

THE OFFICIAL MIXOTRONIC USERS MANUAL

**A Concise Guide
to Eclectic Ideas**

Preamble

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Introduction

We all have a box.

We think inside this box, whether we realize it or not. Our minds latch onto certain pieces of information, or certain modes of approaching problems, and we use those pieces or those patterns again and again in our work. Our boxes are also reinforced from the outside, as we observe societal and cultural trends, fads and so on.

I first created the Mixotronic as an Excel spreadsheet in order to bust myself out of my own box. I realized that I needed one when I sat down and 'brainstormed' a list of project ideas. I then compared this list of newly minted brainstorm material to a similarly brainstormed list from about six months earlier, and found they were nearly identical. I hadn't come up with one really original, spiffy idea. It was then that I realized that there was a pile of mental bricks that my brain was stacking, over and over, like an obsessive-compulsive. Maybe I'd come up with some novel combination of these idea-bricks. Probably not.

So I made a list of 101 terms (isn't it always 101?) that were vaguely related to game design, geek culture, and some random samplings from online encyclopedias and dictionaries just for good measure. I dropped that into Excel, made a random lookup formula, and extracted three terms at random from the list. Then I'd force myself to write at least a paragraph of **something** on whatever had come up the first time I hit refresh.

The result was some very interesting new ideas that have since borne fruit as short stories, game design widgets and whatnot. No, it didn't make me ten feet tall and fill my bank account with untold riches - but it did wedge a big ol' crowbar into the lid of my personal thought-box and gave it a yank. I started to look differently at another project, which at the time had the codename of 'Chamber'. Before the Mixotronic, I thought it was the bee's knees. After? I realized how derivative I was really being, and saved myself some heartache by yanking out *Chamber's* soul and re-working it into *Elsewhere*. I couldn't be happier with the results.

Since then, the Mixotronic has been distributed in one form (the Excel spreadsheet, with a bunch of new terms added), reworked into two other beta-forms (neither of which

went anywhere), and finally has seen the light of day again, reborn as a PHP-based web application. Hence, Mixotronic v. 3.0.

The Terms

The terms currently in the Mixotronic's database were originally drawn almost directly from games and gaming. In fact, the first five terms were: vampires, werewolves, mages, ghosts and changelings - a 'tribute', if you will, to White Wolf's oeuvre. They progressed through fantasy and science-fiction tropes and quickly entered a dead zone of second-guessing terms like 'Vulcans'. I redacted a large section at the end of the database and started again, this time throwing in terms that had absolutely nothing to do with gaming. I ran through the eternal verities: beauty, truth, honor. I quickly progressed from the humanities to the Humanities Department, adding fields of academic and physical endeavor.

After expending myself with hundreds of online glossaries and technical dictionaries, I had around 600 entries and had reached a new, critical decision. I had drained myself of every erg of generic terminology I could come up with, and then some ('naval' is in the database, after all.) I had to decide whether or not to add trademarked terms - mainly the titles of movies, books and TV shows. After some debate, I finally decided to go ahead.

Since then, I've combed IMDB (Internet Movie Database), library lists, banned book lists, TV Guide's site. Slowly, the Mixotronic has started to look like a real idea generation tool, bringing together authors, genres and titles that really weren't meant to grace the same screen. (One random example as I click over: Machiavelli's *The Prince*, 60's French surrealist film *Alphaville*, and *Forrest Gump*.)

So what you see now is around 1,700 terms. Taken three at a time (and given that a term can only show up once), there are a total of 4.904 billion combinations in the Mixotronic. Not all of them will get you from zero to Shakespeare, but there you have it.

The Number

Why three terms?

Well, the answer is simple, and it has to do with human memory. The end product of the Mixotronic is not three oddly-placed words or concepts. The terms are just the beginning, the germ of possibility. What really matters are the *relationships* that you, the user of the Mixotronic, create between the terms, and how you combine them.

For example, with two terms (A & B), you have just one relationship: A-B (and, technically, B-A). This relationship, we'll call it C, has a specific relationship with A and B, which are really just parts of the A-B relationship. These might all be quite interesting, but the system lacks a complexity that lets your brain move around and play.

Three terms (A, B & C) have three relationships: $A-B = D$ $B-C = E$ $C-A = F$. Each of these relationships (D, E & F) also then can have a relationship with each other - $C-D = G$, $D-E = H$ and $E-F = I$. G, H and I are *higher order* relationships. These higher order relationships then can form relationships with one another, and so on.

This creates a stable, dynamic series of relationships, proceeding up and up into higher orders. These higher orders are where all of the 'eureka' moments come from in using the Mixotronic. The simplicity within each order, with only three relationships in each tier, means that you can hold more than one tier in your mind at a time and play with it.

So if three terms is so much better than two, why not four? Or ten? Because there's only so much that you can hold in your head at one time. With four terms, you get six relationships in the first order. There are then *fifteen* relationships in the second order, and *105* in the third order. There's no elegant dance of relationships - it just turns into an impossible mess very quickly. The problem only gets worse the higher the number of terms that you use.

Now, there are two exceptions to that, and that's *six* and *nine*. But with six terms, you first want to pair off the terms and collapse them into three, then start working from there. With nine, you want to group them into three groups of three, get one solid idea out of each bunch, and then start from there.

In practice, six and nine are not as productive as just three. After a certain point, it starts to feel as though you're simply throwing in everything but the kitchen sink whatever idea you're getting out of the Mixotronic.

Remember: Ninjas are cool. Bears are cool. Lasers are cool. Ninja bears with lasers?

Not cool.

Relationships & Breakups

Now that we've discussed exactly how and why the Mixotronic works, how do you, the end-user, make it work for you? The key, as I mentioned above, is in the relationships that you draw between the terms and concepts that the Mixotronic pumps out. There are two major methods that I've used in the past, and I've outlined them below.

1. smash them all.

The first method is very basic - take each concept and place it in a word processor or text editor. I've found it's best to use Notepad or something similar that comes along with your computer's operating system, or a blank sheet of paper. Someplace to write, that has as few distractions as possible.

Then take the term and start smashing it up, breaking it down into its core elements.

For example, the term *Titanic* (referring to the obscenely popular James Cameron movie):

ship
1911
ocean liner
fate
tragedy
shipwreck
survival
iceberg
Atlantic Ocean
star-crossed lovers
salvage
flashback

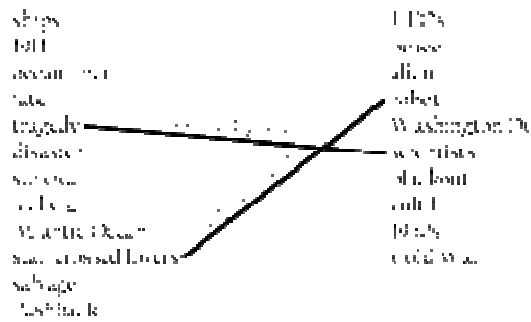
At this stage, you're simply trying to identify the basic concepts that the term suggests to you. No element is worthless (even *iceberg* might turn out to be helpful), and you shouldn't self-censor. I will have to admit that I didn't take this advice myself, and kept "Kate Winslet's breasts" off the list above.

Do this for each of the three terms that comes out of the Mixotronic. Then, put the lists next to each other and start looking for low-level connections to draw between the lists, and start trying to put them together. You may even want to use a dice, number the terms, and connect them randomly. For each connection you make, try to bridge the two with a single word, preferably a verb or adverb to form new, crude concept.

Let's get another term from the Mixotronic and try this out. Our second term is, oddly enough, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*:

UFOs
peaceful
alien
robot
Washington, DC
scientists
blackout
cult films
1950's
Cold War

And so let's put them side-by-side and start drawing connections:



The connection that immediately hit me was between *star-crossed lovers* and *robot*. Imagine a world where very human-like androids have been perfected. Years after their introduction, any sort of relationship between android and human, other than strictly professional, is forbidden. Androids have had their emotional centers hobbled to avoid reciprocation of any stray human feelings.

And then a group of scientists decide to perform an experiment to see if the emotional hobbling is reducing the productive potential of the androids. A few robots are modified to allow for emotions like love and passion. This is where our story begins.

Note that you don't have to go all-out when smashing up the original terms. You may want to smash one and keep the others intact, and if that doesn't yield anything, try it again with the next term. There's no "right" number of smashed-out terms to get from a single Mixotronic result, either. Some of the terms in the Mixotronic are pretty specific as-is.

2. Mash Notes.

This is the method I was discussing in the Number section above. You start by taking each term and giving yourself a one-sentence "high concept" simplification of a concept, if it needs it. "Soylent Green is people," for example. Or, as Gene Roddenberry famously described *Star Trek*: "It's *Wagon Train* to the stars."

Then take each concept-line, mash it to others, and see what happens.

Let's do an example. The Mixotronic says:

The Qabbalah : artificial life : *My Favorite Martian*

Ok, this could be tricky.

So for our three "high concepts", we'll give a quick definition of the *Qabbalah* and *artificial life*, and sum up *My Favorite Martian*, a sit-com from the 60s.

Qabbalah: The Jewish mystical tradition. Qabbalah includes the understanding of the spiritual spheres in creation, and the rules and ways by which God administers the existence of the universe.

artificial life: The study of life through the use of human-made analogs of living systems.

My Favorite Martian: A human-looking extraterrestrial crash-lands in L.A., and is taken in by a reporter and passed off as his Uncle Martin. Hijinx ensue.

Ok, so let's smash these together and see what we get.

Qabbalah + artificial life = homunculi: Mix the Qabbalah with alchemy to create homunculi, or creatures to do the bidding of the alchemist.

Qabbalah + *My Favorite Martian* = *My Favorite Mystic*: A foreign correspondent happens to save the life of a mystic, who follows him home and "helps" him until his debt is repaid. Hijinx ensue.

artificial life + *My Favorite Martian* = Modern-Day Magnus: A computer programmer down on his luck accidentally creates a true computer intelligence. Afraid to reveal the existence of his creation to the outside world for fear it'll be taken away from him, he keeps it on his desktop/laptop at home. Hijinx ensues.

Already, we can see patterns starting to emerge. Of course, these represent just my impressions of the terms involved - each of these mash-ups could easily be interpreted in other ways. My personal favorites are *My Favorite Mystic* and Modern-Day Magnus (Magnus, by the way, refers to Albertus Magnus, a German monk and alchemist who was Thomas Aquinas' teacher.)

We could either leave these connections as they are if we really like the results, or mix them up a bit more - maybe taking Modern-Day Magnus and instead of one intelligence, he has several of these personalities, each taking on some personal foible and strength of the lead character. They argue with each other, invade the toaster. Hijinx ensue.

Smash & Mash

Of course, the truth is somewhere between these two extremes. Once you've had some practice with Mixotronic, you'll find that you smash and cherry-pick the best bits of some terms, and mix just a pinch of that term into another part of the result, creating an idea that is just a shade different, but different enough to be novel.

I usually will just let the terms from the Mixotronic sort of stew in my head for a while - usually while listening to music or in the shower. (I think the whole 'eureka' factor of the shower is under-rated, myself. Half of my ideas come to me when I've got shampoo in my eyes.) Eventually, either something will pop out the other end, or it won't. In

either case, you're just letting your brain do all the smashing and mashing subconsciously.

The Prize

Remember during this entire process that you need to keep your eyes on the prize - the type of project that you're working on should inform the choices you make. For instance, if we were developing the *Robota & Juliet* idea as an RPG, it might be too tight a concept, and we should loosen it up. Or you may wind up just abandoning the robot angle and just concentrate on the star-crossed-lovers angle.

The Devil, as they say, is in the details. For all the Mixotronic *can* do, there end of the Mixotronic is just the beginning of any project. By getting experience in working with raw ideas, however, you may find that you can gain clearer visions of the guts of a project. The Mixotronic, in the end, is just chewing gum for the mind - something to work the muscles and refresh the palette while the real work goes on upstairs.

Good luck.