

## **Swords of the Skull-Takers**

A solo survival horror RPG. I am Legend meets Play Your (tarot) Cards Right.

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I'm using 'Sword and 'Skull for this entry – funny that. It was nearly called Skull Soldiers though.

This is a solitaire RPG, because I'm also going to submit it to Emily's RPG design contest. I find the solo concept appealing, strange but the vast majority of RPG games I play are solo games – on a computer. I was also into Fighting Fantasy back in the day (House of Hell gave way to Dungeoneer). A close friend of mine has recently collected *every* FF book incidentally.

The biggest obstacle to actual play is finding other actual players. So a solo RPG game could see a lot of play...But I digress. Let me tell you about this game.

You are the sole (or so you believe) survivor of a devastating catastrophe. Try and hold out as long as possible against the horror of the Skull-Takers. They are sharpening their swords for you...

## **Requirements**

To play you need: a journal and a writing implement. Or a voice recorder I guess.

Also a deck of tarot cards *or* a deck of playing cards and a D20 (not as cool).

## **Play**

Quick – think about these questions -

- Where and when are you?
- Who are the Skull-Takers?
- Why are they more active at night?

## **First entry**

Get your journal out and complete your first entry – in the voice of your character. Make sure to include your name, hideout, assessment of the situation and that your health is fine, despite the circumstances. During the game, health declines through six levels: fine – shaken – hurt – grievously wounded – at death's door – deceased.

Also choose your speciality, one of: fighter, worker, explorer or leader

*My name is Alfredo Bosch. I am a corporal of the Marienberg 2<sup>nd</sup> Halberdiers. If they even exist anymore. It is autumn, November 13<sup>th</sup> I believe. I've lost track of time. I've lost everything and now I'm trapped in Marienberg city. I'm holed up at a jewellers on Giberge Platz. For now I feel well - but I know not how long I will last. The Skull-Takers are everywhere like a plague. They are more active in the darkness. Daytime is my only chance, perhaps I could locate supplies – other survivors and make it through this hell hole...*

So I'm a fighter. Although I didn't explicitly mention it in the entry I've got an idea on the Skull-Takers. Basically they are demonic servants of the blood god here to harvest fresh skulls. They are weaker by day because by day they battle the other dark gods.

### **Set up**

Separate the Major Arcana from the rest of the Tarot deck. The minor arcana become the play deck, the majors become the Boon deck. Set the Fool in front of you – this is your character, the journalist. If using a standard deck, remove the jokers and place one of them as your character.

### **Daytime**

Deal two cards face up, Explorers deal three cards.

These cards represent the places you can explore during the day and tell you what resources you may find there. Swords (spades) indicate weapons. Coins (diamonds) mean defensive materials which can be used to build barricades. Wands (clubs) indicate essential supplies, food, medicine & hope. Cups (hearts) represent survivors.

Decide which one of these cards you will try for.

### **Exploration phase**

Set the card you are trying for in front of you. Now try and guess whether the next card will be lower or higher than the current card.

- If you guess correctly then the search begins promisingly (move the card up).
- If you guess incorrectly, your exploration runs into trouble (move the card down).

Then guess whether the next card you turn over will be higher or lower than the second card.

- If you get one card right and the other wrong then your search falters, you find nothing of value.

- If you get both wrong, then your search has led you into peril – in this case your health decreases one level.
- If you get both cards correct, then the exploration has gone well – and there’s a chance it could go even better. Now decide whether you want to take the card you were trying for or wager it for a major boon. If you take the card place it face up in your cache.
  - If you opt to gamble, then once again try to guess whether the next card will be higher or lower than the previous one.
  - If you get it correct then you discover a major boon. Draw a major boon from the deck and place it face up in your cache. If using a standard deck then roll D20 and refer to the major boon table. If you ever draw death then either you or an NPC with you must die – a skull is taken.
  - If you get it wrong then you lose the minor card you wagered.

### **Day entry**

Record in your journal the happenings of the day. Make sure to note down any cards added to your cache and who or what they represent. Also record any changes to your health.

*Today I made it to the market square. I recognised the heraldry on one of the nearby manors as House Chalistes, which kept me on track. I saw a dead Skull-Taker, run through with cold steel. They can die after all! I find myself filled with a new courage (7 of wands into cache).*

### **Night**

During the night Skull-Takers sweep through the area. It’s only a matter of time until their swords come for you.

Deal out one card for every day that has passed. Each sword represents a skull-taker attack wave.

You can sacrifice one or more barricades (see below) to negate the same number of sword cards.

Each wave will make three strikes against you. You must guess high or low for each strike, use the sword card’s own value for guessing the first strike. Every one you get wrong causes your health to deteriorate by a level. A Fighter can re-flip one card per night.

### **Night Entry**

Record the events of the night in your journal. Then another day begins...

*I heard terrible howls in the night, but naught else, god be praised.*

### **Cache**

You can hold up to 5 cards in your cache. These cards may represent weapons (swords), materials (coins), supplies (wands) or minor characters (cups). Or cards in your cache may represent Major Boons, crucial to completing the game.

### **Weapons**

Weapons can be used during the night, or when trying for a sword card. Instead of flipping over the next card in the deck, place the sword card from your cache. Obviously as you know the value you will get it right! The sword card does not return to your cache.

### **Barricades and Healing**

Instead of exploring, you can discard a coins card to build a barricade. Workers can build a barricade and still explore. You can never have more than 3 barricades. You can decide what defences the barricades represent, they don't literally have to be barricades.

Instead of exploring, you can discard one or more wands cards to recover your health by one step per card used.

### **Non-Player Characters (NPCs)**

NPCs are either minor NPCs, from the suit of cups (hearts) or they are one of the following major NPCs: The Magician, The Empress, The Emperor, The High Priestess, The Hierophant, The Hermit, The Hanged Man or The Devil.

During the day each NPC can either: stay with you, search alone or build a barricade (if you have a coins card to discard).

You can send an NPC out to explore during the day, but they might not make it back. During the exploration phase deal an extra card for each Non Player Character you send out alone.

Set the NPC card next to the card they are going to explore. Guess high/low and turn over the next card.

- If you guess wrong then the NPC meets the Skull-Takers, this means death for a minor NPC. A major NPC can escape death by getting the next card right – though such a narrow escape leaves him useless for the next day, turn his card face down.
- If you guess correctly then the search begins well for the NPC. Guess again.
  - If you now guess wrong then things go bad. This spells death for a minor NPC, or miss a turn for a major. If however, you guessed right then you win the card the NPC was exploring. You can opt to wager the card for a major boon, but the NPC's health will be wagered as well – death for a minor or a turn lost for a major.
  - If an NPC is with you then you may have them die instead of you losing a health level. All NPCs are with you during the night.

A Leader gains one re-flip per turn for an NPC exploration draw or exploration draw made when trying for a cup (heart) card.

### Major Boons

Any Major Boon can be discarded to prevent you losing a health level. Once discarded, Boons are removed from play. Each Boon also has a specific effect.

D20 roll	Major Arcana	Game Boon
1	The Magician	NPC, can heal you a level once only
2	The High Priestess	NPC, Spiritual Victory
3	The Empress	NPC, Worldly Victory
4	The Emperor	NPC, Worldly Victory
5	The Hierophant	NPC, Spiritual Victory
6	The Lovers	Worldly Victory
7	The Chariot	+1 Exploration card
8	Justice	Gain another Major Boon if you are at death's door
9	The Hermit	NPC, can build a barricade (with materials) and explore
10	The Wheel of Fortune	+1 re-flip per day
11	Strength	Gain a barricade
12	The Hanged-Man	NPC, Diabolic Victory

13	Temperance	Spiritual Victory
14	The Devil	NPC, Diabolic Victory
15	The Tower	Diabolic Victory
16	The Star	Cosmic Victory
17	The Moon	Cosmic Victory
18	The Sun	Cosmic Victory
19	Judgement	You win ties
20	The World	+1 cache size

Note that if using a D20, after acquiring your first Major Boon, death will replace it on the table. For example, if you rolled 13, you would gain Temperance, but any further rolls of 13 would result in death.

### Death

If you lose a health level at death's door then you die. If you draw the death card you may also die, unless a NPC dies in your stead. Take your journal, read it one last time then set it aside.

If you later play Swords of the Skull-Takers using the same setting, then your new character may choose to find your old character's journal, instead of acquiring a Major Boon. When you find someone else's journal, you may add any of the cards that were in their cache into your own.

### Reshuffle

Reshuffle the deck after gaining a Major Boon or when exhausted.

### Endgame

You will notice that a dozen of the Major Boons are Victory cards. By collecting all three Victory cards in a set, you can complete the game (I originally was going to require 5 cards for victory, but I relented). There are 4 different types of victory.

**Cosmic Victory:** The Skull-Takers are smashed, driven back from whence they came, the world returns to a state of nature.

**Worldly Victory:** With your love for the Emperor, The Empress or theirs for one another, you manage to escape. You get far away from this cursed place to start a new life.

**Diabolic Victory:** The Skull-Takers are gone, replaced by a greater evil. But an evil at your beck and call.

**Spiritual Victory:** You come to terms with the invasion, make peace with your gods and understand why the Skull-Takers had to come. Your third eye opens and you journey to the next realm of existence.

## **Journal**

Keeping a journal is the heart of Swords of the Skull-Takers and what makes it a role-playing game. You have to step inside the mind of a fictional character to complete each journal entry.

## **Inspiration**

Tarot cards can really aid creativity when playing Swords of the Skull-Takers. Both the images on the cards and the interpretations provided with the deck provide a wealth of inspiration. A suitable deck can really help set the genre and tone too. I recommend using the tarot over and above a standard deck, but hey needs must!

*Computer games:* Last Stand 2, Resident Evil

*Solo-play:* Space Hulk, Advanced Heroquest, Fighting Fantasy

*Indie RPGs:* How to Host a Dungeon, S/Lay with Me, Dread (Jenga)

*My stuff:* Hell 4 Leather, Labyrinths & Lycanthropes

*True horror revealed:* I am Legend, Bruce Forsyth's Play Your Cards Right

Ok, that's it, them's the bare bones of the game. The deadline is fast approaching so it's unlikely I'll get any more done. One other option I toyed with but left out was the ability to ditch some of your cache in order to re-locate elsewhere – this would lower the number of night cards. Any thoughts?

Anyway please let me know how you get on with my game.

Cheers

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