

CHARACTER-DRIVEN HORROR

INTRODUCTION

These rules are intended to allow you start playing EPOCH immediately. They set out how to create and introduce characters, how to conduct a Challenge Round, run an Audience Ballot, use the Horror Track and conclude the game through end scenes. More detail on all of these elements, as well as advice on how to run Tension Phases and overcome the main challenges of running a genuinely tense and suspenseful horror game can be found in the full version of EPOCH.

SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Characters are created at the table. The creation process begins by establishing a group which defines the relationship of the characters to each other. Characters then get dealt a Relationship, Trait and Strength/Weakness card which they may use to flesh out some details during the opening scene for each character

An EPOCH scenario is divided into a number of Tension Phases (usually six). In each phase, the players develop their characters by interacting with each other and NPCs or investigating the source of the horror. At the end of each Tension Phase the players are confronted with a potentially deadly or sanity-shattering challenge -either mental or physical- which they must survive by playing an outcome card during the Challenge Round. If they have no cards remaining the

character is killed or suffers a total mental collapse and is eliminated from the game. Players can also play a Hero/Zero card for their character which may increase their interest to the audience through a selfless or selfish act.

Once the challenge has been resolved the players and GM vote for the most interesting character. That player recovers one of the played outcome cards, enhancing their characters chance of overall survival.

Players who do not win the Challenge Round get a flashback token, which can be spent during subsequent Tension Phases to narrate a flashback and increase the interest value of their character. Characters are generally assumed to have sufficient competence and skill to overcome most activities that are not part of the Challenge Round. Where complicated activities are initiated players are allocated a time-cost which will lessen their screen time and thereby potentially reduce interest in the character.

Survival is the primary objective of EPOCH, however it may be possible for the characters to defeat or weaken the source of the horror. Success allows the surviving characters to narrate a happy ending of their choice. Failure means that the GM can add a sting to the tail of the scenario for the surviving characters. To defeat the source of the horror, players uncover scenario specific Horror Track cards during play. These cards must be of sufficient value to secure either total, or hollow, victory.

CHARACTER CREATION

The principles underlying EPOCH character creation are as follows:

1. Players must have ownership of character development. They must make the important decisions about who this person is, and why the audience should care about them.
2. Characters need not be fully developed when the game begins. Development takes place during the game, so players should not feel confined by their early decisions.
3. Players should always strive to make their characters interesting. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, but key elements include: developing character backgrounds and motivations, revealing secrets, and the character's relationship with other characters or NPCs.
4. The GM should support each player's efforts to make their character interesting, through allowing shared narration, encouraging flashback scenes, and balancing 'spotlight' time for each player. Determine whether the characters will be a Group of Colleagues, Friends or Family, or Strangers and place the appropriate card on the table (in the quick-start rules only a limited selection of cards for the 'Friends' group are included).

To start the character creation process randomly deal each player a Relationship card from the appropriate card deck. These are shown to all players and may require decisions from the players as to which other character shares the relationship. Also ask each player to write a Secret their character has that relates to the group and place it face down under the group card before the end of the opening scenes.

Each character is also randomly dealt one Trait card and one Strength/Weakness card. These cards are kept secret by the players unless revealed by the character during the game.

Give each player a set of four outcome cards (3 physical/mental outcomes and 1 Hero/Zero Card).

The cards are tools for character construction, not constraints on imagination. The purpose of the background cards is to spur creative thinking, and provide some anchors to what would otherwise be an entirely open process. It's highly likely, and desirable, that players will interpret the cards in different ways, and weave the elements into unique stories.

THE OPENING SCENE

EPOCH begins with a series of scenes where we get to meet the characters. There is one opening scene per character. Each player helps frame the scene, sharing some of the narrative duties with the GM. During these scenes the GMs should focus on prompting the player to provide more detail. The scene should begin with an opening question, for example:

It's 8:00am on a Wednesday, where is your character?

- What do they look like?
- What are they wearing?
- What are they doing?

After answering these initial questions, it's important for the players to add more detail to the characters. If they're at home, what is the house like? Is it clean or messy? How expensive does it look? If they're at work, what sort of workplace is it? How many people are employed? What is staff morale like?

After we have established some detail, the scene needs a conflict or difficult situation to allow us to learn more about the character. The purpose of the scene is not the detail of the conflict, or the NPC, but to explore the character further. You may wish for the opening scene conflict to foreshadow a key element of the scenario. Feel free to improvise your own difficult scene; ideally it should be a minor, but potentially aggravating twist. No outcome card is played as part of the opening scene.

THE TENSION PHASE

Each EPOCH scenario is broken into a number of Tension Phases. Each Tension Phase represents a concentrated period of action, investigation or interaction in the game. For more information on how to run Tension Phases see the full version of EPOCH. At the end of each Tension Phase conduct a Challenge Round.

THE CHALLENGE ROUND

The Challenge Round represents a test, mental or physical, which each character must face and attempt to overcome. These tests are major threats to the character and are either the source of the horror, or something closely related to it.

Each player is dealt four outcome cards at the beginning of the game. Three cards depicting physical or mental outcomes, and one Hero/Zero card.

Every Challenge Round a player must either play one outcome card for their character of a type appropriate to the challenge (physical/mental) or a Hero/Zero card.

Players narrate the specific effect of the card on their character. This effect of this outcome continues only until the end of the next Tension Phase.

If a player has no outcome cards remaining when required to play a card during a Challenge Round, their character is eliminated and either dies, or goes insane. The player continues to act as an audience member and votes in subsequent ballots.

PLAY OUTCOME CARDS

The first player (the player sitting to the left of the GM. In subsequent turns the 'first player' mantle moves clockwise) reveals the outcome card they have selected. In the case of a physical injury the details are narrated immediately in conjunction with the GM. For a mental outcome card, the specific impact of isn't narrated immediately, as it will be revealed during the next Tension Phase. Further detail about Outcome Card types is included in the Appendix.

The next player (moving in a clockwise direction) then reveals the outcome card they have selected for their character as above. Continue until all players involved in the challenge have selected an outcome card for their character, and played it.

If a player has no outcome cards remaining, when required to play a card during a Challenge Round, their character is eliminated and either dies, or goes insane, which is narrated by the player in conjunction with the GM. The player continues to act as an audience member and votes in subsequent ballots.

HERO/ZERO CARDS

If a player selects to play a Hero/Zero outcome card, they must declare the target of the card (the character they will endanger or save) and narrate how this occurs.

The player who played the Hero card must immediately play a second physical/mental outcome card for their character. If the player who plays a Hero card has no Outcome cards remaining, their character is killed, or driven insane, by this heroic final act. The player whose character was

targeted by the Hero card does not need to reveal an outcome card in response to the Challenge this round (unless also the target of a Zero card) and, if they have played an Outcome card already, may return this to their hand.

Any player whose character is the target of a Zero card must immediately play an additional outcome card immediately. If they cannot, their character is killed, or driven

insane, by this final, despicable act. If the second card is more severe than the first card, the effects of the second card replace the effects of the first (discard the first card). If the second outcome card is less severe than the card already played, then the severity of the first card is increased by one level to a maximum of Severe (ignore the text of the card played).

CHALLENGE ROUND SUMMARY

1. Announce the nature of the challenge and whether it is physical, mental or either.
2. Determine the first player to play an outcome card, this moves clockwise every round.
3. Players take it in turn to play outcome cards for their character and narrate the effects. These effects must be role-played during the next Tension Phase only.
4. Players that are the targets of a Zero card must play an additional outcome card or be eliminated.
5. If the new outcome card is more severe than any played previously in the Challenge Round, the new card takes effect. If it is less severe, the severity of the initial card is increased by one level for each additional outcome card.
6. Players who play a Hero card must play an additional outcome on behalf of the targeted player.
7. Once all cards have been played, and consequences narrated the Audience Ballot is conducted, with each player and GM voting for the most 'interesting' character.
8. The player of the character which wins the audience ballot may recover any one Outcome card to their hand.
9. Players whose characters are not voted 'most interesting' receive a flashback card which may be used in the next Tension Phase.

THE AUDIENCE BALLOT

At the end of each Challenge Round (except the last) there is a secret ballot for the most interesting character. Each player and the GM get to place one vote for the character they think was the most 'interesting' during the preceding Tension Phase. The GM decides all ties, so it is suggested the GM vote before reading the player ballots so as not to be unduly influenced. The ballot winner may recover any one discarded outcome card to their hand, increasing the chances of their characters survival.

FLASHBACKS

Each player whose character is not voted 'most interesting' at the end of a Challenge Round is given a flashback token. A player may only ever have one flashback token at a time, and may spend it during a Tension Phase to trigger a flashback for their character.

Players initiate flashbacks at an appropriate moment during a Tension Phase in order to provide further audience insight into their character. A flashback is a single scene, which is framed and facilitated by the player whose character is featured. A flashback might include dialogue, or even other characters, but it should not contradict the plot or any of the character stories already established.

Flashbacks should establish the following:

- Who is present (PCs and NPCs)?
- What is the place and time?
- What is revealed?
- How is this relevant to the characters current circumstance?

THE HORROR TRACK

There are three possible outcomes of an EPOCH scenario. These are not central to the story, as EPOCH is not an investigative game, but rather determine the way the end scene is constructed.

DEFEAT

The source of the horror is not defeated. This results in potentially catastrophic consequences for the world, and fatal consequences for all of the characters in the final scene of the game.

HOLLOW VICTORY

The source of horror is defeated, but this comes at great cost. The characters suffer a terrible fate as a result of their encounter with the horror.

TOTAL VICTORY

The source of the horror is defeated, and the surviving characters return to their lives. They may even resolve personal obstacles or challenges as a result of their encounter with the horror.

To determine which of the three outcomes are used for the end scene, the characters progress in unmasking and defeating the source of the horror is tracked through the use of scenario specific cards.

Horror Track cards are placed face down, in front of the GM at the beginning of the game.

THE END SCENE

Each Horror Track card is assigned a points value which is printed on the card. The points represent the importance of the element in helping the characters survive or defeat the source of horror.

When the GM determines the characters have fulfilled the requirement of a card, that card is turned over and the point value is awarded to the characters collectively.

- If the characters score 20+ points they secure a Total Victory. Players of deceased or insane characters narrate the consequences for friends and family. Players of surviving characters then narrate a happy ending for each survivor.
- If the characters score 10-19 points they secure a Hollow Victory. Players of deceased or insane characters narrate the consequences for friends and family. Players of surviving characters then narrate an ending for each survivor but the GM adds a twist which ultimately claims the life, sanity or happiness of the survivor.
- If the characters score less than 10 points they suffer a Defeat. Either continue running Challenge Rounds until all the characters have been claimed, or provide a final narration to outline the grisly fate of all the remaining characters.



AN EPOCH SURVIVAL GUIDE

Character survival is the aim of the game in EPOCH. Scenarios will remorselessly eliminate characters, so each player is under pressure to make their character one of those that will survive the horror right through until the end scenes.

While it is true that EPOCH is guaranteed to eliminate some characters, it is equally true that there are guaranteed to be survivors, so long as there is a basic level of engagement by the characters with the source of the horror. So, how can you ensure that your character makes it through to the end?

Because eliminations are the result of collective decision making, there is no guaranteed method, and every group will be different - but the following section some methods that often distinguish characters that go the full distance.

CHARACTER CREATION

In the opening scene, consider doing some or all of the following:

- Introduce drama. Things aren't going great for the character, be it relationship, career or otherwise. You don't need to develop the detail yet, just establish that the character is feeling some pressure. Even if everything seems to be going well for the character themselves, perhaps it isn't for those around them?
- Think carefully about your characters Secret. Try to come up with an idea for a secret that you can hint at in the opening scene and develop later. Avoid being too specific at first, because if the plot goes in a different direction to what you expect,

you may not be able to fully realise your secret. However, if you do some basic groundwork at the beginning there is a good chance you can look clever later when you weave things together.

- Embrace the conflict. In the opening scene you should get an opportunity to show the audience how your character responds to an aggravating minor conflict or challenge. Make the most of this opportunity to reveal an insight about the character, and try and avoid ambivalent or run-of-the-mill responses.

FLASHBACKS

In EPOCH, the player whose character was voted most interesting each challenge round returns an outcome card to their hand, increasing their character's chance of survival. All the other players receive a Flashback card.

The mechanic of the flashback has a specific purpose. It is designed to even the playing field, allowing the characters who did not win the vote an opportunity to introduce interesting scenes or moments which highlight their characters backstory.

Well executed, memorable flashbacks are often a significant influence on the players and GM when they vote during the next round. However, if you are not used to framing a flashback or assuming narrative control during a game, constructing and narrating a flashback can be intimidating. Often, the use of the Flashback card is the biggest difference between experienced EPOCH players, and those playing for the first time.

Successful flashbacks generally do the following:

- Clearly establish the scene and time as it relates to current events in the scenario.
- Increase audience empathy or intrigue about a character by revealing more about a secret or a major motivation for that character.

- Avoid confusion about what is revealed. Everyone needs to understand what the scene has revealed, and how it relates to the character. If necessary, do not be afraid to spell out aspects of the scene that may be ambiguous.
- Create intrigue and leave the audience wanting more.

EXAMPLE: FRAMING A CHARACTER IN 'BEHIND THE MASK OF EVIL'

In 'Behind the Mask of Evil' (a scenario set during peacekeeping operations in the Congo published in War Stories) I was dealt the group relationship card "Unpopular" and was given the role card "Photographer". Drawing the shortest line between two points (an unpopular photographer), I determined the character would appear to be a sleazy paparazzi. However, it seemed like that might not give me enough mileage or interest value in subsequent tension phases, so I also completed my "secret" card, specifying the character was actually a secret agent - being a photographer was just his cover. Having a generic but significant twist would allow me a variety of options to engage with either the plot or the other characters as part of my character's 'mission'. But as I obviously had no idea about the other characters or the plot of the scenario, I could let the story evolve and decide what 'mission' my agent had been assigned once I knew more about both.

THE FLASHBACK

For the character's first flashback, I wanted to hint at the character's secret and help explain why he was in Africa. So I set the scene as a Hollywood red carpet function, where my character, along with dozens of other paparazzi, was snapping pictures of a glamorous celebrity. At the conclusion of the scene the character left the red carpet and entered a large black SUV, where a big man in a suit was waiting. He uploaded his pictures onto a laptop and both men considered the close-up shots that character had taken of the diamonds that the celebrity was wearing. This foreshadowed a connection to African blood diamonds, which I had (by now) decided would be a major motivation for my character.

Another way of making flashbacks more compelling and interesting for the audience is to weave them into another character's backstory. Listening carefully to another character's flashback, you might either decide to piggyback into their flashback, or even to have one of your own with the same setting. The aim should be to add to that character's story, by adding an interesting twist involving your character without distorting or changing the fiction already established.

Piggybacking, or adding to another player's flashback must be done with care. Players often have strong ideas for a story and may be resistant to sharing or changing their planned direction in the fiction. While an active collaboration between players over multiple tension phases is the most desirable outcome, the GM may need to act as a broker to test whether players are receptive to changes in their characters' backstories, or negotiate how the details are integrated.

EXAMPLE: DRAWING ANOTHER CHARACTER INTO A FLASHBACK

By the time of the second flashback we were embroiled in the scenario, the stakes had been raised and I wanted to frame this flashback to provide a significant and specific reason why my character was in the movie.

As the plot we had experienced so far seemed to have little to do with blood diamonds, I decided that my character 'mission' was to do with smuggling. At this point, I thought it might be interesting to interact with another character's backstory, so I picked a character who had not revealed much to that point, but who had narrated their character as being sick and sweaty during travel into the jungle.

I framed a scene set in at night, at a morgue in Kinshasa where 3 people, one of them who looked very much like the other players character, were being operated on to have bags of diamonds inserted in their stomachs. My character was present and confirmed with the doctors that the drug cocktail applied to the characters would mean they had no memory of their abduction, or this procedure. In this way I linked my character's story with another character, but also gave that character a reason to explain why they didn't know about this particular twist, and even allowed him to opt out (by specifying the character on the slab 'looked like' his character - perhaps it wasn't that character, but rather a close relative)



Fortunately the player in question took this story, and ran with it - literally. He activated his flashback and piggybacked off mine, narrating how, soon after my character had left the morgue, his character had woken up and managed to stagger off in the darkness, clutching the recently stitched wound in his stomach, pursued by the doctors. Hiding down a dark alley, he placed his hand on his stomach and spoke several words in a guttural language and the skin healed itself. And with that twist he established both that he still had the diamonds implanted, and knew that he had been operated on, and that he had some kind of mystical power - a revelation which won him the ballot that round as most interesting character.

The initial cards and secret probably only gives most players enough material for one or two flashbacks (and if these are too vague or only reveal a small amount of material, they may not be memorable enough to influence the voting). So players must find inspiration from other sources as the game evolves.

Using the example provided, by the time I reached the third flashback I had largely exhausted the interest value in this aspect of my characters backstory, so I needed something fresh.

However, coming up with something new once a character has been established, and after the player has spent some time in their skin, can be difficult. One obvious solution is to interact with another character's backstory as outlined previously.

BEING A HERO OR ZERO

The Hero/Zero card allows a character to have an important and direct impact on another character. Done in an interesting enough way, and supported by roleplaying both before and after the challenge round where it occurred, playing a Hero/Zero card can secure enhanced interest value, and also develop a significant relationship between two characters which is likely to enhance interest, and provide excellent fodder for future flashbacks..

Being a Hero and making a selfless act, on behalf of another character, has obvious interest value. To emphasise this, the character playing the Hero card, should be specific about the nature of the injury they have suffered during the subsequent tension phase. The drama of the pain or inconvenience suffered as a result of this injury could then be used as a catalyst for an exploration of why the character was willing to risk danger for another, and what implications this might have for their ongoing relationship. In addition such heroic behaviour may elicit a reciprocal act of heroism, enhancing the characters future survival.

Being a Zero through a selfish act which endangers or harms another character can also greatly enhance the interest value in a character. A sudden betrayal, or even a last minute act of self-preservation which endangers others, might serve to introduce guilt, tension or conflict into the game and increase the drama. Characters might further justify or explain this act through subsequent flashbacks, drawing out their characters backstory. Playing a Zero is also likely to add drama to the relationship with the character who suffers an injury as a result (assuming they are not eliminated) and this can also provide increased tension in subsequent phases, making both character more interesting to the audience.

Equally, the complication deck is specifically designed to provide a player with some simple suggestions which may trigger great ideas for twists in the characters backstory. The element listed on the card may initially seem difficult to integrate into an established character, but if players think creatively (and a little outside the box) virtually every card could be incorporated into their character's backstory, and usually with interesting results.

EMPHASISING TRAUMA

Every challenge round, characters suffer some form of trauma - mental or physical. Players have complete control over how this trauma manifests for their characters, and this is an excellent opportunity to enhance the interest in a character and strengthen the visualisation for other members of the audience. To achieve this:

- Be as specific as possible about injuries, and add additional details during the subsequent round i.e. *"my arm is clearly broken, and you can see where the jagged bone has torn through the skin. There is a lot of blood."* Then later: *"I take off my jacket gingerly and use it to make a crude sling, wincing and biting my lip against the pain."*
- Be sure to show how mental trauma has affected the character, though manifesting different mannerisms, narrating the character doing something alone which illustrates the true impact of their suffering, or generally increasing the characters tension and alarm. A good contrast, to show just how severe the impact has been for the character is to use a flashback to show a time when the character was more tranquil and clam.
- Make sure the trauma manifests in the character's interactions with others - pain or stress is likely to have an influence on their inter-personal skills and priorities.
- Find a unique approach if possible. If most of the characters are being stoic, then a character who is overtly alarmed and unnerved may prove more memorable. Similarly if the other characters are alarmed, then acting in a stoic manner, and seeking to calm other characters may be memorable - especially if it is later revealed that this measured approach is actually only a veneer.

Although there is no mechanical penalty applied for injuries, these may be used during game play to justify the play of Hero/Zero cards - badly injured characters bravely sacrificing themselves to allow others to survive, or healthy characters abandoning those too injured to continue. Both a selfless or selfish act should be a moment of high drama, as a character faces their ultimate mortality.

A CHARACTER IN TWO ACTS

As has already been discussed in the flashbacks section, most characters begin the game with enough starting elements to sustain the interest of the audience for several tension phases. However, once a character has been well established, sometimes they exhaust their interest value for the audience - people may feel that the player needs to add something new to secure their vote in subsequent ballots.

To combat this, players may wish to add a compelling twist to their character halfway through the game. The twist may be completely out of left-field; a sudden agenda, secret or history which makes their character undeniably interesting. The complication card deck is designed to offer a suggestion for this twist, as has been discussed in the context of flashbacks.

Another option is to link the character to the source of the horror, as the characters discover more about it. Perhaps the character knew something about what was to occur, or maybe they are even partially responsible for the horror that now threatens all the characters? Twists like this may be at odds with the scripted scenario, but GMs are encouraged to apply some flexibility, as it is likely that the game will be greatly enhanced by the greater involvement of the characters.

SURVIVAL BY OTHER MEANS

Although unlikely, it is possible for a character to survive an EPOCH scenario without ever winning the audience ballot. A character may benefit from being the target of multiple Hero cards through the course of the scenario. To try and achieve this result, the character will likely need to establish themselves as needing the protection of other characters.

This might be achieved through establishing a particularly tight-knit group of characters from the outset, by the character establishing the importance of their survival for other reasons during the game, or by the character assuming a vulnerable role within the group. In any event, this will likely be an artefact of role-playing during the tension phases, but should not be discounted as a viable strategy for survival.

