

Self-Less

A roleplaying game of personal horror by Tristan Brightman. (Character Sheet by Mike RM)

Self-less is a roleplaying game. When playing this particular roleplaying game, two people will play out a story, with a streak of horror running through it. When you play Self-Less you may end up playing the same character the whole way through, or different characters through the evening. The way you play those characters is partly determined by the game, but the detail that makes it interesting is down to you.

This is not an easy game. It isn't intended to be an easy game. If played correctly it will be challenging and emotive. I hope it will be enjoyable, but I don't guarantee it will be *fun*.

Playing the game

Once you have gathered the requisite two players, there are a number of steps you must take to play Self-Less. These are detailed below:

1) Decide on theme.

Yes, okay, it's horror. But that covers a multitude of sins. Self-Less can cover a lot of different styles of horror story, from slasher-horror to a more psychological, deep down horror. Decide between the two of you what theme you will play.

2) Character Generation

Take the character sheet; admire it's artistic design and elegant function. Now, working together, decide what the fundamental stake is for your main character. In a slasher horror this is easy – they are trying to escape with their life, so the stake is “I am alive”.

Good fundamental stakes reflect the nature of the horror story you want to tell. If your character loses that stake, that the the ultimate moment of horror in your story. If the character avoids losing that stake, they have – to some extent – won through.

Other good fundamental stakes include:

- * They can not control who I love
- * I deserve equal rights
- * I am wrongly imprisoned
- * I refuse to be like them

Don't worry though. There will still be personal horror along the way.

Now write the fundamental stake right in the middle of the character sheet – in the innermost box of the 21 boxes. You should write this in the first person. This is the starting point you will develop the character from.

The four boxes adjacent to this central box should contain traits that are very important to the character, but not quite as critical as the fundamental stake. To continue in a slasher theme, we might put “I am able bodied” “I sleep soundly at night” “I would never betray a friend” and “I look extremely hot”. These things should start to give you an idea of the nature of the character.

There should now be eight boxes adjacent to these four, that don't already have writing in. In these boxes you should write details that are less important to the character, although still part of their personality. For instance, you might write “I keep a photo of my boyfriend in a locket next to my

heart” or “I’ve always loved cats”. “I am terrified of spiders” is also fine.

The final eight empty boxes are for trivial traits – round the character out. These things are part of the character, but not actually important. Make sure it feels like both of you know him. It hurts more that way.

3) Setting

You should now flesh out the setting between you. Is the slasher plot set in an abandoned cabin, or an old warehouse, or a graveyard, or your character's home? The game will start *in media res* so now is the time to discuss the nature of the horror the character will face. Finally, you need to decide who will play the character. That person will play just the character, the whole way through. We'll call him the character player, or CP. He should pay attention to the current traits of the character, and play the character as best he can with those current traits. Much of the horror in this game comes from the loss of things that make a character what they are. The other person will play anyone the character meets in their story – including the source of the horror. We'll call him the horror player, or HP.

Setting up to play: An example

We are going to play Self-Less. Our genre is quiet psychological horror. We decide that the character is a man who rebels at an all controlling government. He falls in love, and the authority aims to control his rebellion. We've decided the ultimate moment of horror will come if the man no longer loves – if he can walk past the object of his love in the park, and say nothing more than “hello”.

The game starts in the middle of the action, so we decide the man has already begun rebelling, and fallen in love. He has been taken by police, and doesn't know what he will find when he wakes.

4) Play

The CP sits at a table. The arrow at the base of the character sheet should point straight at him. To begin with, the HP sits directly opposite him, across the table. An arrow also points directly at him.

The HP will change position in play, and the role of the HP will change during play as he does so.

Important rules about where you sit:

While the HP is sat across from the CP:

The CP may not speak, unless given permission.

The HP **must** use aggressive or derogatory language if he does invite the CP to speak.

Characters introduced to any scene must be opposed to the main character.

While the HP is sat at 90 degrees from the CP:

The CP may ask permission to narrate.

The HP may not look at the CP.

Characters introduced to the game must be neutral or uncaring towards the main character. (they can be friendly, but not helpful)

While the HP is sat next to the CP:

The CP and HP narrate together

Characters introduced to the scene must be purposefully helpful towards the main character.

Now give the CP three six sided dice.

The HP begins play proper by narrating some incident, which threatens one of the outermost level of traits – the trivial details. The CP must defend it by rolling one of his dice. Whenever the CP rolls a die, the results are always found as follows

1-2 – the CP loses the trait. Cross it out, and narrate how it has been lost – a love of cats might end when the Viet Cong force a character to eat raw cat or starve, for instance. If it was a negative trait, you may instead circle it – it has now become a terrible handicap to the character. For instance, “Fear of rats” might, if lost, be circled. The character would now have a morbid screaming pathological fear of rats, such that they can not operate at all in the presence of one.

3-4 – place the dice in the arrowhead pointing at the HP. The HP continues the narration, the trait is not yet lost, but neither is it saved.

5-6 – the CP saves the stake, and draws a mark in the arrowhead pointing at the HP. Narrate how the character escaped the situation without losing the trait.

When the CP has lost half of the traits at one level, the HP must now threaten the next level. So, after 4 trivial traits are lost, the HP threatens the “less significant” traits. When four of these are lost, he threatens the major traits. When two of these are gone, he threatens the fundamental stake. If the fundamental stake is lost, the game ends after narration of how it is lost.

If an arrowhead has three marks in it, the HP must spend any dice in that arrowhead, before moving one arrowhead around the table, closer to the CP. If he is sat next to the CP, when the third mark is drawn the HP and CP should hug, as they narrate the escape of the CP from the horror; the game then ends.

As well as being forced to spend them when he moves seat, the HP may spend any dice in the arrowhead pointing at him at any time. He does this according to where he is sitting. If he is sitting across from the CP, he gives one die back as he narrates a scene where one of the characters stakes is lost with no chance at a defense. If he is sitting at 90 degrees to the CP, he gives one die back (remembering not to even glance at the CP). If he is sitting next to the CP, he gives a die back, narrating some development that aids the character, and writes a mark in the arrowhead pointing at him.

5) Other

It's important to note that the HP can either play the same character all the way through, or different characters – a natural point to change is when he moves seat. As an example, when he is across from the CP, he might play the evil axe wielder, when at 90 degrees he could mainly play a sheriff who just doesn't care (although it's likely the axe-wielder would also feature) , and when he moved next to the character, he could play the same sheriff, convinced of the truth.

6) Games I want to play with Self-Less

A game about the relationship between a prisoner and a guard at a concentration camp. I'm not sure whether I'd make the prisoner the main character, or the guard.

A game about a disturbed guy trying to cope with voices in his head, without losing enough of himself to do something really terrible.

A game about social exclusion, where the main character struggles to maintain belief that they are equal, and the challenges are not just from people who overtly hate the main character, but also those who are content not to challenge the status quo.

A funny-horror game (think *Scream*) about trying to write a decent roleplaying game in a short length of time.

7) Design notes

When I saw the sheet, the barbed wire grid game me quite a bleak first impression. My initial thoughts were about prison, but as I developed the ideas in my head, I thought about writing a psychological horror game.

I think the best horror (well, scariest) comes from loss, and the negative changes people adopt or are forced to adopt. No bloodbath B movie has come close to sending the same chill shiver down my spine as 1984 did when I read the final scene. I felt broken inside, truly horrified by the fate of these characters.

I wanted this game to replicate that horror.

When I saw the arrowheads on the sheet, I thought about some kind of playing pieces moving around the outside of the grid. I really wanted to draw the players into the game, and involve them more viscerally with the fate of the character. These two things eventually knocked together, and I decided to use the players as playing pieces to show the state of the game, and involve them more immediately with the emotions of the characters. I really like this, I think it makes the game ten times more intense – and it's awesome when the character gets away, and you hug with relief (and because the game told you you had to).

The simple resolution system is the last bit I designed. I wanted the way the HP uses dice to relate to his position, but otherwise I had no requirements other than a fairly simple system, where you don't know the fate of the character until the end.

It should work out at 50/50 for the character escaping, but there is usually a strong element of horror, as the trustworthy guy only pulls through by deciding to betray his friend, or the cheerleader comes away from the mad axeman alive, but horribly scarred.

Hope you enjoy playing it, and thanks to Mike RM for the excellent sheet.