

THE PLAGUE +



PROTOCOL
game series sixteen



CREDITS

words and graphics by jim pinto

art by DryIcons and Felipe Gaona

proofing and assistance by James Glover and Martijn Tolsma

The Plague is Game 16 in the *Protocol* game series. Inspired by GMZero.

CONTENTS

- INTRODUCTION 2
- GETTING STARTED 3
- MOTIVATIONS..... 5
- RELATIONSHIPS..... 5
- GAMEPLAY 6
- SCENES
- OPENING SCENE 6
- VIGNETTES 6
- INTERROGATIONS 6
- INTERLUDES 7
- ENSEMBLES 7
- SCENES 8
- LOCATIONS..... 8
- SPENDING DRAMA POINTS 9
- OPTIONAL RULES 9
- OVERVIEW 9
- BACKGROUNDS..... 10
- ADVANCED ROLES 10
- NAMES 11
- SCENES 12
- CHARACTER SHEET..... 12
- KICKSTARTER BACKERS..... 13

THE PLAGUE

The Plague is a story roleplaying game about a nationwide flu that wipes out a considerable portion of the population overnight. Characters must hold up indoors until the CDC gives the all clear. But as each day passes, resources dwindle, isolation turns to fear, and paranoia sets in. Can you hold out until help comes?

The *Plague* is a zero-prep game for 3 or more players. The game length is exponentially long, so games with more players take more time to complete. The *Protocol Series* requires a deck of poker cards as well as tokens to track drama points.

This series presumes some understanding of GMless game protocol: scene-framing, shared authority, and so on. If you've never played a GMless game, try one of the GMZero games such as *Dying Memoryes*, or *George's Children*. A free pdf of game advice — GMZero — is available for download at drivethrurpg.com.

INTRODUCTION

The *Plague* is the sixteenth game utilizing the *Protocol* game mechanic. Light and quick, the system gives players everything they need to start playing immediately, doing away with over-explanation and getting right to the tools.

Players take on the roles of directors outside the action and characters inside the action, using the ebb and flow of four different scene-framing styles to tell meaningful stories about characters in crisis. Specifically, they are normal people trying to survive a plague for an indeterminate amount of time.

LOCATION

Unlike a normal *Protocol Game*, location cards are not drawn during game play in the *Plague*. Instead, one location is determined at the beginning of the game and used for all scenes throughout, though the players are welcome to create specialization within that location for each individual scene.

Consider drawing a second card to determine how many days have passed between scenes.

GETTING STARTED

Each character is an average citizen trapped in an untenable situation of isolation and disease. Locked indoors for an indeterminate amount of time while the world outside implodes, the characters must endure rationing, starvation, and maybe even death in the hopes of outlasting the plague. The characters need names, roles, motivations, and relationships, as well as an understanding of the plague. Once each player has completed the following steps, you are ready.

- Name your character
- Select one role for your character — this has no mechanical benefit
- Determine a character's motivation by drawing a card
- Determine a relationship between two characters by drawing a card
- Determine elements about the game world

DECK SHUFFLING

A standard deck of cards is shuffled at the beginning of the game and again (only) if the deck runs out of cards. Used cards are discarded. Do not return Motivations or Relationships to the deck. The same goes for Scenes and Locations during play.

The use of jokers is optional.

DRAMA POINTS

Each player starts the game with one drama point and only gains additional points during interludes and interrogations. See page 5.

ROLES

Roles provide flavor and context, but no mechanical benefit.

- Construction Worker. Where is the rest of your team? How did you end up here? How can you help those you are trapped with?
- Delivery Man. Wrong place. Wrong time.
- Drug Addict. Been too long since your last fix.
- Engineering Student. You haven't finished school yet and already you're having to fabricate solutions to problems...
- Factory Worker. The world is ending outside, and yet classism still exists in here.
- Family Man. Going crazy not knowing where his kids are.
- Delivery Man. Wrong place. Wrong time.
- High Schooler. Your parents must be going crazy not knowing where you are.
- Immigrant. Poor language skills are only half the problem.
- Office Manager. Certain to believe himself a leader.
- Personal Life Coach. Certain to believe himself a key advisor to whomever is in charge.
- Pregnant Teenager. Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong everything.
- Soccer Mom. Going crazy not knowing where her kids are.
- Writer. Certainly you've written or at least read about the end of the world. What can that do to help everyone?



MOTIVATIONS

Motivations are determined by drawing one random poker card from the deck for each character. The motivation descriptions are vague — specificity is your job. For instance, the ♠10 is a motivation of family, impulsively. The player may define this motivation as doing whatever it takes to protect her family.

A list of motivations is on page 5.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are determined by choosing (any) two characters and drawing one random poker card from the deck. The pair of characters share this relationship. The relationship descriptions are vague. Specificity is your job. For instance, the ♣10 is a relationship of burdensome trust. The players sharing this relationship may define it as an ongoing issue of trust between two brothers who have lied to each other since childhood.

A list of relationships is on page 5.

WORLD BUILDING

Each player selects one ingredient from the list below. If you are playing a 3-player game, then each player selects two. Now is a good time to determine the location where everyone is holed up by drawing one card (see page 7).

- What is the CDC calling the disease? How long as they saying to stay indoors? How frequent are their emergency updates?
- What supplies do you have plenty of? What supplies do you lack?
- Who thinks they are in charge?
Who does everyone agree is in charge?
- How do you pass the time?
- How long were you potentially exposed before you found shelter?
- Does anyone have a working cell phone? Is there a signal?
How much battery life does the device have?
- What do the infected look like? How close are they to you?
- Where is your family? Do they know where you are?
- Describe your personal space. Do you need to keep it secure?
- Name and describe two symptoms of the disease?
Are they noticeable or conceable?

MOTIVATIONS

SUIT

- ♣ Sternly
- ♦ Surreptitiously
- ♥ Reluctantly
- ♠ Impulsively

VALUE

- A Meditative
- 2 Freedom
- 3 Pride
- 4 Work
- 5 Desperation/Fear
- 6 Wanderlust
- 7 Renewal
- 8 Wealth
- 9 Distance/Time
- 10 Family
- J Retribution
- Q Love
- K Respect
- Joker

Draw two and combine the results

Day 6. I think I know everyone's life story already. Piper. Greg. Ginger. Natalie. Roan. Me. All waiting for the CDC to give the all clear. And nothing to do but talk about our kids. Well. Their kids. And show pictures. And talk about "good times."

I miss my Xbox.

RELATIONSHIPS

SUIT

- ♣ Burden
- ♦ Complex
- ♥ Fortune
- ♠ Ominous

VALUE

- A Survival
- 2 Abuse
- 3 Loss/Reconciliation
- 4 Codependent
- 5 Reliable
- 6 Generous
- 7 Long-Term/Siblings
- 8 Proximity
- 9 Obsessive
- 10 Trust
- J Rivalry
- Q Anxiety
- K Outsiders
- Joker

Draw again, adding another character to the Relationship

Day 12. Batteries in my flashlight are dead. Phone hasn't worked in days. Piper made it clear that we can't touch the radio except once per day. "Gotta save batteries."

All those times I could have purchased a hand-crank radio. Damn, she gets on my nerves.

GAME PLAY

While creating a story of their characters' survival as a plague rages outside, the players take turns directing scenes. Although this document provides the tools for framing the action, map-making and location naming are left to the players. A chart of scenes is on page 8.

In *The Plague*, the active player (director) draws only ONE card, which determines the scene type — vignette, interrogation, interlude, or ensemble — instead of the normal two cards. The scene's type (suit) and atmosphere (value) are determined by the card. *For instance, the director draws a ♦6 indicating an interrogation (♦) about symptoms. The standard location (♣7) has already determined that the characters have found refuge in a cramped (♣) school.*

THE OPENING SCENE

The opening scene of the game is always a vignette at the present location. The vignette focus is either Organization or Supplies. Determine randomly which player narrates this vignette, but do not draw any cards. Afterwards, take turns until every player has directed four scenes.

VIGNETTES (CLUBS ♣)

Vignettes involve no actual dialog, merely setting the atmosphere for the story. The director determines the location from the card drawn and narrates a brief scene. A vignette shouldn't take more than a minute or two to narrate.

The director draws a ♣10 for scene — Vignette about Safety in Numbers. "We've spent most of the day securing all the school windows and sealing up the gaps in the floor. Naturally we need oxygen, but we need to reduce our chances of contracting whatever it is the CDC says is killing people. We can't underestimate the value of keeping a look out for one another."

ADVICE

Keep your vignettes short and simple. Narrate enough information to set the tone, but don't overdo it by dragging the action on too long. Concise sentences are a writer's best friend.

INTERROGATIONS (DIAMONDS ♦)

Interrogations involve the director asking questions to one character. The director selects a player and steals one drama point from him. Then the director asks five questions — in or out of character — which must be answered by that player in character.

If the interrogation is in character, the director may ask the questions from the point of view of an NPC or his own character. This process should feel organic. If the interrogation is out of character, the director asks the questions in an abstract fashion, as though going down a list. The questions can be anything fitting the theme.

The director draws a ♦4 for scene — Interrogation about Radio Transmissions. The director decides that Piper has been left to listen to the radio, when some chatter comes in. It sounds like an official who has questions about the state of the group, their health and so on. The voice on the other end never identifies itself, but tries to sound official.

ADVICE

Ask leading questions. Avoid yes/no questions, or questions that can be reduced to short answers. What and why questions are great. Did or can questions are not. "Why are you waiting for reinforcements?"

NPCS

The director may add one NPC to an interlude or interrogation, but the characters remain the focus of the scene. Vignettes do not have dialogue, but any number of NPCs may color the story background. Ensembles may have NPCs, but they are controlled/run by the director. Other players may introduce NPCs by spending one drama point.

In *The Plague*, scenes are about isolation and cabin fever, spending too much time trapped indoors. When you are the director, make the most of your scenes by ratcheting up tension through pre-existing relationships.



INTERLUDES (HEARTS ♥)

Interludes involve two (and only two) characters with a pre-existing relationship. Neither of these characters needs to be the director's character. The director determines the location and sets the scene based on the cards drawn. The scene runs as long as the director likes, without being self-indulgent, calling "scene" when the characters have said or done enough. An interlude involves only one location. Should the characters leave the location, the scene ends.

All players **not** involved in the scene gain one drama point at the end of the interlude.

The director has drawn the ♥5 for scene — Interlude about Personal Challenges. The director decides that Joe and Piper have been left alone while the rest of the group performs some routine maintenance around the school. It is no secret that Joe and Piper do not see eye to eye, thus leaving them an opportunity to finally air their grievances. The director does not have an agenda beyond this and wants to see where the characters take the story.

ADVICE

Interludes are mostly about the drama between two characters. While the interlude can be used to advance the plot, this is secondary to the interpersonal actions and reactions of the characters. An alternative example of the scene above could be the pair working out their growing feelings for one another.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

In the Protocol Game Series, whenever two or more characters reach a moment of unresolvable conflict one of the following things happens:

- In an interlude, the director decides who wins the conflict, narrates the conclusion, and ends the scene.
- In an ensemble, the scene ends, which leaves the conflict dangling.
- Should the players wish to override any of these rules, they must spend one drama point, or in the case of a tie, more drama points than anyone else. The winner narrates the conclusion.
- Should a scene end unresolved, this creates a cliffhanger effect. Players may wish to resolve this in the following scene. But this isn't always necessary. Use your best judgement. Sometimes the best things are left unsaid.

Vignettes and interrogations have no conflict.

ENSEMBLES (SPADES ♠)

Ensembles involve all of the characters. Like an interlude, the director determines the plot of the scene, as well as the location. The director may preempt the scene as much as he likes, but once the ensemble starts, the players should let things develop organically. The director still has the right to call "scene" at any moment, but any player may override the director by spending one drama point to end a scene early, or to extend a scene longer.

The director has drawn the ♠3 for scene — Ensemble about Organization. The director decides the group has been growing tired and listless. The school is already cramped and the trash has been piling up. The place is a shambles and everyone has been blaming everyone else for the state of things. Someone clearly needs to take charge and get the group organized again.

ADVICE

Ensembles involve everyone and should be allowed to run their course. But not too long. Eventually the characters will start spewing every kind of theory and idea, which slows play and distracts from the story.

Let everyone get a say, but once you resolve the scene's primary focus, it's time to end things. Don't forget, if there's conflict, the scene ends on its own, unless someone spends one Drama Point.

DAY 99

Players take turns directing scenes. The order is not important. Players may decide to take turns in a random order, clockwise order, or even bid to be the next director. Just make sure everyone is involved and no one directs two times in a row.

The players may also decide to have the game end only after all of the face cards have been revealed (during character creation and game play) for a longer game, or all the aces are revealed for a shorter game.

Once everyone has directed four times, help arrives. Each player narrates his character's involvement in detoxification and rescue. For each drama point a player still possesses, he narrates (in turn) a vignette about the CDC's rescue operation. Once everyone has spent their drama points, each player determines if his character contracted the disease, dies, is quarantined, is reunited with loved ones, or is otherwise changed by the ordeal.

SCENES

SUIT

- ♣ Vignette
- ♦ Interrogation
- ♥ Interlude
- ♠ Ensemble

VALUE

- A Movement Outside
- 2 Supplies
- 3 Organization
- 4 Radio Transmissions
- 5 Personal Challenges
- 6 Symptoms
- 7 Air/Food/Water
- 8 Suspicions
- 9 Tough Decisions
- 10 Safety in Numbers
- J Chaos
- Q Internal Conflict
- K External Conflict
- Joker
- Monologue

MONOLOGUE

Monologues are (optional) solo scenes where the director's character (or an NPC) delivers a single speech that cannot be interrupted. The director decides who else is at the location. The director gains one drama point.

LOCATIONS

SUIT

- ♣ Cramped
- ♦ Poorly-Ventilated
- ♥ Renovated
- ♠ Abandoned

VALUE

- A Factory
- 2 Office Building
- 3 Warehouse
- 4 Apartment
- 5 House
- 6 Basement
- 7 School
- 8 Store
- 9 Gas Station
- 10 Medical
- J "Bad Place"
- Q Government Building
- K Bus
- Joker
- Bunker



DRAMA POINTS

Drama points are used to control the narration and finale. In addition, players may use drama points in the follow ways.

- The director may **spend one drama point** to discard a scene/ location card and draw a new one.
- During an interrogation, the player being interrogated may **spend one drama point** to avoid answering one question.
- If a scene ends with unresolved conflict, any player may **spend one drama point** to shift the conflict to an NPC who has already made an appearance in the story, or **spend two drama points** to shift the conflict to a new NPC.

OPTIONAL RULES

- If the same suit is drawn three times in a row for a scene or location, discard the card and draw a new one until a new suit appears.
- At the beginning of the game, shuffle the deck and remove 10 cards at random. Do not look at them. Remove them from play and never shuffle them back into the deck.
- Should a player ever run out of drama points, the director may give him one of his, regardless of the scene type.
- On page 10 is a list of advanced roles and backgrounds. Neither is necessary to play the game, but each adds additional color and flavor. No character has more than one. When using backgrounds, these are selected before roles. When using advanced roles, these replace standard roles.
- Once per game, the players may decide to **award one drama point** to a director who has framed a particularly good scene.
- Select a permanent director who does not play a character, but instead runs the game like a traditional RPG. Cards are still drawn for scenes. The game lasts for a number of scenes equal to four times the number of players, or as long as the director chooses.

OVERVIEW

CREATE CHARACTERS

- Shuffle a deck of poker cards
- Name characters
- Determine backgrounds (optional)
- Select roles
- Determine motivations
- Determine relationships
- Determine location
- Give each player one drama point

OPENING SCENE

- Vignette (Organization or Supplies)

SCENES

- Take turns directing scenes
- Draw one card: one scene type
- Gain drama points during interrogations and other players' interludes

DAY 99

- Take turns narrating vignettes about the final moments when the CDC comes

END GAME

- Who contracts the disease? Who dies? Who is quarantined? Who is reunited with loved ones? Who is otherwise changed by the ordeal?

BACKGROUNDS

SUIT

- ♣ Lower Class
- ♦ Working Class
- ♥ Academia
- ♠ Entitled

VALUE

- A Focused
- 2 Lazy
- 3 Alone
- 4 Overshadowed
- 5 Judgmental
- 6 Jilted/Scorned
- 7 Well-Known
- 8 Sycophant/Bully
- 9 Regarded/Respected
- 10 Talented
- J Single-Minded
- Q Sympathetic
- K Inheritance
- Joker
- Ex-Military

ADVANCED ROLES

SUIT

- ♣ Novice
- ♦ Reputed
- ♥ Unreliable
- ♠ Journeyman

VALUE

- A Construction Worker
- 2 Delivery Man
- 3 Drug Addict
- 4 Engineering Student
- 5 Factory Worker
- 6 Family Man
- 7 High Schooler
- 8 Immigrant
- 9 Office Manager
- 10 Personal Life Coach
- J Pregnant Teenager
- Q Soccer Mom
- K Writer
- Joker
- Survivalist

Day 27. I miss watching the game. I miss any kind of entertainment. Nothing to do here. Eat canned food. Crap in a bag. Repeat. Thank god I found a box of pens.

Day 34. The radio crackled to life today. The reception in here is bad, so we could barely make out any of it. Piper insists it's about a request, but the rest of us think the CDC is sending more warnings. Damn. 34 days.

Day 51. We are out of everything. Water. Food. No one dared believe the quarantine would last this long. Some of us have talked about going outside and risking infection. So long as Piper doesn't find out. God. We need something to eat...

Day 67. I'm tired of writing. None of this matters. We're just going to die here, anyway.

Man, I hate Piper.

CHARACTER NAMES

Alberto	Alexis
Ben	Bonnie
Bradley	Brian
Carol	Cecilia
Chuck	Colby
Crystal	Daniel
Deane	Debra
Delia	Dennis
Doug	Elmyra
Erin	Everett
Fiona	Frank
Geoff	Gale
Heather	Henry
Jack	Jamie
Jason	Jasmine
Jean	Joe
Karolina	Kevin
Lacie	Lang
Lisa	Lorrie
Marcus	Mary
Merrick	Mitch
Molly	Oscar
Paco	Peter
Ray	Ritchie
Roger	Russell
Ryan	Sara
Shane	Shawna
Stacey	Steve
Tanisha	Tanya
Tim	Tobias
Vicky	Weston

PATHOGENS

Bacterial. Pathogenic bacteria contribute diseases such as tuberculous, pneumonia, and foodborne illnesses. Pathogenic bacteria also cause infections such as tetanus, typhoid fever, diphtheria, syphilis and Hansen's disease.

Parasitic. A parasitic pathogen introduces the disease through an outside vector, such as a flea carrying the pathogen.

Prionic. Prionic pathogens are a relatively new discovery. Prions are abnormal, misfolded proteins that do not contain nucleic acids. All known prion diseases – such as Mad Cow and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease – affect the structure of the brain or neural tissue. They are currently untreatable and universally fatal.

Viral. Some notable pathogenic viruses can lead to smallpox, influenza, mumps, measles, ebola, and so on.

CONTAGIONS

Airborne or Waterborne Pathogens/Toxins

Avians/Rodents	Blood/Mucous/Sweat
Dead Skin or Hair	Fungal Spores
Human Bite, Saliva, or Spit	Insects and/or Spiders
Offal/Urine	Rabid Animals
Tainted Food or Water Supply	Tainted Medical Supply
Unsanitary Living Conditions	

SYMPTOMS

Blood In Eyes, Mouth, Pores	Blotching
Chest Pains	Coughing
Flu-Like Symptoms	Gangrene
Hair Loss	Headaches
Internal Bleeding	Itching
Lethargy	Mood Swings
Numbness In Hands	Red Eyes
Sneezing	Sores
Stiffness Of Joints	Swollen Glands
Tremors	Trouble Eating/Drinking
Trouble Hearing/Seeing	Trouble Walking

SCENES

VIGNETTES (CLUBS ♣)

Vignettes involve no actual dialog, merely setting the atmosphere for the story. The director determines the location from the card drawn and narrates a brief scene. A vignette shouldn't take more than a minute or two to narrate.

INTERROGATIONS (DIAMONDS ♦)

Interrogations involve the director asking questions to one character. The director selects a player and steals one drama point from him. Then the director asks five questions — in or out of character — which must be answered by that player in character.

If the interrogation is in character, the director may ask the questions from the point of view of an NPC or his own character. This process should feel organic. If the interrogation is out of character, the director asks the questions in an abstract fashion, as though going down a list. The questions can be anything fitting the theme.

INTERLUDES (HEARTS ♥)

Interludes involve two (and only two) characters with a pre-existing relationship. Neither of these characters needs to be the director's character. The director determines the location and sets the scene based on the cards drawn. The scene runs as long as the director likes, without being self-indulgent, calling "scene" when the characters have said or done enough. An interlude involves only one location. Should the characters leave the location, the scene ends.

All players **not** involved in the scene gain one drama point at the end of the interlude.

ENSEMBLES (SPADES ♠)

Ensembles involve all of the characters. Like an interlude, the director determines the plot of the scene, as well as the location. The director may preempt the scene as much as he likes, but once the ensemble starts, the players should let things develop organically. The director still has the right to call "scene" at any moment, but any player may override the director by spending one drama point to end a scene early, or to extend a scene longer.

NAME/ROLE

BACKGROUND

MOTIVATION

RELATIONSHIP

NOTES

SCENES

DRAMA POINTS

Spend one to end or extend an ensemble

Spend one to resolve conflict

Spend one to shift the conflict to an existing NPC

Spend two to shift the conflict to a new NPC

Spend one (during an Interrogation) to avoid answering a question

Spend during final narration

HELPER MONKEY

Diana Kwalkoski Stoll

REGULAR BACKERS

Catherine

Dale Murchie

Daniel Boles

Ed Pegg

Fernando

Hana Kucharova

James Wood

José Luis Porfirio

Julian G Hicks

Keith Brake

Stras Acimovic

IRREGULAR SUPPORTERS

Alejandro Albert Garcia

Alex W

anderland

Andrew Wells

Ben Woerner

Benjamin Tham

Bernard Gravel

Black-Thing

BlackWyrn Publishing

Brett Easterbrook

C P

Caoimhe Ora Snow

Charley Brandum

Chris Carlson

Chris Schoenthal

Chris Shorb

Christian Nord

Clayton Falconpunch

Daniel C

David Margowsky

David McGuire

David Terhune

Derek Guder

Descendingform

Diana Stoll

DivNull Productions

Ed Possing

Felix Girke

FelTK

Filthy Monkey

flashbytes

George Panopoulos

George VanMeter

George Vasilakos

Glazius

Glen Conolly

Greg Chapin

Happion Laboratories

irriion

Jack Gulick

Jake McGrath

James Glover

James Stuart

Johan Kristian Milde

John A W Phillips

John Diffley

Judd M. Goswick

Kairam Ahmed Hamdan

Ketwyld

Khyron

Lars Erik Larsen

Laura Scott

Leslie Weatherstone

Lin Liren

Malk

Marc Majcher

Marcus Johnson

Mark Kilfoil

Mark Nau

Martijn Tolsma

Martin Blake

Michael Bergh Hansen

Michael Leader

Michael McNeal

Michael Wight

Morten Berg

Natalya Alyssa Faden

Nate Miller

Nathan Hillen

Nathan Lax

Nathanael Cole

Nathaniel Brengle

Nils Kullberg

Owlglass

Pablo Martinez

Paco Garcia Jaen

Pete

Philip Espi

Philip Reed

Richard Carter

Robert Carnel

Robert Mull

Robert Posada

Ross Isaacs

Ruth Phillips

Sophia Brandt

Scott Jamieson

Sean Cameron Crane

sehmerus

Seth Harris

Seth Johnson

Shane Hensley

Solid Art Labs

Stephen Kilpatrick

Steve Bean

Steve Dulson

Steven Lord

Steven Watkins

Stew Wilson

Svend Andersen

T. Anthony Moore

Teppo Pennanen

Tijn Rams

Tim Clouse

Timothy Hidalgo

Tobie Abad

Tom Pleasant

Tomer Gurantz

Trevor Smith

Tristan Zimmerman

Vic Smith

Volker Jacobsen



PROTOCOL
game series