

Red-Rimmed Eyes

A story-game about a monster.

“And even as its claws sunk into a man’s shoulders, even as it tore through yet another one of my friends, I looked at its red-rimmed eyes and just had to wonder: had it just been crying?”

A game by Joe McDonald.

This game is intended for a large group of people.

you are an adventurer

You have been slaying the evils of the world for countless years. You've slain goblins and orcs before, and seen their green blood etched across the rocky ground. You've slain small dragons, and dodged their last breath of fire. You've slain enemies, and once or twice you've slain friends.

Or maybe you haven't, and you are new to the world of heroism. Maybe your sword is still virgin steel, and you've never witnessed the agony of bloodshed. Maybe you are still hot for your first real hunt. Maybe you don't really know what you're doing out here.

Regardless of your past, you are here now. You have been hired by the mayor of Joshuan to rid the forests of a deadly beast that has terrorized the town for months. You have been hired to kill a ferocious beast that you've never heard of before. An *owlbear*.

you don't live in Joshuan

It's a charming community, it really is. But it's important to always keep this in mind: You do not live in Joshuan, and the people you are adventuring with are not your friends. You have been assigned to an adventuring party with a bunch of strangers. These people are do-gooders, paid mercenaries, and militia members. You don't know if they have families or live alone; whether they have jobs or are transient bums; whether they are poor or have overflowing coffers.

you aren't perfect

It's important to admit that to yourself every once in a while. Sometimes you do the wrong thing. When you're a powerful, broad-shouldered warrior, a single mistake can leave quite a lot of impact.

It's important to keep that in the back of your mind: You've done wrong before, and you've seen the bloodshed that can result. You don't like doing the wrong thing.

the woods of Joshuan

The woods surrounding Joshuan are often described in fearful whispers. The inhabitants of Joshuan are highly superstitious and believe that the forest consumes and corrupts any townsfolk who enter without the proper protection and prayers.

The woods are thick, dense and gloomy. Barely any light pierces through the dark green canopy overhead. Thick briars and ferns rise up, making some areas almost impossible to make progress through. It sometimes feels like the trees and briar walls are steering you in a certain direction, like the forest has a plan of its own.

The forest rises over the Joshuan Plateau, and it seems that the grounds on which the forest stand is the only fertile land in the county: farmers have no avail with crops, and outside the thick forest it is dry plains and rocky hills.

the story

Townsfolk say that a hundred years ago, a plague fell upon the district of Joshuan. Locusts swarmed and destroyed crops. They brought with them a horrible pox that nearly wiped out the entire district. Goblins and strange ghostly things marauded and pillaged. Entire cities were burnt to the ground, and it seemed that there was no end in sight.

The mayor was visited that night, in a dream, by three angels. They told him what needed to be done: All the children in the district would need to be slaughtered if anyone was to live. As hard as it was, he issued the orders for slaughter the next day. All children under the age of ten were ceremonially murdered. The locusts, goblins, ghosts and disease all retreated that night.

It is said that those evils now live in the woods. They live there, and they've been joined by a new terror: the owlbear. And now, the owlbear is leaving the woods at night.

the quest

The same fear that plagued the old days has returned to Joshuan. The owlbear stalks at night, killing border guards and terrorizing cattle. It is only so long before its sharp claws and hooked beak find their way into the village proper.

You've been hired to hunt down this owlbear and slay it. If your party brings back the owlbear's skull, you'll all be presented with untold riches.

creating a character

First Step: Equipment

Each character picks one piece of equipment from the list below:

- ☛ A Lantern.
- ☛ Flint and Steel.
- ☛ A Compass.
- ☛ Rope.
- ☛ A medic's kit.
- ☛ A crystal ball.
- ☛ A religious tome.

Write down exactly why the party won't be able to survive without your piece of equipment. Your reason may involve ghosts, goblins, the owlbear, disease, darkness, locusts, terrain, or any evil which is external to the party. One, and only one, player must involve the owlbear in the equipment.

An Example of Equipment

A Lantern: Without this, the party will be unable to see the goblins which are sneaking up on them, and will be open for attack.

Second Step: Pick Traits

There are 3 character fields:

Empathy. This describes how perceptive you are of others, and how much you care about others.

Hostility. This describes how aggressive and violent you can become, and how confrontational you are.

Momentum. This describes how much you will fixate on something, how riled up you can get, and how far you will go before giving it a rest.

For each of the three fields, write one line of text which describes how you use this field to others' disbenefit. This can be a way of directly attacking someone, or it can be a subtle way of manipulating others.

After selecting a trait for each field, you must determine their mechanical value. Roll 2d6. This is the numerical value of your first trait. Do the same thing for the other two traits.

An Example of Traits

I will defend others when they are being attacked. 6

I kill first, ask questions later. 4

I feel the need to always have the last word. 9

Another Example of Traits

I only hurt others in order to save them more pain later. 9

I yell at others, and have a hair trigger temper. 7

I have a hard time letting go of attachments. 5

the Stream of Life

In Red-Rimmed Eyes, characters will die.

As the party adventures deeper into the forest, they are in more and more trouble. Evil things start appearing both inside the forest and inside themselves. These things will wear away at the party, and eventually claim a victim.

The Stream of Life represents how much resistance is left in the party, before a victim gets claimed. Put a single counter in the middle of the table. This counter currently represents the Stream of Life.

Each counter put into the Stream of Life represents a fathom measurement.

mark twain

Whenever the Stream of Life has at least two fathom depth, the characters are fine. Two fathoms depth is required for safe passage. Whenever the water drops below two fathoms depth, known as mark twain, the passage becomes hazardous. A character is bound to die.

Once the Stream of Life has dropped below mark twain, it must be refreshed by killing off a player-character member of the party. This must happen in the next scene.

the first campfire tale

The game starts with a campfire tale. A player is selected, or volunteers, to tell the first campfire story.

This story is a campfire horror story, which involves all the player characters. It tells the story of how they entered the woods in search of an owlbear, but in the end they were destroyed by their own human flaws. There should be a core theme in the story, such as treachery, dishonesty, greed, sin, or something equally abstract and dangerous. There can be no mention of anything but the owlbear and themselves.

The characters all go to bed fixating on this theme, and wondering if the story held some grain of truth.

An Example of the First Campfire Tale

Tonith Steeling looked around the campfire. “The beast was said to be ten feet tall, but judging by its tracks it must have been at least twelve. Pellets were dropped across the forest floor. Peering into the pellets, you could see the remains of mice and lizards, and small lettered tiles. It was then that we became scared.”

Tonith Steeling pointed across the fire to Gable Garder, and said, “Gable thought we should turn back. He convinced us that even if it was cowardly, it was our only hope for salvation. Little did we know that cowardice would be our end. The owlbear smelled our fear, and tracked us down through it. It was our fear that lured him to us, and it was our fear that led to our demise.”

killing off the first character

The Stream of Life begins with only one die in it, which means that someone needs to die in order to restore mark twain. This happens in the scene following the first campfire story.

During the scene, the theme which was established in the campfire story comes to the forefront. In an attempt to prevent this theme from dooming the party, a character will kill another, abandon another, or force another to leave the party.

This is done through a Dispute.

Any character may Accuse another of possessing the theme. If they do, they pick a Trait through which to confront the character with. They then roll 2d6.

All characters who wish to Accuse must pick a Trait and roll 2d6.

The character with the highest score wins the Dispute, and convinces all party members that his or her target is destroying the party from the inside. That target is killed off, as narrated by the high scorer.

For each player that rolled dice, add one counter to the Stream of Life.

Each player that rolled dice checks their Trait value. If they rolled below it, the trait's value is replaced by the value of the die roll. This applies to the party member that gets killed, too.

An Example of Killing off the First Character

After Tonith Steeling's campfire story of owlbears and cowardice, the party goes to sleep. They dream of how cowardice will destroy them if they aren't careful.

In the next scene, Schindle Goldenleaf sees Kurn Duumer nervously glancing into his crystal ball. Schindle accuses him of being so much of a coward that he couldn't just put faith into the situation. He uses his "I start fights" (Hostility) trait to Accuse.

Kurn Duumer says that the crystal ball showed him something shocking. He saw Bilton Saber running through the forest. He extrapolates that Bilton must have been running away, out of cowardice. He uses his "I rant" (Momentum) trait to Accuse.

Gable Gardner jumps to Bilton's defence. He uses his "I defend my friends" (Empathy) trait to Accuse Kurn Duumer of being such a coward that he lashes out at others.

They roll dice. Schindle gets 10, Kurn gets 7, and Gable gets 9. Schindle wins the Dispute, and convinces the others that Kurn is a coward and a weak link. Schindle narrates taunting him into a scrap, drawing his sword and killing Kurn.

Three counters are added to the Stream of Life, bringing it up to 4, which is well above mark twain.
Because Gable's roll of 9 is below his Trait value of 10, his Trait is now set at 9.

the ghosts of the past

Each character carries a piece of equipment with them. When they die, the equipment is somehow lost to the party, or unusable by any of the other members.

Each player designed a threat that only their own piece of equipment could prevent. When a player dies, their threat can now open fire against the party.

external threats

In the beginning, the only thing that can harm the party is itself. When that first character dies, however, the party loses valuable defences. The equipment that character carried is lost, and the thing which it protected against can now attack the party.

When a character dies, discard all but the highest Trait value they have. External Threats have only a single Trait, which is used to attack the party. Name that trait.

An Example of an External Threat

Kurn just died.

His equipment, the crystal ball, protected the party from surprise attacks from the goblins.

He will now play the goblins.

His highest Trait value was 10.

The Goblins will thus have a single trait set at 10.

He decides to name the trait “conniving, devious plots”.

A scene which pits the party against the external threat is called an Encounter.

As long as the Stream of Life is above mark twain, each scene can either be a Dispute, a Campfire Tale or an Encounter.

a new campfire tale

At any time, a player can introduce a new campfire tale. The tale follows the same basic format, but the player may opt to focus the story on new external threats instead of the owlbear, if they so desire.

Regardless, the story must have a theme which outlines a human flaw which destroys the party in the end. This new theme replaces the old one in future Disputes.

encounters

The group decides which External Threat (if more than one have been created, so far) is attacking the party.

The external threat rolls 3d6.

All characters that wish to actively defend the party roll 2d6.

If the External Threat wins the encounter but rolls under or equal to its trait value, nothing happens.

If the External Threat wins the encounter, then it will claim a number of fathoms from the party's Sea of Life equal to the amount it succeeded its Trait value by.

If by removing these counters the External Threat drops the number of counters to zero, then a member of the party is killed during the encounter. This member is chosen at the External Threat's controller's decision. If a character didn't defend the party, it can't die. After the character is killed, the Sea of Life is restored to two fathoms (mark twain.)

If by removing these counters the External Threat drops the number of counters to one, then no characters are killed in combat, but because the total is lower than mark twain a new Dispute will happen during the next scene.

If a member of the party wins the encounter, then the External Threat loses from its Trait value an amount equal to the amount the party member succeeded the Threat by. In this way, if the External Threat's trait is ever dropped to zero, it is removed from the game.

An Example of an Encounter

After Schindle died, he became "Ghost" with the trait "terrifying assault" set at 8.

During this encounter, Ghost rolls 3d6 and gets 11.

Two characters each roll 2d6, and get 5 and 8, respectively.

Because the Ghost won, and succeeded the players by 3, it removes 3 fathoms/counters from the Stream of Life. This brings the total counters to 0, meaning a character dies.

Because only two characters rolled to defend, only they can be targeted. The Ghost chooses one, and describes swallowing the character whole with its misty presence.

Because someone was killed, the Stream is reset at 2 counters.

Another Example of an Encounter

The Ghost decides to make another attack the following morning.

It rolls its 3d6 and gets 6.

Two party members each roll 2d6, and get 4 and 9 respectively.

Because they won the encounter, they beat the ghost back easily. Because the ghost lost by 3 points, its Trait is reduced by 3 points: from 8 to 5.

The party cheers its victory, but knows that its only so long before the ghost returns.

where do we go from here?

If all External Threats have their traits dropped to zero and thus are removed, and the Stream of Life still sits above mark twain, then the characters must enter a Dispute about what to do next. Like all disputes, someone will die, which creates a new External Threat.

arranging scenes

The first scene in Red-Rimmed Eyes is always a campfire tale.
The second scene in Red-Rimmed Eyes is always a Dispute.

After that, scenes can alternate between Dispute, Campfire Tale and Encounter as the players decide amongst themselves.

The only statute is that if the Stream of Life falls to one, a Dispute must follow.

One character has a piece of equipment that is protecting the party from the owlbear.
When that character dies, the party enters endgame: an encounter with the Owlbear.

Endgame : the owlbear

When the character who's equipment protects against the owlbear dies, the owlbear is loosed into the game.

The next scene will be the final encounter with the owlbear. Just like when any other External Threat is created, the player whose character who just died now plays the owlbear.

In this scene, the owlbear player describes how earthshakingly scary and fearsome it is. The player can't describe the owlbear attacking though. The owlbear doesn't attack, it defends.

The character with the lowest momentum score describes the party charging into combat, and attacking with amazing force and strength.

The player with the lowest empathy score describes how he or she watches in horror as his or her comrades attack an innocent and scared animal. The player must show us how cruel the party is being.

The player with the lowest empathy score must try and stop the party, and the player with the lowest hostility score must describe how he or she intervenes, and tries to shut the empathetic one up.

Each character must choose to attack the owlbear, attack those trying to stop the assault, or attack those continuing the assault. The character with the lowest empathy score and the character with the lowest hostility score will automatically target each other.

Each living party member rolls 2d6. The owlbear rolls d6.

If the winning roller was targeting a party member, that character is killed in the heat of battle.

If the winning roller was targeting the owlbear, it is wounded. This only serves to make the beast even more mad. It will now roll with an extra die.

This combat continues in rounds until only one party member still stands.

An Example of the Owlbear Encounter

Harper Bellin dies, and thus there is no equipment left that can protect them from the owlbear. That night, the owlbear lumbers close to their camp. Harper's player now controls the owlbear.

Jake Gustaff has the lowest Momentum score, and narrates charging all gung-ho into combat. Others leap into the fray, and start slashing at the startled beast.

Gable Gardner has the lowest Empathy score, and describes watching in horror as the owlbear is attacked. He yells for his friends to retreat, and hold off their attacks.

Jake Gustaff also has the lowest Hostility score, and thus describes shoving Gable Gardner back, and then yelling at the men to keep assaulting.

Now, people roll dice. Jake and Gable automatically target each other. Henry Killjoy targets the owlbear. Jonathan Height targets Gable, realizing that this animal lover is getting in the way. The owlbear targets Gable, in confusion. Everyone rolls 2d6 (except the owlbear, who rolls d6). Henry gets an 11 and wins, and thus the owlbear takes a wound (and will roll 2d6 from now on.)

Everyone chooses the same targets this time, except the owlbear targets Henry. Everyone rolls 2d6 and the owlbear wins with a 12. The owlbear tears through Henry, ripping his body in half.

This time, Jake and Gable target each other (because they must), Jonathan targets the owlbear, and the owlbear targets Jonathan. Everyone rolls 2d6, and Jake wins. He trips Gable and stabs him, ensuring that he won't get in the way of success again.

Now, Jonathan and Jake both target the owlbear, and the owlbear targets Jonathan again. The owlbear wins with a 9, and narrates killing Jonathan. It is down to just Jake and the owlbear now.

the last moment

That final living party member now looks into the eyes of the owlbear. This is a moment of realization. The player describes how everything flashes before the character's eyes now.

Now, the character tells a story – one which parallels the campfire stories. This story begins with a fearsome party of adventurers in search of an evil owlbear. The story must have a central theme which explains why the party was reduced to a single, fearful, doomed man standing in front of a confused, scared and aggressive animal.

This story flashes through the character's head, while the owlbear stares the character down.

The owlbear now gets to make a simple decision: It can either keep raging and snap the character in two, or realize it has won and retreat, leaving a sole survivor. The player narrates the owlbear's final decision.

Whether this man returns to Joshuan or not, the mayor doesn't issue another quest party.

The end.

This game is part of the BPG Owlbear Game Contest.

