

Unwholesome Tennancy

Overview

O! Muse...

This is an artsy-fartsy hippie game about monsters and bums, but it's not experimental. It's based off several principles that have been well tested over the last decade.

Hopefully, if you've found this, you know what a roleplaying game is, but it's traditional to say explain that you will have to play pretend for most of the game in order to really enjoy it.

The best definition for this type of game is that these rules help you create a shared world by laying a ground work that allows the imaginations of all players to both conflict and come to an agreement. They help players agree on what just happened in the story of the game.

The rules are specifically-presented in a style known as "Pedagogy of Play." That means that, as you are reading the instructions, you will also be playing the game.

The first four turns of the game are all demo turns, in which you will build your characters and define the situation they are in as well as getting some practice using the rules in their most basic form.

You may find that your game's play style will cause other rules to crop up or that you may invent "house rules" to make things go smoother or rougher to your taste.

Wonderful! We'd like to hear about them at:

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(Mapachitly on twitter)

(Arpie on Story Games)

...but, please, give the basic rules a try first before you start adding new ones.

Incidentally, Loosed in Heaven is pretty much the same game as this one, only the starting conceit is that you're modern abductees in a crashed UFO on an alien world.

Alien technology is our favorite kind of phlebotinum at Apostropaic Games. Tells us how it went!

Materials

What You Will Need:

- Some creative imagination.
- Two to Six Players (Three or Four is the Sweet Spot)
- Several Sheets of Blank Paper or Scratch Paper
- Pencils or Other Things to Write With
- Three Cards (or scraps of Paper) for each player with the following Symbols (one on each card):



(In point of fact, any three distinctly-different symbols would do, as long as each player has their own set. For instance, the next 3 would also work:)



But for rules-purposes, it's easier to stick with triangle-circle-square. You can make these cards yourself or just have the players make their own symbols on 3 separate notecards. Each notecard should have its own symbol and each symbol should be on a different card.

You should also make two copies of the **Summary** page and put them in the center of the playing area.

Once all this is gathered, pick someone to read the "Read Aloud" parts of the following rules (or take turns.)

The game has no set finish. When players feel like stopping, you should stop. Look for a good note to end the game on, a relative period of calm or a really neat dilemma if you have some sort of time limit,

This game is inspired by many other "indie" story games, but in particular *With Great Power...* (which uses a more complex form of trait redemption) and *Penny for Your Thoughts* (which has fantastic pedagogy of play.) I made it mostly because I think the interplay of cards grants more of a feeling of control than dice and it seemed like a good way of balancing out shifting scores.

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Workers vanish! Authorities Baffled!

Read This Aloud, First:

“In 1929, you lost everything. The world crashed into the Great Depression and choked on its own despair.”

“But you’ve survived for a few years now, doing mostly nothing here and there. You’ve seen breadlines and jail cells and hobo jungles. Maybe you’ve run moonshine or guns or the numbers. You’ve learned to beg.”

“But sometimes you get lucky. An organization has a job for you. It’s disreputable and dangerous and you’ll be working with a bunch of lowlife deadbeats but that’s peachy, because they’ll probably get eaten. Unlike you.”

“Take a moment and imagine yourself sitting in the back of an unheated panel truck on your way to a cave where the organization says the monsters are waiting. You’re sitting on crates of something, but they promised the explosives were in the other truck. Pretend you’re cold and tired and hungry, desperate enough for this job.”

“Does your character believe there are actually monsters? Have you worked for this organization before? How far can you trust them? Did you see any monsters last time? How did you survive?”

“Look at the player sitting next to you. Introduce yourself and try to find out how much they know. The more you know, the better chance you have of surviving when they drop you off.”

“Talk until everyone falls quiet or at least two players both agree that you must have reached the spot by now.”

Read This Aloud Next:

“That was called a Refresh turn. At the end of a refresh turn, any player who participated may take all three of these cards back into his or her hand.”

**Hand Out One of Each Card to Each Player
(Each player should now have 3 Cards)**



Mutilated Bodies Found in Cave!

Then Read the Following Aloud:

“There’s a price for refreshing your hand. Pick one other player, anyone who seems to be playing a character who might be looking out for your best interest. Point to that player.”

“For each person who pointed to you, suggest a course of action that could solve one of their problems. Offer to help in any way you think you can. It turns out that you’re right - they’re just not in a spot to think it through.”

“Please note that, if you are in a cliffhanger, you may not participate in a Refresh turn... because your character might be dead. The way you end up in a cliffhanger is by coming out on the bad end of a peril turn. Like this one.”

“It turns out there were monsters in the cave. They were pretty clever. They killed the foremen and cut you off from the trucks. They were worse than anything you’ve ever seen before.”

“Fortunately, during a time of peril, you have a chance to shine. Unfortunately, at least one of your shining stars is gonna end up in a cliffhanger.”

“Everyone pick one card and play it. You may refresh again if you like, but that would be pointless with a hand full of card and all these monsters after you.”

“Playing the card represents a redeeming quality you demonstrated under pressure. Write down the quality along with your character’s moniker* on a sheet of paper. Make the symbol on the card you played beside the quality you made up for yourself.”

“Everyone is currently tied, but the player with the lowest value will plunge into a cliffhanger, seemingly perishing in some hideous way (there’s a chance they may escape later, but not much of one.”

“In order to break a tie, each player must reveal an additional redeeming quality of one other player. You may not reveal an additional redeeming quality for yourself, you must point it out in a companion! Put the same mark beside any redeeming quality you get as the last one. Count them all up.”

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Latest Movie Serial Banned by Church!

Read This Aloud:

“Whoever ends a Peril turn with the lowest score plunges into a cliffhanger. If several players are tied for lowest, all of them take the plunge. Players can use their redeeming qualities to support one another and break ties, they can even play additional cards to help themselves or others.”

“Everyone who is not plunged into the Cliffhanger takes turns describing how the situation becomes worse and worse for those who were. Compare scores one final time. If you were not plunged into a Cliffhanger, describe something awful happening based on what has just gone before to the character of a player in peril.”

“While plunging into a Cliffhanger, you may describe yourself making quick actions to save yourself. Keep this up as long as everyone thinks its fun or until two players agree you could not have possibly survived the latest tragedy to befall you.”

Read This Aloud After All Cliffhangers:

“The third type of turn ends quite differently, but you can’t participate in it as your character if you’re in a cliffhanger. However, you can take on the role of a background character.”

“This is fortunate because it turns out that some of the monsters can talk. They claim to be aliens and they have an offer for those who didn’t seem to perish horribly last turn. That’s why this turn is called a temptation.”

“If you plunged into a Cliffhanger this turn, it’s your job to make up a new character now. An alien monster who has an offer to make. Background characters always show up to make offers in temptation turns.”

“When you are ready, introduce yourself and extend your offer to the other players. You don’t always have to play an alien monster on a temptation turn, just someone in a position to make an offer that might have consequences.”

“What kind of offer will you make? What are you doing here? What plans do you have? How can these down-and-out types help you? Are you telling the whole truth?”

New Planet Discovered: Is There Life?

After All Offers Are Made, Read the Following Aloud:

“When someone calls for a temptation turn, that puts you in the position of accepting the offer or turning it down. You are not in a position to turn the tables or otherwise take advantage of those making the offer (more’s the pity since they will usually be creeps.)”

“Each of you must decide to take the offer or turn it down on your own. It’s okay if you plan to betray someone later, what’s important is the decision you make right now. There are different consequences either way.”

“If you accept the offer, and offers can be outright threats, by the way, then you may negotiate an in-story reward with those making the offer and decide how and when in the game you will receive it. A bit now and a lot later, perhaps? Expect betrayals. In return, you must describe your character at least starting to uphold your side of the bargain. Describe what you like and note the promises and rewards you’ve received on your sheet of paper.”

“Incidentally, one of the rewards you can ask for - and you are allowed to ask for your own rewards, is the rescue of a comrade. Is there anybody who perished last turn that you’re willing to save by striking a deal with their monster? Someone who supported you, perhaps?”

“If you turn down the offer, then pick some aspect of your background, preferably something you’ve already discussed, and those making the offer will describe how it is threatened by your refusal. (If you pick something later on that’s already threatened, then those making the offer may describe destroying it. If you pick something that was destroyed, you get to describe how you redeem it by crossing off one of your redeeming qualities and transforming the ruined thing into something new!)”

“But, right now, you have to make the choice. Will you accept the offer, begin its task and gain the reward or will you refuse and watch your world suffer?”

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World Reels from Natural Disaster!

At That Point, Read This Aloud:

“Well, decisions made and problems in place, it’s time to find out about the fourth and last type of turn.”

“It’s time to find out about the Conspiracy turn.”

“The other types of turn each have their own unique limitations and advantages. You get your cards back on a Refresh turn but you don’t get much accomplished and you have to talk about the situation you’re in - but it’s also a good time to make plans as a team.”

“You get to earn new redeeming qualities that make your cards more powerful during Peril turns, as well as finding ways to get extra score from the support of others, but you might get dumped into a Cliffhanger!”

“And you get to either make deals that might change your team’s goals or accept deals and gain resources (or refuse them to change your world) in a Temptation turn.”

“But each of these turns has something in common, there’s a good chance you can play your own character. On a Conspiracy turn, no one gets to play their own character. You must play a powerful member of some powerful group in the game world, such as the organization or the monsters you dealt with, that not only knows about your characters but is worried about them!”

“It’s not a good thing when powerful characters worry about you. They tend to take drastic steps.”

“Let’s take a moment and decide what powerful faction, preferably one we’ve already mentioned, might be worrying about what our characters are doing.”

Help Everyone Decide the Name of the Group and What It Wants Then Write it Down On Its Own Sheet of Paper!

Just For Fun:

Have each player sign the sheet “in character” as one of the higher-ranking members of this group.

New Planet Discovered: Is There Life?

Finally, Read the Following Aloud:

“Each of you must now name one high-ranking person in this group that’s concerned about us. What’s their rank in the faction? What do they want? Why bother with us? Introduce yourselves and call the meeting to order.”

“During the meeting, you must bring up your own character and describe the threat he or she poses or his or her usefulness as a tool of the faction. Then discuss with the other players how to neutralize this threat or put this usefulness to the task.”

“Make note of the scheme you come up with somewhere on the sheet with your list of redeeming qualities. You may cross off one of your redeeming qualities at any time to thwart this scheme. If it comes to fruition, however, you may add a new redeeming quality right there and then (at the moment the scheme comes true.)”

“Schemes can’t actually come true until after the Conspiracy turn ends. Once each player has had a chance to bring up a threat from their character (or a use for him or her) call the meeting to a close.”

“You are allowed to pass if you don’t want to bother with a scheme just yet.”

“Free play, when each player gets to choose his or her own turn type, begins after the Conspiracy closes.”

To Begin the Game, Point to any Player And Read the Following Aloud:

“The game begins in earnest with your first turn. What kind will it be? If you have any questions, there are reminder sheets in the center of the play area.”

“If a rule seems unclear or contradictory, then it’s up to us all to work out the way we’d prefer to see it go.”

“Good luck to us all.”

Unwholesome Tennancy - Summary

Game Structure

First Four Turns

Turn 1: Refresh

Players discuss current situation and pick up their 3 cards at the end. Each player picks a trustworthy friend to point out a course of action that will counteract their flaws. (Players in a Cliffhanger may not refresh but they can play side characters or allies in the discussion.)

Turn 2: Peril

Players face a danger and play at least one of their 3 cards at the end. Each card should be keyed to certain redeeming qualities and playing a card gives you a new quality. Players may play cards to support one another and give one other player (not themselves) a redeeming quality to sway the outcome. Whoever has the lowest score plunges into a cliffhanger described by everyone else one-at-a-time (with the poor souls in the cliffhanger fending it off as long as is fun or until two other players claim the victim could not possibly have survived.)

Turn 3: Temptation

Players in Cliffhangers take on the roles of those (background characters) in position to make an offer. (Therefore you must have at least one player in a cliffhanger to invoke a temptation turn.) Players may accept these offers and gain an in-game reward (such as the rescue of a comrade) or turn them down and suffer a penalty to a previous reward or some other previously-described aspect of the character's backstory.

The penalty has three stages:

First Penalty: Something is threatened

Second Penalty: A threatened thing is ruined

Third Penalty: The ruined thing is redeemed
(transformed into a new, better form)

Turn 4: Conspiracy

Each player must take (and make up or use a previously-mentioned) role in a powerful group. Each player may discuss a way to neutralize or threaten their own character. Players may cross off a redeeming quality to thwart this scheme (at any time) or gain a new redeeming quality if it comes to fruition. (Hint: It's best to make grim hints and allusions during a Conspiracy turn, save direct revelations for Perils and Temptations.)

Free Play

Subsequent Turns & End Game

After the first four turns, go around the table in an orderly fashion allowing each player a chance to choose the next type of turn.

Continue around the table until everyone feels that the story of the game has reached some sort of conclusion or you think you've found a good point to put the story on hold (until the next time you want to continue it.)

Cosmic Horror Wrasslin'

Scale and Transformations

Some groups who have played this game have expressed concerns about escalation. It's possible for a group that starts out as a bunch of depression-era deadbeats to eventually confront god-like aliens and travel to distant corners of the cosmos, even to write history itself.

If this is the kind of thing that concerns your players, take a moment after turn four to set up several layers of Scale and assign Transformation pre-requisites to them.

Each player may suggest 1 layer of Scale, either greater than or less than the last one suggested (the default and lowest scale must be a bunch of bums who are desperate enough to accept monster-fighting work.) Players must list something that would be a tough opponent on this scale but a push-over one scale higher.

Each player then either adds a transformation requirement to the scale (a reward type that all players have to get to reach that level of conflict) or another example of something that would be tough to face on that scale (but easy one scale higher.)

Once this is done, continue the game as normal but players can automatically veto anything they think is out of scale. (You are allowed to introduce things players couldn't handle, but players may not describe themselves overcoming them until they reach the appropriate scale.)

Once you reach the top scale, repeat the process if you want to continue the saga of these characters. You might need an extra universe or two by that point.

UNWHOLESOME TENNANCY

Why take this job?

1. extortion or espionage
2. hunt or investigation
3. pennance or dare
4. bargain or marriage
5. rescue or assist
6. accident or trapped

Need some ideas? We all do, sometimes!

If you've got a pair of d6's, feel free to use these tables any time you like. Never, ever feel constrained by what you roll. Pick what you like or use it to inspire something far better!

Hired by...

(Threat of Exposure)

1. Government Raids
2. Dynamitard Investigators
3. Bloody Revolution
4. Natural Disaster
5. Outright Invaders
6. Primitive Wizards

MONSTER COLONY

Behavior

1. Vanishing
2. Screaming
3. Floating
4. Exploding
5. Cryptic
6. Transforming

Suspect

1. Sweetheart
2. "Monster"
3. Doorway
4. Tome
5. Hooded Figure
6. "Ghost"

Front Organization

1. Smuggling Ring
2. Godhead Cult
3. Fake Business
4. Hypnotic Nucleus
5. Secret Society
6. Mutant Clan

Adv. Fixtures

1. Basalt Slabs
2. Hissing Pipes
3. Pulsating Mass
4. Twisting Wires
5. Rusting Plates
6. Blinking Lights

True Nature

1. Research Center
2. Breeding Programme
3. Penal Colony
4. "Mining" Franchise
5. Hunting Lodge
6. Listening Post

Adv. Chamber

1. Angles-Window
2. Floating Disc
3. Altar of Junk
4. Vending Slot
5. High Catwalk
6. Folding Table

Run By...

1. Kinda Stupid
2. Mad Scientist
3. Party Animal
4. Hard Sell
5. Ever-Hungry
6. Very Polite

...Aliens

1. Huge Bugs
2. Tentacle-Pods
3. Reptoid Frogs
4. Tall Blondes
5. Canine Ghouls
6. Cat Entities

memetic encoding = ritual

Redeeming

1. Kind-Hearted
2. Open-Minded
3. Jocular
4. Artistic
5. Truly-Innocent
6. Hard-Earned

Quality

1. Cleverness
2. Glamour
3. Muscle
4. Sang Froid
5. Wisdom
6. Leadership

CLIFFHANGER!

Seemingly Perished

1. Plumetted, Drowned
2. Crushed, Smothered
3. Tortured, Crashed
4. Shrunk, Vaporized
5. Lost in Time, Frozen
6. Mind-Wiped, Debrained

...from Source of Threat

1. ...by an explosion
2. ...by treachery
3. ...by weird forces
4. ...by enemy weapons
5. ...by a hideous creature
6. ...by a strange device

Resurrection and/or Transformation

1. brain cannister
2. afterlife dimension
3. genetic chrysalis
4. vibratory state
5. mind swap
6. reanimation via...
...serum or essential saltes

Near the...

1. Widdershins
2. Antipodal
3. Fringeward
4. Intercine
5. Hyperjacent
6. Transverse

Techno-Fuel

1. Hylomation (animates "dead" matter)
2. Aetheric (hard to look at)
3. Vivesectory (requires food)
4. Orgasmic (feels too good)
5. Microtron (impossible to repair)
6. Projected (need LoS to source)

Form

1. Tube (requires link to Loper)
2. Powder (supply can run out)
3. Graft (changes your looks)
4. Ritual (takes a long time)
5. Famulus (goes off alone, argues)
6. Button (part of your Alien Device)

New State

1. primitive hominid (hairless ape)
2. fishy hybrid (sexy reptoid)
3. macrobial hiveform (giant bug)
4. amorphous pseudopod (tentacle ooze)
5. atomic shade (energy ghost)
6. hylogenic projection (talking hardware)

Alien Landscape

1. Huge Fungi
2. Vibratory Crystals
3. Acid Lakes
4. Rock Formations
5. Glacial Ice
6. Cratered Caverns

Alien Horizon

1. Domed (Basalt) City
2. Assorted Moons
3. Extra Suns
4. Ringed Giant
5. Star Field
6. Nebula Mists