SECRETS in Suburbia

A role-playing game of hatred, desperation and scandal

By Warren Merrifield

HATRED, DESPERATION AND SCANDAL. WHAT MORE COULD YOU WANT?

Secrets in Suburbia is a role-playing game written in 24 hours as an entry into the 1st 'Ronnies'. It is based on two of the keywords provided (Suburban and Hatred) and is influenced pretty heavily by the TV show *Desperate Housewives*.

Introduction

You have got everything you were told you ever wanted. Nice house in the suburbs, loving partner, 2.4 smiling children, white-picket fence, the works. But you aren't happy. In fact you hate yourself for having all this stuff, and as such, the perfection appearance doesn't represent the reality. Maybe your kids are off the rails, maybe you can't afford the mortgage repayments, and maybe there is infidelity in the marriage. You were managing, just about, living in quiet desperation, until the scandal erupted.

This changed everything. Some secrets about you or your family that you had hoped would never be uncovered have been brought to the surface. If they got out, they would spread through the suburbs like wildfire and you and your family would never be able to show your faces in public again. If you can get to the bottom of what caused this scandal, then maybe you could deflect attention away from yourself. But the more lying you have to do behind false smiles the more your self-hatred and the hatred for the lifestyle which put you in this situation builds. And what will happen when it just gets too much to bear?

You aren't alone here - you just *know* that there are others who are caught up in all of this, and that if you support each other you might be able to deal with the situation and get to the bottom of things together. And, hey, if that doesn't work, you could uncover the dirt on *them*, and use their problems to give you time to escape your own.

As the stress in your suburban lifestyle builds, things are going to get out of hand and it's up to you, as a player, to decide how this ends. Do you keep up appearances and deal with your responsibilities, or do you go off the rails and find a way out of suburbia?

The Scandal

This should be done together with the entire group. Firstly, the entire group should collectively describe the suburb in which the game will take place and then all agree on a scandal that has just happened within it. Then each player chooses someone who lives in this suburb and is somehow involved with this scandal.

A Scandal could be *"One of the most-loved housewives in the lane has committed suicide out of the blue."* Characters could then be friends of the deceased. Another could be *"One of the most respectable families is found to be running an amateur porn studio in their house."* Characters could be family members, neighbours, 'actresses' who would rather remain unknown, etc.

Note that the scandal is something that is discovered *right at the start of play*, but there has to be a question behind it. This question usually arises naturally from the scandal – *why* did the housewife commit suicide? *Who* was involved in this pornography? *How* could it happen? Any question is OK, but it is important that the whole group agrees upon it and that no one player character would know the whole answer to it.

The scandal has a rating that determines how long the game will last. A starting rating of 4 times the number of player characters involved in it is a reasonable suggestion, although it should be agreed by the entire group.

Once the scandal has been defined and noted down, each player should flesh out the character they have chosen in more detail. This, again, should be a group effort, with players making and receiving suggestions from everyone else.

> **Example:** We will use a single example suburb all the way throughout the book. I'll go with the idea mentioned above -- One of the most respectable families is found to be running an amateur porn studio in their house. We will call that family the Smiths and make them an oldish couple that moved in a several years ago. They have no children, but some of the players want the family to be bigger, so we agree to say that they often had nieces, nephews and the like to visit for extended periods of time.

We consider various questions before settling on "Why did this lovely couple get into the porn business?" And to make things easier, I will say that the couple have flown out to Hawaii after the scandal erupted. Finally, I rate this scandal as a 12.

Character Creation

After the players have chosen roughly what characters they want to play it is time for them to define their characters more and create all the details. The core of each character is their Secret. This secret should be related to the Scandal and be shocking enough that the character would be virtually driven out of the suburb if it were made public. It should also be something that is put at risk of discovery by the discovery of the scandal. Examples could be *"I once appeared in a porn shoot"* or *"I'm having an affair with the housewife's gardener."* This secret cannot come out completely to the other characters unless the player wishes it to at the endgame, but the stress of keeping it hidden will cause its own problems.

Secondly, the characters have three Pressures that weigh on them. Each stress has a numerical rating and a short description. The rating of a stress may never drop below one, but may rise with no limits. Although the higher the rating of a stress the harder it will make the character's life.

Starting characters need to split nine points across these three stresses, with a minimum of one point in each. The relative rating of these three stresses at the Endgame determines how things will finally turn out for that character.

The first stress is the character's Burden. This is a general responsibility that weighs heavily upon them and gets in the way of leading a happy suburban life. It could be money issues, unruly children, an unhappy marriage, etc. It is a good idea to have the burden as the general case of the character's secret. For example, if a character had the secret *"I'm having an affair with the gardener"*, a good burden would be *"I'm unhappy in my marriage."*

The second stress is the Suspicion of the character. This reflects how much the rest of the suburb and the non-player characters within it distrust the character and their motives. It is also a rough gauge of how much people are aware of the characters Secret. The description should specify what makes the suburb suspicious of the character. *"I always have young men helping out around the house"* would work, for example.

The third and final stress is Hatred. This reflects how much the character hates the suburbs, their life in the suburbs, and themselves generally. The more hatred a character has the harder it is for them to care about propriety and keeping up with suburban standards and the more unresolved anger the character holds. The description should show how this hatred expresses itself: It could be external - *"Screaming at the kids"*, *"I graffiti other people's homes in the night"* or internal - *"I drink too much"* or *"I'm obsessively clean"*.

The Secret and the descriptions of all these stresses should be known and shared openly by all the players, but they are not common knowledge amongst the other characters unless the player wants them to be.

Thirdly, players can pick three Traits that define the character. Traits work differently to some other role-playing games, but we will worry about that in the scene resolution chapter later. All that's needed now are three short descriptions, which can be simple words: *"Attractive"*, *"Reckless"* or *"Perfectionist"* for example. At least one of these traits should be a notable relationship to a non-player character in the suburb: *"Nosy Neighbour"* or *"Local Cop"*. Regardless, they are mechanically the same. All Traits should have a possible downside to them too, as otherwise it may be hard for players to being them into play. All traits start off empty (see the scene resolution chapter for details).

Starting characters begin with nothing in their Complication dice pool. The more dice in here the more life can get difficult for the character. It is the ammunition that the Gamesmaster and other players can use to place the character in awkward situations, so the smaller this pool the easier things are to achieve.

Finally, the player should note down the character's name and a one-sentence description what role they play in the community and then you are ready to play.

Example: We'll create a young housewife with money problems to begin with. She and her husband have moved in a few months ago, but they are struggling to make the mortgage repayments. This leads in nicely to her secret; she appeared in one of the Smiths' porn shoots to earn some extra cash.

So her stresses - her Burden is obviously *"money"*. I think that after she participated in the shoot, she shied away from them and as such her Suspicion would be *"nervous around the Smiths"*. And hatred - I think this should be a bottled up thing so I'll pick *"I cut myself"*. I allocate the nine points as Burden: 3, Suspicion: 1, Hatred: 5.

Then I pick her Traits. I think *"Attractive"* is an obvious one and the other could be *"Sneaky"*. That's a good bit of contrast. I make my third Trait a relationship to "The young kid who cleans the pools." Finally, I decide on a name 'Abbie' sound right to me, and come up with a short description. Her final character sheet looks like this:

Abbie, young housewife who moved in with her husband a few months ago.
Secret: *Appeared in one of the Smith's porn shoots.*
Burden (*Money*): *3*
Suspicion (*Nervous around the Smiths*): *1*
Hatred (*I cut myself*): *5*

Traits: *Attractive, Sneaky, Friendly with Jack, the pool boy.*
Complication Dice: *0*

PLAYING THE GAME

So, how do you actually play this game then? The general process is that after scandal and character creation, play goes around the table, with players requesting a scene for their character in turn. Other players, along with the GM can add complications to the scene. The scene will revolve around the resolution of a central goal that is the point of that scene. Once the outcome of this goal is determined, that scene ends and the next scene begins.

Conflict is resolved by the player rolling a certain number of six-sided dice and using the mechanisms presented later to determine the general outcome of the conflict. Once this has been determined, the player gets to narrate the actual events that happened in game. This narration is very open, and the player can describe more than just their own characters actions in doing so, as long as they follow the guidelines presented and the rest of the group don't object.

Play then passes to the next player who wants a scene for his or her character and so on, until somebody reaches the Endgame. At that point, players get to narrate a final epilogue scene to reveal what happens to their character (within the restrictions put upon them by the Endgame rules) and that's the end of the game.

Framing Scenes

The primary building block of the game is the scene, and scene framing is the business of starting and ending scenes in *which things happen*. The first step is determining what the characters present are attempting to achieve in this scene. The whole group should do this out-of-character, and if there isn't a clear objective, then fast-forward through the game until you come up against one. This means that you get to skip all the 'boring stuff' that can happen in other games and get to the action. The thing that the characters are attempting to achieve is what we will call the scene *goal*.

Next, the group should determine what hinders the characters in achieving that goal. There are certain things that nearly always hinder characters (their Stresses, for example) but how they are expressed in the scene should be considered here. If there is no clear, effective, and *interesting* resistance to having the characters achieve their goals than let

them do so. Narrate a quick scene and get on with the action or fast-forward to a point where the hindrances would become effective. This becomes the heart of the scene.

By determining those two things, we can get ready to roll dice – see the scene resolution section for more on that – and determine the outcome. This outcome resolves the scene goal in one of three ways: *"Yes"*, *"Yes, with complications"*, or *"No, with complications"*. There is more on this later, but for now just remember that the player who with the narration rights should narrate what happened in the scene, from *just before* the conflict was resolved to *the instant* it becomes resolved.

The narrator can make anything they like up in doing so, as long as it a) doesn't break the outcome decided by the dice and b) the rest of the group – all the players and the Gamesmaster don't disagree. If, for example, I wanted to narrate something about an angry dog tied up in someone's back yard, I can, unless anybody goes *"dude, no way Mrs. Miggins would have a pitbull tied up out back. That's lame."* In which case, I'd have to come up with another narration. Also, the rest of the group shouldn't just sit silently during a scene narration. If they have an idea, regardless of if their character is in the scene or not, they should say it. It's the narrator's choice if he or she wants to use that suggestion or not, though.

Resolving Scenes

There are three main types of scene, and are grouped by the general goal of the protagonist in that scene. The type of scene determines how many dice are rolled to resolve it, and what the possible outcomes of that scene could be.

- **Investigation:** This is a scene in which the character wants to either determine more of the answer to the question of the scandal or find evidence to raise the Suspicions of another character. The specific objective should be made clear before any dice are rolled. In either case, sniffing around is tricky when a character has got to do this discreetly, away from the prying eyes of the suburb, and it always risks people asking uncomfortable questions and spreading gossip if you are found out.

- **Avert Suspicion:** This is a scene where the character decides that they want to act properly, put their woes behind them or put their Secret in a tiny little box and throw away the key. The bigger the character's burdens the harder this is to do. And a problem left ignored tends to play on the mind a little heavier than before.

- **Releasing Tension:** The character has chosen to try and lighten the weight on their shoulders. The specifics of how the character tries to do this in these scenes will play out very much vary according to the character and their burden. A character with "*I've got an unhappy marriage*" could try to release tension by sneaking off to sleep with the gardener, whereas another might try to go to a marriage counselling to achieve the same effect.

The category a goal falls into determines the initial amount of dice rolled to determine the outcome. Unlike many other games, the more dice you roll, the harder it is to achieve your goal.

- **Investigation:** The number of dice to roll starts equal to the character's current Suspicion rating. The narration should describe how the watching eyes of the suburb hinder the investigation.

- **Avert Suspicion.** The number of dice to roll starts equal to the character's current Burden rating. The narration should cover how their problems, or even just worrying about the problems, make it hard to distract the suburb away from their Secret.

- **Releasing Tension:** The number of dice to roll starts equal to the character's Hatred rating. The narration should describe how they are hindered in some way by their hatred of suburbia or themselves.

Complication Dice: Characters will build up Complication dice during play. If a character has one or more dice in their Complication pool then the Gamesmaster or any other player may introduce a Complication. These are things like an unwanted busybody calling around when you are trying to deal with the kids, or a car breaking down on the way to the hospital. Once introduced, the Gamesmaster or player will use a certain number of dice from your Complication pool to add to your scene

resolution dice. Whoever introduces the Complication cannot add more dice than you have in your complication pool, and must narrate how the Complication applies to the scene before it is resolved.

> **Example:** Abbie is trying to deal with her money problems by sneaking off to visit the bank manager. This counts as a *Releasing Tension* scene so the player will roll Abbie's Hatred dice – four at the moment. The Gamesmaster wants to make her life even more difficult, so he introduces a complication. Abbie has five dice in her Complication pool, so the Gamesmaster decides to use three of them to create a complication, leaving Abbie with two.
>
> The Gamesmaster then describes how Abbie drops a bank statement, one that shows her dire financial problems, out of her purse when she leaves for the bank and her next-door neighbour - Mrs. Miller - picks it up and calls after her. That's put this simple scene under a lot more pressure, so now the player needs to roll seven dice. Four for Abbie's Hatred rating plus three from the complication.

Using Traits: Once the initial number of dice to use in this conflict has been calculated, the player can opt to *charge* or *use* their Traits. Traits act like batteries – you can only use them one they have been charged, and using them will dissipate the charge in them. A Trait is considered either *empty* or *full*.

To charge an *empty* Trait, you must have the agreement of the group and the narration must reflect that this trait was somehow a hindrance to achieving the goal. Each Trait charged in this way will force you to roll another 2 dice in this conflict, but regardless of success or failure this Trait will become *full* at the end of this scene. You cannot charge already *full* traits.

To use a *full* Trait, you must have the agreement of the group and the narration must reflect that this trait was somehow beneficial to achieving the goal. Each Trait used in this way will subtract 2 from the number of dice you need to roll (to a minimum of one die) in this conflict, but regardless of success or failure this Trait will become *empty* at the end of this scene. You cannot use *empty* Traits until they have been charged again.

Rolling Dice: Roll the number of six-sided dice that you have just calculated out in the open and you must always roll at least one die. If you rolled a one on any of these dice, your character has failed in their goal; otherwise the goal was achieved successfully. There will be additional *consequences* of success and failure depending on the type of scene. See below for details.

Next, count up how many dice show either a one or a two. Add this number of dice to your character's Complication pool. The bigger this pool gets, the more difficult the Gamesmaster or other players can make this character's life later on.

> **Example:** I end up needing to roll four dice. They come up 6, 4, 4, 2. My character has achieved their goal as none of the dice rolled a 1, but not without some problems, as I rolled a 2 so my Complication pool goes up by one.
>
> In another scene I need to roll five dice which come up 5, 3, 2, 1, 1. My character fails at the goal, because of the 1's, and adds three dice to their Complication pool from the two 1's and the 2.

Desperation: If you really don't like the dice you rolled, you can choose to be *desperate*. This allows you to roll a single six-sided die and take the result of that instead. You must take this result, even if it is worse than your original roll. When you are desperate, you will automatically gain one point of Hatred, your current complication pool will double, all your Traits will *empty* and your narration must describe how your hate, anger and desperation overrode any other concerns. This is in addition to the normal consequences of the scene.

Accepting the Consequences

Once the conflict has been resolved, your character will have to suffer the consequences. The exact effect of these consequences depends on the type of goal and if you succeeded or failed during the resolution of the scene.

Investigation: An investigation scene will always cause the rating of the character's Suspicion to be increased by one point, regardless of success or failure. If the scene was a success, however, the exact consequences depend on if the goal was investigating the scandal generally or another

player character specifically. If it was the latter, then the character under investigation will gain an additional two points of Suspicion and double their current Complication pool.

On the other hand, the character's Hatred rating is reduced by two points (to a minimum of 1) if they successfully investigate the scandal. In addition, the rating of the Scandal is reduced by one point and the player can also make up exactly what has been found out about the scandal in their narration. The only limit on this narration is that, unless the rating of the Scandal has been reduced to zero and Endgame is triggered, it may not answer the question of the Scandal completely, and should prompt further questions to be investigated.

Avert Suspicion: A character will always gain a point of Burden from one of these scenes, regardless of success or failure, as a problem that has been swept under the carpet will fester. If the character was successful, however, they can reduce their Suspicion rating by one point (to a minimum of 1).

Releasing Tension: A character will always gain a point of Hatred from Releasing Tension, regardless of success or failure. This is because a character will always feel at least a little bit guilty, ashamed or angry over their problems, and this fuels the Hatred. The character's Burden rating will be reduced by one point (to a minimum of 1) if they succeeded in this Scene.

> **Example:** This is an example scene with Warren as the Gamesmaster. Peter is playing Abbie, and Sarah is playing Ellen, an older housewife who is the curtain-twitching busybody of the street. Her secret is that her son, Bradley, dated the Smith's teenage niece for a while and she got him involved with cannabis before they all moved away suddenly.
>
> Warren: "OK, Peter, what kind of scene do you want for Abbie now?"
>
> Peter: "She is going to try and investigate what's been going on with the Smiths. She is going to try sneak into their house and search through their computer. "
>
> Warren: "Sounds good - does anybody else want in on this?"

Sarah: "Oh, me! Well, I want Bradley to be having a crafty puff in our back garden, but he is well placed to see what Abbie is doing around there. What's Abbie's complication pool at now?"

Pete: "Six dice at the moment."

Sarah: "Ok, I'm going to use two of Abbie's complication dice for that."

Warren: "Cool. Is everyone happy with that?"

Pete and Sarah both nod. Pete reduces Abbie's Complication pool by two points, leaving her with four.

Warren: "Right, we are finding out if Abbie manages to successfully find out some more on the scandal. Pete, what's Abbie's Suspicion rating?"

Peter: "Uh, just one. Easy."

Warren: "OK, that's three dice because of the two from complications. Any relevant Traits you want to charge or use?"

Peter: "Well, I'd like to charge my Attractive Trait - Bradley wouldn't miss an attractive woman, I assume?" Sarah and Warren both nod.

Warren: "Sure. Remember to throw that into your narration. That's five dice all told then."

Peter rolls a 6, 4, 3, 3, 2. "No 1's, so I manage it, but I do get one point of Complication."

Warren: "OK, cool. You've got some complication and you charged your trait. You also gain a point of Suspicion and lose two points of Hatred. So, what happened?"

Peter notes down the changes on Abbie's character sheet: "OK, so Abbie gets dressed up in her best black slacks and poloneck sweater and waits until nightfall. When she thinks the coast is clear, she sneaks around the back of the house and remembers that they always left a spare key out somewhere. After a few minutes of searching she finds a spare key under a flowerpot."

Sarah: "This is where Bradley must have heard something and started watching."

Peter nods. "Yep, Bradley sees this cute brunette bending over in the garden next door and certainly starts to pay attention! But Abbie doesn't notice as she sneaks upstairs and finds the PC. She looks through all the old emails, looking for anything that catches her eye."

Warren: "Cool – you succeeded, so the Scandal is down to eight points now. The complication needs introducing, remember, but tell us, what did you find?"

Peter: "She comes across an email that was sent to the Smiths several months ago. It seems as if it was a demand for a sex tape from the owner of some club… um…"

Sarah: "Paulie's Revue Bar?"

Peter: "Wow. Is there something you should be telling us Sarah?"

Sarah grins. "Never you mind."

Peter: "Anyway, yes. Paulie's Revue Bar, and if they didn't provide him with a new tape every month then there would be repercussions. And at that point Abbie hears the back door open and Bradley shouting 'Hello' up the stairs."

Warren: "OK, I'm going to stop you there. That's ready for a good next scene, no doubt! Very nice. How did this help Abbie lose some Hatred?"

Peter: "Well, she doesn't feel quite so guilty for appearing in a video now, as the Smiths were obviously being blackmailed. They were only taking advantage of her because they *had* to."

Direct Confrontation

All the conflicts given above are between a player character and the environment, themselves, or non-player characters. But it may be possible for a player character to come into direct conflict with another player character during a scene, and this requires another form of resolution.

Firstly, it is important to determine that this is a direct conflict. This is determined by being a conflict between two player characters *and* this conflict is the goal of the scene, *and* both players wish to have their characters actively participate in the conflict. If it is not a direct conflict then each player can call for a scene individually.

If the goal of the scene is something other than the conflict itself, then resolve that goal as normal and describe the outcome of the conflict between the player characters in the narration. It is important to remember that any narration of another player's character can be vetoed by that player and therefore all players should come to an agreement before it should be accepted as 'the truth'.

> **Example:** Ellen, played by Sarah, has called in on Abbie 'unexpectedly' attempting to find out more about Abbie's secret. Abbie is busy on the phone with her bank manager begging for another loan, and is trying to deal with her problem. This is not a direct conflict, and should be resolved as two scenes, one for Ellen and one for Abbie, although obviously both characters will appear in both scenes.
>
> In a later scene, Abbie is trying to talk her way into Ellen's house so she can take back a porn DVD of her that Ellen's son has hidden in his bedroom. Ellen obviously wants to know what is going on. This isn't a direct conflict and should be resolved as one or two scenes. One for Abbie who is rolling to hide her secret (Avert Suspicion), and perhaps another one for Ellen who is trying to find out about Abbie's secret (Investigation).
>
> In another scene, framed in the local supermarket, Abbie confronts Ellen over her out of control children, and Ellen argues back - hinting at what she knows of Abbie's secret. This is a direct conflict and should be resolved using the rules below.

Once a direct conflict has been framed, each player must choose which of their opponent's Stresses to attack and how they will do so: The burden the character has to carry, the suspicion they are under or their emotions (their hatred). The attacked player must then use the rating of that stress to defend their character. Traits and complication dice can be used to modify the number of dice rolled in the usual way.

Once both sides have determined how many dice they get to defend against the other attacks, both players roll simultaneously and find the lowest value of any single die. The player with the highest low value manages to 'win' this conflict. If it is a draw, both characters are considered to have lost and the scene ends with neither character satisfied. Dice which roll one or two still generate Complication as normal. Additionally, direct conflict is always ugly and will result in the Hatred *and* Complication of both characters increasing by one point at the end of the scene regardless of the outcome.

In addition, the loser (or losers, in the case of a tie) will suffer more consequences. If the loser failed to defend their hatred they will have to increase it's rating by one point in addition to the one point it was increased by for participating in direct conflict in the first place. Similarly, if they couldn't defend themselves against an attack on their Burden, the rating of that will be increased by one point. And if they couldn't defend against their secret getting out, they will increase the rating of their Suspicion by one point.

> **Example**: To continue from the 3rd scene described above, Abbie, played by Peter is attacking Ellen's problem - her children, and Ellen is attacking back at Abbie's secret. Abbie has a Suspicion rating of 3 at the moment, and Ellen has a Burden rating of 4.
>
> Both players choose not to use or charge any traits, or create Complications for each other, so they roll their defence dice straight up.

Peter rolls 6, 3, 2 for Abbie giving a low value of 2 (and an extra point of Complication), and Sarah rolls 5, 5, 5, 4 for a low value of 4, so Ellen defends herself well, despite Abbie's aggression, and wins the argument. Both sides get an increase in Complication and Hatred of one point each - arguing in a supermarket indeed! And Abbie gets that as well as a one point increase in her Suspicion rating in addition to the extra point of Complication she got from the dice roll.

This wasn't a good fight for Abbie to pick.

ENDGAME

Eventually the group will figure out the answer to the question posed by the scandal at the beginning of the game by reducing it's rating down to zero, and the game will enter Endgame. Once in Endgame each player gets to narrate an Epilogue for his or her character in turn, and then the game is over.

The content of an Epilogue narration is up to the player within the following restrictions. If two ratings are equal, the players can chose which of the appropriate epilogues they wish.

Hatred, Burden and Suspicion all less than three: The character accepts, and is accepted by, the suburbs. Whatever problems and secrets the character had are dealt with in an effective, discreet manner. The details of this process are left up to the player.

Hatred greater than Burden greater than Suspicion: The character attempts to commit suicide rather than risk their secret getting out. The success or failure of the attempt and exactly how much of the suspicion is revealed is up to the player.

Hatred greater than Suspicion greater than Burden: The character snaps and attempts to kill/attack/endanger other characters in order to try and resolve their problem. The character must end up dead, in jail, or otherwise away from the suburb at the player's discretion.

Burden greater than Hatred greater than Suspicion: The character snaps under the strain and needs to be institutionalised, gets addicted to tranquillisers or otherwise looses their mind. Exactly how this happens is up to the player.

Suspicion greater than Hatred greater than Burden: The character is driven from the suburb by external forces. From gossip and rumour mongering to calling the police. Exactly what these forces are and how they remove the character from the suburb is up to the player.

Burden greater than Suspicion greater than Hatred: The character will continue living in the suburbs, hiding their problems and secrets as best as they are able, both from themselves and others. The effect of this self-denial is up to the player.

Suspicion greater than Burden greater than Hatred: The character leaves the suburb due to internal factors. Usually this is to save face or prevent the family from being scrutinised at every turn. Exactly what these factors are and how they force the character away are up to player.

> **Example:** At the end of the game, Abbie has a Suspicion rating of 4, a Hatred rating of 4 and a Burden rating of 2. Peter (her player) can choose either to go on a killing spree (taking Hatred as greater than the Suspicion) or to get forced out of the suburb (taking Suspicion greater than Hatred). Peter chooses the latter and narrates a scene in which Abbie can hear the whispered insults and feel the eyes on her back as she tries to carry on with her daily life. Eventually, it all gets too much and she leaves her husband to return to a small apartment in the poor part of the city.

Secrets of Self-Hatred

Whilst the previous chapters told you how to play *Secrets in Suburbia*, by describing how to frame scenes, resolve conflicts and so on, this chapter is about making sure that the game runs well and that everybody enjoys playing it.

Firstly, it is important that the players are willing and ready to engage their imaginations. This isn't like some other games where the Gamesmaster writes a plot that the player characters walk through, contributing only the actions of their own character. *Secrets in Suburbia* requires the whole group - all the players and the Gamesmaster - to determine what the story is as the game progresses. That means that everybody has the right - no, the responsibility - to make stuff up as they go along. But it is also the responsibility of the entire group to ensure that everybody is happy with what is happening as it happens. If not, then back up a little, talk about it, and when a compromise has been reached, get going again.

The main thing that helps this process is getting a good Scandal at the start of the game, and from that a good Question and compelling character Secrets. Find a Scandal that 'grabs' everyone, and don't start anything else until you've got it. The Scandal is the engine of the game, and it drives everything else, so don't skimp on this step. Also, don't worry about the history of the Scandal or why it happened - there are good candidates for the Question.

A good Scandal should immediately bring good Questions to mind, but it is important to settle on one which nobody - not even the Gamesmaster - knows the answer to. It is vital that nobody decides up front what happened, as that spoils the whole game for everyone. Finding out (i.e. making up) the answer to this Question, as a group, is how the game moves forward and doing so should be a great objective for everybody. It is, if you like, the road the game will run along.

The wheels of our game are, in my increasingly tortured analogy, the character secrets. It is important that the players choose secrets that are connected to the Scandal in such a way that the secret becomes a problem that the character has to deal with, in some way, *right now*. And the secret will always be an issue - to a greater or lesser extent - until the Scandal is resolved. A good secret shouldn't be hidden from the other players - it is important that the whole group knows how to push each other's buttons.

And where the rubber hits the road? That's the scenes. The core of the game is about setting up scenes that move things on. The Gamesmaster's responsibility is less than in most other games - in fact, I think it might be possible to run *Secrets in Suburbia* without a formal Gamesmaster, but I will leave that for another time. Anyway, the Gamesmaster must ensure that the game keeps moving. The Secrets the players have created and the answers they come up with for the scandal should keep things going, but if it starts the drag and the players seem to be getting stuck the Gamesmaster throw something in to get the players going again.

Complications are a good way of doing this. Most games will have plenty of complication dice building up, and it is always good to have some to hand in case the player cannot think of any. Even mundane events can take on a special significance if the framing of the scene in which they appear makes them a risk to a character's Secret.

Hatred is the other side of the coin. This shows how much a character hates what hiding their secrets and dealing with their problems so they can 'fit in' to the suburbs does to them. It can reflect itself in many ways, but the higher the score gets the more stress and hatred of the world around them, as well as hatred of themselves, builds within them. This is dangerous and destructive, and to Gamesmaster should remind players of this fact, lest they forget.

This should cause the players to try and relieve their Hatred, and this can only be done by investigating the Scandal and realising that they are not the only ones with problems. The game systems have been designed so that the more scenes character has focused on one outcome, like investigation, the harder those scenes get. The only way of making an investigation scene easier, for example, is to reduce Suspicion and try an Avert Suspicions scene. And that will need a low Burden rating to be successful, which requires some Release Tension scenes.

You can imagine the three types of scene as a pump, moving points between the three Stresses, with Complications making life more difficult. So the sequence of play will normally look like Investigation – Avert Suspicion – Release Tension – Investigation until the Questions have been answered and the Scandal has been resolved.

Desperate Thanks

I would not have even known where to start without the Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com) and all the role-playing theory blogs that teach it to us mere mortals. I would especially like to thank Vincent Baker for writing *Dogs in the Vineyard* and bringing me back to role-playing after seven years in the wilderness.

As is probably quite clear, *Secrets in Suburbia* owes a great debt to *My Life with Master* by Paul Czege, and there is also more than a soupcon of *InSpectres* by Jared A. Sorensen. I also shamelessly stole the Thematic Batteries idea from a thread on the Forge. The layout was inspired by another 24 hour RPG, *Above the Earth*, by Bryant Durrell. And I'm sure that I'm standing on the shoulders of giants other than those mentioned here, so thank you to the entire Indie RPG scene.

Finally, I have to thank Ron Edwards, firstly for starting the Forge, and secondly for coming up with the Ronnies which prompted me to get up off my ass and actually finish something.

How to Print

This PDF is designed to be both fairly readable on screen and easily printable. If I were going to print it out, I'd print it just as it's laid out, with two pages per sheet. Then I'd fold each page in half, printed side out. Then I'd stack all the pages up in a pile and staple them together down the spine. You could print the cover page out on heavier cardstock, cut it in half and use the blank half as the back cover if you wanted. Use tape down the spine to hide the staples.

Quick Reference

Investigation Scenes:
- Starting dice: *Suspicion.*
- General consequences: *+1 Suspicion.*
- If successful: *-2 Hatred, -1 Scandal* or *+2 Suspicion and double Complication of investigated character.*

Averting Suspicions:
- Starting dice: *Burden.*
- General consequences: *+1 Burden.*
- If successful: *-1 Suspicion.*

Releasing Tension:
- Starting dice: *Hatred.*
- General consequences: *+1 Hatred.*
- If successful: *-1 Burden.*

Direct Confrontation:
- Starting dice: *Stress (Opponent picks Burden, Hatred or Suspicion).*
- General consequences: *+1 Hatred, +1 Complication.*
- If loser: *+1 Stress.*

Complications: The Gamesmaster and other players and can spend your complication pool to increase the number of dice you have to roll in a scene.

Traits: A Trait must be charged before it can be used. Charging a trait adds 2 dice to the scene. Using a trait reduces the number of dice you need to roll by 2 (to a minimum of 1).

Rolling Dice: Roll the total number of dice. If any come up 1, you've failed. Gain one point of Complication for every dice that comes up 1 or 2. In direct confrontations the highest low die wins. If tied, then both characters lose.

Desperation: Roll a single die and take that result instead. Double your current Complication pool, empty all Traits and +1 Hatred in addition to the normal consequences.