EXPLORATIONS OF THE HAUNTED ISLAND

BY NICK WEDIG

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You awaken to find yourself on a mysterious island, full of ruined building and enigmatic secrets. You don't know how you came to be here. You'll need to explore this place and discover its mysteries if you want to make it out of here alive.

Explorations of the Haunted Island is a GMless roleplaying game. You'll need:

- 1-7 players
- 2-4 hours
- the cards for this game
- the tokens from the game Splendor:
  - ◦ 7 red tokens
  - ◦ 7 blue tokens
  - ◦ 7 green tokens
  - ◦ 7 white tokens
  - ◦ 7 black tokens
  - ◦ 5 yellow tokens
- A bag to hold the tokens
- Some way to write or take notes

(Other tokens, poker chips or glass beads could be substituted for the Splendor tokens, so long as they have 6 distinct colors and feel the same to the touch.)

BEFORE PLAY

You probably want to use whatever safety and editing tools work well for your group. I usually use the **X-Card** (created by John Stavropolous) in my play, but other tools like **Script Change** by Beau Sheldon might work best for you and your players. The goal of the game is to create a pleasurable experience in all the players, so use whatever tools are needed to help everyone feel comfortable while playing.

SET UP THE MYSTERIES

Take the Splendor tokens and place all in the bag, except for the yellow tokens. Leave those aside for now.

Take the Mystery cards and separate them by rank. There should be 18 rank 1 cards, 10 rank 2 cards and 5 rank 3 cards. Shuffle each rank of cards separately, giving you three decks to draw from.

Draw 4 cards from the rank 1 deck and lay them in a row in the center of the table. Do the same with the Rank 2 cards. Draw 3 cards from the rank 3 deck and place them in a 3rd row. Put the draw decks at the end of each row.

CASTAWAYS

Each player creates and controls a castaway, someone who has found themselves on this island through mysterious means. Each castaway has:

- A name or nickname
- Pronouns
- A distinctive aspect of their appearance
- A normal life they had before coming to this island
- A unique personal tone

For each, you can make up anything that fits. For your personal tone, every character has their own flavor to their story. Every time a blue token is drawn from the bag, the result is narrated according to that character's personal tone. So choose a short, flavorful term (usually an adjective) that can be broadly applied to many different situations.

Personal Tone Ideas: Apocalyptic, Poetic, Tragic, Gruff, Brooding, Maniacal, Eerily Calm, Petty, Naively Optimistic, Soap-Operatic, Smoldering, Whimsical, Visceral, Philosophical, Vibrant, Academic, Sly, Uncertain, Shadowy, Fairy Tale, Blue Collar, Resigned, Resolute, Envious, Haunted, Comic Relief, Coldblooded, Coldhearted, Cruel Justice, Untrustworthy, Inquisitive, Hardboiled, Bureaucratic, Risky, Been There Done That, Corrupting, Erratic, Ethereal, Forceful, Frightening, Frozen, Jovial, Glum, Hollow, Impassive, Inquisitive, Macabre, Manipulative, Mechanical, Militant, Mystical, Nightmarish, Noble, Peaceful, Prophetic, Proud, Rational, Ruinous, Secretive, Silent, Spidery, Spiteful, Unstable, Wild, Wondrous, Aggrieved, Profound, Whimsical, Anti-Intellectual, Monstrous, Melancholy, Rushed, Horrifying, Terrifying, Conspiratorial, Gloomy, Ponderous, Contemplative, Thunderous, Brittle, Technical, Clever, Brutal, Elegant, Uncaged, World-weary, Self-Loathing, Cozy, Carefree, Clinical, Expeditious, Compulsive, Studious, Paranoid, etc.

RELATIONSHIPS

Once each player has established some basic details about their character, you'll establish relationships between the characters. Your characters knew each other before being brought to the island, though their relationships could be tangential or surprising.

Take turns asking another player (one who hasn't been asked yet) a question about the relationship between your character and theirs. (Be careful choosing who to ask to make sure no one has to ask themself a relationship question.) A good relationship question is open ended (not a Yes or No question) and relates to one or both character's backgrounds. A good question is also something where you as asker don't already know the answer, but you'd like to find out what it is.

The person who was asked then draws a random token from the bag and answers the question following the tone of the question. (See below for more information on questions and tones.) For blue tokens, use the personal tone of either castaway.

Any player can X-card any answer, but especially one of the players whose castaway is involved in the relationship can do so.

Once every player has asked and answered a relationship question, put all the (non-Yellow) tokens back in the bag. Every player keeps track of their own pool of tokens, but every player's pool starts out empty.
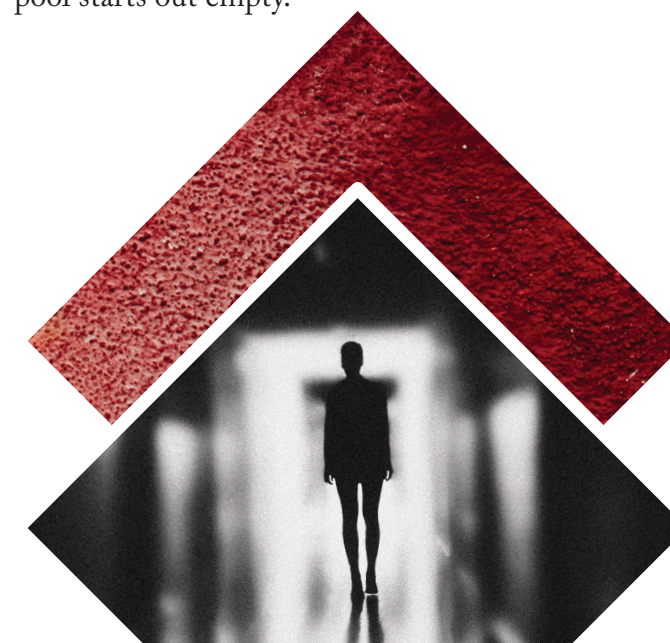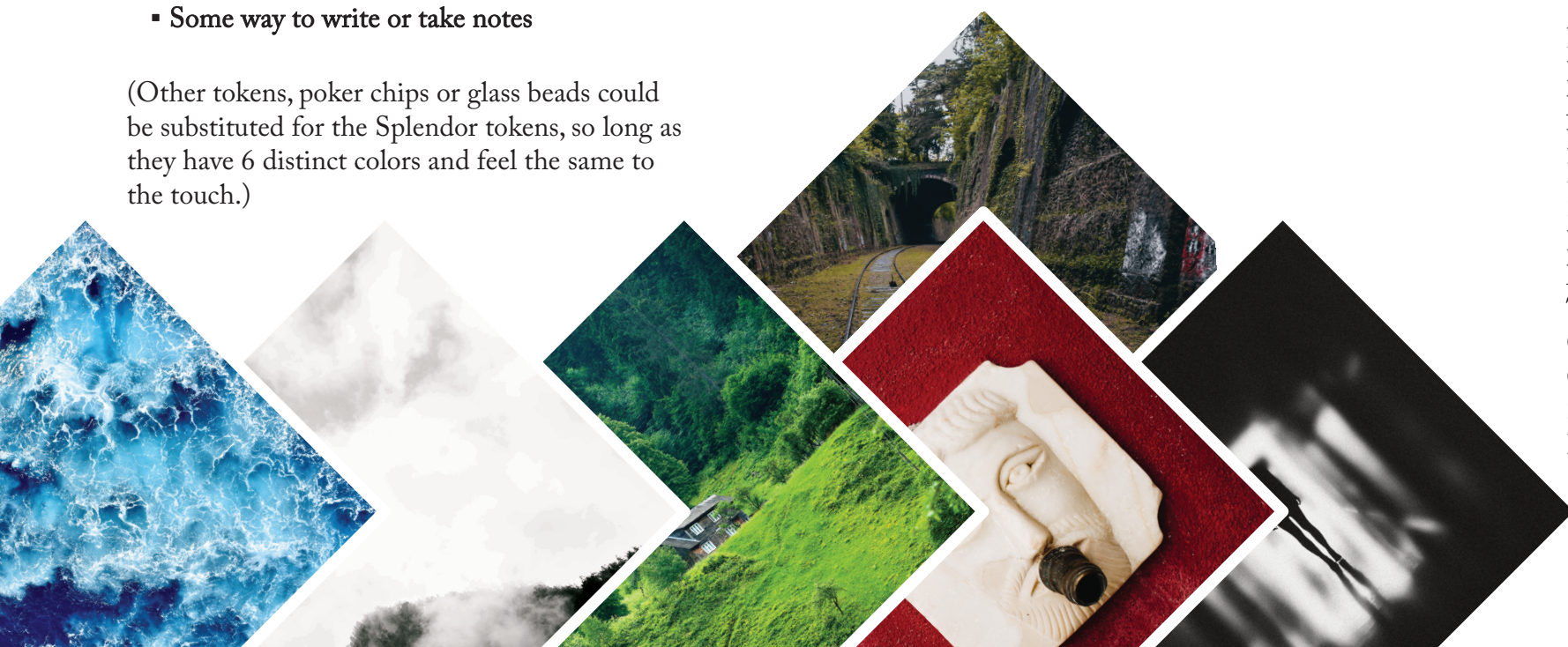
EXPLORING THE ISLAND

Most of the game consists of the castaways exploring the island. During this time, you as a player describe what your castaway is doing, thinking or feeling. You're free to roleplay interactions between the castaways and add minor details to the scene as needed.

Whenever you are uncertain what will happen next (including at the start of a scene) you will have a player draw a token from the bag to discover the truth. Point to the player with the fewest tokens in front of them and ask them an open-ended question (not a Yes-or-No question). They reach into the bag and draw out a token at random (without looking).

The color of the token they draw from the bag will determine the flavor of what they narrate to answer the question. Each color of token has its own tone associated with it.

A tone doesn't determine the specific answer to the question so much as it shapes the style or emotion of the answer: If you're exploring a secret tunnel beneath the Temple, and someone asks you what they find there, the tone of your answer can lead you to a variety of different responses: maybe you find an ancient corpse if you draw a Foreboding token, or a dusty and decaying library if you draw an Abandoned token, or an impossible place like your childhood bedroom if you draw an Otherworldly token.

It is the responsibility of the answerer to make sure the answer fits the specified tone. Other players are free to suggest ideas, add small details, or ask questions about the narration. The one who drew the token has final say, though.

Each token is a moment of spotlight on a setting detail. Keep describing it in rich detail until the person who asked the question is satisfied. The narrator then keeps the token in their pool of tokens.

In your narration, you should be careful to avoid answering the Mystery question that are currently on the board. You can create hints, clues and details that imply things. But nothing is certain until the tokens are spent to answer a mystery.

THE TONES

BLACK   FOREBODING
Ominous, dangerous, shadowy, tragic, bleak, painful, nightmarish, suspicious, gloomy, sinister

RED   UNPREDICTABLE
Surprising, chaotic, changing, coincidental, bizarre, inexplicable, unstable, volatile, whimsical

WHITE   OTHERWORLDLY
Numinous, alien, dreamlike, unreal, impossible, mystical, ethereal, eternal, prophetic, ilusory

GREEN   ABANDONED
Empty, decayed, desolate, deserted, neglected, forgotten, overgrown, ruinous, isolated, archaic

BLUE   PERSONAL
Each PC has their own personal tone that their story tells, and blue tokens represent that one.

GOLD   PERFECT
Whatever the best possible outcome for the PC is, this is it.

SPECIAL TONES

Two of the tones have special rules associated with them.

Blue tokens are a unique tone for the PC who asked the question. (Note that you use the personal tone of the person **asking** the question, not the answerer, so that everyone has the chance to use more varied tones.) In this case, the tone will be different depending on who asked a question. If you asked about what the corpse has in its pockets, you might get a different answer than I would, because your personal tone of "Mystical" encourages the item to be something of spiritual significance, while my personal tone of "Comic Relief" might make it something embarrassing in some way.

Yellow tokens have a tone of "Perfect". This means whatever is the best possible outcome for the castaways at the moment. It's a stroke of luck, a moment of skill or competence, finding something useful or reassuring.

TRYING SOMETHING DIFFICULT

For the most part, the game isn't concerned about your characters succeeding or failing, but rather about what you learn while exploring the island. You can narrate success or failure of your character as appropriate, or include other character's successes and failures in your narration as appropriate to the tone you have drawn.

If you really need to know if an action succeeds or fails, do this: ask the question as normal. But before drawing the token, the player asking the question names a tone that will signify success. The rest of the table then names a second tone that would also be a success. If the player character's background or relationships would help them in some way, they can name a third tone that counts as a success (but only if the rest of the table agrees that these apply). Then you draw a token from the bag and describe the character's success or failure depending on the tone token drawn.

Yellow tokens are always a success.

INTRODUCING DANGER

The island is filled with dangerous situations. At any time, but especially when answering a question, you can describe a perilous situation that a character finds themselves in. Take a yellow token from the stack and offer it to the player whose character you placed in danger (not your own). That player then has two choices. They can:

▪ Reject the peril, describing how they easily overcome the danger. They then put the Yellow token back in the pile of available tokens.

▪ Describe in detail their suffering from that peril, the problems it causes them, and their need for help. They then take the token and place it in the bag to be drawn later, improving future character's chances of success. Their character will require the assistance of another castaway to escape the peril.

ANSWERING MYSTERIES

The player characters are seeking the truth about the mysteries of the island. In order to solve a mystery, you have to collectively spend a number of tokens equal to the mystery's cost (listed on the bottom of the mystery card). Each mystery requires a certain number of tokens of various colors: some mysteries only require tokens from one or two colors, some require many different kinds of tokens. Some require only 2 tokens to solve, some require up to 7 total tokens.

Each player has their own collection of tokens. If you can pay the cost of a mystery on your own (or using the solved mysteries), then you get to decide the answer to the question.

If you don't have sufficient tokens to pay a mystery's cost, then you can ask for help from the other players. Each other player can pledge their tokens to pay part of the cost as well, to make up for any part you can't pay on your own. If you can convince enough other players to spend tokens to meet the cost of a mystery, then you get to solve the mystery. All the players who spent tokens get to collaborate to decide the truth of the mystery.

You can optionally propose a solution to a mystery and see who will spend tokens to help make that answer true. Or you can get people to agree to spend tokens first, then collaborate to answer the question. Use whichever method works for you, and try both at different times.

Yellow tokens act as wild cards: you can substitute a yellow token for a token of any other color. So a mystery that requires 2 red and 1 blue could instead be answered using:

- 2 red and 1 yellow
- 1 yellow, 1 red, and 1 blue
- 2 yellow and 1 blue
- 2 yellow and 1 red
- 3 yellow

Regular tokens spent to solve a mystery are returned to the bag of tokens. Yellow token are returned to the pile of available yellow tokens.

Previously solved mysteries reduce the cost of all future mysteries, effectively acting as available tokens as well. This makes solving more mysteries easier as you go. Rank 1 mysteries count as a single additional token, while rank 2 and 3 tokens count as 2 tokens.

Example: If you have solved a red Rank 1 mystery and a Green rank 2 mystery, you could solve a mystery with cost of Red 1, Green 2, Blue 1 for just one Blue token.

Unlike tokens, solved mysteries remain in play and can be used repeatedly, so eventually the table will have access to many solved mysteries, making it easier to solve more difficult, higher rank, mysteries. Also unlike tokens, solved mysteries aren't owned by any player in particular. Any player can use the solved mysteries to reduce the cost of future solutions, even if their PC didn't have any hand in solving the previous mystery.

When you answer a mystery, remove its card from the row of available mysteries and move it to a pile of solved mysteries. Solved mysteries are shared by the entire table, so keep them where everyone can see them. Draw a new mystery to replace it and put it in the row.

ALREADY ANSWERED QUESTIONS

Sometimes you may turn up a new Mystery card that asks a question that has already been answered. In this case, you can add it to the pile of solved mysteries if you immediately pay the cost. Otherwise, discard the Mystery and draw a replacement. You don't want to spend time investigating mysteries you already know the answer to.

GAME DESIGN NOTE

This game jam version of the game hasn't been playtested at all. So I don't know for sure what an appropriate cost is for each rank of mystery. I'm eyeballing here, but it could easily be that 2 tokens is too easy for rank 1 mysteries, or that 6 tokens is too much for rank 3 mysteries. Your group of players might play differently than mine as well, depending on how many tokens spotlight you want and how quickly you want the game to play out.

ENDING THE STORY

The player characters cannot leave the island until they discover the answer to the level 3 mystery "How can we leave the island?" Once a way to escape has been found, the players can then leave whenever they fulfill the requirements of the mystery answer.

The story could end before then, if all the players agree a satisfying conclusion has been found without the PCs escaping.

ENDNOTES

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This version was made for the Terraforming Dragons Game Jam, June 2023.

GAME MECHANICAL INSPIRATION

- **Splendor**, a board game designed by Marc André - most of the mechanics come from this game
- **For the Queen**, a roleplaying game designed by Alex Roberts - the idea of structuring a story as a series of leading questions
- **Glitch: A Story of the Not**, a roleplaying game designed by Jenna Moran - the idea of structuring a game around specific spotlight moments

FICTIONAL INSPIRATIONS

- **LOST**, a television series created by Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams, and Damon Lindelof
- **Myst**, a videogame created by Robyn and Rand Miller
- **The Witness**, a videogame by Jonathan Blow

If you play this game, please email me at nickwedig@yahoo.com to let me know how it went. You can find me on social media and the internet at large by going to https://wheretofind.me/@nickwedig to see links to everywhere I am online.