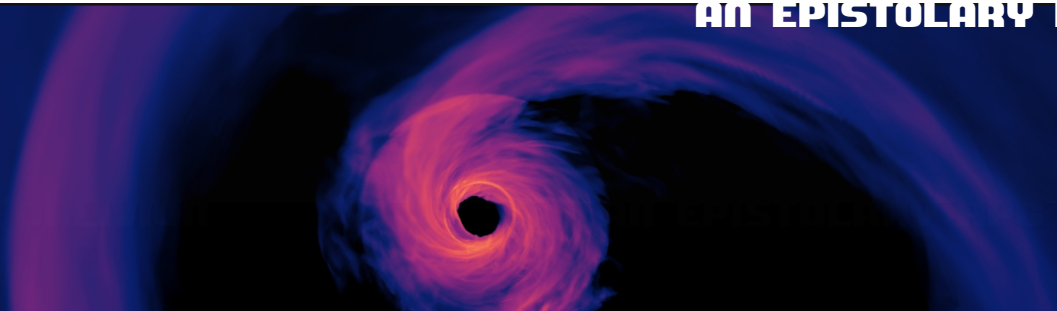





# FALLING FOREVER INTO OBLIVION

AN EPISTOLARY RPG BY NICK WEDIG





You were a pair of interstellar explorers. You traveled the galaxy together, and you cared about each other deeply. Perhaps you were lovers. Perhaps you were parent and child. Perhaps you were colleagues who had built your careers working together.

While studying a black hole, you separated in two small scout vessels to examine the black hole's accretion disk. Somehow, one of the ships was knocked out of its controlled orbit. The ship, and the explorer inside, fell into the inescapable gravitational pull of the black hole.

Now they are slowly falling into the black hole. There's no way to stop their inevitable descent across the event horizon. But you can still communicate via electronic messages, through your sub-ether quantum entanglement messaging system. (Due to technical limitations of the entanglement system, real time video and audio are not possible, but written messages are.) So you're sending electronic mail back and forth, for as long as you can. The loss is inevitable, so you hold onto what connection you have left.

## GAMEPLAY

*Falling Forever Into Oblivion* is a cooperative letter writing and Tarot collection game for two players. It's a modified version of *Wish You Were Here* (another epistolary RPG I wrote, also available online).

Players will take on the role of two interstellar explorers who cared for each other very much. One of them has accidentally been knocked off course, and is now falling into a black hole. The two can still send and receive letters from each other, despite one of them being inside a black hole and the other still in the larger universe.

As players, you will send physical letters back and forth between you and your correspondent. Your goal is for both players to complete their deck of major arcana. Each player begins with a mixture of the two Tarot decks. As you play, you will try to guess what card the other player was basing their letter on. If you guess correctly, then you will receive a card for your deck, getting you closer to completing your own deck. If you guess incorrectly, you will instead receive a card from the other player's deck, getting you farther away from completing your deck.

If you and your correspondent are able to complete both decks, you can create a satisfying conclusion to your character's stories. But if you make too many incorrect guesses, then communication between the characters may be cut off completely, forever.



## THE BLACK HOLE

As you fall into the black hole, time and space warp in strange ways. Gravity warps space so that all paths lead in the direction of the black hole's singularity. There is no path that can lead you out. Once you enter a black hole's gravitational pull, your doom is inevitable.

How long you have left is difficult to say, though. To the outside observer, you seem to slow down, never quite reaching the event horizon. To the person inside the black hole, time outside seems to move faster and faster. This means that, as one correspondent falls into the black hole, the outside correspondent will experience longer and longer gaps between each message: at first minutes or hours, then days or weeks, then years or decades, then centuries. To the inside correspondent, messages come quicker and quicker, going from hours to minutes to seconds to instantaneous.

The scout vessel can keep the correspondent safe and alive inside the black hole for a time. They will have enough food and oxygen to survive the descent toward the singularity. And the vessel can protect its occupant from most astronomical forces. Eventually, though, the black hole's power will become too strong. As the correspondent approaches the singularity, the pull of gravity on their closer side will become much stronger than that on the far side. Their ship, and the correspondent inside, will be pulled into long thin strands, a process known as spaghettification. The ship can withstand a lot of stress, but it will eventually disintegrate, killing the correspondent.

This isn't a game about rescuing someone from their doom. It's about inevitability and the pain of losing someone, even while they are still alive and communicating with you.

## YOUR CORRESPONDENT

To play this game, you will need one other player to work with. Find someone you want to work with, to write letters back and forth with them in a fictional voice.


## COMMUNICATION

Even though this is a game about physically mailing letters, you should set up an outside communication channel for talking with your correspondent without being in the voice of your character. Modern telecommunications provide many options, such as a Discord chat, Slack channel, shared Google Doc, wiki, email list, or series of text messages. Use this to discuss logistical matters, rules issues, and to give feedback.

## EXAMPLE

*You and I have decided to play a game of **Falling Forever Into Oblivion**. I create a Google document and share it with you, to record information about our two fictional personas. When something changes for one of our characters, you add a comment to that character's page, pointing out how the character has changed from where they were at the start of play.*

*You set up a Discord channel for just the two of us. When I'm going to be on vacation for a week, I send you a message in the Discord system to let you know that my next letter will be delayed. Later on, there is a minor ambiguity in the rules, so I ask a question of you in the Discord and we use the chat system to work out an answer that we both are happy with.*



One specific usage: *"I'd like a rewrite"*. If a letter introduces fictional elements or descriptions that would make you uncomfortable, you can invoke this ritual phrase in the out of character channel. This identifies that the last letter had some content that hurt your enjoyment of the game. You can use this phrase for problematic or emotionally fraught content, such as violence, sexual content, and phobia triggers. Or you can use it for tone (e.g., if your correspondent does something silly in what you hoped was a serious game) cliches, or any other issue that would hurt your enjoyment of the game.

When your correspondent invokes this phrase, you rewind the fiction back one step and excise the content that was a problem. Then continue the story from there, in a different way or avoiding that fictional content. If necessary, discard the last letter entirely. Write and send a new letter to replace the problematic letter last sent.

Explain as much or as little as is comfortable for you. You don't have to explain why the content is a problem. Just let your correspondent know which parts are hurting your experience. Work with your correspondent to change what was said to be more acceptable. The goal of the game is to create a pleasurable emotional experience for both you and your correspondent.

## EXAMPLE

*I am writing you a letter concerning my character's experience outside the black hole, how life is different without their partner. Based on my card drawn, I write about some political struggles within the galactic empire are pushing our once peaceful society more toward dangerous fascism. This makes you uncomfortable, because it reminds you too much of the politics of the present day. So you request that this be changed. We get on together on the Discord to discuss how to fix the situation. We decide that it would be difficult to ignore large political changes like that. So I agree to write an entirely new letter, which isn't as directly reflective of real world politics.*

## THE TAROT DECKS

You will need the major arcana from two Tarot decks to play this game. Each player selects a Tarot deck that is symbolically tied to their character. What deck fits the mood and style of the character you want to play? Make sure the two decks are clearly distinct from each other. You don't want two copies of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, or it will be impossible to tell your target deck apart from your correspondent's.

You could use any Tarot or Tarot-like set of divination cards, such as the *Petit Lenormand* deck, *Everway's* vision deck, Edward Gorey's *Fantod* deck, the *Tarokka* deck from *Ravenloft*, etc. If you use an alternative deck such as that, make sure both players are familiar with the cards in the deck and that each player's deck has 22 cards in it. For this game, Tarot decks with a futuristic or science fiction aesthetic are probably the most thematic, but you can work with any deck that sparks your imagination.

If your two decks are wildly different in size or shape, you might have some issues shuffling the cards together. Do the best you can to get them randomized. It doesn't need to be perfect, but you should try to make it as random as possible. Whatever you do, you'll probably know which deck your next card is from, based on different backs and sizes. That's okay, because your correspondent will be somewhere else and won't know which card you're working from.

## EXAMPLE

*You and I are playing the game together. We discuss and decide our future is a rundown universe, where the poor scrape by with patchwork ships and the gigacorporations control all the habitable planets, like a cyberpunk story in zero gravity. I decide to use the feminist sci-fi **Tarot of Many Doors** for my character outside the black hole, to represent the weird universe outside. You choose to use the cyberpunk-ish **Neon Moon Tarot** to represent your character in the black hole, and the decaying vessel you're riding into the black hole.*

## LEGACY MECHANICS

Discuss with your correspondent whether or not you are willing to deface and destroy the Tarot cards you'll be using in play. If both players agree, then there are mechanics in the game where you mark up the cards as you play. If either player is unwilling, then you can keep track of this information in other ways.

## TONE AND EMOTION

Before beginning play, discuss the tone you want to hit when writing letters. Is the story you're telling serious or spooky or sad or silly? Also talk with your correspondent about what content is appropriate or inappropriate for the game. If there's anything you want to see in the game, that you don't want to see, then spelling that out in advance can get you on the same page as your correspondent.

## CREATE CHARACTERS

Together with your correspondent, you will tell a story, in epistolary format, of two people who were emotionally very close to one another until one became trapped in a black hole. This pair could be lovers or spouses, or they might be in a purely platonic relationship, such as close friends, siblings or professional collaborators. The important thing is that the loss of the character into the black hole must be significant to the character still outside the black hole.

Decide which player is playing the character inside the black hole and which will play the character still outside.

While creating your characters, it's helpful if you can meet your correspondent face to face. If that's not possible, real time communication (voice chat, phone call, text messaging) is the next best thing. You want to be able to provide feedback to your correspondent in real time as you work together to create characters, so that the characters mesh together. Take turns answering questions from your question lists until you've answered them all.

Each player should take the major arcana from their Tarot deck and shuffle them. This forms their **"target deck"**.

To create your character, you will answer the questions from the appropriate questionnaire. For each question, draw a card and interpret it as symbolic of the answer. Think of the card as an omen of the answer. Explain your answer to your correspondent and get their feedback. Make sure the characters you both are creating are people that are interesting and appealing to you.

## OUTSIDE

- *How has the universe become worse since the 21st century?*
- *Who are you?*
- *What are your dreams or goals in exploring the universe?*
- *Why was your bond between yourself and the other character special and meaningful to you?*
- *What were you hoping to discover studying the black hole?*
- *What hole will there be in your life now that your correspondent is gone?*
- *Why were you reluctant to go on this investigation of the black hole, and how did the other character convince you to go?*
- *What did you want to ask the person in the black hole but never could? Why not?*
- *What did you want to tell the person in the black hole but never could? Why not?*
- *Why do you blame yourself for their death?*
- *What is your name?*

## INSIDE

- *How has the universe become better since the 21st century?*
- *Who were you?*
- *Why was this black hole so unusual or scientifically interesting that you had to investigate it up close?*
- *What is the shuttle craft that you're trapped within for the rest of your life like?*
- *What did you hope to achieve in life?*
- *How did you fail to live a life true to yourself? What did you lack the courage or conviction to do?*
- *How is the interior of the black hole different than you anticipated?*
- *What do you hope for the living person will do with the rest of their life?*
- *How do you hope you will be remembered?*
- *How do you fear you will be remembered?*
- *What is your name?*

## EXAMPLE

*You and I are playing the game, and I will play the character outside the black hole. For the first question about how the world is worse than modern day, I draw the Oracle (which my **Tarot of Many Doors** uses to replace the Empress card in a conventional Tarot deck). I decide that humanity has developed a limited ability to predict the future about certain events. That technology has been largely kept in the hands of the obscenely rich and powerful, who use this ability to keep themselves obscenely rich and powerful. Ordinary people only learn small amounts of their future, if anything, which means they get all the despair of predetermination and none of the certainty of actually knowing their future. Oracular knowledge of the future becomes a tool for economic oppression of the lower classes.*



Once you are done creating your character, take the 11 cards you used to answer the questions. Those form your starting deck. Take the unused cards from both decks and shuffle them together. Then deal each player 11 cards, a mixture of cards from their target deck and the other player's target deck. Add these random 11 cards to your starting deck. You now should have a deck of 22 cards, with at least 11 cards of your deck and several from the other player's deck.

If you are physically separated from your correspondent, then the simplest method may be to have one player send their 11 unused cards to the other player, who shuffles and mails back 11 random cards.

## EXAMPLE

*You and I connect via video chat to discuss and create our characters. We each work through our questions, answering 11 questions each. You mail me the 11 major arcana cards you didn't use for your questions. When I get them in the mail, I shuffle them together with the 11 cards I didn't use to answer my own questions. Then I separate those cards into two equal stacks. I randomly choose one to be yours, which contains 5 cards from your deck and 6 from mine. I keep the other deck (containing 5 cards from my deck and 6 from yours) and shuffle it together with the 11 cards I used during character creation. This will be my deck for the game, though its contents will change as we play.*

## WRITING LETTERS

Players take turns writing letters. Think about your character and the style of message they would write. What is their writing style like? Find ways to personalize letters, to show what your character is like and what they feel about your correspondent's character. Messages are being transmitted electronically via a quantum entanglement based email system, so your letters could take various forms (typed, handwritten, illustrated, etc.)

When you receive a letter, you write a new letter in response. Each letter has several parts:

- **The main body**
- **A question for the other character**
- **A guess**
- **A Tarot card enclosed with the letter**

Each letter you receive will end with a question, from the other character for your character. The main body of your letter should be devoted to answering this question and to describing your existence separated from the other character.

To write your letter, shuffle your deck and draw a card. The card you draw might be from your target deck or from the other player's, it does not matter. Interpret that card as an omen or symbol of the answer to the other player's question. Write as much or as little as seems appropriate to you. You cannot mention directly the Tarot card you drew, but you want to convey, indirectly, its themes or tone. And answer the question and speak about whatever else matters to your character.

Make a note for yourself which card you interpreted to write that letter. It could be days or weeks before you get your reply, and it is important not to forget which card you were working from.

You must conclude your letter with a question for your correspondent's character. Ask the question in the voice of your character, as part of their letter. Ask any question that you are interested in. Push the story in directions that interest you. Ask leading questions, if you want. Just make sure your questions are open ended. A simple Yes or No question won't give the other player much room to work. Better to ask an interesting open ended question that can be interpreted multiple ways.

## GUESSES

Include in your letter a guess as to which Tarot card your correspondent based their letter on (the one you are replying to). Make a small notation in the bottom corner of your letter, or on a separate scrap of paper in the envelope, or in some other way both players agree upon. Make sure it's unobtrusive, but that your correspondent can't miss it if they know what to look for. If you're using the standard Tarot deck, then each of the major arcana has a number between 0 and 22. You can simply write your guess's card number on the bottom or back of your letter.

When you receive a letter, your correspondent will include a guess as to which card your previous letter was based on. If they have correctly identified the card you were working from then you reward them. Take one card from your deck that is part of their target deck. Include that card in the envelope with your letter when you mail a reply. This

gets you and your correspondent one step closer to your desired ending.

If their guess was incorrect, then you instead take one card from your deck that is of your target deck, and include that in your letter. Include in your letter to them a sign that your characters are growing apart. Perhaps they have forgotten details that were once important to you, or perhaps you have begun to move on with your life without them. This should be an unhappy note in your letter, a sense that your old relationship is fading now that you are no longer in each other's presence.

**Legacy mechanics:** If you and your correspondent are willing to deface your Tarot decks, then when your correspondent makes a wrong guess, you should deface the card itself. Include a black mark in the upper corner, as well as modifying the art of the card in a way that encourages more negative interpretations. If the card has already been defaced once, add another black mark in the upper corner, and deface it further.

If you would place a third black mark on a card, instead destroy it. Contact your correspondent to let them know the game has ended. Your characters have lost contact with one another. Your characters will never hear from each other again.

**Non-Legacy mechanics:** If you aren't willing to destroy or deface your Tarot cards, then you should make a list of all the cards in your deck. When your correspondent makes an incorrect guess, write an X next to the card on the list. If a card has three X's next to it, then the game ends and your characters lose contact with each other.



When you interpret a card with a black mark against it (either on the card or on the list), you always interpret it in the worst possible manner. Think of what bad things it could mean for your character, and build on that definition. Even something positive and hopeful could be very negative, if it applies to your enemy instead of your PC.

## EXAMPLE

*Your last letter to me had asked about your family back on Enceladus. What they were doing, how they were dealing with your loss into the black hole. I draw Warp Drive (which the **Tarot of Many Doors** uses in place of the Chariot in conventional Tarot decks). You had previously guessed wrong about that card, so it has a black mark against it in our shared Google Doc. I interpret the card to mean that your family has left Enceladus. When I returned to the solar system after you fell into the black hole, I came back to tell them the bad news, but they had vanished. The entire family had picked up and left the moon. No one knew where they had gone.*

When you receive a letter, you take whichever card was enclosed and add it to your current deck. So more correct guesses makes your deck look more like your target deck. Incorrect guesses make your deck look less like your target deck, moving you further away from your desired ending.

## EXAMPLE

*You and I are playing. I'm looking to complete my **Tarot of Many Doors** deck, while you're trying to complete the **Neon Moon** deck. In my letter to you, I made a guess in the bottom corner, and it turned out to be correct. So you take one of the Tarot of Many Doors cards out of your current deck and mail it to me. Now my deck is a little bit more like my target deck. If I had been wrong in my guess, you would have mailed me one of your Neon Moon cards, meaning I was further from my goal. Either way, I shuffle it into my deck with the other cards.*

## THE FIRST LETTER

The first letter is slightly different. It is not written in response to any letter. Therefore, it doesn't contain a Tarot card (because it is not answering a guess), and it does not have a guess of its own. The player of the character inside the black hole should write the first letter. They should draw a Tarot card and interpret it to answer the question "**What did you want to tell your correspondent but never did?**"



# ENDINGS

The game can end one of two ways this story can end.

## CUT OFF

If either player makes three wrong guesses about a specific card, then the game ends as the characters lose contact with each other. Neither ever hears from the other again. Perhaps the correspondent inside the black hole is spaghettified. Perhaps the outside correspondent dies or loses the ability to transmit messages. Perhaps you may never learn why communication was lost.

If your deck is ever filled solely with cards from the other player's target deck (unlikely but possible), then you also trigger this ending, where communication is suddenly cut off.

If all communication is cut off, contact your correspondent through the out of game channel and let them know that the game is over.

## CONCLUSIVE

If both players are able to fill their decks with all their own Tarot cards and none of the other player, then you can conclude your character's stories in whatever way is satisfying. That might mean the characters are united inside the black hole, or that they find a way to escape the black hole, or that their relationship finally falls apart after the impossible strain. It could be a good ending or a bad ending, depending on the tastes of the players and where the story has taken you so far. Discuss with your correspondent in the out of character channel, and decide on a general outline of how the story concludes. Then you each write one final letter, describing the ending in character.

Whichever way the game ends, you should return the Tarot cards to whoever owns them. Have a conversation with your correspondent about how the game went, what you liked and didn't like about the game. And you should finish the game by emailing me ([nickwedig@yahoo.com](mailto:nickwedig@yahoo.com)) to let me know how it went.

## AFTERWORD

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