

EPISTOLARY

*A game of Letters
and Monsters*

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Created for the 2012 Game Chef

A note from the author to his readers, 4/15/12

First of all, thanks for your attention. This is *Epistolary*, a game meant to create a playing experience that mimics an epistolary novel... that is to say, a story which is told entirely in the form of letters, newspaper articles, and other found documents. The most obvious comparison is Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, of which this is an obvious pastiche. If you haven't read it, you probably should.

A few notes before I begin; this game is set a hundred years in the past, and the gamebook is written in character, as an epistolary guide which posits to come from the same general time. Being epistolary, it's not necessarily written in the most coherent or chronological fashion... please, give it a chance and read it through before you dismiss it as incomprehensible.

(That said, if you do read it through and still find it incomprehensible, I shall have to take the blame for that one.)

Secondly, this document is assuming that all the players are going to be men. What can I say, 1912 is sexist. Any archetype can be played as either sex; Whitchester may be exactly as liberal as you wish it to be with regards to female officers, doctors, and soldiers.

Finally, the game as it currently appears was written for the 2012 Game Chef competition, the theme being "Last Chance" (represented by the PCs being the last chance to save Whitchester, and the game itself being intended for single-session play). The ingredients included Lanterns, Doctors, and Mimics, all of which contribute to the narrative, as well as the following

Forge forums, which are represented in the focus on investigation and stories told in flashback, respectively.

<http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=18687.0>

<http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=20387.0>

Finally, please know that this is an early draft of a game I wish to continue work on; most importantly, the choices of archetypes and monsters are limited at the moment and, in time, I hope to add more of each.

Thank you,

Ed Turner.

EPISTOLARY

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Letter from the GM to his Players, date unknown.

Dear Valued Player,

Greetings! I hope the evening finds you well, and in a mood for suspicion and horror. The game I've planned for tonight is named *Epistolary*, and is meant to be played by four to six, in addition to myself. I shall be the game's master, or GM, and you shall be embodying specific characters, residents of the small coastal city of Whitchester.

All is not at it seems, as the city has recently been visited by a creature able to mimic human form; a bloodthirsty beast stalks the streets at night, but during the day appears to be as human as you or I. Indeed, as you look about the table at the other Monster Hunters, for that is what you shall be, you must bear in mind that one of your companions may not be what he seems at all!

How delightfully suspenseful!

Exciting times ahead!

Yours, Sincerely,
Edward D. Turner

Very well, let us not waste time on formalities; accompanying this letter are several articles which will highlight the rules and setting of the game, and I ask that you peruse them before you begin play, however, there is some material that must remain secret! For best enjoyment of the game, I am going to request that you NOT look at any of the pages at the end of this document which cover matters which might be best kept hidden from the eyes of players; this include information of the nature and powers of the monster stalking Whitchester, as well as secrets haunting the other Monster Hunters. I understand the temptation but, alas, must put my foot down... some information is for GM's eyes only, and should only be revealed to you once the game is afoot.

I have set up a play area which we might use, and prepared the appropriate materials. My dining room has a large table we can be arranged around, with room for five or more, easily, and I've taken the liberty of delivering my phonograph into the room, that we might enjoy the festivities with the accompaniment of Messrs. Pachelbel, Vivaldi, Handel, and whomever else might lend texture to the silence. I have also raided the cellar for a fine red which will nicely accompany the savory finger-food repast we shall be enjoying.

Shopping list recovered from Mr. Turner's ashbin.

Game tonight! Remember to get the necessary bits!

- Skill cards: One deck of standard playing cards (remember to pull the aces out before you shuffle!)
- Prop cards: Blank index cards (four per player, three labeled "item," "location," and "character," and one unique card for each Archetype).
- Archetype cards: Business card paper, and the printing templates; don't let the players see these in advance! (n.b.: if the printing press fails, I can copy the information onto extra index cards.)
- The Quill: Any totem which can identify the narrator. I've a brass candlestick which would be ideal.
- Additional index cards for passing notes, with pencils, etc.

Add'lly, I'm lacking both a soft option (Brie?) and crackers: visit the cheesemongers WITH HASTE.

From the desk of Ronald Twain, Lord Mayor of Whitchester:

Eight corpses in two weeks. I've tried to convince the medical examiners to classify some of them as "accidental" but with no luck; they've all been killed and mutilated in the same fashion, no way to deny it. Panic is stalking the streets, panic as dangerous as the killer, and I've got to do something.

I'm calling a town meeting. Tomorrow night, we'll have a civil discussion, lay the facts on the table... and I'll beg somebody to rise to the occasion and save the town. A hunting party, that's what we need. I can get them set up, share what little I know, and pray that they have the skills to save us.

Alas, we don't have a professional monster hunter at our disposal, but some of my residents could fit the bill; they have a monster hunter's archetype.

- The Aristocrat—though he had always disdained to mingle with commoners, the monster's bloodbath should bring him out of his mansion. He may not be physically imposing, but he has money and power enough to protect his town.
- The Doctor—in the months since he moved to Whitchester, he's made no friends, and remained ever aloof in his laboratory. Still, as disaster looms, he is resolute in his belief that the powers of science will save us all.

- The Servant—dependable, loyal, hard-working, and rarely-seen, he was the perfect servant until he lost his master, and with it his livelihood, to the monster. He is low-born, but he is shrewd, skillful, and, one hopes, seeking vengeance.
- The Constable—when the Capitol learned of the murders, they dispatched their most reliable officer to investigate. He is no detective, but he is brave, good-hearted, and will not allow injustice to persist if he may stop it.
- The Scholar—when he learned that his parents were victims, he left his studies at the Academy and returned to a home he hadn't seen in years to mourn. He is frail and bookish, but he is cleverer than most and anxious to prove himself.
- The Soldier—he's returned from the war older, scarred, and changed, only to find a worse battle on his doorstep. Still, where there is violence, he has a duty so use his military training and strength to return peace to his countrymen.

Let us hope some of them, four at least, are moved to join the hunt. Else... may God have mercy on us all.

Letter from the GM to his players, hand-delivered.

Hello gents; I know we went over the rules last week, but Paul asked that I jot down a reminder he could glance at before the game begins, and I thought it wise enough that I had copies made for us all to have on hand.

I shall endeavor to be brief.

Prior to play:

First, all players select an archetype to portray, remembering that none may be dually represented and any might, in reality, be the monster.

I shall present you with your Archetype cards that detail your powers; keep these hidden from the others. Each archetype also gains a unique Prop card. You shall then construct a hand of five cards, drawn from any combination of Archetype, Prop, or Skill cards (for your initial hand, you may select the Skill cards of your choice). The remaining Skill cards and unused Prop cards should be placed in easy reach of all, while your unused Archetype cards stay in front of you.

We shall chat a while pleasantly, detailing our characters and our familiarity with Whitchester, and have a lovely time, but at some point, I, as the GM, shall silence you, and the game shall begin.

The structure of play:

A player shall select the Quill from the center of the table; if two players both want the Quill, they may determine ownership of it via a silent Game of Chance.

The possessor of the Quill is known as the Narrator, and his oration is meant to mimic either a journal entry or letter to another player or non-player character: it should begin with a “Dear Whomever” and end with a “Yours, sincerely, et cetera,” as appropriate. Within those bookends, the player is free to describe his attitudes, ideas, memories and concerns about the state of the investigation, as well as, most importantly, the conversations he has with the other Hunters and the actions he takes in order to further the investigation.

(Importantly, the Narrator is expected to be honest... he might lie about his emotions and intents, and he may dissemble in conversation, but lying about his actions is difficult. If he must, he is honor-bound to write on a blank index card the actual truth and present it to me, letting the entire party suspect there is a lie, but not know the truth. He may also write on an index card to ask me a question, or attempt an action in secret.)

When I suspect that the task the Narrator describes will be difficult or that their failure would be narratively intriguing, I will

raise a hand to pause them, and draw a number of cards from the Skill deck—one card for tasks of middling difficulty, two or even three cards for more complex tasks. Using these Skill cards (and any cards handed to me at this point by the players), I will inform the narrator with a nod or shake of my head if he must describe the action as succeeding or failing.

I, during this, will hand notes to inform the Narrator of major events, though he will mostly be filling in details from his own imagination. Occasionally I may interrupt the action to provide articles and notes from the Whitchester Lantern, or, rarely, diary entries of non-player characters which provide necessary; this may even interrupt the Narrator, to reveal, say, an item he discovers during an investigation, or a body which he encounters whilst searching the woods, or other information which the character must be privy to, but the player may not have expected.

When he has finished his thoughts, the Narrator will sign his letter and return the Quill to the center of the table, at which point the players may redraw cards if necessary, and another player may retrieve the Quill. This continues until the Monster is either killed, or reveals his evil plot has come to fruition (for indeed, it has an evil plot). And of course, a delightful time should be had by all.

Yours,
Ed Turner

From the Journal of Paul Crase, player.

An epistolary RPG... 'twas a strange experience indeed, though fun. I'll write more on it later, but I'll jot this down, that I wouldn't forget: our GM gets quite upset if you speak out of turn.

"It's an epistolary novel!" he told me, after I'd made a suggestion to a fellow player. "Only the player holding the Quill may speak. It is meant to mimic a narrative told in letters! This is why my guidance is in mime, where possible, and newspaper articles when not, that the illusion not be shattered."

"But what if I have a suggestion for another player?" I protested.

"You may forward him a Prop card. You may wait until you hold the quill and suggest it then. You may attempt to arrive in the current scene."

"But if I'm not to speak, how does it help to be in the scene?"

"That is the one exception," he admitted. "Dialog may be expressed normally... indeed, it must. It is uncouth to put words in another player's mouth. Besides, authors in epistolary fiction are noted for their incredible capacity to recite dialogue."

I shan't soon forget the rule of silence, I think.

—PC

Letter from Angela, the GM's maidservant, to an unknown player:

Hello love,

Right, the master's been getting hot and bovered on account of he finks he's explained how the cards work well enough, but you seem to disagree. Now I'll pay Mr. T. his due deference, to be sure, but he can get a mite wordy on the subject of his little games, so I said to meself, if it ain't too familiar, I might send you this little reminder.

So, you start with five cards, and whenever a scene ends, you draw back up to five (and if you've already got five or more, well, it don't matter none). Draw face-down from the Skill deck, or pick up any of the Plot cards or your Archetype cards what've been discarded,. It's first come, first served with the Prop cards, , so be quick about it.

Now, your Archetype cards are unique powers and they tell you what they do. Some'll tell you to show 'em to the Narrator. The rest, you give straight to the GM. Either way, once you've shown 'em, put 'em in a discard pile close to you.

Skill cards are normal playing cards, except the values of the numbered cards don't matter, and the suits of the face cards don't matter. Also, your GM'll be holding onto the aces. When I say "hearts," I mean the 2 through 10 of hearts, and when I say "faces," I mean all the jacks, queens, and kings.

Each suit stands for a sort of skill.

- Hearts for feats of strength and force.
- Spades for feats of cunning and skill.
- Diamonds for feats of agility and speed.
- Clubs for feats of charisma and trickery.
- Faces for nothin' at all, they're neutral.

So, you know how, when the GM wants to challenge you, he draws some skill cards? Well, he's also gonna pick a suit, and show you lot the ace, to let you know what skill you need. When he draws, each matching suit is called a Benefaction, and the other suits are called Impediments, and the faces ain't called anyfing at all. If you got more Benefactions than Impediments, he'll nod to tell you you succeeded, otherwise, he'll shake his head.

Here's the trick with that: when he draws, everyone except the Narrator can give him a Skill card to influence the outcome one way or the other. If you want someone to succeed, or fail, you can give up a card. Also, since playing cards is the only way to get 'em outta your hand, you'll wanna play your neutral cards whenever you get the chance, coz they're clutter otherwise, right enough.

Last you got Prop cards. Three of these are blank— whenever you think that somefing's gonna be important to the story, pick one up and write what that thing is, and pop it right in your hand. Easy as pie, o'course you can only do it the three times,

and you gotta show everyone what it is, coz you can't have two cards wif the same prop on 'em.

If you got a Prop card in your hand you can do two fings wif it: if you ain't narrating, you can try and hand it to the bloke what is, and if he accepts it, he's making a promise to visit the location or use the item or talk to the person or whatever right quick.

If you are narrating, and you get in a challenge what involves the prop in some way, give the GM the card. You get a Benefaction for your trouble, and he'll toss it in the discard pile in the center of the table.

Oh, and the GM can make Prop cards too, if he wants; they work just like yours except, well, the GM made them.

Hope that made fings a little clearer!

Angela

Letter from a Player to the GM, date unknown:

Edward,

First of all, thanks for inviting me to the game and explaining the rules. It's not my normal sort of game, yeah, but it's interesting. I think it could be a laugh. But hey, while you were talking about how health works, I got a bit confounded, and so did Pete, and we tried to hash it out afterwards among ourselves, so I want to make sure I got it right.

If one of us should fail to defend ourselves, or fail at a task which might have hurt us, you'll point at us to say that we've been hurt, yeah? Or even psychologically scarred, or summat? And when that happens, we've got to grab a card, either from our hand or from one of the discards, and Lock it, which is to say, put it face up in front of us in an obvious sort of way. Right so far?

Locked cards stink, because they mean there's a card that we can't use. And they stink because if there are no cards we can legally Lock, we get dealt a killing blow, right?

Now, if we Lock a Skill card, then every time we try to use a skill of that suit we get an additional Impediment, nothing to be done about it. Oh, and we can't Lock more than two cards of the same suit, yeah? And we can't lock face cards either, right?

But if we lock a Prop card, it means that the prop has turned hostile somehow, and then when anybody gets involved in a challenge with it, you're gonna draw an extra card for the difficulty?

So, last thing... a Narrator might un-Lock a card once a narration by spending some time recovering—you'll give him a nod to say he's gotten healthier. Or, as often as he wants, he can Burn a card, and that means he picks up the Locked card and uses it immediately, and he can even do this to use a Skill card on himself, which he normally couldn't. Except after doing this, he's gotta flip it over and lay it face down in front of himself. It won't hurt no more, but it can't be re-used at all, and it won't go away.

Oh, and because Burning a card is exerting a major force of will, it cripples us pretty bad. Once we've got five Burned cards in front of us, we're doomed to die quickly, right after the end of that letter. Yeah?

Last thing, just to make sure I got this. If a Hunter dies, then the Narrator can discard and destroy a Prop card to recruit a follower... either the person, or someone from the location, or someone tied to the item, or whatever. These followers only draw up to four cards, and they got no Archetype cards, but otherwise they work like Hunters except, and I want to make sure I got this right, if the Monster can kill or disable all the Hunters, the game ends even if there are healthy assistants? Because assistants just

aren't up to snuff, and would be picked off without the Hunters, or something like that?

Oh, and if the Monster gets killed, the Hunters, and the world, I guess, win. Right?

I mean, it sounds right, that's what Pete and I thought, but I wanted to check for sure. I mean, what with the mystery solving and investigation, that'll keep me right busy, so I don't want to be worrying that I'm mixed up about health.

Yrs.,
Perry Chambers