

# CON ARTIST ROLES

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While most small cons entail only one grifter (or at most two or three), a big con can involve dozens. In order to sell the illusion to the mark, many people must be in on the take — both the con artists themselves and minor figures whom they task or pay off. Every grift varies, but most big ones involve a specific set of roles which must all work in conjunction if the con is to come off. The organization is similar to that of a typical role-playing party — individual skills combined to facilitate a larger goal — and as such will come second nature to most experienced gamers. The different types of roles in a big con (and several smaller ones as well) are broken down below, along with a brief description of the traits and characteristics required by each.

### The Roper

Sometimes known as the “outside man,” the roper is charged with selecting the mark and securing his confidence. Sometimes, several ropers are employed in the service of one con, hoping to hook a large variety of marks. They often travel far and wide, riding the rail lines and the like in search of their prey. In some ways, they are not unlike private detectives: seeking clues, creating profiles, and learning everything they can about their prospective marks. In short cons, the roper usually acts quickly, going on gut instinct and what few clues he can glean on the fly. For big cons, the mark is more carefully selected, usually for the right combination of money, greed, and gullibility. (Role-playing scenarios may entail the selection of a unique mark, culled for the purposes of revenge or similar player character motivations.) But whatever con is in effect, it’s up to the roper to set the proper bait. He must know who is a good mark, and who might cause trouble. He must observe the mark’s habits, find his weaknesses, and determine the best con to play against him. He must know the mark as well as he possibly can, for the roper is more responsible than anyone else for securing his confidence.

Hooking a mark once he’s been selected is an even more arduous process. The roper must insinuate himself with the victim, setting the man’s mind at ease and convincing him that the roper is likable and trustworthy. The mark mustn’t think that the roper is smarter or more clever than he, nor can he get even the slightest whiff of ulterior motive. Often, the roper must express interest in a topic which the mark holds dear, to better establish a common rapport with him. Sometimes, it takes no more than buying him a few drinks, though most ropers rarely have it so easy.

Once the mark is on the hook, the roper must lead him into the scenario cooked up by the con artists and keep watch over him to make sure he stays with it. When the time is right, he must introduce the mark to the inside man (see right) and help propose the “investment.” He must also prevent any outsiders (the police, the mark’s relatives, etc.) from entering the picture. At this point, the mark is aware of the “investment” he must make, and often has thousands of questions about it. The roper must answer them all in a manner that both maintains the mark’s interest and allays any suspicions.

It’s an exhausting process, and often dangerous as well. One slip-up or perceived lie could blow weeks of work, and an angered mark could easily get the police involved. The pressure starts even before that, since the roper is the one out on the edges of the crew. To secure the mark, he must often leave the city in which he is based, away from his partners and the protection of any criminal mob or corrupt lawmen which may be on the take. He is subject to shakedowns from local police, NLEB agents, railroad detectives, and anyone else who spots his game. If trouble comes, he rarely has anyone to turn to, and as the mark’s primary point of reference, he can be easily fingered if things go sour.

Despite this, most ropers find they love their job. The thrill of danger — the excitement of operating “without a net” — gets into their blood, leaving them eager to embark upon whatever new scheme is afoot. And they love the sense of control they have over the marks: the feeling of getting victims to dance to whatever tune is required, and to heighten or assuage their fears as the situation merits. Though inside men are safer and usually get a larger piece of the take, the roper holds the real key to any successful con.

A roper must possess high social skills and an exceeding amount of charisma (Moxie) in order to do his job. Many are also quite dexterous, and good at disappearing when trouble comes calling. Most of them are jacks of all trades, possessing a little knowledge in a wide variety of areas, rather than a lot of knowledge in just one or two. Above all, they must have patience and willpower, for only by maintaining a mark’s confidence over a sustained period will the con finally come to fruition.

### The Inside Man

If the roper is the fishing hook, dangling his bait for the mark to bite, then the inside man is the reel: the powerful fulcrum that pulls him in. The inside man controls the operation, maintaining its headquarters and coordinating the various elements of the con. He makes sure local cops and politicians are paid off, keeps contact with the ropers to monitor their progress, and when the time is right, engineers the taking of the mark’s money. He also serves as the crew’s accountant (such as it is), and arranges for both the up-front expenses and any incidental fees (such as bail money) incurred during the job. When the mark has been fleeced, the inside man divvies up the money and makes sure every member of the crew is satisfied.

Those are mostly incidental duties, however. The inside man’s real job begins once the roper has a mark. He meets briefly with the two and sizes the victim up, determining if they have the resources to properly take his money. If they do, then the inside man “transfers” the victim’s confidence to himself from the roper, laying out the “opportunity” for the mark to take. He sells the get-rich-quick scheme, flashes the money the mark will get his hands on, or the like. He then leaves the mark in the care of the roper, and contacts the other members of the crew to set up the big play. In many ways the inside man serves as the con’s director, orchestrating events in order to ensure that the mark’s money is taken and that the crew

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gets away clean. He delivers instructions to the minor players, pays for the furnishings of any stores or false fronts involved (see page 24), and makes sure the roper has the protection he needs to keep the mark on the hook.

When the con finally comes into play, the inside man is the central performer, inducing the mark to give up his money, and then coordinating the “blow off” that gets rid of him with a minimum of fuss. It is here where the inside man really earns his keep, for he can manipulate the mark to surrender the money and depart without even being aware that a con has been played. Without the inside man’s valuable expertise, the roper has nowhere to lead his victim, and the song-and-dance which produces the pay-off has no driving rhythm.

Inside men are the most organized of con artists, with a knack for planning and an eye for the little details. They assume a natural leadership position within the crew, and hold the group together during the often-stressful periods when the con is hanging in the balance. When the time comes, they must be excellent actors as well, manipulating the mark even more deeply than the roper does. Finally, they must serve as the intermediary between the crew and other elements which may interfere with the con — usually local police and organized crime. Most big-time con artists operate under mob protection, and the inside man makes sure the local Don or capo receives his pay-off. Similarly, the police and political influences must be neutralized, either by ensuring that they’re unaware of any illicit activity or paying them to look the other way. The inside man’s regular association with powerful figures requires a strong personality and a cool head, able to keep difficult situations from interfering with the crew’s operation. Small wonder, then, that the inside man receives the lion’s share of the take when the mark is finally fleeced.

## The Manager

Most big cons require “stores” — false fronts where the con is perpetrated and the mark is led to believe some great and exciting event is taking place. It may, for example, be a phony gambling den where high rollers come to place their bets, or the offices of a large company which the mark is led to believe can make him a quick fortune. It all depends on the nature of the con... but whatever its nature, it needs a manager to make it look authentic. The manager is the con’s props department and set decorator; he furnishes the backdrop against which his fellow crew members play. He secures the location, oversees its outfitting, and provides all of the dressing it may require to look authentic. When the con is over, he must oversee the teardown, making sure that there’s nothing left but empty space for investigators to discover. (See the sidebar on page 24 for more on the big store.)

In addition, the manager also procures any props or outfits which the con artists themselves may require. The list is almost endless: train tickets, teletype machines, police badges, false checks or banking bonds, luxury automobiles, fake newspaper clippings, university diplomas, letter heads of all varieties, firearms, uniforms, and money. Money is often the most important part of a con, for nothing piques a victim’s inherent

greed (and thus his willingness to go along with the con) like the sight of a briefcase full of cash. All of these items must be acquired by the manager, and kept track of for the length of the con.

Much of the time, the job is very routine — like a storekeeper opening and closing his shop — but the sheer variety of items required by a good crew means that the manager is always on the lookout for something new. Experienced managers in established crews often have much of what they need already, but more transitory ones must often acquire things on the fly... and there’s always a rare item or two which must



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be obtained before the deception can move forward. Forgeries can often do in a pinch, but the more authenticity an object has, the better. In order to obtain the right props, managers can put themselves in very tricky situations... such as sneaking into a police station to obtain a sergeant's uniform, or bargaining with a wanted warlock for a copy of one of his books. Money, too, can be difficult to obtain, and while the old trick of sandwiching one-dollar bills between a few twenties or fifties can help stretch the budget, big cons still require an impressive display. The inside man tallies it, but it's the manager's job to make sure it stays where it's supposed to... and gets it back to its proper owner when the con is completed.

Consequently, many managers are first-rate thieves, able to filch items out of the most secure locations. Good dexterity (along with a knack for stealthy movement) comes naturally to them, and they are also strong planners and organizers. They can coordinate numerous underlings in the building or disassembling of a set, creating and destroying various façades with breathtaking speed. They collect things with a magpie's voracity, storing props in hidden trunks and warehouses for use in a later con. Many are also excellent forgers, able to falsify identification papers, bank notes, or even individual signatures depending upon the need. Forgery can serve as an excellent source of income in between big cons, as well as exposing the manager to different letterheads, check types, and other forms of paperwork which may prove invaluable on a future con.

## The Tailer

A tailer is sort of an auxiliary babysitter, following the mark when the roper or inside man can't. He keeps tabs on the victim's whereabouts, notes the places he goes and the people he sees, and reports anything unusual back to the inside man. Tailers also serve as de facto bodyguards — especially when the mark has obtained the money, but not yet delivered it to the inside man. (It wouldn't do to let some anonymous mugger or street thief make off with the con artists' hard-earned pay-off!) Many crews use more than one tailer, who follow the mark in rotating shifts to prevent him from becoming suspicious.

When not serving in their primary function, tailers act as lookouts and guards, keeping an eye out not only for the mark, but also for any intrusive cops or rival criminals looking to wreck the con. They can quickly raise a hue and cry if trouble arrives, and are expected to take care of it themselves if it involves the mark.

Tailers are naturally very good at following people discreetly, but they also can be burly and intimidating if the situation calls for it. They make good wheelmen too, since tracking a mark sometimes calls for automobile use. Of all the con artist roles, the tailer is most likely to be armed, and may be employed during the con itself if gunplay or fisticuffs are called for. They usually have the inside man's phone number memorized and can call in extra help if the situation merits. The good ones make a habit of memorizing all the phone booth locations in a given area and a few have even experimented with surplus walkie-talkies in an effort to keep their compatriots informed.

## The Shill

Shills are often little more than moving scenery. They fill out the façade crafted by the manager: appearing as prosperous gamblers at a fake racing parlor, for example, or secretaries at a phony law firm. They are sometimes used in building or teardown operations (especially when time is a factor), and may serve other minor clerical duties as well. Otherwise, they are the incidental players in the big con.

Most shills are recruited on the fly and given only a short time to acclimate themselves to the con (the fewer people involved, the easier it is to keep the con a secret). Many are grifters in their own right who are between jobs, or are willing to help out a friend in exchange for a small cut of the take. They often have several "characters" which they can play, depending upon the exact nature of the con. The inside man or manager instructs them how to behave, and they simply go about their appointed task, selling the false front as best they can and otherwise endeavoring to stay out of the way. Shills are rarely a permanent part of the crew, but come and go depending upon what other jobs they have going.

Most of the time in a role-playing session, shills will be played by NPCs; their roles are too minor to be populated by player characters or their adversaries. Once in a while, however, a PC may take on the role of a shill — either to earn a little extra money, or as part of a larger storyline which the GM is planning.

## The Fixer

Technically, the fixer isn't part of any crew; he merely helps to facilitate them. He's usually the owner of a bar or pool hall: some legal profession that keeps the police from looking too closely. Every city has some place where con artists congregate — safe refuge to talk among themselves, compare battle scars, and speak about their work in the open without drawing the ire of an innocent bartender. Fixers run such locations and don't strictly belong to the con artist community, permitting them to take a neutral position. However, such a position implicitly entails certain duties vital to any big con operation.

Foremost among these is communication conduit. Con artists looking to find each other often leave messages with the fixer, who dutifully relays them when the pertinent party comes in. In this manner, he can be used to help assemble a crew, or provide shills on the fly when a big con is going down. He also serves as a point of contact, allowing any member of the crew to contact the roper or inside man simply by going to the fixer and conveying the message. Finally, a fixer's place often provides protection for longtime con men — a place where they can go if the grift falls apart, or if they need someplace to lie low. The fixer often has contacts with local mob and law enforcement officials, and can deflect them when harboring a grifter on the run. Most fixers are good at keeping their ears open and their mouths shut; they tend to be skilled with a baseball bat or other implements of civil order, but their only other required trait is possession of a locale where grifters can meet and a willingness to lend a hand in exchange for a quiet pay-off.