

Shade

a ghost story game

You're reading an alpha draft of this game. It has been edited for clarity, grammar and mechanical consistency, but little attention has been paid to presentation and aesthetics. If you have any thoughts or comments, please send them to whduryea@miserytourism.com. Any and all feedback is appreciated. Thanks for playing.

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When I was a kid, I was infatuated with ghost stories. I read everything and anything I could find about ghosts. I didn't discriminate between fiction and dubious nonfiction and folklore. I don't remember all, or even most, of the stories now. Mostly I've retained fragments without context. I remember a Victorian child who fell down a flight of stairs, leaving a blood stain at the bottom that would return, undeterred after every cleaning day. I remember the witch's jawbone, and how her spirit would leave fruit and toys for poor sick Mrs. Bell, even while it consumed her husband's life. I remember the hitchhiker's abandoned jacket, and her tombstone.

I only remember those fragments now, because I grew old enough to stop thinking about ghost stories and to start thinking about work and codependent relationship and role-playing games about post-Reconstruction racism. I also grew old enough to realize I had lost something, or many things.

So, my point is, this a story game about ghosts. It is not the game about how awesome ghosts are that my eight year old self would have made. But it is also not solely about slogging through a mundane life towards death, as my jaundiced current self would like it. This game is a compromise. It is about what time takes from the living, but it also about the thrill of dying young and leaving a powerful presence behind.

Before you play, you will need to print the card sheets that are included with the game, cut out the individual cards, and glue them to old playing cards, index cards or construction paper squares. Whatever you use, make sure the card backs are identical (or close enough).

Remove the Death cards from the deck and set them aside. Shuffle the rest of the cards together.

Once the cards are ready, you will need to find three or more people to play with. Five is ideal, but I understand that this is a niche hobby and we are mostly unpleasant, lonely people, so three is fine. Maybe let your cat play if you only have two.

You won't need anything else to play. No pens. No paper. No dice.

When you sit down to play, sit in a circle, or something like one. You can sit around a table, or in a ring of chairs, or cross-legged on the ground. But you must be in a circle, and you must be sitting.

Once everyone is seated, one player should pick up the deck and draw five cards from the top of the deck. Anyone can draw first. Maybe you want to talk about it, or maybe you just want to let the overenthusiastic douchebag who grabs the deck right away have the honor. Just remember who drew first. They will also have the first scene, and the first opportunity to die.

Pass the deck, counter-clockwise, around the circle. Each player should draw five cards. Don't worry about hiding them. Let everyone see the lot you drew. Might as well wear it on your sleeve. You won't get to draw again.

Once everyone has drawn five cards, each player should also take one (and only one) death card and add it to their hand.

The cards that you are holding each have two halves. On the top half of the card is a personality trait. As long as you have that card in your hand, your character will have that personality trait. You should do your best to incorporate the trait into your character in scenes where they appear. You are free to interpret each personality trait as you wish. A character with a “disorganized” card may have a messy home or simply a messy mind. They might be a hoarder of trivial knowledge, or just a hoarder of cats.

Since you have five cards in your hand at the beginning of the game, your character will have five major personality traits. This might seem like a lot. You might feel like you are playing an incoherent or inconsistent character. Good. You should. But don't worry, your hand, and your life, won't remain so rich for long.

The bottom half of your card lists a ghostly ability. This is something that your ghost, if you become one, will be able to be or do. Maybe you'll be able to manifest yourself as a black dog, or steal metro tickets from your victim's pocket. These abilities are also open to interpretation, but should be interpreted literally. Phantom music should be music, not whispered messages or rhythm-less banging. Those are other ghosts' territories. None of the abilities come into play unless you are a ghost, so ignore them for now (or fantasize about what you'll do when you're finally dead and you can have them, either way).

Take a moment to think about your cards and what kind of character you want to play. The game may frustrate these plans, but you should make them anyway. Don't give in to learned helplessness before the game even begins.

The game will take you through a series of scenes depicting the lives (and deaths) of your characters. You will play through an entire full (or unfinished) life each time you sit down to play. The scenes flow through five life stages, beginning with childhood and moving on to adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and, finally old age. Each living character will get one scene to direct for each stage of life. There will also be an epilogue scene for each of your characters, because this is a story game, and story-gamers love epilogue scenes.

When you are ready for the first scene, the player who drew the first hand should stand. It's time for them to frame a scene about their character's childhood. They can narrate the scene if they like, but standing should give them plenty of space to get as much acting and movement in as they wish.

Part of narrating the scene is deciding where and when it's set. Try to do this quickly, but keep in mind that the other players will likely use these first ideas to build upon for future scenes.

Remember, during this scene you're trying to squeeze in all five of your personality traits. Yes, you'll seem scatter-brained and incompletely formed, you know, like a kid.

At any time when you are directing a scene, you can point to a seated player and ask them to stand. Once they are standing, give them a character to play in the scene. This could be their usual character, or it could be another character that you need for the scene. If you are asking them to play someone other than their own character, you can give them as many or as few details about the character as you'd like.

If you were directing a scene set at school, you might ask one player to bring in their usual character as a fellow student in the class and then ask another player to portray the disinterested, borderline-abusive (but fully tenured) teacher.

You can also dismiss a character from a scene that you're directing at any time by asking the character's player to sit.

Play the scene out for as long or as little as you'd like. When you're finished, take a seat. The player to your left will stand and begin their scene, following the same rules. Continue in this way until everyone has directed a scene.

After each of you has directed a scene, you will move onto the next stage of life, but not before life takes something from you. And not before you have a chance to die.

Each player should pick up all of their cards, including the death card. Hold your cards with their backs facing the other players, so they cannot see which card is which.

Starting with the player who drew the first hand and had the first scene and going counter-clockwise, each player should pick another player to draw a card at random from their hand. You must pick someone who you invited to stand during your scene to draw your card. If you were a scene hog who didn't invite anyone to stand (or if everyone else is a ghost), any player can volunteer to draw your card.

If the card drawn is one of your personality traits, then simply discard that card. That trait is no longer a part of your character. Life has eroded it away, rounding your character's rough edges, but leaving them smaller than they were before. Don't incorporate that trait into future scenes.

If the card drawn is the death card, your character has died and will become a ghost. What's more, the character of the player who drew your card is somehow responsible for your death.

Direct a scene that explains how you died. Be as frank and direct or as maudlin as you like. It's your death. You only get one. Your role is

the same as it is in any other scene that you direct. Just be sure that you ask the player who drew your card to stand before the scene is over. They must portray their own character, and they must show how their actions, directly or indirectly, helped to bring about your demise.

Only one death card can be drawn after the first scene. Statistically speaking, children who have made it past infancy don't drop dead too often. It happens to a few, but it's not going to happen to everyone. If someone's death card is drawn, all of the players who haven't lost a card yet should remove the death card from their hand so it won't be drawn on their turn.

The number of possible victims increases by one with each set of scenes. After adolescence, two characters may die. After young adulthood, three. Four after middle age. And any number of characters are allowed to die following old age.

After everyone has lost one card, the player to the left of the last starting player gets to direct a new scene, this time set during adolescence. The rules for this cycle of scenes are the same as those for the previous cycle, except that now there are ghosts.

Ghosts will haunt the player who was responsible for their death. They no longer get to direct their own scenes. Instead, they appear in the scenes of the character who helped to kill them.

As a ghost, your mission is to interfere in the life of the character who carries the guilt for your passing. While this could certainly mean playing a malevolent, vengeful spirit, not all ghosts need to be hostile. Maybe you are trying to be your hauntee's conscience, or their benefactor, or their protector. Guilt and responsibility manifest themselves in a lot of ways.

Regardless of what type of ghost you are portraying, you can now use any or all of the ghost abilities on your card during your

hauntee's scenes. You can rattle your chains (or whatever it is you can do) as much as you please. As long as the player of the character being haunted is directing the scene, you don't need an invitation to use your abilities. You can simply stand, unbidden, and tell everyone what how your ghost is manifesting itself. But you must stick to the abilities on your card.

You can also haunt your victim's scenes in another way. At any time, you can stand (once again, no invitation necessary) and introduce a character into the scene. This character must be a living person—you can't bring your character back from the dead for a monologue—but otherwise it can be anyone you wish. The character may do what you wish, and may remain in the scene until you decide to sit down.

Unlike living characters, ghosts aren't diminished by time. Once you're a ghost, you no longer lose cards following each stage of life.

If a haunted character dies, the character responsible for their death inherits all of their ghosts. So not only will they be haunted by the recently deceased character, they will be plagued by that character's ghosts as well. It won't be unusual for one poor fucker to be tormented by three or four spirits by the end of his life.

The game continues to follow this pattern until the end of the cycle of old age scenes or until all of the characters are dead, whichever comes first.

Sometimes a character may survive even old age by losing their last personality trait following the old age scenes instead of having their death card drawn. If this happens, they've lost their identity completely before losing their lives. This might be because of mental

deterioration, like senility or Alzheimer's, or they may be gravely sick or comatose. Or they might simply have been so worn down by life that they've lost all desire to be a participant in it. Either way, they get another scene, but they don't get to direct it. They must spend the scene seated, narrating only occasional actions, while their ghosts run the show, using their abilities willy-nilly and summoning whatever supporting characters they want. This scene only ends when all of the ghosts have had enough and sit down.

When all of the characters have died, each player gets to direct a final epilogue scene, beginning with the one who started it all by drawing the first hand. The epilogue scene may be set at any moment during your character's life, but it must be set while they were alive. So if your character only lived to young adulthood, you couldn't give them an epilogue scene set during old age.

The epilogue scene is your chance to offer your character closure, not by offering them a happy ending, but by showing a moment in their life when they were happy or content or where they accomplished something special or momentarily realized their full potential.

Unlike other scenes, the epilogue is all about you. You cannot ask another player to stand and join your epilogue. The other players are, for this moment, your audience. You may introduce other characters into the scene, but you must play them yourself. No ghost may interrupt your epilogue.

The epilogue ends when you sit and another player stands and begins their epilogue. The game ends when everyone is seated.