

Penny Dreadfuls

Setup

You will need a group of two or more people to play this simple role-playing game about mysteries and suspense.

Choose one person to be the Author. She will narrate most aspects of the game and make decisions about rules. To do this, she'll read the "Author's Toolkit" in addition to this page. Everyone else is an Investigator and only needs to read this page. You'll also need coins to resolve checks and paper to keep track of character information.

Making an Investigator

The Author will present some details about the Locale and Mystery, giving some basic information about the story so that characters can be made. Each Investigator chooses a name and writes a sentence describing who he is and what he does. Anyone can be an investigator; it is not a title. Teens exploring a haunted house, a family of four moving into a strange new neighborhood, and coworkers suspicious of their employers' motives are all good examples of investigative groups.

Next, assign 9 points to the following three Traits and write them on your sheet. Each trait must have a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5. **Mind** represents intelligence, problem solving, and learned skills. **Body** represents strength, speed, constitution, and coordination. **Heart** represents social aptitude, empathy, charisma, and will.

Equipment and Weapons

Consider what your investigator would be carrying. With the Author's approval, write these items on your sheet. Items do not affect your stats but they may influence what actions are possible and at what level of difficulty. You cannot shoot someone without a gun and it is easier to kill something with a hatchet than your bare hands.

Finally, draw three boxes on your sheet to represent the stress you can take.

Playing the Game

The Author will begin the game by describing where the Investigators are and what is going on. The Investigators describe how they look for clues, talk to locals, and act according to character. If an Investigator tries something

where failure would be interesting and could cause stress, a check is made. The Investigator describes his action and the Author chooses a Trait that matches the action and sets a difficulty. The Investigator tosses a number of coins equal to his Trait. If the number of heads meets or exceeds the difficulty then the action succeeded without trouble. If not, the action succeeds with difficulty and the character marks a stress box.

If an action would not have the potential to stress the acting character then the Author simply decides if the action is possible. If it is, the Investigator describes what he does. The Author may require compromises to be made about the outcome if it does not seem easily accomplished or realistic.

Stressed, Spooked, and Snapped

When marking stress, put a [/] in an empty box. If there is not an empty box, turn a [/] into an [X]. If there is still not an available box, the character Snaps and is no longer a protagonist. Talk to the Author to find out if you will play a supporting or opposing role towards the remaining Investigators. Snapped characters always toss 3 coins regardless of their original traits and do not track stress anymore.

If an Investigator gets time to catch his breath, erase all [/] boxes but keep the [X] boxes. Each [X] means the Investigator is Spooked and gets to toss an extra coin for each [X] during every check.

Opposed Checks

If Investigators oppose each other, the aggressor or aggressors mark stress and then each Investigator makes a Trait check matching his actions. The Traits need not be the same. The character with the highest number of heads on the result determines the outcome with the Author's approval. The outcome may include stress for the loser. On a tie, the Author dictates a result that helps or hurts both parties equally. Again, this may be stress.

Continued Stories

If continuing a story using the same characters for a new mystery or plot arc, completely clear all stress boxes. Snapped characters recover. Each Investigator may move a single point from one Trait to another.

Investigators do not become mechanically stronger but they may be savvier, better equipped, and generally more capable of dealing with the new mystery.

Author's Toolkit

Creating a Story

As the Author, you get to determine what kind of story is going to be told. While you have the most control over the story, remember that the Investigators are the primary focus and that they have free will. Create a story that your Investigators want to play. When starting to create your story, you may ask your Investigators for input as to when, where, and what they want the story to be.

Penny Dreadfuls is designed to tell stories about mysteries, suspense, and dread. As the Author, you have plenty of flexibility with how these elements fit into your story. Death does not always need to be the threat – sanity, money, and friendships are other stakes that your Investigators can be playing for. The tone does not even need to be true horror: a wacky adventure searching through an allegedly haunted house for a masked fraud can be just as entertaining as investigating a serial killer or a monster.

The Locale

Consider where you want your story to take place. This is not just a physical location. The time period could be modern, Victorian, futuristic, or anything else. It helps if the world works similarly to our own so that the Investigators intuitively know what they can do.

Focus in on exactly where the story is taking place. A dusty old manor, an abandoned coal mine, or a remote village are all good locations to set a story. Remember that not every suspenseful story requires the characters to be alone. As the Author, you have the ability to voice any character that is not one of your Investigators. Having these supporting characters or extras also gives your Investigators more reason to use their social skills and to talk in-character.

The Mystery

A good, suspenseful question that requires skilled Investigators is what ties all Penny Dreadfuls together. Mysteries are what give the Investigators common purpose to drive the story forward. A mystery could be supernatural or mundane; sometimes, it may be fun to hint that it is one and then reveal it to be the other.

A mystery could be an antagonistic character or monster of your creation. Alternately, stopping an impending threat that has no master or will of its own could provide a worthy challenge for the Investigators. A grim situation due to mysteriously faulty equipment, inexplicably strange weather, or weird supernatural phenomena is a good way of providing suspense without having a character opposing the Investigators.

The mystery starts with hints and is eventually revealed by the actions of the Investigators.

Running the Game

The Author has more responsibility for the game than any of the Investigators. Along with the requirement of describing how the environment and supporting characters react to the actions of the Investigators, it is also your duty to make the game entertaining for all of your players. Try to manage the narration so that no character steals the spotlight too often or for too long. If one Investigator has been silent for awhile, have something happen close to him and ask him how he reacts. The story is about all of the Investigators equally.

Asking for Checks

Not every Investigator action requires a check. Only call for one if the action is difficult, dramatic, and could cause stress to the Investigator. If you do call for a check then you'll need to set a difficulty. In general, set the difficulty at 1 for most actions, 2 for especially hard actions, and 3 for actions that would be extremely difficult, even for an expert. Higher numbers are nearly impossible for Investigators to accomplish.

Handling Snapped Investigators

When an Investigator snaps, he becomes your pawn. He no longer has the complete free will of the other Investigators since he is now a special kind of supporting character. When you get the opportunity, take the player aside and discuss his new role in the story. You may make him a blatant antagonist, a subtle saboteur, a whimsical burden, or an unreliable sidekick. Give him something fun to do that does not take him out of the story entirely but that also moves the focus to the unsnapped Investigators.

Snapped Investigators should be able to continue having fun but should not derail the story. Keep them engaged but do not let them override the importance of the remaining unsnapped Investigators.