

# EXCENDANCE



written by Neal Stidham for Game Chef 2013 | [parenthesispress.com](http://parenthesispress.com)

Accept Unity. Merge.

Join the Defiance. Diverge.

## EDEN

**Eden** is a colony on the planet HD 85512 b, about 36 light-years from Earth. The surface of the planet, called the Garden, is nearing the end of a century-long terraforming project. Above the planet, the original colony ship, named the Mela, was converted into a Bernal sphere where the first generation of colonists resided during the terraforming. Now, approximately 20,000 humans, colloquially known amongst themselves as **Gardeners**, live, love, work, and play across the two habitats. A space elevator called the Tree extends from the sphere down to the planet. The planetside environment is an idyll, sparse but pastoral as flora and imported fauna begin to claim their niches, while the orbital habitat is a wonder of technological advancement, home to the colony's data archives and seat of governance.

## WHISPERNODES

Most members of human society are connected by **whispernodes**: neural implants that wirelessly connect individuals' thoughts. Since they serve as a person's credentials and identification, as well as ubiquitous communication, it is unorthodox for someone to lack a whispernode. A trained medical professional can insert or remove one with an hour for surgery; otherwise, they are difficult to remove without harming the wearer. They only send or receive when the wearer wishes it, either globally or to specific recipients, apart from emergency broadcasts and monitoring the wearer's well-being. Wearers are alerted when a message is incoming, and can accept or defer it until later.

## THE EVANGELISTS

The colony is connected to other colonies by a wormhole gate independently orbiting its star. To conserve fuel, only one cargo exchange is made each year when the gate is at periapsis to Eden, with an incoming ship replacing the departing one. Seven weeks ago, when the latest ship arrived, the crew of seven brought with them a peculiar mes-

sage concerning a new belief system called **Unity**. An amalgam of several ancient Earth concepts, Unity holds that all sentience is fragmented from a greater super-consciousness, and that the highest goal of sapient beings should be to reintegrate their experiences into the whole. The **Evangelists**, as they came to be called, made their precepts available to any who would ask, stressing that only those who chose Unity of their own volition would be Merged. They also claimed that Unity had already overtaken approximately 70-80% of human space in the past year.

## THE DEFIANCE

Some of the Gardeners accepted the new belief and requested the Merge, but others remained uncertain. Merging with Unity was a one-way process, the Evangelists cautioned; the admonition implied that dissent was either impossible following the Merge, or suppressed unequivocally. Loved ones of potential candidates to Merge balked at the idea of being cut off permanently, while the candidates urged their peers to accompany them in the Unity.

While the colonists discussed the situation amongst themselves, a new piece of information emerged. Hidden in the cargo, one colonist found an encrypted data disk containing a star map and archived news items that corroborated the Evangelists' claims of Unity's spread, along with a coded message signed with the moniker *Polyculture*, warning of the threat of Unity assimilating all individuality wherever it touched and providing several sets of contact coordinates to beam a request for help from a group calling itself the Defiance. When the Evangelists learned about the disk, they tried to suppress this message, but its existence and general contents were leaked to the Gardeners (though not the coordinates of the Defiance enclave).

Following further discussion, the Gardeners conclude that, until the next periapsis, the Evangelists would be guests of Eden, but that they would no longer Merge individuals into the Unity themselves. The Evangelists readily agreed.

## THE CONSENSUS

As a player, your alter ego in the game is a high-ranking and influential Gardener: perhaps an ombudsperson, or transit scheduler for the Tree, or agricultural minister, or any of a number of other persons of authority. It's your choice what sort of individual you want to play, but what matters most is that you control a character whose voice holds weight with the other Gardeners. Your character may belong to one of the first generation of colonists, an elder who has watched the Garden sprout from the barren planet below, or a second generation Gardener, who has known and loved no other home and thinks of themselves as unique in the universe. Either way, your decisions have repercussions on the rest of the colony. You have not yet chosen whether to embrace the Unity or heed the warnings of the Defiance, but the direction you lean convinces others in Eden to follow, as represented by the Consensus.

You will need eighteen tokens: nine black and nine white. Black represents Unity, and white represents Defiance. Keep the tokens in a container from which they can be drawn without being able to distinguish them.

At the beginning of the game, the Consensus in Eden must be established, measuring the Gardeners' collective attitude toward Unity or Defiance. The simple method is to simply set the Consensus at 50%. Alternately, one player can randomly draw ten tokens from the bag and use those to determine the current Consensus. Example: if the initial draw is 7 white and 3 black, the Consensus in Eden starts 30% in favor of Unity. Return the tokens after ten have been drawn.

## DISPOSITIONS

The player controlling a character should signal through their character's actions whether that character is leaning toward Unity or toward Defiance. The Consensus among the other Gardeners is swayed by how their leaders

behave.

Four key markers indicate a willingness to Merge. If a character exhibits these characteristics, they can be considered to have accepted Unity.

- Divestiture of material goods: property individualizes and differentiates a person, and the Unity provides for its own
- Embracing positive attitudes so as not to taint the Unity with counterproductive thoughts
- Attempting to minimize change in one's life; the Unity wants as perfect a "snapshot" of an individual during the Merge as possible
- A desire for new abstract learning as a "gift" to the Unity

If a focus character exhibits one or more of these behaviors during a scene, the player may substitute one white token into the final vote (see below).

Conversely, four major behaviors by characters signal their Divergence.

- Aggressive skepticism or distrust of information, in assertion of one's critical independence
- Seeking new experiential input so as to remain unique
- Acceptance of emotional turmoil and dark thoughts as natural and part of the human experience
- Enjoying and acquiring unique or distinct physical possessions, selfishly or not

Likewise, if a focus character acts in line with one or more of these indicators during a scene, the player may swap one black token into the final vote (see below).

## ROLES

Each scene has a narrator and a main focus character. The narrator is selected first, and the narrator then selects the main focus character. The narrator randomly draws five tokens to determine the nature of the conflict. Each scene is on a separate page, which should not be read in advance. Only the narrator may see the page once the conflict is drawn. The main character's player then nominates another player to take the part of their allies and confidants, while the narrator nominates a different player to take the part of the Evangelists.

## FRAMING SCENES & RESOLVING ACTIONS

Each scene takes place at a specific place during a specific time; a scene therefore ends when any of the characters wants to move somewhere else or focus on events at a different time.

The narrator leads the scene by describing where it takes place and when, and what is present. It is also helpful to describe what has happened since the prior scene, if there was one. The focus character's antagonists then get to enter the scene and add details, followed by the focus character, and finally the focus character's allies arrive in the scene and contribute their details. From there, the narrator and the player of the main focus character narrate and respond to one another. The player of the main focus character can briefly pass narration or ask questions to his or her allies, while the narrator can briefly pass narration or ask questions to the antagonists.

What the current narrator narrates, always happens. What another player narrates, happens, except in three situations. First, if the character attempts something that has a significant chance of failure, and that failure would have undesirable consequences, the player of the character must ask the narrator what occurs. Second, if the character's action would have a negative impact on another character, the player must ask the player(s) controlling his or her al-

lies what occurs. Third, if the character wants to take an action that changes the world around him or her in a lasting way, the player must ask the player(s) controlling his or her antagonists what occurs.

A scene ends, as mentioned above, when the characters present attempt to adjourn to another place and/or time. A scene also ends if the focus character takes an action to attempt to resolve the central tension in the scene (see below). Such actions always affect the Consensus in Eden toward or away from accepting the Unity, and as such, the players vote once the resolving action has been dealt with.

## CONFLICT ORACLE

When the narrator draws a conflict, he or she consults the page for that scene below. B = Black (Unity) token, W = White (Defiance) token. Each scene occurs once; draw again if a result occurs again after it has been played. Return the tokens after drawing.

BBBBB:	Cataclysm
BBBBW:	Separation
BBBWW:	Trial
BBWWW:	Cascade
BWWWW:	Overture
WWWWW:	Discord
Special:	Ultimatum

No player should read the scenario pages in advance: only the narrator should read them, and only when the conflict is drawn at the beginning of a scene. Each scene conflict has one or more Tensions between forces relevant to the

decision to Merge or Diverge. Each also contains a Temptation for the focus character, luring them into siding with the Unity, and a Revelation concerning the Evangelists and Unity, which should be sought for and uncovered through play.

## END OF SCENE VOTE

The Consensus shifts toward Unity or Defiance after each scene based on what occurred. This is mostly abstracted – the players are voting on the opinions of a population of imaginary colonists – but they also have an opportunity to attempt to change one another's minds if there is a deadlock.

Each player other than the narrator and the main focus character takes two tokens, one of each color, and secretly selects one as their vote as to whether the outcome of the scene, in their opinion, pushes the Consensus closer to Unity or Defiance. This is not whether the characters, or even players, want individually to join the Unity, but whether the scene's repercussions are likely to shift the Consensus in one direction or the other. Votes are revealed simultaneously. If there is a tie, the players discuss how they voted, attempting to persuade one another to vote differently, and then another vote is cast.

The votes are left on the table to be modified as follows:

The narrator may choose to draw a random token and add it to the vote. This may create a temporary tie; continue to the next step to determine whether it needs to be broken.

The player of the focus character may choose to substitute one token, changing a black token to a white or vice versa, based on the actions taken in the scene, as indicated above (whether the character acted strongly in favor of

Unity or Defiance). If the exchange would create a tie, return to the discussion step as above and then re-vote.

Once a definitive vote is reached, the Consensus moves based the majority vote: one space (10%) toward Unity if more tokens are black, or toward Defiance if more are white. If the vote is unanimous, the Consensus shifts two spaces (20%). Return the tokens after the Consensus is adjusted.

Once the Consensus has been adjusted, a new narrator is chosen, preferably a player who has not yet been narrator. The new narrator chooses a new focus character (again, preferably belonging to a player who has not yet filled that role), and the next scene is set.

## ULTIMATUM

The Ultimatum scene occurs once one of two conditions is met: either all of the above conflicts have arisen in play, or the Consensus reaches 100% in either direction. This scene serves as a denouement more than an endgame, but if the players want to discuss the situation and how their characters would respond, they are welcome to do so. No further voting is conducted, however, as the events unfold based on the results of the prior scenes.

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## BBBBB: Cataclysm

Tragedy or disaster threatens Eden. Perhaps the terraforming project goes awry, wracking the surface with unpredictable and dangerous weather; perhaps a stray meteorite is on a collision course with the Tree. The Evangelists claim they possess information that could avert the problem, but they require a Gardener to Merge in order to serve as liaison to share that information.

Tensions: Should a Gardener be permitted to Merge to save the colony from catastrophe? Can they be prevented if they volunteer? Would refuge in the Unity, which claims no home or possessions, be preferable to losing home and loved ones to calamity? Is avoiding Unity worth potential loss of life from a disaster?

Temptation: Eden has been isolated for close to two generations, with a hard life for all due to the slow process of terraforming. The promise of access to new technology and information possessed by the Unity could improve the Gardeners' lives greatly.

Revelation: Merging is a slow process, taking up to a day, and that individual's information must then propagate through the Unity as it is scanned.

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### BBBBW: Separation

Someone close to the focus character (colleague, mentor, loved one) accepts Unity. (The Merged individual is controlled by the Evangelist player.) A Merged individual cannot touch someone outside the Unity, so intimacy is cut off.

Tensions: Is the character's relationship compromised? Does the loved one's choice constitute a betrayal of the character? What is implied about the relationship if the loved one consciously chose to diminish it in favor of joining the Unity? Is the relationship significant enough that the character would Merge to continue it?

Temptation: As the Unity slowly increases its hold on the colony, those who have not accepted the Merge feel ever more lonely. The promise of permanent acceptance with and by the other members of the Unity suggests never having to worry about such feelings again.

Revelation: Merge nanites are transmitted by skin-to-skin contact; isolation prevents accidental contamination of the unMerged.

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## BBBWW: Trial

An Evangelist is called to serve as a witness in the arbitration of a dispute between a Gardener who has Merged and another who has not. The Evangelist in question was not a witness, but the tribunal wishes to leverage the shared awareness of the Merge. This is an unprecedented legal gray area.

Tensions: Can the Evangelist's word be trusted? Even if the Evangelist is honest and impartial, will the mediator and jury accept their fair testimony with due weight? Is Eden's conservatism causing disharmony through an enforced separation, even conceptual, between Merged and unMerged?

Temptation: This is a chance to glean more information about the Merge through the Evangelist's testimony. The Evangelists are aloof and alluring figures, almost celebrities among the Gardeners, who are comparatively isolated from outside human society even with the yearly ship exchange.

Revelation: The whispernodes of Merged individuals are constantly active and recording all ambient data within the area of an Evangelist's sensory input, with the data carried on a separate and secure frequency.

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BBWWW: Cascade

Gardeners who had previously been Merged are bringing new individuals into the Unity. The Evangelists claim that they had no bearing on this decision and counseled against it, but likewise took no action to prevent it, either, claiming free will to decide on the part of the new candidates.

Tensions: Since the Evangelists themselves are not Merging individuals, does this violate the spirit of their compromise, even if it doesn't violate the letter? How will the steady momentum of building peer pressure affect Eden as the numbers of Merged Gardeners only increases?

Temptation: If the Gardeners are truly accepting Unity at such a steady rate, their leaders must see that resisting damages the colony's harmony. Eventually the unMerged will be a marginalized group; the promise of avoiding increasing division and fragmentation awaits within Unity.

Revelation: Each Merged individual can only Merge one other person, transferring their nanites to the new candidate. That candidate must then Merge the next, and so on.

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## BWWWW: Overture

One of the Evangelists tries to forge a closer relationship with the focus character. The impulse may be to distrust the move, but to do so would be cynical. No Gardener has been able to claim a sincere bond with one of the Evangelists without undergoing the Merge.

Tensions: Would – or can – an Evangelist seduce someone into Unity? What would the character be willing to offer to find out more? If the gesture is genuine, what sort of signal would rejection send? Is fear of the new and unknown turning the Gardeners paranoid with regard to their new guests?

Temptation: Besides the lure of getting a personal glimpse into the workings of the Unity from within, if the “Separation” scenario has already occurred, the promise of replacing a personal loss will likely be foregrounded in the characters’ (and players’) minds.

Revelation: The Evangelists agreed to the compromise because they knew they were no longer capable of Merging individuals, and so had nothing to lose.

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WWWWW: Discord

A group of Gardeners becomes belligerent to one of the Evangelists, or perhaps to another Gardener who has Merged. They may or may not have actually committed an offense; if they have, the characters must be careful to discern whether the situation is exacerbated by the accusers' distrust.

Tensions: The mob perceives a threat from Unity, but is it real, or just panic over the unknown? Do the Evangelists and their followers fall under a different legal or societal classification than the rest of the Gardeners? If the accused is in fact blameless, what spotlight does this throw on Eden's purported calm and unanimity?

Temptation: Crime is unthinkable among the Unity; embracing the Merge offers the promise of eliminating interpersonal conflict and achieving real peace.

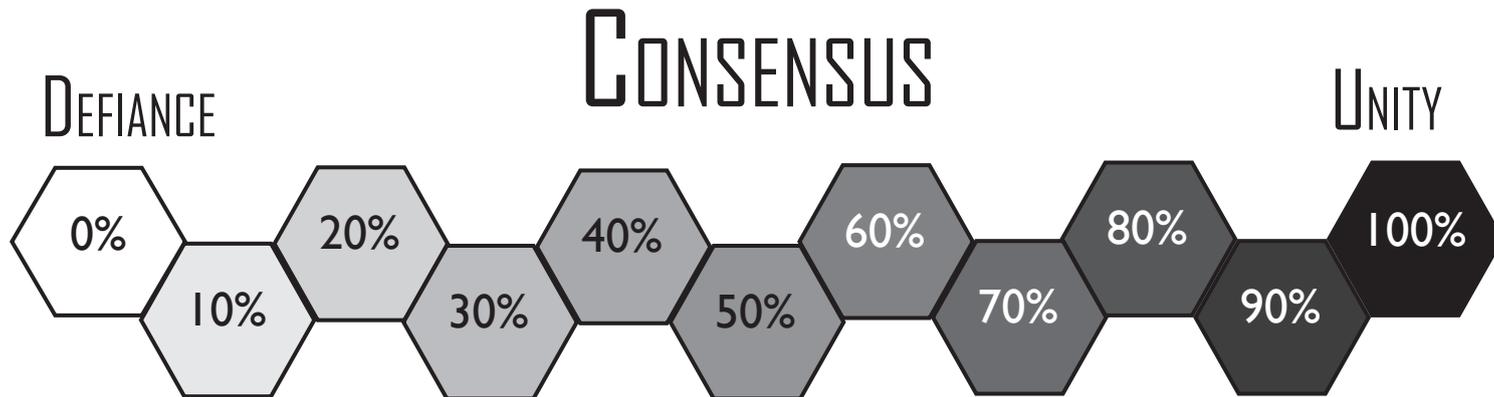
Revelation: In a perceived emergency, the Unity vessel is armed and capable of serving as a refuge against hostile action; all Merged individuals are prepared to retreat to the ship at a moment's notice at a pre-arranged mental signal.

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## Ultimatum

If the Unity overcomes all Defiance, remaining hold-outs are pressured to Merge. No force will be used, but resistance should elicit palpable discomfort. The Evangelists will not proactively offer assistance to those who wish to Diverge, but if pressed, they will allow those who reject the Unity to depart on a ship for another region of human space — if there are any that have not already succumbed to the Unity, the Evangelists say, the refugees are welcome to search for it.

If Defiance reaches 100%, or if all six conflict scenes occur without the Consensus reaching either Unity or Defiance, the Evangelists withdraw to their ship, inviting any few scattered individuals who still want to Merge to accompany them, departing for the wormhole gate far in advance of periapsis. Their parting message indicates that they have absorbed a sufficient amount of data during their stay to “satisfactorily replicate” Eden in the Unity’s consciousness without having to Merge the actual Gardeners. The subtext is that Eden may be attacked by Unity ships at some point in the future.



Each player other than the narrator and the main focus character takes one token of each color.

Votes are revealed simultaneously. If there is a tie, the players confer and re-vote.

The narrator may choose to draw a random token and add it to the vote. This may create a tie temporarily - proceed to the next step.

The player of the focus character may choose to swap one token. If this results in a tie, the players confer and re-vote.

Move the Consensus one space (10%) in the direction of the majority. If the vote is unanimous, the Consensus shifts two spaces (20%).