

ABOUT OPFRAME

This is OPFRAME: **O**perational **P**lanning **F**ramework for **R**econnaissance **A**nd **M**ission **E**xecution. It's designed as a toolkit, template and framework to design your own FIST missions. I also go into some things I learned *about* FIST missions, that I basically 'uncovered' as I was writing this document. This bit of background/game design/philosophy helps explain why I use certain methods, and can inform your decisions to do the same, or do things entirely differently.



It's completely free to use, of course, but if you find this document inspires you, feel free to add a MADE WITH OPFRAME logo on your final creation!

DEFINING TACTICAL ESPIONAGE ACTION

Tactical Espionage Action requires a different approach than traditional dungeon crawls or combat encounters. At its heart, it's about the dynamic interplay between information and execution - a cycle of gathering intelligence, forming plans, and adapting those plans when circumstances inevitably change.

I define Tactical Espionage Action as:

A style of play where operatives must carefully manage two key resources: **INTEL** and **ASSETS**. Players gather intelligence and leverage it to turn unfavorable odds in their favor, using both careful **preparation** and quick **improvisation**. Through **calculated risks**, they work to achieve their objectives while preserving their limited **assets** - time, equipment, and ultimately their own lives. Success requires understanding not just the physical layout of a **MISSION AREA**, but its living ecosystem of security measures, personnel routines, and opportunities for exploitation.

In this way, it differs from a 'standard' elfgame dungeon crawl, which tends to focus more on **ASSETS** and **LOOT** - how much can you plunder before you die. Now, of course an elfgame does also involve gathering information, but it's not *about that*, as much. You're not going to distract an orc by cleverly weaving a

narrative about something you pieced together from the notice board in the break room and the contents of his personal locker.

In a way, that's what makes Tactical Espionage Action somewhat unique for the information age - it's about weaponizing the foe's size, bureaucracy and systems - its *banality* - against it.

Your targets aren't just monsters in a maze, but complex organizations with procedures, hierarchies, and paper trails. Victory comes not from overwhelming force, but from understanding and exploiting these systems. You don't just avoid the guard patrol - you learn the guard's name from his locker, his medical condition from the infirmary records, and his gambling debts from the personnel file, then use all of that to talk your way past him entirely. And should that fail, there's always space for ballistic negotiations.

This document isn't about ASSETS - that's what the FIST core rules are for. Instead, I'll focus on INTEL, how that maps onto physical space through ZONES, and how you can implement those elements to create exciting missions.

PREPARATION & IMPROVISATION

Every tactical espionage mission exists on a spectrum between two vital skills: **preparation** and **improvisation**. These represent different approaches to managing INTEL and ASSETS, and understanding where your mission falls on this spectrum helps both Referees and players set appropriate expectations and strategies.

PREPARATION

Preparation represents how much of the mission can be known and planned for in advance. A high-preparation mission might involve:

- A bank heist where the building's layout, security systems, and staff routines can be studied
- An ambush of a convoy whose route and schedule are known
- Infiltrating a facility with predictable guard patterns and security protocols

In these missions, thorough gathering of Strategic INTEL before the operation begins can significantly tip the odds in FIST's favor. Players can develop detailed plans, contingencies, and specific approaches because the MISSION AREA is relatively stable and "knowable."

IMPROVISATION

Improvisation, on the other hand, represents how much the mission requires thinking on your feet and adapting to unexpected circumstances. A high-improvisation mission might involve:

- Responding to a surprise attack on FIST's position
- Infiltrating a fortress-like location with an unknown interior
- Exploring an anomalous zone with unpredictable properties
- Pursuing a target through unfamiliar territory
- Dealing with a complete intelligence failure where initial assumptions prove wrong

These missions test FIST's ability to gather and leverage Tactical INTEL in real-time, making quick decisions with limited information.

In practice, most missions blend both elements. Even the most meticulously planned operation can go sideways, requiring rapid adaptation. Conversely, even highly improvisational missions benefit from whatever preparation is possible. This creates a natural mission structure where initial preparation gives way to improvisation as plans inevitably contact reality.

Referees can adjust these "dials" to create different mission experiences:

- A **high-preparation, low-improvisation** mission emphasizes careful planning and execution
 - KUNDUZ GAMBIT revolves around carefully planning an ambush - picking the site and trying to align as many factors in your favor as possible.
- A **low-preparation, high-improvisation** mission tests players' ability to think on their feet
 - KILL THE SHADOW POPE's flow is randomly generated by dice rolls, the subterranean tunnels of Rome revealing themselves as players progress.
- A **balanced** mission might start with preparation but include a mid-mission twist that forces improvisation
 - HOUSE of CARDS and NUMBERS starts with a plannable casino infiltration, but shifts into a train section and alpine chase.
 - PERFECT FORMS can be planned for, but revolves around uncovering a secret deep in the mines

Understanding where your mission falls on this spectrum helps players know how to invest their time and resources effectively - whether to focus on gathering intelligence and making detailed plans, or to maintain flexibility and preserve ASSETS for unexpected challenges.

This naturally leads us to examine how FIST operatives gather and leverage INTEL to support both preparation and improvisation - let's talk about INTEL!

INTEL

To make meaningful **preparations** and take **calculated risks**, players need **information**. I put all in-universe information under one umbrella: **INTEL**. I feel like understanding INTEL and its role in the world adds a cool new layer of gameplay, and makes a big difference in making a location feeling 'alive' as opposed to just "a collection of rooms with goons in 'em".

Just as HP, equipment and ammo indicates the overall status and well-being of the operatives, INTEL indicates their mastery and knowledge of their mission environment.

TYPES OF INTEL

There's two main categories of INTEL, based on their gameplay functions. Strategic INTEL informs planning and decision-making, while Tactical INTEL provides flexible advantages during execution.

STRATEGIC INTEL

Strategic Intelligence ("Strategic INTEL") represents concrete, actionable information that players can use to **prepare** and make **informed decisions** during mission planning and -execution. This is information that both **players** and **characters** know explicitly, like:

- Number and positions of guards
- Building layouts
- Security system details
- Key personnel schedules
- Where to go when to achieve the objective

"The blueprints show the general layout of the base, and the room with the safe is clearly marked"

"So, we know that this approach has 5 guards, and this approach only has 3, but they do have the high ground in this one. What do we do?"

Some Strategic INTEL is often part of the mission briefing. More can be acquired through [Stakeouts](#), [Recon](#) and by players asking questions during the mission itself ("How many guards do I see?").

TACTICAL INTEL

Tactical Intelligence ("Tactical INTEL") represents the **abstract knowledge** that **characters** accumulate which can be used for **improvisation** and be leveraged during mission execution. Rather than explicit details, this represents general expertise and understanding that can be called upon opportunistically, such as:

- Security protocols and procedures
- Personnel dossiers and tendencies
- Facility operations and routines
- Communication codes and methods

Tactical INTEL can be considered a sort-of meta currency; *Schrödinger's Guard Roster*. If a player has invested time and effort into reading the Guard Roster, it could allow them to (at least once) leverage that information in play. To take that one step further: If the Referee briefly mentions a guard roster hanging in a guard room, and the players decide to focus on that and put effort into distracting guards and retrieving it, it *should* give them the 'reward' of leveraging it into play.

REFEREE: "The guard at the checkpoint is giving your forged ID a suspicious look."

PLAYER: "Wait - since I studied the personnel files in the security office earlier, would I know anything about this guard's background that could help?"

REFEREE: "Actually yes - you remember his file mentioned he was recently transferred from the Jakarta office. You can strike up a conversation about Indonesia that helps sell your cover. Roll +CRE+2."

REFEREE: "The electronic lock on the server room door has a blinking red light. It seems to need both a keycard and a code."

PLAYER: "Earlier when I was going through those maintenance logs in the basement - would they have mentioned anything about these security systems?"

REFEREE: "Yes! You recall the logs mentioned these locks have a maintenance override that triggers if you swipe a card three times rapidly. No roll needed - the door clicks open."

REFEREE: "You hear radio chatter - sounds like the guards are organizing a sweep of this floor."

PLAYER: "From studying their security protocols earlier, would I know their standard search pattern?"

REFEREE: "Absolutely - you know they always clear rooms clockwise from the stairwell. That lets you stay one step ahead of them. Take +2 on your +RFX roll."

Tactical INTEL should be layered all throughout a MISSION AREA see [Tactical INTEL During Play](#) for more.

LANDMARK, HIDDEN, SECRET

As mentioned, there should be some balance between the *risk/reward* involved in obtaining INTEL. The [Landmark/Hidden/Secret](#) (LHS) framework helps Referees structure their mission's INTEL in layers of increasing effort and reward. Think of it like peeling an onion - each layer reveals more detail and grants more advantages to the players.

When preparing INTEL for a mission area, consider what information naturally falls into each category:

Landmark INTEL forms your mission's foundation - the basic facts that anyone could learn through simple observation or public knowledge. This includes:

- Visible security measures like guard posts and fences
- Public areas and entrances
- General purpose of the facility
- Official opening hours
- Known VIPs who frequent the location

This information should be freely available to players who ask, and can be worked naturally into your mission briefing or initial scene description.

Hidden INTEL represents the layer that requires some active investigation but isn't heavily restricted. Players might discover this through:

- Talking to locals or employees
- Basic surveillance
- Public records research
- Careful observation of patterns
- Light social engineering

Hidden INTEL often provides the context needed to form initial plans and identify promising angles of approach. A casual conversation with a janitor might reveal when cleaning crews come and go, while watching the parking lot could show when security shifts change.

Secret INTEL is your deepest layer - information that would be actively protected and requires significant effort or risk to obtain. This includes:

- Security system specifications
- Personnel files
- Emergency protocols
- Command structure details
- Vault combinations
- Building blueprints

When players manage to obtain Secret INTEL, it should provide substantial advantages - perhaps even allowing them to bypass certain challenges entirely. The guard roster stolen from a locked office might let them perfectly mimic shift change procedures, while stolen blueprints could reveal a maintenance tunnel that bypasses all security.

Remember that these categories aren't rigid - they're tools to help you create satisfying layers of discovery. The same piece of information might be Landmark INTEL in one mission (the security company's name displayed prominently on the building) but Secret INTEL in another (a classified contract revealing which agency really provides security).

Consider using this framework when designing both Strategic and Tactical INTEL opportunities. A facility's layout might be Landmark (visible from outside), Hidden (requires getting inside), or Secret (full blueprints in a locked office) - each layer providing progressively more detailed Strategic INTEL for planning. Similarly, guard procedures might range from Landmark (visible patrol routes) to Hidden (shift change times) to Secret (emergency response protocols), offering increasingly valuable Tactical INTEL.

STAKEOUT

A **STAKEOUT** is a **thorough gathering** of both **Strategic INTEL** and **Tactical INTEL** for most of, if not the entire, MISSION AREA. A STAKEOUT takes time (probably at least a day), and is done from relative safety/anonymity (whereas **RECON** is done on-the-fly, while already in the MISSION AREA).

CONSTRAINTS & CONDITIONS

- **Time Limit:** Define a clear timeframe for the stakeout to prevent indefinite surveillance. This could be due to an impending event or the risk of detection increasing over time (X-in-6 chance of getting detected during stakeout, X being the amount of Stakeout Turns taken so far.) On the flip side, a stakeout requires time - at least a day or so. If FIST *must* move in within the next hour, use the **RECON** rules instead.
- **Access:** There must be some level of public access to some ZONES of the mission area; off-duty staff to bribe or charm, plausible reasons to be in the area. You're not going to stake out Guantanamo Bay.

- **Stakeout Turns:** Divide the available time into discrete turns (e.g., three per day) during which players can perform Stakeout Actions.

DEFINE STAKEOUT CATEGORIES AND LEVELS

The following list serves two purposes:

1. It helps the Referee with considering all the elements of a MISSION AREA. Not every MISSION AREA has each category listed below.
2. It helps players with choosing their own approach. Players are aware of the categories and levels - they know that "Layout" is a factor they can research, and they know that at the 3rd level, they will know about vents and load-bearing walls.

CATEGORY	LEVELS
PERSONNEL	1. Raw numbers and basic categories (how many guards, how many civilians)
	2. Distribution (which floors), equipment, general capabilities (rookies, capable, veteran)
	3. Individual details, patterns, weaknesses
LAYOUT	1. Basic floorplan of publicly accessible areas, main entrance/exit points
	2. Full labeled floorplan, secondary routes, restricted areas, security checkpoints
	3. Detailed infrastructure (vents, maintenance tunnels, load-bearing walls)
ROUTINES	1. Opening/closing times, shift changes
	2. Regular deliveries, maintenance visits, client patterns
	3. Individual schedules, break patterns, inspection routines
SECURITY SYSTEMS	1. Visible measures (cameras, guards, locks)
	2. System types and coverage (alarm types, backup power)
	3. Detailed specs (bypass codes, blind spots, response protocols)
COMMAND STRUCTURE	1. Basic hierarchy (who's in charge)
	2. Communication channels and chains of command
	3. Personal relationships, rivalries, loyalties
LOGISTICS	1. Basic supply lines (what comes in/out)
	2. Storage locations, inventory systems
	3. Specific suppliers, schedules, quantities
COMMUNICATIONS	1. Primary channels (radio, phone)
	2. Frequencies, protocols, backup systems

CATEGORY	LEVELS
	3. Code words, specific procedures, individual tendencies
EMERGENCY PROCEDURES	1. Basic evacuation routes
	2. Response protocols for different threats
	3. Individual responsibilities, rally points, contingency plans

CONDUCTING STAKEOUT ACTIONS

During each turn, players choose an **stakeout category** to investigate. Multiple players focusing on the same category can improve the chances of success.

When you perform a stakeout or investigation into a target location, roll

+ATTRIBUTE

6 OR BELOW (FAILURE): The stakeout failed and the next stakeout roll gets a -1. If this happens 3 times, the place goes into high alert/lockdown.

7 TO 9 (PARTIAL SUCCESS): The stakeout succeeds (no punishment, as this already took time. This method is more about player choice and -strategy than random chance).

10 OR ABOVE (SUCCESS): The stakeout succeeds, and the next Level is revealed as well.

RECON

RECON is the quick gathering of **Strategic INTEL** and **Tactical INTEL** to overcome a particular challenge or hazard. Imagine this as follows:

The target HQ BUILDING lays beyond a tent encampment patrolled by US Marines. FIST is currently on a hilltop, laying in the tall grass, observing the camp with binoculars.

The tent encampment isn't the 'main attraction' of this mission; it's meant as an interesting little obstacle on the way to the HQ BUILDING. Therefore, actually mapping out all the guard routes and -patterns (as in, the Referee actually preparing all of that, each guard accounted for) feels excessive.

Instead, the Referee wants to run it as a few brief 'vignettes' as the players move through the camp, assigning Risk Levels on the fly. However, the Referee also wants to 'award' FIST's position of preparation and observation, which is where the roll below comes in.

RECON is quicker, and mostly yield

When you observe a ZONE's security for ~30 minutes, roll **+TAC**




6 OR BELOW (FAILURE): No useful intelligence gained.

7 TO 9 (PARTIAL SUCCESS): Gain 1 BOON (see below), but with a complication; misread timing of patrol route, overlooked a camera etc.

10 OR ABOVE (SUCCESS): Gain 2x BOON: During the infiltration of this ZONE, players can indicate how their preparation grants them a benefit. This benefit can add an extra 1D6 to a roll (using the highest 2 dice for the result), or lower the RISK LEVEL of an action, depending on what makes sense in fiction.

TACTICAL INTEL DURING PLAY

When designing rooms and locations, consider what Tactical INTEL might be present beyond the obvious physical contents. Just as you'd note furniture, guards, and valuable items, think about what information players might discover. Tactical INTEL generally falls into three categories, each offering different opportunities for player creativity:

-  **Personnel Intel** reveals the human element of a location - who works there, their roles, and their relationships. A break room might contain a duty roster pinned to a bulletin board, while a supervisor's office could hold personnel files detailing which guards have gambling debts or medical issues. Even a simple magazine left on a desk can hint at someone's interests or vulnerabilities.
-  **Technical Intel** exposes the mechanical and systemic aspects of a facility. A janitor's closet might house maintenance logs showing which security cameras frequently malfunction, while an IT office could contain network diagrams perfect for planning cyber-intrusions. Even a stack of repair invoices can reveal which equipment breaks down most often.
-  **Operational Intel** illuminates how the facility actually functions day-to-day. A security desk might have a manual of standard procedures, while a dispatch office could reveal delivery schedules and approved vendors. Even a simple shift change checklist can expose exploitable patterns.

The real power of Tactical INTEL emerges when players can **combine** different types. Consider this example:

Players find a maintenance schedule (**Operational**) showing when a particular guard (**Personnel**) checks the backup generators (**Technical**). This creates a perfect opportunity for infiltration - they know who will be there, what they're supposed to be doing, and how the equipment works. Each piece alone is useful, but together they enable much more sophisticated plans.

When designing a location, try to include at least one piece of each type of Tactical Intel. This gives players multiple angles to approach problems and rewards thorough exploration. However, remember that the specific details don't need to be predetermined - let the players' creativity guide what exactly they discover in those personnel files or maintenance logs when the moment arrives.

In this office, you find not just the typical desk and filing cabinets, but also a wall calendar marked with security inspection dates (Operational), a employee performance review folder (Personnel), and a manual for the facility's state-of-the-art security system (Technical). What would you like to investigate first?

ZONES

A **MISSION AREA** is divided into ZONES. Zones are interconnected areas, and defined by their actual contents (physical boundaries, architecture, lay-out) and by their function and security status.

A ZONE is a distinct section of a larger area with its own security ecosystem; a MILITARY BASE might have the zones MAIN GATE, BARRACKS, WAREHOUSES, TANK YARD and HQ BUILDING.

Imagine a fancy party in a manor. FIST must obtain a briefcase that will exchange hands between two VIPs. Zones might be the Gardens, the Grand Hall, the Kitchen/Staff Areas and the Upper Floor (VIP area).

The cool thing is, we can use the [LHS framework](#) for ZONES as well:

ACCESS

PUBLIC

- Open to everyone, no immediate risks.
- Examples: Hotel lobbies, main streets, festival grounds.
- Potential actions: Gathering information, stealing disguises, blending in.

MONITORED

- Require some effort to enter (disguise, invitation, stealth).
- Examples: Staff areas, security rooms, VIP lounges.
- Consequences of discovery: Arrest, removal, or being tailed.

RESTRICTED

- High-risk areas requiring significant effort to infiltrate.
- Examples: Vaults, private apartments, security hubs.
- Consequences of discovery: Immediate violence or death.

Note

A good start for defining a mission area is to think about its ZONES, and their level of access. A military base would be all RESTRICTED, all the time, and would have quite different dynamics from a mission area which features PUBLIC, MONITORED and RESTRICTED zones in combination.

To help players plot a bit more, implement **Quiet Spots** where individuals are likely to be isolated, ripe for ambush:

- *Public Quiet Spots*: Restrooms, wardrobes, parking lots.
- *Monitored Quiet Spots*: Supply closets, storage rooms, empty offices.
- *Restricted Quiet Spots*: Private office, personal penthouse, grand balcony.

Various NPCs have **loops** that move between various zones, for instance:

- Guests to a fancy party move between **Grand Hall** (Public) and the **Gardens** (Public Quiet).
- Serving Staff moves between the **Grand Hall**, **Kitchens** (Monitored), **Supply Closet** (Monitored Quiet) and **VIP Lounge** (Restricted).

RESTRICTED ZONES & GETTING SPOTTED

For **ZONES** that are clearly shoot-on-sight, the following framework fleshes out stealth mechanics, to help Referees with their rulings, and players with making informed decisions and taking risks.

The following system is designed to reflect the actions of a single or just a few guards at a time - it's not about base-wide alerts, it's the poor guy standing watch who hears a strange noise and isn't sure whether to go check it out.

The stealth framework operates on three key elements: **RISK LEVELS**, **GUARD REACTIONS**, and **ZONES**. When players attempt any covert action, first determine its Risk Level, then use the outcome of their roll to determine if and how guards react. These reactions can escalate over time, creating dynamic stealth gameplay.

Every covert action falls into one of three RISK LEVELS, which determine the potential consequences. Note that RISK LEVELS do not equate to the entire base; it's purely about nearby guards in a particular ZONE.

LOW RISK

Inherently quiet and careful actions (picking locks, sneaking past sleeping or distracted guards).

When attempting a LOW RISK covert action, roll **+ATTRIBUTE**

6 OR BELOW (FAILURE): ORANGE: Guard checks out what he noticed.

7 TO 9 (PARTIAL SUCCESS): YELLOW: Guard remains in position and looks around. "What was that noise?"

10 OR ABOVE (SUCCESS): GREEN: You execute the action unnoticed.

MEDIUM RISK

Actions with some inherent noise or visibility (crossing open areas, taking down a guard)

When attempting a MEDIUM RISK covert action, roll **+ATTRIBUTE**

6 OR BELOW (FAILURE): RED: Guard calls in disturbance on radio, goes in to check with weapon drawn.

7 TO 9 (PARTIAL SUCCESS): ORANGE: Guard checks out what he noticed.

10 OR ABOVE (SUCCESS): YELLOW: Guard remains in position and looks around. "What was that noise?"

HIGH RISK

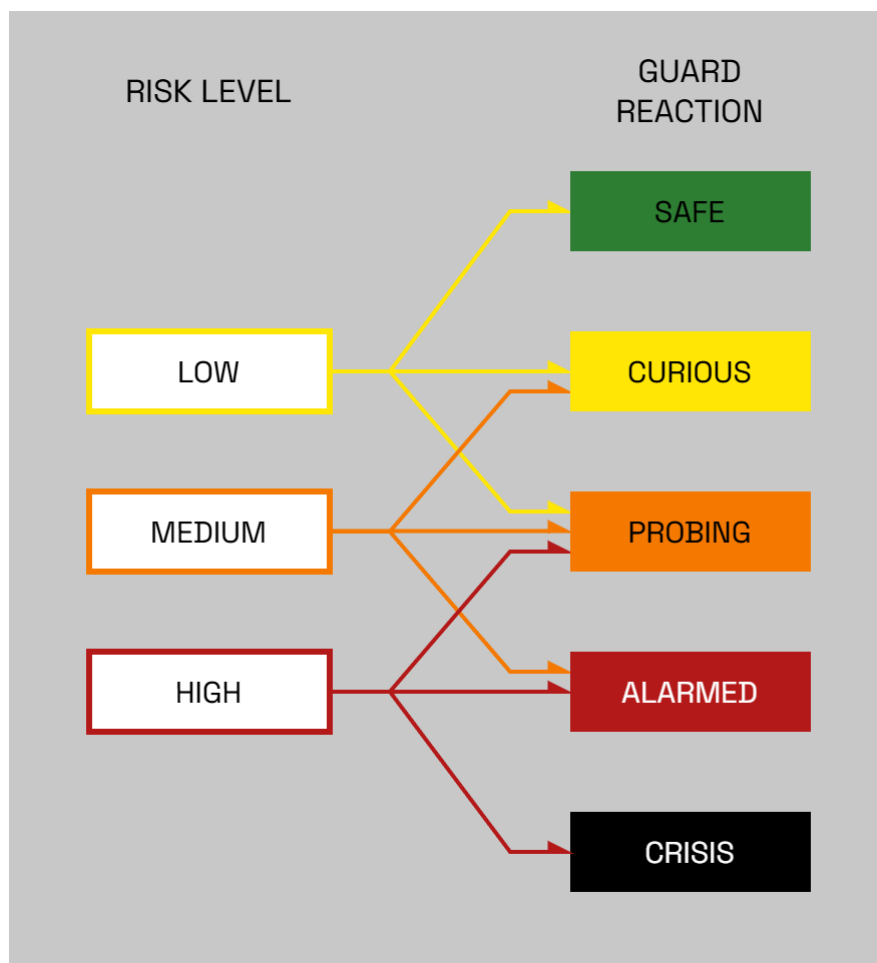
Inherently loud or obvious actions (breaking windows, kicking down doors and other noisy actions - or sneaking through a heavily-patrolled area)

When attempting a HIGH RISK covert action, roll **+ATTRIBUTE**

6 OR BELOW (FAILURE): BLACK: Guard calls in an alert for this ZONE and asks for backup, engages the clear and visible threat.

7 TO 9 (PARTIAL SUCCESS): RED: Guard calls in disturbance on radio, goes in to check with weapon drawn.

10 OR ABOVE (SUCCESS): ORANGE: Guard checks out what he noticed.



GUARD REACTIONS

YELLOW - CURIOUS

- "Huh, what was that noise? Did I just hear/see something?"
- Guard remains in position, but looks around.
- Next time YELLOW is triggered for this guard, it automatically becomes ORANGE.

ORANGE - PROBING

- "I'll go check it out, I noticed *something*, but I'm not sure if it's a threat yet. And I don't want Command to think I'm a whim."
- Guard investigates the disturbance directly. Returns to spot if nothing is found.

RED - ALARMED

- "Ok, that was *definitely* suspicious. Let's call it in and check it out."
- Guard radios in the disturbance and moves in with weapon drawn.
- Other guards in ZONE also more alert, potentially increasing RISK for a while.

BLACK - SPOTTED

- Intruders spotted - ZONE goes into alert, backup called in.
- Start of COMBAT.

ZONES & ESCALATION

Each zone handles their alerts independently until certain triggers occur:

- Discovery of casualties
- Armed intruders sighted and called in
- Evidence of sabotage
- Multiple security breaches

BRIEFINGS & INTRODUCTION

The following is a 'template' of how I write mission briefings/introductions. I'm not saying it's perfect - just that it works for me!

Note

FIST is a game about paranormal mercenaries, yes, but also a very potent tool to explore real-life historical events. If a mission contains or ties into actual historical events, I like to include a Note at the start which provides further context and information, while also clarifying that the mission is not meant as an accurate representation of actual atrocities of history.

OBJECTIVE: A brief, punchy objective that is shared with the players from the get-go.

REWARD: An exciting reward that opens up interesting new possibilities for future play.

CONSEQUENCE: The stakes/cost of failing this mission.

INTRODUCTION

[YEAR, LOCATION] A brief description of events that have led up to the contract. A mention of the client/handler, and the situation FIST is being inserted into, along with their objective. All of this is from the perspective of the client, which might differ greatly from The Truth.

"NEWS HEADLINE THAT TALKS ABOUT EVENTS"

News headlines add a bit of flavor, and also show how the current events are being perceived by the general population.

Newspaper Title, Country, Date of Publication

"NEWS HEADLINE THAT TALKS ABOUT EVENTS"

The byline can add a bit more context. It's also fun to play with wildly varying perspectives in these headlines.

Newspaper Title, Country, Date of Publication

"NEWS HEADLINE THAT TALKS ABOUT EVENTS"

A small local newspaper might be close to the truth, a big national one might (purposefully) shift the truth.

Newspaper Title, Country, Date of Publication

THE TRUTH

Lay out what's actually going on - what's the real objective of FIST being hired? What's the client's true agenda? Lay it out short-and-sweet; the text above should be a juicy pitch to the players, the Truth should be a nice hook for Referees.

📌 Important

When outlining a mission, I ask the question **"why now?"** a lot, to nail down the internal consistency. Why is FIST being hired *now*? Why do they need to go in *now*? What made the matter urgent to the client? What are the antagonist up to - *and why now*?

📌 Important

When writing a FIST mission, I tend to look at **location, opposition** and **objective** - there's a location where things take place, a faction that wants something, and the thing they want. Generally, I like to make **one** of those elements "weird":

The **location** is generally relatively grounded (because that's the fun of using the real world as inspiration; you get to use actual places).

The **opposition** can be the "weird" thing; a strange cult, organization, faction, syndicate or singular antagonist, pursuing something palpable (like a nuke, or control of a region, or scientific knowledge).

Making the **objective** the "weird" thing can allow for shocking reveals down the line; something mundane that everyone was pursuing was actually something paranormal the whole time.

You can make more than 1 thing weird, of course; experiment!

BRIEFING

"For briefing scenes, I like to prepare a little bit of dialogue from the client/handler to FIST. This is a nice tool to add some character to the-

[stops to pick nose]

"Sorry about that. Nice tool to add character, and is a nice 'warming up' for the Referee - a handrail for the first bit of roleplay."

Client, function title

Add a few lines to clarify FIST's starting position; a safehouse nearby, a choice of equipment etc.

APPROACHES

There are essentially 3 ways to kick off a mission:

- **Free-form.** FIST has a target location, and is completely free to engage how they see fit (which probably includes performing a [STAKEOUT](#)). Note that this freedom can come at the cost of pacing - it's very heavy on [preparation](#), and the amount of freedom can cause choice paralysis. Implementing some sort of (arbitrary) time limit is usually a good idea.
- **In Medias Res.** Never underestimate the power of a good in-the-middle-of-things opening. This trades in [preparation](#) for a high pace, lots of [improvisation](#) and potentially *improv*; it can be very fun to start a mission aboard a plane that's falling out of the sky, besieged by furious ant people, outnumbered and outgunned - now let the players explain how they ended up in this situation, and figure out how they're getting out.
- **Guided.** Call it 'free-form with guardrails'; the Guided approach offers a few distinct tactical approaches that FIST can choose from, with space to improvise.

GUIDED APPROACHES

One possible way to handle guided approaches is defined in [DEAD ZONE](#), allowing FIST to pick between going in slow and stealthy, or fast and loud.

That idea evolved into 3 variables that tie into approaches:

- **GEAR.** The degree to which the approach allows for full kit of choice, or puts a limit or restraint on what FIST can bring in.
- **SPEED.** How fast and easy this approach brings FIST to the objective.
- **STEALTH.** The 'volume' (quiet/loud) of the approach. Loud is inevitably more **dangerous**, and quiet more **safe**.

If we go by these elements, I feel like a predefined approach should contain **2 out of 3**, which gives us 3 types of approach - that so happen to correspond with the pillars of **TACTICS**, **ESPIONAGE**, and **ACTION**.

NAME	GEAR	SPEED	STEALTH	EXAMPLE
Tactical	✓	✗	✓	A methodical, careful approach - crawling through the bushes.
Espionage	✗	✓	✓	A clever way of approaching the objective with some kind of play - a disguise, a scheme.
Action	✓	✓	✗	A loud, all-out assault, coming in hot - guns blazing.

Generally, I try to offer 3 main ways of approach. FIST is of course free to improvise; in those cases, pick whatever approach is most relevant as a point of reference.

 **Note**

Each of these approaches can be further tweaked to create interesting outcomes. Some missions might be on a time limit - meaning that FIST *can* choose to go in Tactical, but the downside being less time to complete the operation. In other cases, going for an Action approach might risk losing out on secondary objectives (the enemy hears you coming and shreds valuable intel).

TIME MANAGEMENT

A ticking clock is a great motivator - it keeps things going in the preparation phase, and can create tangible pressure during missions. Beyond that, it is essentially an ASSET for the Referee to target - some actions do not include a credible risk of failure or detection, but *do* run out the clock. A few different approaches to consider are:

DRAMATIC TIME

No actual time is kept, but the Referee can use the notion of a ticking clock/countdown to keep things moving.

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PLAYER: I get that this metal door is locked, but can't I
like, chip away at it?
REFEREE: Eventually you'd break through, but the dark
ritual is completed at midnight, and it's like, roughly
23:00 now, and it'd totally take more than an hour.
```

See the [Progress Clocks](#) from *Blades in the Dark* for Dramatic Time with multiple stages.

TIME SLOTS

Give a broad time limit - say, 12 hours. When players take an action, note what kind of action it is, and decrease the countdown timer by the given amount.

- **Quick actions (No time).** Brief conversations, simple item interactions, quick equipment checks, basic movement between rooms.
- **Short actions (10 minutes).** Lockpicking, a cursory room search, brief social engineering, basic sabotage.
- **Medium actions (30 minutes).** Detailed technical analysis, thorough room searches, complex system sabotage, extended social infiltration.
- **Long actions (60 minutes).** Complete system reprogramming, full security patrol route mapping, major equipment repair

USAGE DICE

Place a dice where all players can see it. If it's rolled and comes up 1-2, the size is decreased (d20>d12>d10>d8>d6>d4). If the d4 comes up 1-2, the timer has ran out. When players perform an action that would take 'some time', the dice is rolled. If it takes *quite some time*, it's rolled twice. Determine the starting

size based on how many times you think the dice would be rolled in the mission: A d20 has **30** uses on average, a d12 **20**, a d10 **14**, a d8 **9**, a d6 **5** and a d4 **2**.

This method makes the timer itself fickle and unpredictable.

INCREASED ATTENTION

Sometimes, a MISSION AREA might not have an inherent time limit, but the longer FIST stays, the more attention they'll draw.

For this, use a Countdown that starts at 12, and is visible to the players. Short actions decrease the countdown by 1d4, medium actions by 1d6, long actions by 1d8. Optionally, certain actions that are particularly loud (explosions, gunfire) also incur a roll. If the timer hits below 0, an encounter occur and the timer resets. The timer can even reset to smaller values after each time (12>10>8 etc.)

IN SUMMARY

CORE DESIGN DECISIONS

INTELLIGENCE VS EXECUTION BALANCE

How much of the mission revolves around gathering and leveraging INTEL, versus direct action? This connects directly to the Preparation & Improvisation spectrum:

- Heavy INTEL focus requires robust Strategic INTEL opportunities and layered Tactical INTEL throughout the MISSION AREA
- Action-focused missions lean more on improvisation, Tactical INTEL and quick RECON

ZONE STRUCTURE

The composition and arrangement of ZONES fundamentally shapes how players can approach the mission:

- All Restricted zones create high-tension infiltration scenarios
- Mixed access levels enable more social engineering and disguise play
- Quiet Spots provide tactical opportunities and breathing room

TIME PRESSURE

The choice of Time Management system impacts pacing and player decision-making:

- Dramatic Time for narrative-focused missions
- Time Slots for methodical planning scenarios
- Usage Dice for unpredictable tension
- Increased Attention for organic escalation

EXAMPLE MISSION CONFIGURATIONS

THE HEIST

- Extensive Strategic INTEL gathering possible through STAKEOUT
- Mixed zone access (PUBLIC entrance areas, MONITORED back rooms, RESTRICTED vault)

- Multiple viable approaches (Tactical/careful, Espionage/social, Action/loud)
- Clear Time Management system (security patrol timing, vault timelock)

THE HOT INSERTION

- Limited initial intelligence, heavy reliance on Tactical INTEL
- Primarily RESTRICTED zones requiring careful stealth management
- Quick RECON opportunities rather than extended surveillance
- Dramatic Time pressure from an impending event

THE SOCIAL INFILTRATION

- Rich opportunities for gathering Personnel Intel
- Predominantly PUBLIC and MONITORED zones
- Heavy emphasis on Espionage approach
- Increased Attention system as suspicion potentially grows

Remember that these configurations are starting points - the real art lies in how you adapt and combine elements to create compelling scenarios that challenge your players in unique ways. The key is maintaining internal consistency while providing multiple vectors for player agency, whether through careful preparation or skilled improvisation.

Most importantly, always return to the core question that drives your mission design: **"Why now?"** This helps ensure your mission has urgency, clear stakes, and meaningful choices for the players to engage with.