



Design by Mark Nau

Character Sheet by Mendel Schmiedekamp



The ancient grandfather clock in the hall seeks Justice. Impartially, impassively, it uses its considerable powers to weigh the measure of human lives, delivering deserts accordingly. Rare is the person who can bear the full weight of what e deserves.

Tonight, the clock has invited a small party to its house. The guests arrive, not knowing quite why they attend, but compelled to do so nonetheless. Over the course of the evening, dark secrets of the past will out, and the guests will be thrown into a nightmare world of their own making. The clock has its Justice when midnight tolls.

What the Game is About

Each player represents one of the guests who arrived this evening.

Look over at the player sitting on your right. Eir guest character is your Target, and you will get to torment em throughout the game. The player on your left will be doing the same to you.

Starting at 11:00, the game passes though 12 scenes of increasing surrealism, as the house and denizens transform in response to the guests' evil secrets. After the 12th scene, midnight strikes and we see what each guest's fate is.

Object of the Game

Each player has three goals:

- 1) Defend your own guest character.*
- 2) Stick it to the player sitting on your right.*
- 3) Bring fun to the group.*

What you Need to Play

One copy of the game's character sheet for each player

Writing utensils

A deck of playing cards

10:30, Setup

Give each player a character sheet, something to write with, and 6 cards from the deck. As play progresses, players will draw more cards from the deck, and discard cards into a nearby face-up pile. Shuffle the discard pile and place it under the remaining deck whenever the deck starts getting low.

10:35, Background

To start, we will establish who the guests are, and some things about them. We'll be filling out the section in the upper-right of the character sheet (near sections II & III.) Under "Form," write "Guest," so we know this section refers to your guest character.

Starting with the youngest player and proceeding clockwise, each player states one fact about eir guest. Facts can be an Adjective, or be part of the story's Color, helping to establish the fabric of the game world. Any Adjective should be recorded on one of the lines in the Guest's section of the sheet. Players should feel completely free to consult with one another for good ideas.

At some point, one of the facts you state will be the name of your guest. Record this on the Name line.

A player may pass if e chooses. The Background phase continues until each guest has a name and exactly two Adjectives describing em.

10:40 Introductions

Starting with the youngest player and proceeding clockwise, each player summarizes what we know about eir guest, possibly adding more Color to round out the picture.

10:45 Connections

Once all guests have been introduced, we go around again. Each player takes a turn briefly telling about some troublesome and/or suspicious situation eir guest was involved with in the past. Just describe a sticky situation, nothing overtly evil. Don't tell us how it turned out, just describe the trouble. It might involve another guest somehow. That's fine.

10:50 Shadows

Each player will now create the Shadow character that will be used to torment eir Target. This is a manifestation of some dark emotion: the Target's guilt, some wronged party's Wrath, etc. Give the shadow an appropriate name and form that it manifests itself as. Then give it one Adjective. As usual, feel free to ask for suggestions. All this is recorded in the upper-left section (near XI & XII.)

10:55 Shadows Revealed

Go around the table once more. Each player should share the Shadow's information, tying it in with the Target character.

11:00 Scene I

Scene I is the first of 12 scenes that will be played throughout the game. Every scene is prefaced with an auction to determine who the Attacker for the scene is. The winner of the auction gets to describe a scene where eir Shadow Attacks the Target. E then also gets to push for an Admission from the Target. These are all bad things for the Target. Once these two actions have been performed, the scene closes and we proceed to an auction for the next scene.

Bidding to Attack

Each scene starts with an auction to determine who will attack during the next scene. The First Bidder must put out at least one card as a bid for the right to frame the next scene. The order of precedence for determining First Bidder is:

- 1) Player with the most cards*
- 2) (among those tied) Player who has attacked in the fewest scenes so far*
- 3) (among those still tied) Player who is youngest*

After the First Bidder has placed eir bid face-up, we proceed clockwise with each player getting only one opportunity to either bid higher or pass. First Bidder then gets one last chance to bid higher or pass. High bidder discards eir bid cards, puts a check mark in the scene's section on the character sheet as reminder that e attacked this scene, and then kicks it off. All others return eir cards to eir hands.

What Constitutes a Higher Bid?

A bid that has more cards in it is always higher than a bid with fewer cards. A bid of the same number of cards can be higher if its highest card is higher than the other bid's highest card.

Example Bidding Sequence

Alma is First Bidder and plays a single card, a ten. Brent is next and passes. Charlie is next and plays a single card, an Ace. Even though Charlie bid the same number of cards, this is a higher bid because the highest card in this bid (Ace) is higher-ranking than the highest card in the other bid (a ten). Daria passes. Edwin plays 2 cards, a Jack and a nine. This is higher than the single Ace because it has more cards. Finally, Alma gets one last shot. She adds a King to her ten. She therefore wins the auction and gets to attack. Those two cards are discarded, and everyone else picks eirs back up.

Setting the Scene

The attacker then describes the scene, stating where the Target is in the house, and generally what e is doing there. The attacker may also bring other guests into the scene if e wishes. They are not subject to attack, but are there for Color. Next, the guests in the scene are given some time to describe and/or act out any activities and/or conversations they wish to have occur. This is all Color.

The Attack

At some point, the attacker decides to take control of the scene back, describing the Shadow manifesting itself and making an attack on the Target. This attack can be physical and/or psychological. The Target gets a Blot for being attacked. This Blot is recorded as a small dark circle in the scene's section on the Target's character sheet.

Trying for an Admission

After describing the attack, the attacker will describe what Admission e would like for the attack to elicit from the Target. An ideal Admission would be a spontaneous act or statement that would plausibly be naturally elicited by the attack. A single Admission should merely tend to tarnish the Target with some suspicion, not spill all the beans at once.

All other players (neither the Attacker nor Target) now throw out a thumbs up (that was a good Admission!) or thumbs down (that seems weak/strained/too much/not quite right). A majority of thumbs up earns the Attacker a free face-up card from the top of the deck. A tie or majority thumbs down means no free card.

If the Attacker got no free card, e now chooses to play a single card from eir hand or concedes the Admission. If there is a card in play for the attacker, the Target must now either concede to the Admission or play cards higher than the current attack. The rules for what makes a higher play are the same as for the pre-scene auction.

We go back and forth between the Attacker and Target, each having to either construct a higher play than the opponent currently has, or else concede.

Each player may, during the exchange, invoke one of eir character's Adjectives as coming into play. E briefly describes how the application of that Adjective would give em some advantage in the situation. E crosses out that Adjective to indicate it has been used up, and gets a free card from the deck, put into play in front of em. If that is sufficient to make eir play higher than the opponent's, the exchange goes back to the opponent for em to raise or concede. If not, the player must construct a higher play or concede.

Scene Conclusion

Once someone concedes, e takes the second-highest card from the winner's play (the sole card is taken from a winning 1-card play,) and then ALL other cards from BOTH plays are DISCARDED.

Narration now passes to the Target, who will narrate an appropriate conclusion to the scene. If the Admission was successful, record it under the Target's Adjectives on eir sheet.

11:30 Transformation

Once scene VI has concluded, the clock strikes once for 11:30. Everyone turns eir character sheets around so that the two empty corners at the bottom of the sheet are now at the top. Put your guest character's name in the empty new upper-left white section. Pass your character sheet to the player on your left.

11:31 Avatars

Everyone is now in possession of the sheet of eir Target. You are now going to select an Avatar for your Target. Strip em away of all goodness and humanity, and what is left? What form would that guest take in a nightmare? Write this on the Form line under the Target's name.

Then, for every Admission on the Guest portion of your Target's sheet, you will write down an appropriate Weakness (a negative adjective) on the lines under the Target's Avatar Form. Note the number of Admissions, for this number comes into play in the next step.

11:32 Terrors

Hand the sheets back, so everyone has eir own sheet now. Construct a Terror Monster that will punish the Target's Avatar. Give it a name and a form. Then, for every Admission the Target had, give your Terror one Adjective.

11:33 Saving Grace

Give your Avatar one positive Adjective, the one redeeming feature that remains, the one glow of hope for eir soul.

11:34 Replenish

All players decide which, if any, of their leftover cards they wish to keep. Everyone then draws additional cards to bring eir hand up to 6 cards.

11:35 Scene VII

We're now back to the usual process of bidding for a scene. From now on, we're dealing with the house and its denizens as they enter the world of nightmare. You will frame crazy distorted scenes that bring your Target's darkest fears to bear against em. The rules change somewhat during this second half of the scenes.

Target's Weaknesses in Bidding

During bidding, if your Target has a Weakness, you may state that you are going to attack this Weakness. The Target crosses that Weakness off, and it may not again be used against em. This gives you a free card face-up from the deck during the bidding. You may then add whichever other cards you want from your hand to constitute your bid. Keep your free card separate from the others, because it goes back into the discard pile after the bidding, even if you don't win. Note that the Weakness is crossed off even if you don't win the bidding.

Scene Framing

You're no longer constrained by any notion of setting realism. Construct a nightmare scenario for your Target. Feel free to bring in other players to play any roles your whims lead you to. The power of the clock transforms the house into any setting you need. Flashback to the past? Great. Crazy surrealistic landscape? Fine. Go nuts.

Trying for a Revelation

Instead of trying for an Admission, you are going for a Revelation. A Revelation is a very damning sequence. The contest over Revelation is played out just like that for Admission. A successful Revelation puts a SECOND Blot on the Target in addition to the one e automatically got for being subject to an attack this scene.

12:00 Midnight

At the end of Scene XII, the clock strikes midnight. It is time for the guests to be judged.

Prepare for Judgment

Each player keeps any RED cards that remain in eir hand, and discards the rest. Now, everyone draws additional cards to bring eir hand to a total of 10 cards. Don't look at your cards. Shuffle them up, and note how many Blots your guest got over the course of play. Fan your hand out and have your Target remove and discard that many cards from your hand at random. Still, don't look at any of the cards.

Judgment

Everyone squares eir hand and puts it as a mini-deck face-down in front of em. The youngest player says "The clock strikes 12." At the same time, everyone turns the top card of eir deck face-up in front of em. Anyone who turns a BLACK card must turn over one more card on top of the first. Then stop, even if that second card is also black,

Losing It

If anyone is exhausted of cards, eir guest was fully guilty of terrible evildoing, and is punished by the draconian clock. The player controlling that guest should fully confess to all the evil that eir guest was guilty of (keeping in mind any Admissions and Revelations), and then tell what fate that guest met that evening. It should be maximally horrible.

The player to the left of this wretched creature takes a card from the top of the deck and puts in on top of eir own stack. This is your reward for sticking it to your Target.

Lightning Flashes, the Walls Weep Blood

If nobody is exhausted of cards yet, the player who turned the highest card briefly describes some supernatural happenings inside the house as the angry clock winds up its wrath for a heavy blow. We repeat the process of everyone simultaneously turning a card over (and then possibly a second card) until someone is out.

Next!

After the first guilty party has gone by the wayside, the rest of the players continue the card-turning procedure until we find the next victim. Eir guest is guilty of wrongdoing, but not as badly as the first guest. The guest meets a terrible fate. The player confesses and describes the fate eir guest met.

Last One Standing

We continue this process, each successive player who runs out of cards describing a lesser evil than the one before, and a less horrid fate. Each time someone “goes out,” the player seated to eir left gets a free card from the deck (if e is still in) as acknowledgement of having outlasted eir Target.

When there is only one player left with cards, eir guest leaves the house scot-free. Exonerated. Describe the mitigating circumstances behind your past troubles, and/or how you repented and made good. If multiple players exhaust their cards on the same round, and nobody has cards left, all those players get to walk free.

Master of The Fun

Now that we’ve determined the pasts and fates of the guests, award one player the title “Master of The Fun.” Give each player a number of red cards equal to one less than the number of players, and the same number of black cards. Everyone then puts two of these cards, face down, in front of each other player. Give red cards to show appreciation to that player for having Brought the Fun to the game.

After everyone has distributed the cards, each player shuffles what cards e got and then looks at them. Anyone may show their hand as a claim for Master of The Fun. Then, anyone else may show a hand with an equal or greater number of red cards. After an interval where there are no more hand reveals, acknowledge the hand(s) with the most red cards as Master of The Fun.

Designer Notes

Kevin Allen, Jr. had just about the best idea ever, and created the Reverse Engineering game design challenge. I got assigned Mendel Schmiedekamp's cool character sheet, ideas pouring out of it the moment I saw it. Big Thanks to you both.

I use Spivak pronouns throughout because I like their logical disambiguity. I am not grinding axes.

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Of the dozen or so fonts I had installed on my machine, I went with this one, Monotype Corsiva. It doesn't match the character sheet. I'm going to go with the excuse "I'm an idea guy."

I think I like the way the game plays out at the end. It should create a tense countdown moment where no-one is really sure who will be the next to go out, and everyone hopes it is eir Target so e can get a valuable free card. I say "I think I like" because the game is completely un-playtested.

I've designed far more card/board/computer games than I have role-playing games, so I think I tended to lean heavily on mechanics in the creation process. I formed the big-picture idea based on the character sheet, then thought about what I wanted the players to do during the game, then made mechanics that encouraged that behavior.

Although each player has a guest that is putatively eir own, players are given a lot of control over the definition and actions of their Targets. I wonder how that works out in actual play.

One-Page Mechanics Summary

Pre-Scenes:

Setup – character sheet, 6 cards

Background – everyone gets 2 Adjectives to help defend with

Shadows – get 1 Adjective to help attack Target with

Scenes 1-6 structure:

Auction – Bid for the rights to the next scene

Attack – Target takes one Blot automatically

Admission – contest to see if Target will have to take an Admission

Transformation:

Avatar – Give Target's avatar a form & Weaknesses = Admissions

Terror – Adjectives to help attack = Target guest's Admissions

Saving Grace – One Adjective to help Avatar defend with

Replenish – Keep or discard leftover cards, fill back up to 6 total

Scene 7-12 structure:

Auction – Bid for scene, free card by using up Target Weakness

Attack – Target takes one Blot automatically

Revelation – contest to see if Target will take another Blot

Contest Resolution:

Must beat opponent's current cards played or concede. More cards beats fewer cards. Can play same number of cards if your high card is higher than opponent's. Get a free card by using up an Adjective. Loser takes second-highest from winner. All other cards discarded.

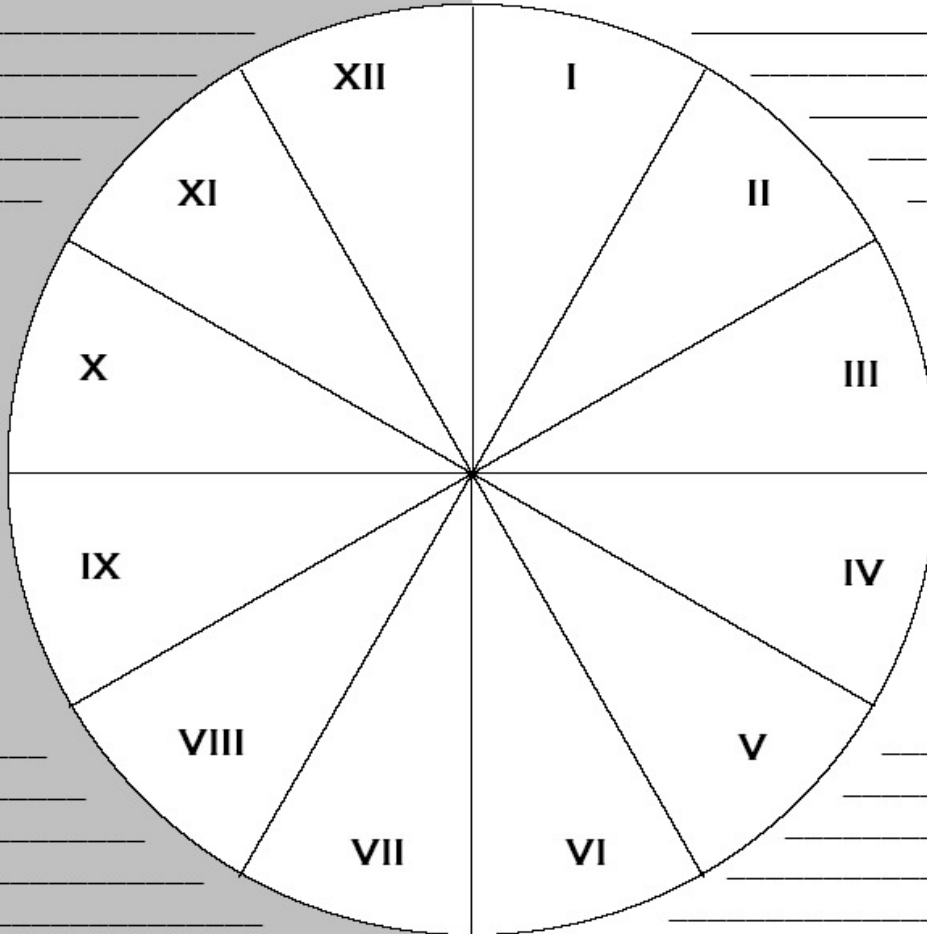
Endgame:

Keep leftover red cards, fill up to 10 total. Randomly discard number of cards = Blots. Simultaneously reveal one top card each.

Flip second card if first was black. See if anyone went out. Repeat.

NAME _____

FORM _____



FORM _____

NAME _____

NAME _____

FORM _____

FORM _____

NAME _____