

Wish

You

An Epistolary
Roleplaying Game
for 2 correspondents
by Nick Wedig

Move

Here

Two people cared about each other deeply, until one of them died. But somehow, the living and dead characters can still communicate with each other by sending letters. They don't know how their letters can travel to and from the afterlife, but it doesn't matter. They aren't going to let go of the only connection they still have.

Wish You Were Here is a cooperative letter writing and Tarot collection game for two players, about loss and mourning.

Players will take on the role of two people who cared for each other very much. One of them has died. The two can still send and receive letters from each other, despite one of them being in the afterlife and the other in the living world.

As players, you will send physical letters back and forth between you and your correspondent. Each player begins with a mixture of the two Tarot decks. Your goal is for both players to complete their deck of major arcana. As you play, you will try to guess what card inspired the other player's letter. If you guess correctly, then you will receive a card for your deck, getting you closer to your goal. 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 collaborate to create a satisfying conclusion to your character's stories. But if you make too many incorrect guesses, then communication between the characters will be cut off completely, forever.

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 communications technology provides many options, such as a Discord chat, Slack channel, shared Google Doc, wiki, email chain, 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 "Wish You Were Here". 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.

Rewrites

One specific thing you might need a second communication channel for: **“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 lessen 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 that avoids that fictional content. If necessary, discard the last letter entirely. The author writes and sends a new letter to replace the problematic previous letter.

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 (though tragic) emotional experience for both you and your correspondent.

Example:

I am writing you a letter concerning my character’s experience in the afterlife. I decide that spiders factor heavily into the way my spirit is punished for their earthly deeds. This letter and future letters will detail the arachnid-based punishments my character undergoes. As I write that, I fail to realize that you, my correspondent, have a serious spider phobia.

Upon receiving my letter, you immediately send me a message through our shared Discord, saying “I’d like a rewrite”. You tell me about your issue with spiders, and I apologize profusely. We decide to move forward rather than rewrite the letter. But future afterlife punishments will take other forms. That was just a passing spider-based phase in the afterlife. Future torments will take other forms, that can be tragic and horrifying, but aren’t personally traumatic to the person I’m trying to entertain.



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. You don't need a complete Tarot deck, just the major arcana. If you use an alternative deck, make sure both players are familiar with the cards in the deck and that each player's deck has 22 cards in it.

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 coming 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 the game should be set in modern day and slightly spooky. I select Brennen Reece's **Retromodern Tarot** for my living character. You decide to use the **Welcome to Night Vale Tarot** for your dead one. My deck's imagery is more mundane, while yours will be spookier and stranger, which fits our characters thematically.*

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 before one of the pair died. This pair could be lovers or spouses, or they might be in a purely platonic relationship, such as close friends, siblings or artistic collaborators. The important thing is that the death of one of the pair must be significant to the character still alive.

Decide which player is playing the character still alive and which is playing the one who died.

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 questionnaire for the living or the dead. 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.

The Living

1. *Who are you?*
2. *What are your dreams or goals in life?*
3. *Why was your bond between yourself and the dead special and meaningful to you?*
4. *How do you mourn their death? What sort of funeral, memorial, burial, cremation, etc, was there?*
5. *What hole is there in your life now that they are gone?*
6. *What did you believe about the afterlife... at least until you start getting these letters?*
7. *What did you want to ask the dead person but never could? Why not?*
8. *What did you want to tell the dead person but never could? Why not?*
9. *Why do you blame yourself for their death?*
10. *Why do you believe the letters are real, despite the fact that they are clearly impossible?*
11. *What is your name?*

The Dead

1. *Who were you before your death?*
2. *What did you hope to achieve in life?*
3. *How did you die?*
4. *How is the afterlife completely different than what you expected?*
5. *Is your afterlife punishment, reward or something else?*
6. *What is one aspect of the afterlife you can't discuss?*
7. *How did you fail to live a life true to yourself? What did you lack the courage or conviction to do?*
8. *What do you hope for the living person for the rest of their life?*
9. *How do you hope you will be remembered?*
10. *How do you fear you will be remembered?*
11. *What was your name?*

Example:

For the first question, I established that my (living) character is a screenwriter struggling for ideas. For the next question "What are your dreams or goals in life?" I draw The Hanged Man. There are several ways I could use that card to answer the question. I could be literal: perhaps my character is on death row, fearing execution for a crime, and I want to be freed. I decide instead that the card is symbolic of suffering in a more abstract way. He has fallen into depression and alcoholism following the death of his sister. He hopes to clean himself up and repair the damage he has done to his own life.

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 draw 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 letter they would write. What is their writing style like? Are their letters handwritten or typed out? Are there doodles in the corners? Find ways to personalize letters, to show what your character is like and what they feel about your correspondent's character.

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**
- **(Sometimes) a keepsake**

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 hint that your characters are growing apart. Perhaps they have forgotten details that were once important to you, or there is conflict between the characters, 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. You will never hear from them 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 my living screenwriter PC's career and how it was going. I drew the Hermit card. So I wrote you a letter based on that card, about how I felt alone and isolated, like my career was going nowhere. After describing those feelings (and asking

a question and making my own guess about your letter), I mailed that letter to you. Your next letter in response had at the bottom of it the number 16, indicating your guess that my letter had been based on the card *The Tower*. Since your guess was incorrect, I take the *Hermit* card from my deck and make a black mark on the face of it. Then I remove one of my target deck's cards (it could be any, in this case it's *Judgment*) and include it in my next letter to you.

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 **Retromodern Tarot** deck, while you're trying to complete the **Night Vale** 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 *Retromodern* 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 *Night Vale* cards, meaning I was further from my goal. Either way, I shuffle it into my deck with the other cards.



Mementos

When your correspondent makes an incorrect guess, you should include in your next letter a small memento, so they can remember you better. A memento should be a small keepsake that reminds you of your characters and their relationship. Mementos should be small enough to fit in a standard envelope, but otherwise they are up to you imagination. They could be ribbons, feathers, photographs, drawings, paintings, ticket stubs, newspaper or magazine clippings, maps of significant locations, bookmarks or pages from books, or anything else that makes sense for your characters. Make sure your letter mentions the memento and why it was important to your characters. (No, I don't know how or why the dead character has access to these in the afterlife, but they clearly do.)

When you receive a memento, you can make two guesses instead of one on your next letter. If either guess is correct, then the letter counts as a successful guess.

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 dead player should write the first letter. They should draw a Tarot card and interpret it to answer the question **“What do you hope the living character is doing with their life now that you are gone?”**

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.

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 after the living one's death, or that the dead person is resurrected somehow, 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) to let me know how it went.

Afterword

Wish You Were Here by Nick Wedig is licensed under a *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License*. Sabrina Culbertson-Zitzelberger helped me playtest this game.

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