

# ***Danse Macabre***

***A brief role-playing game about death.***

**By William Duryea**

*Note: The following game was designed as an entry for the first round of the 2011 Ronnies competition. I'm currently playtesting the game with the goal of developing a finished manual to sell or otherwise distribute. If you play this game and have any feedback (or just want to share your thoughts or experiences), please send an email to [whduryea@gmail.com](mailto:whduryea@gmail.com). Thanks for playing.*

## **The Dance**

*Memento Mori. Remember that you must die.*

This Latin reminder, which rose to prominence during medieval outbreaks of the Black Death and which has served as a motif for artists and writers throughout history, remains universally true. There is no need to make exceptions or equivocate. We must die.

An old, weathered skull, flanked by vases, books, or other common household objects is one of the most widespread depictions of the Memento Mori. The depiction of a universal symbol of death in the center of the bits and pieces of mundane everyday life presents a clear message: don't be complacent or falsely confident, death is always present and always possible.

This is the same message presented by the Danse Macabre, the dance of death, a motif used in paintings, sculptures, engravings and other art, particularly during the Middle Ages. The Danse Macabre depicts men and women of all ages and social classes dancing among skeletons and corpses, reminding viewers that even during life's most joyous and frivolous moments, death is nearby. All of life's hectic, rhythmic steps must end in a full stop.

*Danse Macabre* is a role-playing game about death. It uses content, scenes and mechanics based on the Memento Mori and the Danse Macabre to allow players to engage with death and mortality. In *Danse Macabre*, the lives of characters are short and, often, incomplete. One player character dies during each cycle of scenes, and players will actively take on the role of a personified Death. The game uses music and a mechanic loosely based on musical chairs to simulate the dance. Ultimately, *Danse Macabre* culminates in a series of direct confrontations (and conversations) with Death where the characters and, eventually, Death itself must answer difficult questions about how and why we die.

## **What You'll Need:**

- x **At least three players.** Five players will offer the most complete experience, but only three are necessary to play. More than six or seven players may make the game cumbersome or confusing to play.
- x **An envelope for each player.** Small, greeting card size envelopes work best, but standard mailing envelopes will also suffice. The envelopes must be opaque so that players cannot see

their contents until they are opened.

- x **An index card or playing card for each player.** If you do not have index cards or playing cards, pieces of paper cut to fit easily inside the envelopes will also work. Folding the paper to fit is not recommended as this will make it harder to check the contents of the envelopes during play.
- x **Paper and a pen or pencil.** Additional index cards can be substituted for paper.
- x **A CD player with a music CD, a radio, or a computer with speakers and a music playlist.** Any device that can play audio, has speakers loud enough to be heard by all players and can be easily turned on and off will work. Any type of music will do. Instrumental music is probably best, as it is less intrusive and unlikely to distract players from the game, but lyrical music that compliments the tone and theme of the game is also a good choice. Avoid albums with lots of skits or spoken word tracks, as these can quickly become distracting.

## Setup

*Danse Macabre* is designed for quick, self-contained play. It does not feature an ongoing campaign or player characters that continue from one session to another. In keeping with the the game's theme, your character's life will be brief and finite. Each time you play you will have a new character with a new life and a new death to experience.

Since the entire experience of play is intended to fit into one two or three hour sitting, there is no need for the players to prepare before getting together to play the game, outside of ensuring that they have the items listed in the “What You'll Need” section above. There are no character sheets to fill in or maps or encounters to construct.

Once you have the materials you'll need to play, there are three things you will need to do before you begin: pick a setting, create characters and fill the envelopes.

### *Choosing a Setting*

Death is timeless and respects no borders, so a game of *Danse Macabre* can be set anywhere and during any time period. At the beginning of the game, the players should suggest possible settings and discuss these options until they reach a consensus about where and when they would like the game to be set. If the players cannot reach a consensus after ten or fifteen minutes, they should hold a vote to determine which of the suggested settings they will use. Remember, your time is limited—both in game and in life—so don't waste it before the game even begins.

Here are a few possible settings:

- x A Medieval village during an outbreak of the Black Death (You might call this the default setting, since the traditions of the *Danse Macabre* and *Memento Mori* reached their peak during this period.)
- x A suburban neighborhood, circa 2011
- x A Sudanese refugee community menaced by the Janjaweed.
- x The trenches of the first world war
- x A nineteenth century city, overcrowded and draped in smog

- x A frontier mining town during a gold rush

Once again, those are only a few possibilities. You may want to opt for a setting that will emphasize the immediacy of death—such as a place suffering under plague or war or famine—but the complacency and normalcy that come with a more mundane setting can also serve to underscore death's universality and suddenness. Keep in mind that the game's atmosphere will become more desperate as play advances and the setting will deteriorate accordingly, so you may want to opt for a setting that has the potential to be dynamic and adaptable rather than static and unchanging.

### *Creating a Character*

There are two steps to character creation: drawing your rank and drawing your temptation.

#### *Character Rank*

One motif common in many version of the *Danse Macabre* is the depiction of individuals from a variety of different social ranks and statures joining in the dance with death. Kings, popes and emperors dance alongside peasants, children and craftsmen, and all dance with skeletons and corpses that are leading them towards the grave or the entrance to Hell. This was a reminder that death is not selective, and that anyone and everyone will eventually die, regardless of status or age or wealth.

In *Danse Macabre*, this variety is represented by five different character ranks: the king, the priest, the artisan, the peasant, and the child. Your character's rank should serve as a general guide for establishing your character's place in your setting's society. It is not intended to be your character's literal profession or position. Each of the ranks are explained below with some suggestions for their interpretation:

- x **The King.** The King is a person of high social class, personal influence or authority. Characters with this rank may be leaders in their community, or they may be individuals with powerful personalities who command respect. Their power may be real, or it may be purely ceremonial. King characters may be politicians, generals, intellectuals, motivational speakers, street gang leaders, pop stars, or pimps. If the setting is a single family home, the king might be the mother or father, assuming their children respect or fear them. (Note that “king” is not intended to be a gendered role. A king character may be male or female.)
- x **The Priest.** The Priest is a spiritual, moral or psychological guide. They may be a religious leader, a philosopher, or simply a character of strong personal conviction. This rank includes imams, rabbis, professors, activists, doctors and nurses, missionaries, muckraking journalists, teachers and union organizers. The Priest's convictions need not be righteous by modern standards. They could just as easily be a conquistador or a seller of indulgences as a social reformer or spiritual visionary.
- x **The Artisan.** The Artisan is a craftsman or tradesman. They are of moderate social status. They may be a middle class professional or a writer or artist. They may make their living by their skills and ingenuity, or they may simply be largely average. This rank includes accountants, blacksmiths, technicians, computer programmers, carpenters, taxi drivers, social workers, student athletes and clerks. Artisan characters may view themselves as the normal or typical members of their society, even though they are usually greatly outnumbered by the peasants.

- ✕ **The Peasant.** The Peasant holds the lowest rank in their society. They hold the least power, but their work forms the necessary foundation for all social life. Peasant characters may be poor or working class, or they may instead be people of little power or influence within their home, workplace, community or social circle. Possible Peasant characters include immigrant day laborers, busboys, adjunct professors, substitute teachers, prostitutes, battered spouses, army privates, homeless children and high school outcasts.
- ✕ **The Child.** The Child is a fresh, innocent or naive member of their society. They need not be an actual child, but they certainly can be. The child is a reminder that death does not respect age or experience. Child characters may be school children, new recruits, mentally handicapped, adolescents transitioning to adulthood, emotionally childish, eager newbies, the elderly and senile or unquestioning idealists.

Each player will be assigned a rank, and each rank will only be held by one player.

In order to determine each player's rank, take five pieces of paper of identical size (or five extra index cards) and write the name of one of the ranks on each the the pieces so that there is a piece of paper for each rank. Next, turn the paper so the writing is hidden and shuffle or otherwise randomize the pieces. Lay the pieces face down on the table. Each player takes a turn flipping over one of the pieces of paper and receiving the rank written on it. After a rank is claimed, the player who claimed it takes its paper from the table and the next player draws their rank from the remaining papers. This continues until each player has claimed their rank.

If you have less than five players, simply discard any papers that remain after each player has a rank. It's not necessary that all ranks be represented in play, but it's best if none of the ranks are excluded from the draw entirely.

If you have more than five players, additional ranks may be added to the draw. Some possible options include: the knight, the jester, the merchant, the wife and the monk. As with the original ranks, these should serve as loose archetypes to spark character development.

### *Character Temptation*

The *Ars moriendi*, a medieval text that provides guidelines for achieving a good death, offers five temptations that a dying individual must overcome: lack of faith, despair, impatience, pride and avarice. If the dying yield to these temptations, they will cling to life, and be incapable of accepting death.

In *Danse Macabre*, these temptations provide motivation and conflict for your character. They are the futile desires that define your character's life and that separate your character from a peaceful death. They will guide how your character behaves in the game's life scenes and shape their ultimate confrontation with Death.

Each player will receive one temptation, and each temptation will be held by only one player. The temptations are assigned using the same procedure as the character ranks. The temptations are written on pieces of paper that are shuffled and dealt face down. Players take turns drawing their temptation until each player has drawn. All remaining temptations are discarded.

As with the ranks, each temptation is broad and contains multiple smaller fears, desires and character

traits. It's up to each player to decide which aspects of their temptation to highlight during play. The temptations are described below:

- x **Lack of Faith.** An absence of faith, whether in life, humanity, the future or yourself, can lead one to face death with insecurity. Living in ambiguity can mean dying in uncertainty and confusion. A lack of faith can manifest itself in several ways in a character's personality. It may show itself as fear, anxiety or apprehension. Or it may offer cynicism and callousness as a defense mechanism. It may also inspire emotional detachment and intellectual navel-gazing, as one distances themselves from the questions they cannot answer or sterilizes them with philosophical generalities. Characters defined by this temptation may be shut-ins, paralyzed by fear that their partners are cheating, excessively scholarly or hyper-critical, obsessive-compulsive, or nervous and insecure.
- x **Despair.** Despair is complete surrender to life's hardships, cruelties and injustices. A character suffering from despair cannot face death with comfort because they've already rejected all comfort from life. They may take empty pleasure in the thought of death, but they are not prepared to face it honestly and completely. A despairing character may be violently depressed or shruggingly apathetic. They may withdraw fully from life's pleasures, or they may have a single overpowering indulgence that they use to escape, such as overeating or drug abuse. They may isolate themselves from others, seeking to be alone with their misery, or sleepwalk vacantly through life.
- x **Impatience.** Impatience may be a desire to have life, in all its fullness, all at once, or it may be a desire to escape life's painful realities. In the former case, impatience is an unwillingness to accept your own limitations, and, as a result, an unwillingness to accept death's inevitability. In the later, the desire to evade life's pain leaves you ill prepared for the difficulties of death. Impatient characters may have lots of enthusiasm but little resolve, or they may dart recklessly from one project or fixation to another. They may struggle with wanderlust, or pace restlessly. They may be unwilling to tolerate mistakes from others while being oblivious to their own failings. They may drift from relationship to relationship, leaving when the initial thrill expires.
- x **Pride.** Pride may mean excessive confidence in your own abilities, or it may simply mean self-obsession and egotism. The proud character may believe themselves too smart or too fast or too strong for death, or they may be too busy with their own affairs to acknowledge its reality. Either way, they will be found unprepared when death arrives. Proud characters may seek to dominate conversations with others, or they may seem oblivious to the words and actions of those around that that do not directly address their interests. They may brag, or they may say little at all, remaining inwardly focused. They might be obsessed with their work, or with proving their ability.
- x **Avarice.** Avarice is commonly conceived as simple material greed, but it may also be imagined as greed for life. A character dominated by avarice might just as easily be emotionally stingy and compassionless as miserly. They can just as easily horde human relationships as gold, demanding subservience from friends and family, treating the living like possessions. Characters suffering from avarice are likely to cling tightly to their lives, and view death as a thief or a cheat. They may bemoan life's end as an unfair bargain, and try in vain to negotiate a better deal.

If you have more than five players, additional temptations can be included. Lust, anger and regret are possible options. Remember that the temptations should be broad enough to be open to interpretation and should provide some emotional or psychological obstacle to accepting life's end.

Once each player has a rank and a temptation, they should take some time to use them to develop a rough character concept. It's not important to know everything about your character before you begin. Your character should evolve organically during play. However, having some idea about how your character's rank and temptation will express themselves in play will help the game run smoothly and establish a clear identity for your character.

For example, if you drew *The Priest* and *Despair* and your setting is a Sudanese refugee camp, you might decide that you are playing a volunteer foreign aid worker who is overwhelmed by the suffering and injustice that they have experienced, and that, as a result, they cannot come to terms with a world where life and death seem arbitrary or, worse, predatory. Or, if you drew *The Child* and *Pride* and your setting is a gold rush mining town, you may establish that your character is an inexperienced prospector, fresh from an Eastern city, and sure that he will make his fortune, oblivious to the dangers and setbacks of frontier life.

Once you have a concept and your character is complete, you are one short step away from beginning the main body of the game.

### ***Filling the Envelopes***

You should have one index card or playing card for each player. If you are using index cards, leave all but one card blank. On the remaining card, have an artistically talented player draw a picture of a skull or simply write the word "Death." This will be your *Death Card*. (Redundant, yes?) If you are using playing cards, choose one of the cards to serve as the *Death Card*. The Ace of Spades is a thematically appropriate choice, since shovels bring to mind a freshly dug grave, but any card will do, so long as all players know which card is the death card before the game begins.

Take your cards and place them inside your envelopes, one card to an envelope, so that the side of the cards with writing or their suit is facing outwards, towards the flap of the envelope. Close the envelopes so the identity of each card is not visible, but do not seal them. Give each player an envelope.

At this time you should also prepare the CD player, radio or computer playlist so that it is ready to begin playing the music you selected, if you haven't done so already. Do not turn on the music yet, but have it ready to play so it can be started and stopped simply, ideally with one button press or mouse click.

Now setup is complete and you are ready to begin play.

### **The Scenes**

Play in *Danse Macabre* is divided into scenes. A scene is the game is very much like a scene in a play or movie, consisting of a series of interactions between characters that take place in a single location for a discrete period of time. In other words, a scene is what the characters do and say in one place and at one time. A scene generally consists of players narrating what their characters do, speaking as their character with other characters, and acting out their interactions with each other. How much time is

spent narrating and how much is spent actually acting will vary from group to group based on personal taste, but it's recommended that players spend at least some time actually acting out their characters actions and dialogue, as this will help to create a stronger personal connection between player and character.

The game consists of two kinds of scenes: *Life Scenes* and *Death Scenes*. Gameplay alternates between these scenes types, from *Life Scene* to *Death Scene* and back to *Life Scene*. There are two exceptions to this pattern: the first two scenes, which are both *Life Scenes*, and the final two scenes of the game, both of which are *Death Scenes*.

### ***Life Scenes***

Each *Life Scene* begins with one player turning on the music. When the music begins, each player picks up their envelope and stands. They begin to narrate and act as their character, keeping in mind their *rank* and *temptation* and the character concept that they developed. Players are encouraged to walk, pace or otherwise move around the room while in character, moving closer to other players as they interact with their characters and moving away as their character's attention is drawn elsewhere, carrying their envelopes with them as they move.

#### ***Framing the Scenes***

The first *Life Scene* should be a fairly mundane depiction of life in the chosen setting. Characters should go about their daily routines, engage each other in casual conversation, and pursue their personal agendas with little apparent consciousness of their mortality. Their *temptation* and its impact on their behavior should be noticeable, but not overwhelming.

For example, if the setting were a medieval village during a plague outbreak, the first scene might be a harvest fair, where both royalty and peasants have gathered to celebrate a successful crop, with only vague rumors circulating about the disease. Maybe someone has heard about a sickness that has infected men and women in a distant city, but it's only a rumor, and, after all, there is so much sin and depravity in the new cities and, well, they've pretty much invited judgment. Meanwhile, the players spend their time festively, singing, bragging, drinking, talking about how hard they worked this season.

Each following *Life Scene* should grow progressively darker, with life's frailty becoming more obvious and death's ubiquity becoming more undeniable. The characters should be more aware of their morality and their struggle with their temptation should become more overt. Play remains the same mix of acting, dialogue and narrative, but the content becomes more oppressive and the characters' moods more severe.

Continuing the plague example above, the second scene may be set in a tavern at night, with the characters sharing stories that they've heard about the plague's effects on nearby towns and fiefdoms. They might talk about the fevers, fits and lesions that the disease brings. But yet, no one in town is sick, so much of the bragging and bartering of everyday life continues.

The next scene might deal with the first word that some people in the characters' village have symptoms of the plague and that one man has died. It becomes impossible for the characters to deny their vulnerability, but they try to preserve some pretense of routine life.

The scenes could continue to escalate in this manner until a final scene where the last remaining

character, the last person in the village left unaffected, wanders the town desperately, flanked by the dead and dying and struggles with the knowledge that they are almost certainly already infected. This final scenes should largely be devoted to grappling with the remaining character's temptation, which, by this point, should have grown to dominate their thoughts and personality. By the end of this scene, the sole survivor should be close to coming to terms with their death or to being completely consumed by their temptation.

### *Pass the Envelope*

During the first *Life Scene*, players may freely trade their envelopes as they interact with each other. They may pass their envelope to another player with whom they are talking or acting, accepting that player's envelope in return. However, the players must not open or look inside their envelopes during a *Life Scene*. The players should remain oblivious as to whether or not the envelope they hold contains the *Death Card*. Also, no player can give up their envelope entirely. They must always be in possession of one and only one envelope, as long as their character is alive.

During all *Life Scenes* after the first only *Death* can exchange players' envelopes. Rules for the role of *Death* are explained in the *Playing Death* section below.

### *Ending A Scene*

A *Life Scene* ends when the music stops. At this point, the dance—represented by the characters' restless steps and exchanges—has concluded, and one character will die.

During the first *Life Scene* any player may choose to stop the music and end the scene at any time. The player simply walks to the source of the music and turns it off. During all later *Life Scenes*, only *Death* can stop the music.

Once the music stops, all players stop moving or return to their seats and open their envelopes. When a player opens their envelope to reveal the *Death Card*, this means their character has died, and that the next scene will be a *Death Scene* featuring their character and the player currently playing *Death*.

There is no *Death Scene* following the first *Life Scene*. Instead, play advances immediately to the second *Life Scene*. However, The character whose player was dealt the *Death Card* still dies. Don't worry, that character will still get their *Death Scene*. It simply comes later in the game.

Once a character has died, they will not appear in any future *Life Scenes*, though their players can still enter those scenes as *Supporting Characters*, so long as they are not currently playing *Death*.

Before moving on to the *Death Scene* take one blank card and one envelope and remove them from play. Take the remaining cards, including the *Death Card*, and return them to their envelopes, then shuffles the envelopes. Each player with a living character then claims one of the remaining envelopes.

### *Playing Death*

A personified Death, often depicted as a skeleton or an desiccated corpse in a funeral shroud, is a common figure in art and folktales about mortality. Often Death appears to undermine the worldly pretensions and obsessions of its victim before leading (or dancing) them out of life. In *Danse Macabre*, *Death* is a role that players assume after their characters have died.



The player whose character died in the previous pair of scenes assuming the role of *Death* in the first *Life Scene* following their character's *Death Scene*, and continues to play as *Death* through the next pair of scenes. So a player who was left holding the *Death Card* at the end of the second *Life Scene* would begin playing *Death* at the beginning of the third *Life Scene* and continue through the following *Death Scene* until the start of the fourth *Life Scene* when the next player will become *Death*.

During *Life Scenes*, the player portraying *Death* moves silently between the players. At any point, *Death* may take an envelope from a player, open it, read the card inside, and return the card to the envelope without showing it to any of the other players. *Death* can then return the envelope to the player he took it from, or hand it to another player, giving the player's envelope to the player he took the original envelope from. *Death* may do this as often as they like during the scene.

If there are *Supporting Characters* in a scene, *Death* can tug at their player's sleeve or point at them, indicating that it is time for them to leave the scene. After this, the *Supporting Character* should hastily exit the scene. (The player of that character may return to the scene as a different character though.) *Death* cannot force a living primary character to exit a scene.

It is also *Death* who chooses when to stop the music and end a *Life Scene*. *Death* may do this at any time, regardless of the length of the scene or the desires of the other players or characters. Unfinished business in a scene is left lingering to be addressed in a future scene or forgotten.

*Death* also plays a critical role in *Death Scenes*, described in a later section.

### *Supporting Characters*

*Supporting characters* are minor characters that come and go within a single scene, passing through and briefly interacting with the main characters, but rarely staying to see a scene's conclusion. They exist to fill roles demanded by the needs of a scene. They underscore the transience of human relationships and the temporary nature of most of life's encounters. (They also provide players of dead characters with something to do without undermining the finality of their character's death.)

*Supporting Characters* may be traveling merchants with fresh news of the plague, or a distant relative stopping for a short visit. They may be an old lover who passes the character on the street and stops for a brief, awkward conversation. They may be a workplace acquaintance coming by to tell a player character that a mutual friend is gravely ill. Whatever their role is, the actions and words of *Supporting Characters* should tie into the larger themes of death, impermanence and loss.

Only the players of deceased characters who are not playing *Death* may play supporting characters.

### *Death Scenes*

Once a *Life Scene* other than the first has ended, a *Death Scene* begins. In this scene, the character whose player was dealt the *Death Card* dies and engages in a dialogue with *Death*.

The scene begins with the player of the dying character narrating the circumstances of their character's death. These circumstances may be as dramatic or mundane as the player desires, and can be acted out

in detail or quickly summarized, depending on what the player feels will be most effective.

After the death has been narrated, *Death* enters the scene and begins to interrogate the deceased character, asking them questions about how they lived their lives, how prepared they are for their death, and, most importantly, about how they have dealt with their *temptation*.

*Death* should not ask the character questions about their *rank* or any character trait (profession, status, wealth, etc.) that is directly derived from their *rank*. These social distinctions are irrelevant to *Death*. If the deceased attempts to use their *rank* or a trait associated with *rank* to excuse or explain themselves, *Death* should not accept their answer and should repeat the question as if the deceased character had not responded.

*Death's* player may decide whether to present these questions as accusations, to simply offer them coldly and without judgment or to offer their own unique take on *Death's* personality. However, they should avoid showing clear approval or offering any critique of the deceased character's answers.

Here are some sample questions that *Death* might ask the deceased:

- ✕ What benefit have you gained from living in fear? Has it kept me away, or prevented the inevitable? (*Lack of Faith*)
- ✕ What has grief and sadness brought you? Have your tears drowned me or your screams frightened me away? (*Despair*)
- ✕ Why have you been so eager to rush into my arms? Did you think I would not have waited for you? (*Impatience*)
- ✕ Do you expect me to respect you? Did you think I would ignore you as you have ignored me? (*Pride*)
- ✕ Did you expect me to carry all you have hoarded on my back? Do you think the void is deep enough to contain what you've amassed? (*Avarice*)

The deceased character may ask questions of *Death*, but *Death* should not answer these questions directly, instead offering silence or another question.

When *Death* is satisfied, its player may lead the deceased character's player to the source of the music and turn it on, ending the scene, transferring the role of *Death* to that player and beginning the next *Life Scene*. Only *Death* can do this and no other player may turn on the music and begin the next scene.

### *The Final Death Scene*

After the last player character has died and had their dialogue with *Death*, following the structure presented above, and *Death* ended the scene by turning on the music, a new, final *Death Scene* begins. However, this scene is different than the ones that came before it, and thus has different rules.

In this scene, the player character who died at the end of the first *Life Scene*, and who has been denied their *Death Scene* until now, has a dialogue with *Death*, who is portrayed by the player of the last character to die, whose own *Death Scene* just concluded.

As before, questions are exchanged. Only now it is the character—who lived the shortest life and missed the most opportunities—who interrogates *Death*. The character may ask *Death* questions about

the futility of life, its brevity, its meaning or whatever other questions the character's player feels are appropriate.

Some sample questions are below:

- ✕ Why have you cut short my potential? What purpose does shortening my life serve?
- ✕ Why do my family and friends have to suffer such a sudden loss? What did you give them no warning?
- ✕ Why wasn't I given a chance to repent or reform? Why was I denied a chance to correct my mistakes and overcome my regrets?
- ✕ What good is a world where all good things are temporary, and where nothing of value lasts?
- ✕ Who benefits from the end of my life? How does good come from my destruction?

*Death* may attempt to concoct answers these questions or to evade them, but the deceased character may ask the question again if they are unsatisfied with the original answer. *Death* has no power to end the questions. *Death* may attempt to ask questions of the deceased, as in previous *Death Scenes*, but the player of the deceased is not obligated to answer.

The scene ends only when the player of the deceased character is satisfied (or abandons hope of a satisfying answer), and walks to the source of the music, turning it off and ending the scene and the game.