

Vast, Cool and Unsympathetic

A 24 hour RPG by Joe Murphy

“Yet across the gulf of space.. intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.

And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment.”

- HG Wells, *The War of the Worlds*.

This great War lies decades in the future. Perhaps the awful horrors of the Heat Ray and Black Smoke will never come to pass. And it's up to you.

For you are the spies sent by Mars to pave the way for invasion.

Martian scouts have cast themselves psychically cross the void of space, inhabiting random people in a small geographical area – the centre of Victorian London. In their short time on Earth, the Martian interlopers must evaluate humanity's possible defenses against Martian weapons and tactics.

This is a game for three players. Together, the group will play a hive of Martians sent to spy on Earth.

You will need:

- Three players.
- One sheet of paper in the centre of the table. This game has no individual character sheets.
- Four different colors of dice, with about 10 dice in each colour. All dice must be of the same shape (d6, d10 etc.).

For easy recognition, use Red dice for the Martians' Hive pool, Green or Blue for Earth (the colors of the planet), White or Yellow for Suspicion (think eyes or spotlights) and Black for Violence (death and fear).

Some elements of this game may be unusual or familiar. This game has no central GM. Instead, power is shared by the group. A character's opposition in scenes is arbitrated by the player to their left. Relevant NPCs are played by the player to their right.

The player to one's left is known as your Phobos, the Martian moon named for 'fear'. The player to the right is your Deimos, the moon named for 'dread'.

Draw three circles in the centre of the page. Write Hive, Suspicion and Violence inside the circles. These will contain pools of dice the players can use in their conflicts.

Place one dice in the Suspicion pool, one in the Violence pool and five in the Hive pool.

The Mission

The group should decide on three things. A mission, the groups' host bodies, and an initial complication.

Firstly, pick a mission or experiment the Martians have been sent to perform. Examples follow below and there are further suggestions in the appendix.

- How do humans reproduce, and what are a human's reproductive capabilities? Might they breed quickly enough to cause problems for the invasion?
- Humans suffer from emotions like greed, envy and lust. What triggers these emotions and can they be used against the humans?
- What are the limits of human intelligence and telepathy? Do they possess psychic defenses or offensive powers?
- What are the limit of humanity's medicine and biological sciences?
- What are the limits of humanity's physical sciences and engineering?
- What weapons do the humans possess and what are their qualities?
- The humans have leaders. Observe one without arousing their suspicion.
- What locations can we use for breeding farms, construction yards, or storage of food humans ?

The mission may or may not have a deadline.

Secondly, the group should decide on the host bodies they will inhabit. The three humans must be geographically close at the time the psychic link is created. Perhaps the hosts could be a noble visiting a prostitute and her pimp, a working class family picnicking, or a group of off-duty soldiers.

The Martians themselves are almost identical in terms of ability. Only their host bodies provide differences in how they interact with Earth. One body may be stronger, more resilient or more attractive (to humans, anyway), or may have greater wealth, a stronger reputation, or more social connections.

Write down the profession of the host in front of each player on the sheet. Names are optional, (and not a Martian custom).

The game begins with the psychic link having just been forged. The Martians 'wake' to consciousness in strange, warm-blooded, bipedal bodies. Exacerbating this, the Martians must deal with the initial complication.

Pick an initial complication the Martians must face. Perhaps the off-duty soldiers have just been drawn into a fight for honor. Perhaps the picnicking family are approached by a beggar. Perhaps the noble's family have come looking for him in this grim whorehouse.

Turns and Scenes

The opening scene should be brief. One player should describe the initial difficulties the Martians face. Perhaps the Martians have brief problems telepathically communicating with one another, the host bodies' limbs fail for a minute, or the complicating NPCs become fearful or hostile. Initial scenes have no effect on the rest of the game, involve no conflicts and no dice are rolled. They're very much like the opening teaser in a tv show and are something of a warm-up exercise for the players.

Once the scene reaches a punchline or satisfying conclusion, end it quickly.

In the rest of the game, play is divided into *turns*. During a turn, each player describes a scene of their choice involving their Martian, likely involving a conflict of some sort. This player is known as the Actor.

Once each player has had a chance to be the Actor, the turn ends. Add one dice to the Suspicion pool and put a checkmark by the pool.

When the number of checkmarks equals ten, each turn adds one dice to the Violence pool instead of the Suspicion pool. Thus, as the mission progresses, mere wariness gives way to hostility and death.

Types of Scenes

There are three kind of scenes the players can choose from each turn. *Alien*, *Spy* and *Confrontation*.

Alien scenes are a kind of rest scene. The player narrates a scene where their Martian encounters an area of human culture – sex, drugs, music, art, a domestic argument. They may instead describe confusion over the weather, geography, or who builds all those trees. These are also great scenes in which to incorporate historical details of Victorian London. At the end of an Alien scene, the Martians' Hive pool completely refreshes.

Spy scenes should form the bulk of the game. These are the steps the Martians take to pave the way for invasion. They could surreptitiously enter a police station, evaluate the infrastructure of London while trainspotting, dissect a corpse or test the limits of an Earthly weapon. At the beginning of a Spy scene, add one to the Suspicion pool.

Confrontation scenes are scenes of combat, fighting or terror. They're moments of viciousness, violence or shock. Perhaps the Martians are herded into an alleyway by a mob, shot at by soldiers or battle their way from a burning factory. Confrontation scenes often describe the successes or failure in the Martian's mission. At the beginning of a Confrontation scene, increase Suspicion and Violence by one.

Conflict

Spy and Confrontation scenes should contain a specifically stated conflict, described either as the player frames the scene or later, as narration naturally leads to a conflict. The Actor should describe what it is that's at stake within the scene in broad terms. Perhaps their Martian is trying to gain entry to a police station without being spotted, or perhaps they want to seduce their host body's brother, advisor to the Queen, without him turning down the advances.

The Phobos (the player to their left) should discuss the stakes of the conflict, and the possible success or failure. The Phobos is responsible for ensuring the success and failure conditions are roughly equal. They may discuss this openly with the Deimos.

Stakes do not necessarily have to relate to a Martian's strict success or failure in a task. The group may decide that entering the station or seducing the brother will automatically succeed, but that losing the conflict adds a new complication, such as the brother's seduction being witnessed by a maid.

Stakes may involve the life or death of a host, morale or the psychic power of the group's Hive dice, a clever ruse to reduce the Suspicion pool. It should be noted that this is the only way to increase the groups' Hive beyond the initial five.

In order to resolve the conflict, both Actor and Phobos pick up a handful of dice.

The Phobos chooses a number of (blue or green) Earth dice based on how difficult, threatening or narratively powerful he feels the conflict to be. This should be discussed with the Deimos. A straightforward task is represented by two to four dice. A difficult task is five or six dice. A near-impossible or unlikely task is seven to ten dice.

The Actor receives one red dice simply for being a Martian. They get another red dice if their host has some relevant talent or resource. They can then choose as many dice as they wish from the table, from any of Suspicion, Violence or Hive.

Both sides roll their dice and compare the results. With d6s employed, a result of 1-3 is success. With d10s, a 1-5 is a success, etc. Whichever side has the most number of successes wins in the conflict.

The player with the *highest* dice on the table, chooses which player narrates these results. For example, if the Actor rolls 1, 2, 2, 5, 5 and the Phobos rolls 1, 2, 4, 6 then the Phobos must choose who narrates the Actor's success. This might even be the Deimos.

Furthermore, the colors of the successful dice on the table determine how the scene should be narrated, and will help suggest further scenes.

Which colour provided most of the successes on the table?

- If red dice provided most of the successes, the Martians stride towards their goal. They make headway, find out something crucial, or achieve some victory.
- If green or blue dice were in the majority, Earth rules the scene. Humanity remains, for now, safe from the Martian menace. The conclusion to the scene should include a little hope, ingenuity or deviousness on behalf of humanity.
- If white or yellow Suspicion dice win out, then the scene should include an element of fear, wariness, paranoia or outright terror.
- Similarly, if black Violence dice are to the fore, then blood is spilled, bones are broken or guns fire.

Endgame

The game ends when the group decides if they are successful in their mission or have failed. The pools remaining may suggest conclusions also – a high Hive score, earned through difficult stake-setting suggests the group have succeeded in their tasks, whereas a high Suspicion might mean the hive are about to be found out.

The Martians

This game purposefully provides little information on what the Martians are like, as many details will suggest themselves in play. The source material provides little information on these invaders. In playing them, the players are free to decide just how 'cool, vast and unsympathetic' to man the spies are.

Physically, they are octopoid, and in living on Mars have developed huge lungs and enormous brains. They possess telepathy, and even in their host bodies can have detailed conversations in a moment – players can debate an issue for as long as they wish, while only seconds pass.

They seek to invade for two reasons: resources and sustenance. Martians subsist on the blood of lesser races. An invasion of Earth may be a recent venture or an ancient vendetta.

The Martians have full access to the host's body – they can walk, fight or climb with little difficulty. They also have full access to a host's memories but may have some difficulty making the correct associations between, say, a host's memories of a party and the correct use of cutlery at a royal engagement.

Martians may switch hosts at will, though there is a cost. Each time they leave a host, the host dies in a violent or horrific manner. They spasm and thrash, bleed or dissolve, perhaps even explode messily. The Hive pool drops by one and the Suspicion pool increases by one.

London

Little information is provided on Victorian London, as it is hoped the players will be familiar with the place and period. Sites such as <http://www.victorianlondon.org/> provide historical details and maps. However, some suggestions follow:

- August and September, 1888 is the time of Jack the Ripper. Was he a human unnerved by vampiric Martians, a hunter of aliens or a deranged Martian spy? Might he merely be a biologist performing less-than-subtle dissections?
- Victorian London is a place where class matters. How would a hivemind understand such a thing, and how can the players push such issues?
- This was a time of strange and strained sexuality. This was a time of masturbation-prevention devices, peculiar fetishes and 'unnatural offences' – is there anything here to intrigue Martian spies?
- Technology has improved life in the city. Water is mostly clean, public works have provided sewage systems and transport. What might the Martians use against London?
- Given sufficient resources, could the Martians use Earthly technologies to build a Martian war machine? Where would be a good place to test a Heat Ray or canister of Black Smoke?
- Adding a little pulp, what if Holmes himself encounters a Martian? Might Dracula fear these awful horrors, or could the scientist behind the Time Machine or an invisibility formula seek their esoteric knowledge?