



A storygame by Joe Murphy (joe.r.murphy@gmail.com)

This game uses image 3, sound B and concept A from the *Sight and Sound* game design challenge 2007.

Characters in this game are old people who have lived past their rightful age.

Some time ago, perhaps as a child or perhaps last week, they stole the breath from another person. In doing so, they took the remainder of that person's life as their own. The act may have been deliberate, malicious, accidental or for another reason entirely, but the breath-taker was forever changed.

Since stealing breath, the character has lived on the edge of life, able to see or sniff out elements of the underworld. Perhaps they can occasionally glimpse the gloomy fate that awaits others, can smell impending accidents or can touch and weave the wisps of life connecting everyone. But most importantly, they have lived beyond their allotted span.

Setup

You'll need a few things to play this game.

Each participant should bring three small keepsakes, charms or old photographs with them. It's best if the items are old and anonymous, so consider scouring antique stores for interesting stuff. These are *Mementoes*.

You'll also need 2 six sided dice, used for *Checks*.

And each player will need about 10 tokens - coins, cotton wool balls, glass beads. These are *Breath*.

Characters

Each player in this game has their own character. They will also take the responsibility of being *kalma*, described later.

Characters are defined by six details - a *Name*, a *Flaw*, a *Goal* and three *Traits*. Record these details on the sheet provided at the end of the game:

Pick a first *Name* for your character.

Then write down your character's *Flaw* - 'I am old and can no longer... <something>'. Perhaps the character can no longer walk without aid, has a health problem, or can no longer believe in hope or love.

Then write down your character's *Goal* - 'My last act will be <something>'. Are you driven to make reparation, make friends, find a lost love, or spit in the eye of an enemy?

Set the goal and flaw against each other to make for an interesting and immediate conflict – how will your character's cynicism affect their search for their lost love? Optionally, step back from the character and pick a Goal such as 'I want to see my character feel pure hatred' or 'I want my rich character to become penniless'.

Characters have three traits - *Tired*, *Frail*, and *Lonely*:

Tired describes how little passion, wit or energy the character has.

Frail is a measure of ill-health and infirmity.

And *Lonely* is a measurement of how poorly connected the character is to their community, friends or family.

Characters begin with a rating of 1 in each trait, and each trait runs to a maximum of 6.

Each player must *add three points to their traits*, for all characters in *kalma* are at the end of their tether in some way. For example, one player wants a character who is poorly connected to his community (perhaps living in a tower block), who remains sharp and driven but is unable to walk without a cane. He adds two points to 'Lonely' and one to 'Frail'. His traits become Tired 1, Lonely 3, Frail 2. He then adds a goal of 'Find and visit my children who moved to the USA in the 80s', a flaw of 'Crippled' and calls his character Harold.

Don't think too much about your character at this stage. Your character's history and personality will develop during play.

Breath

Characters in *kalma* have only so much life left to them. One measure of their vitality is their breath tokens. Everyone starts with 5 breath tokens, and may have a maximum of 7. Pick whichever memento makes the most interesting bowl and place it at the centre of the table. As tokens are used (known as 'taking a breath'), discard tokens to the bowl.

During play, players can choose one of three different *Stances* for their character: modes of thought, attitudes or responses. The stances are Open(based on Lonely), Energised (for Tired) and Vigorous(Frail). When employed, a stance offers one extra dice to the check for the related trait - the player must roll higher than the relevant trait on the sum of two dice, dramatically improving their chances. However, if a character fails a roll while employing a stance, they may never again use that particular stance. Buying a stance costs a breath and lasts for one scene.

Characters can recover breath in two ways: *Stealing* and *Sacrifice*.

A character can frame a scene where they have the opportunity to *steal* the breath of another. Make a check as usual, employing a stance if desired. If the character is successful, roll one dice and receive that number of breaths (to a maximum of seven). A character does not win a Memento in such a scene, however.

The player should then describe how their victim's life is changed or diminished. Perhaps the target dies soon after in an accident, falls ill, or loses some ephemeral quality.

Owned mementoes can be *sacrificed* and removed from play entirely. Doing so wins the owner three breaths, again to a maximum of seven.

Contested mementoes may also be sacrificed, restoring the owner to their maximum of seven breaths.

Mementoes

Mementoes are used for a few different things. At the beginning of play, one item is used as a receptacle for used breath tokens. All other mementoes are placed in the centre of the table and are considered *Unowned*. During play, players will take ownership of these unattributed pieces of history. A Memento won in a scene becomes *Owned*. A Memento won that someone else previously owned becomes *Contested*.

Scenes

In order to start a scene, the player must take a breath and then pick either *any* Memento from the table. Go ahead and pick it up and handle it. Then, describe the opening of a scene in which that Memento is present or somehow influential. Perhaps a broken vase suggests a domestic argument, an old photo inspires a holiday far in the past.

Scenes may take place in the present, or far in the character's past.

Scenes should always have some element of conflict, whether internal or external. Scenes may or may not tie directly to a character's Goal.

During the scene, you'll want to pick one of the other participants to be your *kalma*.

Kalma is a Finnish word for a goddess of the underworld, meaning 'the odour of a corpse'. The *kalma*'s job is to oppose and challenge your character's pursuit of their goals. The *kalma* will also play the part of other characters in your scene. If necessary, the *kalma* can pick other players round the table to play participants in a scene, from children to the dead.

Importantly, the *kalma* can introduce strange, uncanny or supernatural elements in a scene. They are guardians of the next life, and can let awful things through from those endless grey chambers to harass and plague the characters.

The *kalma* has a great deal of power and with it, responsibility. They can be poetically just, cantankerous and begrudging, perhaps even playful.

At some point, you'll want something that the *kalma* is holding from you. Perhaps your character is opposed by a gang of kids and just wants to get home, perhaps he wants to dismiss a ghost with an impromptu folk ritual or perhaps she wants to browbeat a friend into loaning her money.

Describe your character's intent – you want to get past the kids, or cast out the ghost. Then you'll want to make a *Check*.

Checks

These are tests of the characters' three traits. The *kalma* should pick which trait is relevant – Tired for checks relating to wit, creativity, emotion or passion. Frail for tests of the physical, such as strength, health or stamina. And Lonely for checks relating to community, friendship or family. The *kalma* rolls one dice and compares it to the trait.

If the dice is higher than the trait, the player succeeds and should narrate how they achieved their intent. They also gain ownership of the memento chosen. An unowned Memento becomes *owned*, an owned Memento becomes *contested*.

If the dice is equal to or lower than the trait, they fail. *Add one point to the trait*, and the *kalma* describes how the character failed, was penalised, or otherwise did not achieve their intent.

A player can take a breath and buy a stance, as described above. The player rolls the dice in this circumstance and rolls *two dice*. Compare the sum of the dice to the trait. Obviously, stances are very valuable.

There may be situations where two characters oppose each other. In this case, both characters should agree on another player to be their *kalma*. Both should state their intent. And both should make checks as usual. Thus, it is possible for one, both or neither to achieve their intent. In these cases, both characters may own a contested Memento, and both may sacrifice it or retain it.

The histories given to contested Mementoes may be entirely contradictory. The true history of an object is considered to be whatever the current owner ascribes to it.

End

If a character owns five or more *owned* Mementoes, they are assumed to be close to their goal.

If a character owns three *contested* Mementoes, they are assumed to be close to their goal.

In both cases, the next scene or two that they frame should dive headlong into a scene involving their goal. A character achieves their goal if they succeed at this final scene. If a character fails this final check, they are assumed to have failed and perhaps died.

If a character runs out of breath, and is unwilling or unable to sacrifice Mementoes, they are close to death. Their next scene should frame their death scene.

Deaths do not mean the character is out of the game, however. Players become the group's sole *kalma* and will handle all further opposition. All their Mementoes become unowned. The unfortunate player is encouraged to play *hard*.

When a second character runs out of breath, *kalma* duties are shared and the remaining players are assumed to be close to their goals.

This World and the Next

You'll notice that some questions are unanswered in this text. For example, no details are recorded of the characters' past, personality or abilities. Players are free to add such detail during scenes.

Players are encouraged to discuss the meaning and metaphysics of the world in between scenes. Stealing breath is the only given, so what metaphysical rules allow such a thing? Is there a literal underworld (*Tuonela* in Finnish myth) one can travel to? Does it have inhabitants? Do the guardians of the underworld hate the characters or envy them?

When was the character due to die originally? Was the victim of their breath taking due to die moments later, or many years? What was the experience like? Awful and criminal? Beatific or transcendental? Confused? Has the taker stolen another's breath since then?

How do characters steal breath? Is it an ephemeral, spiritual process or does the taker gobble down the gurglings of another? Is it transgressive, or can people give breath freely?

How do breath-takers sense the underworld? Can they taste impending death, read the eyes of corpses, smell other takers, hear the whispers of ghosts or even walk into the world beyond? Do they share a portfolio of tidy abilities, or do each have a mish-mash of quirky knacks? Does the taker's personality, history, health or closeness to death matter? Can one develop abilities with training, or are they scattershot and unreliable?

My name is ...

I am old and cannot ...

My last act will be ...

~~1~~ 2 3 4 5 > Tired (Energised)

~~1~~ 2 3 4 5 > Frail (Vigorous)

~~1~~ 2 3 4 5 > Lonely (Open)

Cross out three more points of traits.

Roll higher than a trait on one dice to win a scene. Take a breath and buy a stance to roll two dice instead. If you fail when using a stance, cross out that stance.

Characters begin with five breath tokens and may have a maximum of seven.

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Cross out three more points of traits. The Ones are already crossed out.

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