

Nameless Horror

A STORY GAME
BY NICK WEDIG

VERSION 0.2

WHAT IS THIS GAME?

This is a horror roleplaying game (storytelling game?). It will work for three to five players. It should be done in one or two sessions of play. There's no game master, no character sheets and relatively little math. Unlike many roleplaying games, you can win and lose this game.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

You'll first choose a scenario, then create some protagonists to play in the scenario, and then act out a series of improvised scenes. When one scene ends, you'll start a new one. Keep doing this until only one protagonist character is left alive.

Each player controls a protagonist character (PC). The PCs are entangled in a terrifying situation. The players work together to narrate the world's setting and introduce terrors and such. Most of the game will consist of free roleplaying of your characters. You only need to invoke the rules occasionally, when something is uncertain to all players.

During the game, you describe what your PC says and does and feels. Other players may suggest things for your character to say or do. You probably want to go along with these suggestion and build on them. But you have final say over what your character is doing, so you can turn down these suggestions. (There are a few exceptions to your PC's total autonomy, like when cards are interpreted or people are in danger).



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Example

Adam, Amber and Stacie are playing this game together. During a scene, Amber explains how her character Isadora reacts to the disgusting slime that they find covering the walls of the house they are exploring. Later in the scene, Stacie suggests that Isadora still has some goop on her hands and accidentally it accidentally drips onto the creepy magic runes they found. Amber could reject this suggestion, because it is about her PC acting a particular way. But the idea is a good one, so instead she builds on it by describing how the slime glows a weird greenish color as it touches the runes.

For everything except the player characters, the players at the table should work as a group to decide. Any player can introduce a new setting element or add new descriptive details to stuff previously introduced. If you require some non-player characters (NPCs), then any player has the authority to describe the NPC. When you create an NPC, you should roleplay as the character in the scene if at all possible. But if you're in a scene with your PC talking to an NPC you just created, delegate the NPC to another player who isn't doing much. Once an NPC is created, they are group property: anybody can roleplay as the NPC in future scenes or add details to the NPC as they see fit.

Example

In a different scene, Adam's PC Emilia has found the missing child he is searching for, but discovers that the child is possessed by some sort of malevolent spirit. Emilia wishes to speak to the child, so Adam asks Stacie to play him and the possessing spirit. Stacie then describes the spirit's actions and behavior just as she would her own PC. But Adam or Amber can interject with additional information about the spirit's behavior.

SCENES?

The story of this game is divided into scenes, just like a movie is divided into scenes or a book is split into chapters. Each scene is a discrete unit of time that occurs in more or less the same place and in the

same timeframe. If you have one or more characters doing something in one place at one time, then that is a scene. If the PCs pick up and move to a different place or a large amount of time passes, then you probably should call for an end to the scene and begin a new one.

Any player can suggest the ending to a scene, even if that player doesn't have a character in the scene. If the table reaches a consensus on ending the scene, then end it. You might say a few words to describe how the scene wraps up: e.g., *"So we all pile into your shoddy old van and drive out to the abandoned factory to investigate."*

When a scene end is called, you can say that you wanted to do a bit more in the scene. Then quickly finish your business in this scene and move on. Don't take too long, though. The other players apparently want the story to move on to something else.

Most of the time, you will leap straight from the end of one scene into the beginning of the next, especially if everyone at the table is really digging the game. But the moment between scenes is a good time to check the time, get a snack, use the restroom and chitchat a little about the game. Make sure that everyone is having a good time, and that they don't mind you throwing horrible centipede monsters at their characters. If the session is running long, you can use this time to ask if the session should be ended or if the other players want to keep playing.

When you're ready to start a new scene, the player with the questioner card will draw a card and consult the oracles about how the next scene begins.

Example

The first scene of the game involves all the PCs gathered together at the wake of a good friend. The player discuss for a while in character their friend's mysterious death. After one mentions seeing a creepy idol in his apartment, the PCs all decide to head over there together. Adam suggests that this would be a good time to break and start a new scene, even though no action or danger occurred. The others agree. They take a brief break to grab some snacks, and then Amber (who has the questioner card) draws a card and consults the oracles to find out what the PCs find at the apartment.

CONSULTING THE ORACLES

You have a deck of Tarot-like cards, called the oracle deck. (*You could use actual Tarot cards if you liked, though I made a deck specifically formulated for this game and genre.*) When important decisions need to be made in the game and no player has a clear answer for the question you ask the deck. We call this "consulting the oracles". To consult the oracles, do the following:

- ✦ **First, identify that there is an unresolved issue.**
- ✦ **The player with the questioner card asks a leading question, if they wish.**
- ✦ **Draw a card from the oracle deck.**
- ✦ **The player with the questioner card hands the oracle card to another player of their choice. That player interprets the card.**
- ✦ **Then the player with the questioner card hands the oracle card to a different player. The second player offers a second different interpretation.**
- ✦ **The player with the questioner card will decide which one of these two answers is the true one.**
- ✦ **The player whose answer was not chosen receives the questioner card as a consolation prize.**



Object #3: Bones by Asja Boros

Let's go over those steps in a bit more detail.

First, identify that there is an unresolved issue.

You consult the oracles when you have a matter that must be answered and that no player is set on what the resolution to the matter should be. This might be the beginning of a scene or it could be the question of what the PCs find when they unseal the locked chamber. Or it might simply be that the players agree that the current scene is losing momentum and should have an unexpected twist enter into the scene. Whatever it is, you consult the oracles when the players at the table don't have a clear idea what to do next.

The person holding the questioner card can, if they wish, ask a leading question before or after drawing a card. There will be a special card used when consulting the oracles. The holder has special duties to perform. The card will move around the table as you play. At this point, the holder of the questioner card can ask a leading question if they so choose. E.g., "Where does he go after the ritual goes horribly wrong?" Similarly, if you're in the middle of a scene, you may ask a specific leading question, e.g., "So who bursts into the room to interrupt this discussion with some urgent information?"

The player with the questioner card hands the oracle card to another player of their choice. That player interprets the card. Interpreting is discussed further down. The questioner player cannot interpret the card themselves. The questioner player can choose any other player they wish for any reason.

Then the player with the questioner card hands the oracle card to a different player. **The second player offers a second different interpretation.** The second player's interpretation might be very similar to the first, or it might be very different. The interpretation must be distinct from the first in some key way, so that the questioner player has a meaningful choice.

The player with the questioner card will decide which one of these two answers is the true one.

They tell the group which is true. Once you're finished consulting the oracles, play will continue building on the chosen narration.

The player whose answer was not chosen receives the questioner card as a consolation prize. This means that they then get to influence the narrative in a different way next time.

Example

Things have turned out poorly for the PCs. In their friend's apartment, they found the idol and unleashed a horrible centipede-like monster. As the PCs run in terror, Amber suggests consulting the oracles about their escape. The others agree that the outcome is uncertain, so they agree. Stacie currently has the questioner card, so she asks "What do we find at the bottom of the stairs as we race out the building?" She draws a card, "Nobody - It must have been your imagination." Stacie first asks Amber to interpret the card, who says "When we reach the bottom of the stairs, I look back and see that there is no monster. It was just an illusion or a trick of the mind or something." Stacie then turns to Adam, who offers an alternate interpretation. "We reach the bottom of the stairs and find that the door that came in through is missing. Just gone, with blank wall where it should be. We rush over to where there should be a window, and it is missing, too. All the exits have mysteriously disappeared." Stacie prefers this answer, so she gives Amber the questioner card and describes her PC panicking at the lack of a door.

HOW DO I INTERPRET THE CARD?

It isn't hard. Each card in the oracle deck has a title, a phrase giving some sort of meaning and a (hopefully evocative) image. You think about the card as symbolic of what is happening in the game. Look for connections and meanings. Relate the images on the card to the characters and things in the scene. Explain how the story might go according to that card's meaning. If you need a moment to think, tell the asker that and come up with an idea. Don't be afraid to suggest the obvious answer. Don't be afraid to steal the other interpreter's answer and make it better, too.

You don't need a huge long monologue to interpret the card. A sentence or two suffices, as long as you answer the question and tie the card into the fiction. Of course, a bit more detail works, too. Some players think the interpretation out as they speak, after all. Find the amount of detail that works for you and your fellow players.

Example

Adam asks Amber to interpret a card to answer a character generation question about his PC, who is known to be the school nerd. The question is "What eldritch tome of blasphemous secrets did I give our friend Dexter as a joking birthday present shortly before he died?" Amber looks at the oracle card that was drawn: "The Author - If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction". Amber thinks carefully about how the card implies that Adam's PC was, in fact, the author of the book. She also notices that the card implies themes of impossibility and metatextuality. She describes how Adam's PC was an aspiring roleplaying game author, and he had written a manuscript for a terrible horror RPG. He gave their friend Dexter the manuscript, and Dexter got super excited by the game's lore and background, despite never actually playing it.

SO HOW DO WE WIN THIS GAME?

There are two kinds of stones or tokens that you receive over the course of the game. You receive black stones by putting the other players into danger. You gain white stones by helping the other players. (You can also get black and white stones in a few other ways. But mostly through endangering and helping your fellow PCs.)

At the end of the game, your final score is equal to your white total multiplied by your black total. The player with the highest final score is the winner, whether their PC survived the game or not.

Example

At the end of the game, Adam has four white and six black, giving him a score of 24. Amber has three black and 7 white, giving her a score of 21. Stacie has five of each color, giving her a final score of 25. Stacie is declared the winner.

HOW DO WE GET BLACK TOKENS?

During the game, you gain black tokens by putting people in danger. After the initial framing narration and a bit of freeform roleplaying, you can introduce a dangerous element to the scene. Identify one PC who will die if they are not rescued from the danger. Take a black token when you describe the danger.

The important bit about danger is that it is imminent and fatal. If some PC doesn't act quickly, then the targeted PC will die. Describe the danger to make clear the seriousness of the situation. This is a life and death matter for the player characters.

You can't endanger a PC right at the start of a scene. Wait until you've been playing for a little bit, then you can initiate the danger. You'll have to watch for how long seems appropriate for your group and for the story that your group is telling. Use your best judgment on when is a good time to introduce a danger. Don't do it too early, or interrupt something interesting is happening. But if the scene starts to lose energy, or if the players do something that clearly must be dangerous, feel free to reach for those black stones.



Shadowy Figure by Richard North

Weird edge cases

- ✦ Only one PC can be endangered in a scene. After someone escapes danger or dies, then wrap up the scene quickly afterward.
- ✦ You can totally endanger your own PC, if you wish. That may be a strategically useful method.
- ✦ If you describe someone being endangered as part of your card narration, then you only get the black token if the deciding player accepts your narration.
- ✦ You can't ask someone for help if they have no more remaining answer cards.

Example

While exploring the abandoned home of their dead friend, the PCs discover a strange form hidden under a blanket. None of the PCs want to remove the blanket, but they all wish to see what is under there. After much stalling and debate, Amber's PC Isadora steps for and tugs at the blanket. Adam says "Yeah, this is obvious but there was something horrible under there. It looks like a giant bloated buglike creature, but covered in sweaty humanlike skin and dozens of weird black eyes. It has surprisingly large teeth which lash out to bite you. Unless you get some help, Isadora will die." Adam then takes a black token from the pool to add to his personal pile.

HOW CAN I GET OUT OF DANGER?

When a PC is placed in danger, that PC can reach out for help to any other PC. The endangered PC's player has to choose a single specific PC to ask for help. Most of the time, this will be looking to another PC present in the scene and hoping that they can help you. But you can frame flashbacks or draw inspiration from the other PC or receive a timely phone call with a warning, if it fits the narrative. It is up to you to narratively justify that you can reach out to another PC and receive help. (If anyone at the table thinks your narration is weak, revise your description until it satisfies everyone or simply ask a different player for help.) Flashbacks and inspiration are good ways to call on the help of a deceased PC.

Each player starts the game with 4 answer cards. When you ask that player for help, they have to reveal one card for their answer. Each card will give a **Yes** or **No** response and a little bit of additional flavor for what happens. If they reveal a **Yes** card, you

survive the danger. (For the moment anyway.) They then describe how their PC rescues you from danger. Because they helped you out of a dangerous situation, they receive a white stone.

If the helping player reveals a **No** card, then their PC is unwilling or unable to help you. Due to their lack of assistance, your PC dies. Using the revealed card as a prompt, narrate your PC's death. When your PC dies, you receive black tokens equal to the remaining cards that the assisting player had (not including the revealed card). The person you asked for help gets to describe your PC's death, in as gruesome a manner as they wish.

If they reveal a **Perhaps** card, then the revealing player offers you a deal. If you accept, then you are rescued as with a **Yes** card. If you don't accept, then you die as with a **No** card.

Example

Isadora leaps back from the bug monster, trying to get another PC between herself and the hideous thing. Amber looks over to Adam and says "I'm hoping that your PC will keep it away from me or something. Can you help me?" Adam chooses and reveals a card from his hand: "Yes, but... you'll still be badly hurt in the process". Adam describes how Emilia tries to fight the insectoid monster off of Isadora and manages to kick it down the staircase. But not until after it had sunk its long nasty teeth into Isadora's legs. Isadora is left alive but bleeding badly. Adam takes a white token as his reward for helping.

Another Example

Later on, Stacie's PC Duncan is hanging from a crumbling ledge, while below the zombified corpse of her friend is clawing up after her. Stacie describes Duncan reaching out to Emilia for help. Unfortunately for Stacie, Adam used up his last "yes" answer saving Isadora. So he plays "No but... your death reveals important information." Adam describes how Emilia's grasp isn't strong enough to pull Duncan up. And then Adam describes the horror of watching Duncan be cannibalized by their undead former friend. Then Adam describes how the undead hulk below shifts in form until it looks exactly like Duncan. Now the surviving PCs know that they are dealing with a shapeshifting creature as their ultimate foe. Adam had one card left in his hand other than the card he played, so Stacie takes one black token as a consolation prize.

WHAT DO I DO IF MY PC IS DEAD?

Keepon playing. Players with dead PCs can keep on interpreting cards as called on. You can still hold the questioner card and decide on interpretations. You can still add details to a scene and roleplay NPCs and such. Endangered PCs can even call on your dead PC for help as a ghost or a flashback. If you're feeling vindictive, each ghost PC gets one free chance to endanger a living PC once per scene. This is above and beyond the 'only endanger one PC per scene' rule. Thus, as the game goes on, things get more dangerous as the number of angry ghosts rises.

Example

Stacie's PC Duncan was consumed by a shapeshifting ghoul, but Stacie keeps on playing the game. When the PCs manage to phone the police, Stacie roleplays the skeptical cop. When the PCs seek a different way out of the apartment building, Stacie helps add new details to the scene. When the shapeshifting ghoul comes back on the scene, Stacie introduces additional dangers that don't count against the 'once per scene' limit.

SO HOW DO WE GET STARTED?

First everyone should pick a scenario. Each scenario is made to focus the game toward a specific manifestation of the horror or thriller genres. The scenario will give you a little bit of background and starting information. It will also give you a set of questions used to create your characters.

Example

Adam, Amber and Stacie decide to play the game you're reading now. They glance over the scenarios. Amber has read them all and gives her opinion on each. Adam and Stacie have not read any, so they skim the files and listen to Amber. The three all discuss what sort of horror scenario they wish to play. Amber tells the others how the scenarios match up with what they are looking for, etc. Eventually, the group reaches a consensus on playing "The Wake of Dexter Durbin" about a group of friends investigating the mysterious death of their collective friend.



Centiform by Matt Reinbold

LET'S MAKE SOME CHARACTERS!

Great. First, draw a card from the oracle deck. Interpret this card for yourself to determine your basic character concept. Are you a rich old widow or a brash young teenage quarterback? Look at the card and consider what sort of person the card implies. Tie the card's meaning in with the information you have from the scenario. Who does the scenario imply that your character is? How do the scenario and card fit together? At this point, you don't need more than a vague idea who you are. A single word can be enough. (If you have more, that's cool, too.)

Example

Based on the scenario chosen, Adam, Stacie and Amber all know that their PCs were friends of the recently deceased Dexter Durbin. Adam draws his card and gets "The Ruins - Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" This is a little odd for a character concept, but Adam gets to thinking about the card and its meaning. Adam decides that his character once was rich and powerful and then it all came crashing down around her. Adam thinks that his PC spent some time as a homeless person until Dexter helped her get back on her feet. That's enough detail for the moment.

Once you have a basic character concept, go around the table asking questions. There are six standard questions that are used in every scenario. Your chosen scenario will give you several more. When it is your turn, pick a question to ask, and consult the oracles for the answer. (Don't worry about the questioner card yet.) Choose questions that interest you but where you don't have a firmly fixed answer in mind. You're not going to answer the question yourself, just pick between answers offered to you. Your character might grow in unexpected ways as your questions are answered.

In a group of three or four players, go around the table three times taking turns choosing and asking questions. If you have five players, only go around twice.

You might want to make some notes about your character on an index card or some scrap paper. Make sure you name your PCs. (I always forget this step). I find it useful to fold an index card in half, write my PC's name on the card and display it so the other players can see it.

Example

Adam so far knows only a little bit about his PC. To learn more, he looks over the list of questions and chooses "What do I want and why can't I have it?" Her then draws a card, which is "The Child - to be powerless to control your own fate". Stacie interprets the card as being about how the PC's daughter had gone missing about the same time as Dexter's death. Authorities had searched for her but found no trace of her. Amber instead interprets the card as the PC herself being unable to control her fate... the PC wants to restore herself to her former level of wealth and power, but no longer has the connections to do so. Adam prefers Stacie's initial answer, and so makes note of it for later. Adam also decides that it is time that he give his PC a name, and so he calls her 'Emilia'. The group continues taking turns choosing questions and consulting the oracles until each player has asked three questions, as there were only three players.

ALL DONE. NOW WHAT?

Each player draws two stones at random from a bag, containing 5 white and 5 black stones. Keep the stones you drew hidden until the end of the game, where it serves to add some uncertainty to the endgame. Put the remaining stones back in a pool along with a bunch of extras.

Assemble the deck. Separate the Yes and Perhaps cards from the No cards. Shuffle each separate pile. Take (face down) one card per player from the No pile and start a new pile. Then add to that pile three times the number of players from the Yes pile. This pile is your deck for the game. Get rid of any excess cards without looking at them. Shuffle your combined Yes and No cards. Deal everyone a hand of four cards. You can look at your cards, but don't show them to anybody else.

Take back all the oracle cards drawn during character creation. Put them back into the oracle deck and reshuffle it.

Now you're ready to start playing the actual game. The person with the questioner card should consult the oracles about the beginning of the first scene.

Example

Amber reaches into the bag and draws out two stones without showing anyone. When she takes a peek at her stones, she sees that they are both white. She'll have to work hard to earn some black stones if she wants to win the game.

Meanwhile, Stacie shuffles the Yes cards and Adam shuffles the No cards. Adam puts three No cards (one for each player) into a pile. Stacie adds nine Yes cards to the pile, as that's three cards per player. Amber takes the assembled stack of cards, shuffles them and deals four to each player. Any leftover cards are put away without looking at them.

WHO GETS THE QUESTIONER CARD?

It doesn't matter very much who gets the card to start. It's going to move around a bunch. If you're explaining the rules to people who haven't played before, then you should start with it. This lets you immediately demonstrate how to consult the oracles at the start of the first scene.

If everyone is already familiar with the game so that no rules explanation is needed, then give the questioner card to the person who was most recently terrified of something.

Example

Amber has read through the rules of the game and played once before. Adam and Stacie are both new to the game. So Amber starts with the questioner card.

The next time the three get together to play, Adam described how he was frightened by a car that ran a red light just as he was about to cross the street, which could have easily killed him. The others don't have any recent stories of being terrified, so they give him the questioner card.

WHEN IS THE GAME OVER?

You keep playing a series of scenes until only one PC is left alive. At that point, they have to face the final threat alone. The survivor's player describes how the last PC overcomes or escapes the threat for good. They then receive white tokens equal to the number of PCs.

Example

After a terrifying experience with a hideous ghou, Adam's PC Emilia is the only one left alive. Adam takes three white stones for the three dead PCs. He then describes how Emilia finds the hideous idol on a crude altar. Just as the ghou monsters begin to close in on her, she smashes the idol, negating the source of their undead power. Without the enchanted idol, the ghouls dissolve into graveyard dust, their reality warping powers are negated and Emilia can leave the apartment building with her daughter in tow.

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

It is unlikely that you'll run out of cards in the oracle deck. But if you do, you should just take the discarded oracle cards and reshuffle them to make a new draw pile.



Day 225 Outtake by Kathryn

Credit where credit is due

Most of the mechanics in this game come from these other, no doubt much better, games:

- + *A Penny for My Thoughts* by Paul Tevis
- + *Archipelago* by Matthijs Holter.
- + *Do: Pilgrims of the Flying Temple* by Daniel Solis
- + *Dread* by Epidiah Ravachol.
- + *Fiasco* and *Carolina Death Crawl* by Jason Morningstar.
- + *Ganakagok* by Bill White
- + *ViewScream* by Rafael Chandler

Playtesters: Jay Bertovich, Sara Bertovitch, Adam Davis, Stacie Davis, Dan Hall, Bryce Hough, Amber Wedig, Nick Wedig, Sabrina Zitzelberger, anybody else that I'm forgetting.

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All artwork is used under its Creative Commons license. Background is '*Grunge Texture 22*' by amptone stock.

If you have questions, comments or reports of actual play, then I'd love to hear about it at nickwedig@yahoo.com. To hear more about this game or other things that I made, visit my website at nickwedig.libraryofhighmoon.com