishing town, separated by its various islands, gathers annually to celebrate the turn of the harvest.

A collective of magical artists embarks on an ambitious project: a guerrilla public transit system powered by enchanted street art.

In a sprawling metropolis decades from now, breakthroughs in biotechnology offer citizens superpowers far beyond mortal ability.

This city that we call home has a magic all its own. It is wonder, and joy, and spirit — and with that spirit, we breathe life into the city together.

about this game

i'm sorry did you say street magic is a game about building a city: filling it with life and vivid detail, exploring its hidden corners, and meeting its strange and wondrous inhabitants.

It was designed to be played as a single-session game, but it can also support multiple sessions of ongoing, continuous play.

i'm sorry did you say street magic is played without a game master or facilitator, and can comfortably accommodate two to six players, though it works best with four or five.



SKAO

starting a
new game

setup and preparation

To play this game, you will need:

- A stack of index cards or flashcards.
- Some pens, pencils, or other writing tools.
- A large, flat playing area like a table.

If you are playing this game digitally, you will need some other method of organizing information instead of physical index cards and a table. You can play in your online tabletop engine of choice, in a shared text document or spreadsheet, or even in an office flowchart software; anything works, as long as everyone is able to share and make changes to the play space at the same time.

A single session of *street magic* consists of multiple rounds of play, and might run anywhere from three to five hours, depending on your group's size and playing style. Check in as a group before you start to set expectations for how long a game you intend to play.

introducing the game

If anyone at the table is playing this game for the first time, you should explain the overall idea of the game together so that you all know what you're getting into. Consider reading the following aloud:

“i’m sorry did you say street magic is a city-building story game. We take turns exploring our city; by the end of the game, we will have created a place that none of us could have imagined alone. Our agenda as players is to create a vibrant and multifaceted city, to fill that city with life and personality, and to expand on each other’s ideas together.

Unlike many tabletop games, *i’m sorry did you say street magic* is played without a game master or facilitator. The game goes back and forth between phases of independent and collaborative creation: at times we will decide on certain aspects of the city as a group, but on your turn, each of us has complete control over what we add to the city.”

player safety and support

Take turns reading the following section as a table:

“i’m sorry did you say street magic is designed for light, breezy gameplay. However, much like exploring a city in real life, a game of street magic might lead us down strange paths or in unexpected directions.

Here are a few different safety tools we can use during the game to look out for each other. Any of us can use these tools at any time during play.”

Change or add to these tools, as a table, to suit your needs as you all see fit. Player safety is always more important than gameplay.

rest stops “To take a **Rest Stop**, everyone playing steps away from the table for a few minutes. We use this break to stretch, catch our breath, and get some water or a snack if we need. We can also use it as a chance to talk about the game so far, and the direction it’s heading.”

Check in about taking a Rest Stop frequently, but at least once after each full round of play ends, before the next begins.

holds “Rest Stops are a great way to check in with your fellow players, but they can't always resolve issues that come up in the moment.

Holds are a tool that work to address that concern. Anyone can call for a Hold at any time to pause the fiction of the game.”

Calling a Hold might look like placing an open hand or fist in the middle of the table, sending a message that says “hold” in your group chat for an online game, or just saying “hold” out loud. You should agree on a signal that works for everyone at your table. Use Holds to ask clarifying questions, raise concerns, or check in before, during, or after potentially heavy moments.

lines and veils “Anyone can call a Hold at any time, but Lines and Veils mitigate the chance that we might need to call one. These tools help us set boundaries: **Lines** are subjects that we do not want to appear in the game at all, while **Veils** are things that can appear in the game, but that we all agree not to discuss in extensive detail.”

It may help to write these topics down in two separate lists. If you can't think of any Lines or Veils at this point, don't worry — you can always bring them up later.

setting the tone

Show this page to your fellow players and read:

“The first part of creating our city is establishing its tone: the color and texture of the setting we want to explore. As a table, let’s decide on three adjectives that will set the mood of our city. We should pick at least one from the list below, but we don’t have to limit ourselves to these options.”

ageless	ethereal	loud	sprawling
airy	faded	magnetic	sturdy
boastful	fickle	melodious	tense
bright	frigid	narrow	tidy
brittle	grand	ornate	tranquil
cluttered	gritty	patient	vast
cramped	heavy	precise	vivid
crisp	hungry	raw	volatile
dark	hollow	ruthless	warm
dynamic	idle	soft	wayward
eclectic	jagged	spare	wry
eerie	kinetic	spirited	yawning

Once you have settled on three adjectives, write them on a blank index card, and place this card at the center of the table where everyone can see it.

“We use these words to start a brief conversation about our city. Let’s come up with a big-picture idea: is it modern, riffing on a city that we are all familiar with? Is it set in the past, or in a strange, speculative future? Do ghosts exist? Do robots? Do talking animals?”

Keep this discussion about tone and genre brief. Advocate for your own interests, but pay attention to what excites your fellow players. Paint with broad brushstrokes and don’t fill in too many details. Give yourselves room to be surprised and delighted as the game unfolds.

Talking about tone and genre is also a great opportunity to bring Lines and Veils into the conversation. Some players may want to grapple with issues and policies that impact real-world cities, such as gentrification or crime; others may prefer to use this game as a chance to escape these issues.

Make sure everyone playing is on the same page about content that might arise in your game. Fostering a culture of support at the table is more important than any single person’s ideas.

laying the foundations

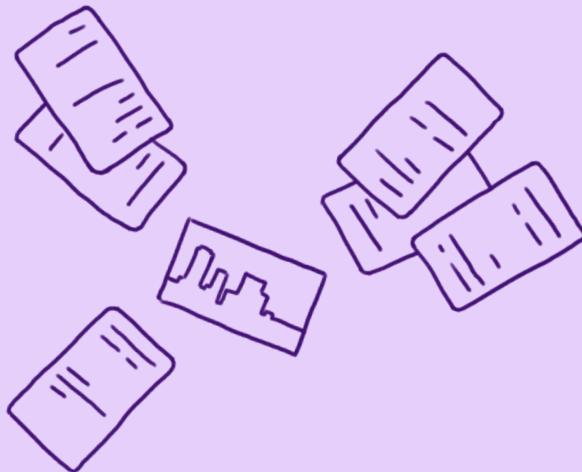
Once you have set the tone of the city, you are ready to move on to the next step. Before you really start exploring the city, you will begin by adding just a few cards to the table to spark everyone's imaginations.

If one player is facilitating the game, they should lead; otherwise, the player who most recently rode public transit should go first. Turn to the section on **exploring a Neighborhood (pg. 22)** and follow the instructions.

Explain your thoughts to the table as you do: how is this particular Neighborhood essential to the city's existence? What makes it different from other parts of the city?

Walk through the process of creating a Neighborhood's **true name** — make sure that everyone has a grasp on it!

Once you have created this Neighborhood, introduce to your fellow players in broad strokes the idea of **visiting a Landmark (pg. 24)**, pointing out the close relationship between a Landmark and the Neighborhood in which it is nested. When you are done, play moves clockwise; during this first pass around the table, every player should add either a Neighborhood or a Landmark to the city.



what the table might look like after laying your foundations

naming the city

You might have noticed that the rules have not asked you to name the city yet. This is intentional! If, after you lay the foundations, you feel you know the city well enough to name it, take a moment to agree on a name and write it on the central index card above the three adjectives.

If you don't yet have a name for your city, don't worry! Let it arise organically during play. Don't try to force it, but be sure to name your city before the end of the game.



playing
the game

rounds of play

The basic overview of a round of *i'm sorry did you say street magic* is as follows:

To begin, one player **declares the Compass** (pg. 19), the theme or subject of exploration for this round of gameplay. This helps set the tone for the round.

That player **wanders the city** (pg. 20), adding a new card — a Neighborhood, Landmark, or Resident — to the table. This card reflects the Compass in some way.

Moving clockwise around the table, each player takes a turn wandering the city, adding a new card of their own to the table.

Finally, the player who declared the Compass **holds an Event** (pg. 29) to close out the round. During an Event, each player takes on a voice of the city and offers a perspective on the way the city changes around them.

Once the Event is finished, the round is over. Players should take a Rest Stop to check in with each other. When everyone is ready to continue, the next player declares a Compass, starting a new round.

declaring the compass

After you have laid the foundation, read out the following:

“Cities are dense, packed with stories stacked atop each other. In order to give each round focus, one player chooses a **Compass** to keep the story moving in the same thematic direction — at least until the next round.”

Anything can be a Compass! A Neighborhood, a Landmark, a Resident, an institution, a lineage, an object, a broad theme or concept: as big or as small as you want. A Compass can be an idea that already exists in play, or something that you make up right on the spot.

For the first few Compasses of the game, consider building off of ideas that your fellow players have already expressed excitement in, especially ideas not already explored during the foundation.

Keep a running list of each round’s Compass and which player chose it, so that everyone can look back at it as your city unfolds. If a player wants to revisit a Compass that was already examined, they can always pick the same one again, or pick a similar Compass that examines that aspect of the city from a slightly different angle.

wandering the city

Starting with the player who declared the Compass, every player takes a turn adding a new card to the city. During this part of a round, a player can do one of the following:

Explore a Neighborhood (pg. 22): The broadest of the three categories of cards, Neighborhoods bump up against each other. They contain all other cards within the game.

Visit a Landmark (pg. 24): Landmarks are unique features and places within the city. Each Landmark is nested within a Neighborhood.

Meet a Resident (pg. 26): Residents are the inhabitants of the city, who fill it with vivid and colorful life. A Resident is always associated with a Landmark.

Every card played during the “wandering the city” phase should have a clear thematic connection to the Compass. If you’re unsure whether your idea fits the interpretation of the Compass, just ask!



exploring a neighborhood

Neighborhoods are the broadest, most overarching type of cards that you can play to build your city.

To explore a new Neighborhood, take a blank index card and write an “N” in the top left corner. Give it the following three key elements: a title, a reputation, and a true name.

A title: This is what denizens of the city call this Neighborhood on a daily basis. It could be named after the local geography, the history of its Residents, or the types of business that are conducted there, to name just a few examples. Write this at the top of the card.

A reputation: In a couple of sentences, describe out loud the Neighborhood's general vibe. Is it predominantly residential or commercial? How do its Residents think of themselves? What do *other* Neighborhoods think of them? Invite other players to ask questions, and build on their answers. Write a quick summary near the middle of the card, right below the title. Keep the reputation brief! What you say out loud is more important than what you jot down; just note a few words to jog your memory.

A true name: Every Neighborhood has a magic all its own. To confer a true name, come up with two or three descriptive, sensory images that paint a clear picture of the Neighborhood in your mind. Write these at the bottom of the card.

True names can be tactile details of the space, but they can just as easily be metaphorical or symbolic abstractions, intended to elicit an idea or personality more than a literal representation.

Think poetically and play to the senses when coming up with true names. Dizzying mirror-glass windows, cobblestone boulevards, a funicular railway, sidewalk patios, burnt coffee, painted fingers, a forever sunset, hushed secrets, an abandoned dream: any of these could be facets of a true name.

A Neighborhood's reputation might be what people think of it, but a Neighborhood's true name is what makes it unforgettable.



visiting a landmark

Landmarks are the second-highest tier of cards that you can play to build your city. They must be played within a pre-existing Neighborhood card. A Neighborhood can, and often will, contain multiple Landmarks.

To visit a new Landmark, take a blank index card and write an "L" in the top left corner. Give it the following three key elements: a title, an address, and a true name.

A title: Just like a Neighborhood, each Landmark should have a common name that people call it in their day-to-day lives.

Write this at the top of the card.



An address: If it feels appropriate, this can be a literal address — after all, street names are another tool to reveal details about the world — but it could also be something more poetic. Is it in the heart of the Neighborhood, or off the beaten path? Is it several stories up, or perhaps below street level? Write this Landmark's address under the title, near the middle of the card.

A true name: Similar to a Neighborhood, each Landmark has its own true name. However, this should be even more specific than the true name for your Neighborhood. How does this Landmark exist within the Neighborhood it is being placed inside — does this Landmark match the Neighborhood's style, or push against it? What makes it unique? What makes it irreplaceable? What can you touch, smell, or taste? Imagine the Landmark as you consider these questions, and let its true name reflect your answers.

When you are finished, place the Landmark so that one corner rests on top of its corresponding Neighborhood card. Be sure not to cover up any of the important information on any cards and make sure that everyone can read the text. The next player then begins their turn.

meeting a resident

Residents are the individual characters and people who inhabit the city, and are nested inside of Landmark cards. A Landmark can contain multiple Residents.

To meet a new Resident, take a blank index card and write an "R" in the top left corner.

Like Neighborhoods and Landmarks, each Resident needs a **title**, a common name known to all. Let a Resident's title inform their personality, and vice versa. Write their title at the top of the card, and write their **pronouns** next to that.

Describe this Resident briefly to the table! If they have a noteworthy profession or other important qualities, feel free to write that information down, but don't spend too much time writing: just use a few words. What you say aloud is more important than what you write.

Like Neighborhoods and Landmarks, every Resident also needs a **true name**. Unlike Neighborhoods and Landmarks, however, a Resident's true name is established through collaboration during a vignette: a short scene in which all players participate.



framing a vignette

A vignette is a brief glimpse into a Resident's daily life. To begin a vignette, the current player decides where the scene takes place.

The location should be connected in some way to the Landmark where the Resident is nested — when in doubt, setting the vignette at the Landmark itself is always a safe bet.

The current player embodies the Resident. Other players play various aspects of the setting: the weather, music, local flora and fauna, sights, smells, tastes, the passage of time, or other characters in the scene.

The player embodying the Resident may make broad scene requests of their co-players, e.g., “Could someone play one of my family members?”, or “Let’s frame this as a montage of my regular customers,” or “I’d like this to be a solo scene! Please only be abstract elements of the space.”

The current player begins by describing the Resident’s interior thoughts and actions; other players respond, freeform, engaging in loose and improvised conversation. Describe sensory details, as well as the Resident’s desires, beliefs, and appearance. Feel free to speak both in and out of character: narrate the character’s actions, or say things they would say in their own voice.

A vignette should portray the Resident in their element: this is a snapshot of a moment when this character is truly, unequivocally themselves. Spotlight their strengths, skills, and shortcomings. What unique spark does this Resident bring to the city that nobody else can offer?

The scene is over when the current player knows the Resident’s true name in its entirety. Write the facets of their true name on the card, and place the card so that it rests partially on top of its corresponding Landmark card. The next player then begins their turn.

holding an event

After everyone has wandered the city during the current round, the player who first declared the Compass finishes the round by creating an **Event** that changes or alters the city in some way.

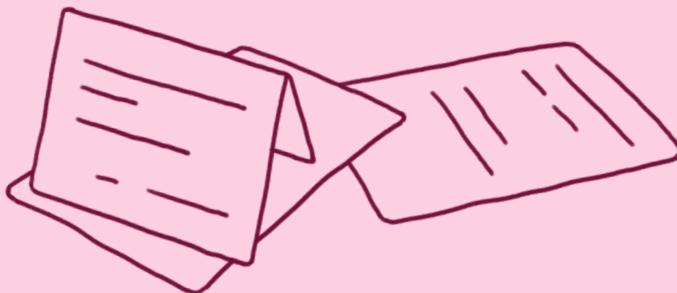
Your Event should be related to the Compass that you set at the beginning of the round, or to a card that was played during the round. Events are a good way to tie up loose ends on questions that arose during a round. However, an Event can also be a chance to highlight an aspect of the Compass that was unexplored, or to recontextualize other elements of the city that were discovered during play.

An Event is always connected to a Neighborhood, Landmark, or Resident. On your turn, describe the Event in a sentence or two, then choose the one card on the table that it most closely relates to. Something has changed within the community: what is it? If it isn't already clear, explain how this Event serves as a connecting point between the card you have chosen and the Compass currently in play.

Take a new index card and fold it in half vertically, tented upright. Write a quick summary of the Event on one side. Place the Event card tented upright on the card it is connected to.

An Event might affect multiple Residents, Landmarks, or even multiple Neighborhoods; however, choose the one card in play that best corresponds to the Event. If you're having trouble deciding, try to localize your focus: even if a festival spans the entire city, consider examining its impact on a single Neighborhood, or a specific Landmark.

Place the Event tented upright on top of the card it is connected to.



an Event card tented in play

voices of the city

Each player gets a chance to respond to the Event by taking on a **voice of the city**. In doing so, the players are *not* embodying specific Residents, but rather the myriad perspectives and viewpoints of the community, especially members of the city who may be impacted by the Event.

Once the person who chose the compass has created the Event, start with the player to their left and move clockwise around the table. As a voice of the city, each player does one of the three following actions:

Ask a question about the origins, implications, or repercussions of the Event. This question is always rhetorical; let it hang in the air.

State an opinion, in one or two sentences, that some members of the community hold toward the Event.

Show a consequence, in a sentence or two, of people in the city reacting to the Event. A consequence can be about a specific Resident, or more abstractly about the community at large.

altering the city

Events change the city around them. At any point during the Event phase, the player who declared the Event may select a card or cards on the table that they feel have been changed by the circumstances of the Event, and reflect those changes on that corresponding cards. This could take the shape of rewriting a Landmark's address or a Neighborhood's reputation, moving a Resident from one Landmark to another, or altering a card's true name or title.

This adjustment might take place multiple times during an Event, but it should always happen at least once. Anybody is free to suggest adjustments, but the player who declared the Event has final say on what stays and what changes.

When changing the city, **never destroy or completely remove a card from play**. Even if a Landmark is destroyed or a Resident moves away, these parts of the city still exist in ripples: in their legacies and in the memories of the city's other inhabitants.

completing an event

The player who declared the Event is the last player to take on a voice of the city; in this way, they have the last word on the Event, as well as this round's Compass.

Events are never monolithic, and no single perspective has all the facts. After the leading player takes on the final voice of the city, they should end the Event phase by writing a second perspective on the back of the tented card (or directly underneath the first perspective, for an online game). The Event's other side should complicate it: add a new point of view that came up during the conversation, or one that was previously unconsidered.

Note that the completion of an Event phase in the game does not necessarily mean that the Event is over within the fiction of the city; it might still have ongoing consequences for the story.

After the Event is finished, the round is over. Take a quick Rest Stop; check in with your fellow players about how you all are feeling, and about the direction of the game so far. When everyone is ready to start another round of play, the next player declares a new Compass, and the next round begins.

a helpful reference sheet

Begin by discussing support tools (Rest Stops, Holds, Lines and Veils, any other tools you wish to use).

Set the tone: What three adjectives describe the city we want to explore? What genres or settings interest us?

Laying the foundations: Every player adds one card to the table, either a Neighborhood or a Landmark. There is no Compass during the foundation round.

every round...

Declare the Compass: One player chooses an aspect of the city to explore and investigate.

Wander the City: Moving clockwise around the table, each player takes a turn adding a card to the city.

Neighborhoods have a title, a reputation, and a true name, all chosen by one player.

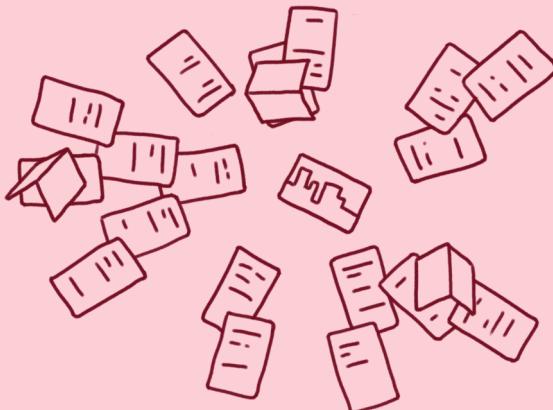
Landmarks have a title, an address, and a true name, all chosen by one player.

Residents have a title and pronouns chosen by one player, and a true name created communally.

Hold an Event: Finish the round by showing how the city changes! Whoever declared the Compass declares the Event. Starting with the player to their left, every player takes on a **voice of the city** and either **asks a question**, **states an opinion**, or **shows a consequence**.

Remember to **alter the city** during the Event. Change the text or placement of cards to reflect how the city evolves. The player who declared the Event has the last word, and closes out the round.

When you are done, take a Rest Stop and check in with each other, then move onto the next round!



what the city might look like after multiple rounds

ending a session

Once the table feels ready to wind down a session of *i'm sorry did you say street magic*, you should play one final round to finish the game.

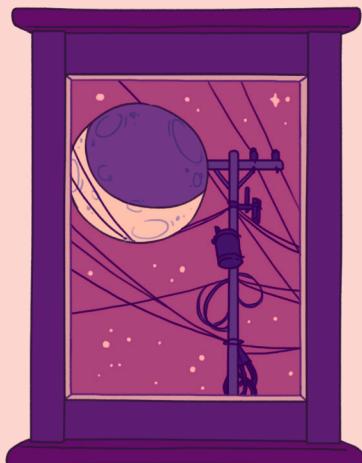
Before you begin this final round, check in with each other: what questions are still unanswered? What aspects of the city do you still want to see more of? Look at the list of Compasses you have explored so far, and the Events that are currently placed on the table.

If everyone is gravitating toward one particular theme or idea, consider selecting that to be the final Compass; otherwise, let the final round of play be a free-for-all, without a specific Compass.

Play travels around the table clockwise, as in a typical round. During the final round, players may opt to create a Neighborhood, Landmark, or Resident as normal. However, since no player chose a Compass, **any player may instead create an Event for their final turn if they so choose**.

If an Event is played during the final round, only the player who created that Event takes on a voice of the city. Keep it brief, since there might be multiple Events in this final round. Events played during the final round can resolve unanswered questions, but they can also be used to introduce last-minute complications or mysteries.

After the final player takes their turn, the session is over. Take time to debrief with your table. Go around the table and highlight aspects of the session that you enjoyed, and contributions from your fellow players that delighted or surprised you. Thank everyone for their time!





tips, advice, & miscellany

good practices

Here are a few tips that you may find helpful while playing a session of *i'm sorry did you say street magic*. These are not hard and fast rules, but just suggestions to keep in the back of your mind.

Take turns and make space: *street magic* works best when each player brings their own unique ideas to the table. Ask for suggestions if you need them, but trust your fellow players to finish their own ideas and to surprise you with their choices. Leave room for quieter players to contribute; if you see someone stepping on another player's idea or trying to steer them, gently remind them that they'll get the chance to guide the conversation on their own turn.

Use safety tools often: If anyone says or does anything that makes you or another player feel uncomfortable, you should always feel like you can advocate for your well-being, even if that means calling a Hold or stepping away from the game. This goes for other players just as much as for yourself; look out for each other as best you can.

The table is not geography:

You might feel an urge during play to declare that one direction on the table is "north", or to say that two Landmarks should border each other because their cards are next to each other. Challenge that impulse! Your world is not a scale map. Lean into the joyful chaos of a table strewn with cards.



Use the Compass to set your own agenda: Declaring the Compass has a lot of influence! A narrow Compass will crystallize a specific aspect or area of the city; a broad Compass offers your co-players lots of freedom to explore. Ask questions whose answers you want to learn, even if you're not certain where they will lead you. You can always find out during play.

Think big: When it's your turn, you have full control over what you can add. As long as your idea fits the tone that you established with the table at the top of the game and fits the Compass for the current round, grant yourself permission to envision brilliant and fantastic places.

Think simple: That being said, there is also beauty in going with an obvious choice. Even if a Neighborhood or a Landmark seems straightforward or simple to you, it may set the stage for a compelling Resident or Event later. Every new card is the foundation for a future opportunity.



Look to your nesting cards for guidance: When creating a Resident, consider how they relate to the Landmark they are placed in; with a Landmark, consider its Neighborhood; with a Neighborhood, consider the three adjectives you chose at the start of the game. What can you tell about a new card based on the true names that surround it? How does the new card you are creating reinforce what has come before it? How does it push against that?

Fill your city with a plethora of stories: Examine aspects of the city that really excite you, but make sure you're not limiting your scope! If you find yourselves getting drawn toward a single resident, storyline, or group of characters, step back and explore other facets of the city. Show multiple viewpoints for every moment. A session of *i'm sorry did you say street magic* has no protagonist beyond the city itself.

Think beyond the biases of the real world: Use this game to imagine and dream beyond real-world limits of race, gender, or class. Challenge yourself and your fellow players to create a vibrant and colorful city that reflects the diversity of the world you want to see.

making the city your own

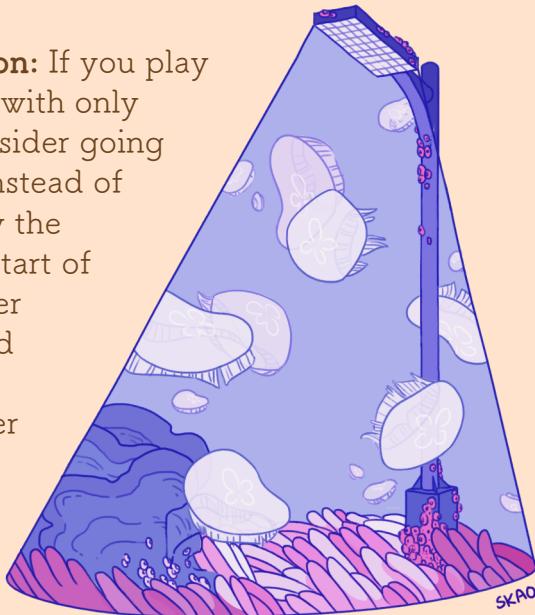
This section includes a few variant rules that you can incorporate into your game of *i'm sorry did you say street magic*. These suggestions are all optional: consider mixing and matching them to find what works best for the play styles at your table!

dictated residents: If you want to speed up your gameplay, consider dictated vignettes for your Residents. Instead of a scene in which every player participates, only the player who creates the Resident narrates the short vignette.

Dictated vignettes keep the game moving quickly. They should still offer the same glimpse into a character's life as a collaboratively created Resident does: what does this character look like in their element? As with collaborative vignettes, a dictated vignette ends when the leading player knows the Resident's true name in its entirety.

On the other hand, if you want a longer game, apply Resident creation rules to Neighborhoods and Landmarks: hold a collaborative vignette for each card added during play, and discover each true name as a table.

double-length foundation: If you play a session of *street magic* with only two or three people, consider going around the table twice instead of only once. When you lay the city's foundation at the start of the game, let every player create one Neighborhood and one Landmark each. This will give you a wider range of cards to build from during your first few rounds of play.



You could also extend this to gameplay during rounds: if you want to really delve into a certain Compass, consider going around the table two times during a round, instead of only once. Just make sure that every player gets to wander the city the same number of times, and that the same person who declared the Compass at the start of the round is the one who closes out the round with an Event.

multi-session playthroughs: If you want to revisit a city you've already explored, store the cards in a way that you can set them out again easily later. Nest all your Residents underneath their corresponding Landmarks, and each Landmark underneath its corresponding Neighborhood. Event cards can be folded over the card they correspond to. The next time you play, simply pull out the deck and rearrange it on the table. Don't worry about getting the exact placement of the cards the same, as long as they're nested correctly.

If you decide to revisit a city, but you want to explore it through fresh eyes, consider laying out only a few of the city's Neighborhoods and a couple of their Landmarks. Set the remaining cards aside, and explore other facets of the city. What does a familiar Neighborhood look like when reinterpreted through another character's eyes?

If you plan to play another session of *i'm sorry did you say street magic* in the same city, it's best to play with the same people, without bringing in new players or excluding old ones. This reduces the chances that someone may suggest an idea that contradicts the already-established rules of the world.

campaign play: *i'm sorry did you say street magic* works well as a standalone one-shot game, but you can also integrate it into a long-form tabletop campaign! If you are a game master who wants to run a campaign set mostly in one setting, consider playing *street magic* with your table as a “session zero” game to help set the tone and palette of the world where your subsequent sessions will take place. If you are playing a game where your players travel to a lot of new and different towns, *street magic* works well as an interlude in between longer missions, to prepare for your next arc of play.

As a game master, playing a game of *street magic* is also a great way to lighten your workload and session prep, and to help your players feel invested in the fiction of your setting. You can easily turn *street magic* Landmarks into locations for your players to visit, or pull familiar Residents into the story as non-player characters for them to interact with. Consider asking your players to add details to places they originally suggested, or even to embody Residents that they introduced!

When everyone at your table feels like they helped create the world, they all feel even more invested in its stakes.

afterword

i'm sorry did you say street magic is a game of exploration, but not of cartography. The following section is included as an appendix to this game intended to highlight some distinctions between these two ideas, and to articulate the importance of the true name as a meaning-making tool.

the limits of mapmaking

Maps are inherently reductive. The purpose of a map is to indicate and to signal valuable information: resources, shelter, threats. The map pares the world down only to the things that the cartographer deems important. The Borges adage springs to mind: a perfect map is useless, because a perfect map would be an exact replica; in other words, the most accurate map is the world itself.

The first line of a map immediately bounds the rest of the world: how do we draw this river? How large do we make the arts district? How big is the apartment relative to its neighbors, relative to the street, relative to the paper upon which it is drafted? A scale map limits the world to flat cartography, and in doing so, primes its reader to view the world solely through a spatial lens.

Rather than abstracting the city through spatial borders, street magic performs this abstraction through the poetic and sensory images of the city's true names. The city is defined not through walls, but through words. There are no cartographic borders, only social ones — and the only social borders present are ones that have emerged in play, which holds the players complicit in the act of division.

a liminal cartography

One of the first things I like to tell my players when introducing them to *street magic* is a tenet that I include in the "Good Practices" section of the game: the table is not geography. Players should not feel bounded by direction, nor should they let the placement of the cards on the table determine their relationships to each other: two Neighborhoods may be on completely opposite sides of the table but exist only a block apart in the city. Two Residents might be nested within the same Landmark, but never meet each other in their entire lives.

In this way, a game of *i'm sorry did you say street magic* is still technically a mapmaking game. The map created in play still indicates value, but instead of valuing distance and resources, the city is mapped through personal meaning and intimacy embodied by the true name.

the mutability of true names

Consider a game that asks you to map out a coffee shop. One might, arbitrarily, describe the coffee shop as the first floor of a building with a trapezoidal footprint, across the street from a bank, with a three-story walkup above it. These details about the space are fixed, set in stone.

But in coming up with the true name of that coffee shop, it might be: *early morning silence, the cheapest espresso on the block, that barista with tacky taste in music.*

To another person, that very same coffeeshop could also be: *pastel tiles, an eclectic mix of chairs and sofas, porch-light rumors, idle gossip with a friend on the phone.*

And to yet another person, that coffeeshop could also be: *scones with too much cinnamon sugar, rustling newspaper, elegant latte art.*

True names are details, same as the trapezoidal footprint or the three-story walkup, but they are flexible: every place has its own magic, but it takes people to imbue that place with magic to begin with. Every landmark, every resident in your game, holds some sort of importance to someone else. This is true both within the fiction, and outside of it;

the players inherently bestow relevance upon a facet of the city through its creation. By introducing a card to the table, it automatically becomes important.

build the world, not the map

External forces in our society — capitalism, colonialism, and countless other prejudices — drive us to divide the world along boundaries. In creating borders, these systems of oppression push us to protect what we believe to be our own territory at the expense of those who surround us.

Both as players of this game, and as residents of the world, I challenge you to recognize this kind of spatialized thinking in your daily life. Acknowledge that these biases are implicit and ingrained, and acknowledge that our perspectives are limited by our histories.

The meaning that we ascribe to a place is not monolithic. Every person we meet contains a multitude of reflected pasts. Nothing is one thing only, cities least of all.

a note on indigeneity

It would be gross negligence on my part to write about nontraditional spatialized thought and the history of colonialism in maps and borders without acknowledging an Indigenous perspective on relationships to land.

i'm sorry did you say street magic is not a game that is necessarily tied to the place where it is played, but it is a game about the wonder and beauty of the physical world. As a designer living on unceded land, a byproduct of immigration and settler colonialism, I think it is important to confront the context in which this game was made and in which it will be played.

If you are playing this game on stolen land, hold a few moments at the start of your session to acknowledge the legacy of the Indigenous communities who did, and who still do, reside on the land where you have gathered. Beyond acknowledgement, consider making a donation to your local Native community. This could be your time, your voice, goods, money, or other requested help.

To look up Indigenous communities near you, or to learn more about land acknowledgement, visit native-land.ca.

touchstones and inspirations

i'm sorry did you say street magic was originally conceived as a hack of *Microscope*, a game by Ben Robbins.

games

Alone in the Ancient City and *How to Build a Place You Love* by Takuma Okada

Yarnspinner by Eaves Mendes

The Quiet Year by Avery Alder

books & visual art

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino

The City Born Great by N. K. Jemisin

I Love This Part by Tillie Walden

The illustrated works of Akane Malbeni

music & podcasts

Neon Impasse by City Girl

Bluff City by Friends at the Table

attribution and thanks

i'm sorry did you say street magic was written and designed by Caro Asercion. Find more of their work online at seaexcursion.itch.io, or on twitter at [@SeaExcursion](https://twitter.com/SeaExcursion).

The illustrations in this game are from *You Can't Get There From Here*, a zine by Shannon Kao. Images used and edited with permission.

i'm sorry did you say street magic was edited by Kai Gee, with sensitivity reading by Pidj Sorensen.

Layout by Caro Asercion, with additional layout consultation by Quinn Vega.

i'm sorry did you say street magic was made on the land of the Chochenyo speaking Lisjan Ohlone people. Sovereignty was never ceded to the settlers who still occupy it.

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to my friends, who taught me how to build

