Rooms

by Vic Smith

In the grand hallway looming around you is a magnificent central staircase, with red carpet and gilded banisters glinting softly in the glow of the fire burning lazily in the ornate fireplace. The walls are dark oak panels, and oil paintings of muted green and grey tones hang there; familiar faces surveying confidently the hazy room, pressing in on you. You know this place. You can feel a nagging unease in the pit of your stomach — you have explored here years before, child-like and wide-eyed — but you can't quite put your finger on it.

Something is different now though. Moving forward, images bubble under the surface of your consciousness as long repressed memories struggle to swim upwards from the murky water and up and out into the shifting firelight.

The surface breaks. You involuntarily draw in a sharp breath.

Behind the painting here, this panel, you remember there is something special about this panel — something is behind it. Doubts and fears rush through you as you start to lift the painting off the wall...

A HOUSE IS A MAJOR ARCHETYPE IN DREAM SYMBOLISM. IT'S A UNIVERSAL SYMBOL EMBEDDED IN THE SUBCONSCIOUS. USUALLY THESE TYPES OF DREAMS OCCUR WHEN THERE IS A LOT GOING ON IN YOUR LIFE: CHANGES, STRESS, UPHEAVAL OR NEW BEGINNINGS. A HOUSE GENERALLY REPRESENTS YOU IN YOUR DREAMS.

YOU *ARE* THE HOUSE, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, AND ALL THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF IT REPRESENT DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOURSELF. ALL THE DIFFERENT THINGS IN THE ROOMS REPRESENT DIFFERENT ISSUES YOU'RE GOING THROUGH. –VICK BELONOGOFF

Rooms is a roleplaying game for two or more players, one of which takes on the role of the gamesmaster (GM). A run of the game will last for a couple of hours, and will be longer the more players are involved. It is an advanced and fairly demanding game, both on the players and the GM, and is not recommended for the inexperienced or the faint of heart.

The action takes place inside a large and mysterious house that the players are exploring, wandering around in a dreamlike state. They do not know why they are there or who they are: all they know is that this place is eerily familiar. As they wander the rooms they start to find echoes of their past hidden around the house — in letters, maps, old jewellery, and other such items — and so start to piece together their own identities.

It gradually becomes clear that each of them has some dark secret or guilt that they have buried here, and as it comes again into the light it starts to physically manifest in the house. The players must work together to defeat their own nightmares by using the happy parts of their past they have recovered along the way.

Getting Started

Like in most tabletop RPGs, the players direct their own actions and development of a single character, whilst the GM plays the rest of the world. However, there are two important differences that make this game different.

First off, the characters being directed are either asleep and dreaming, manifesting in someone else's dream, moving in some kind of shared consciousness space; or indeed some other possible interpretation of the situation (we deliberately do not specify which). You do not remember the start of a dream. You are simply there. Likewise your characters should not start by panicking that they have lost their memories as in clichéd amnesia stories. They are just there in the house, moving through the rooms, and starting to grow more uneasy and self doubting as their past is brought up and examined.

Secondly, in most games the background of your character is decided upon and fixed before the start of play, either by yourself or by the GM. Your characters development is from then on governed only by what happens to them, and this is not always as in your control as it could be. In Rooms, you develop and shape your characters past as the game continues. This is a two way process. The GM provides simple hooks that you find inside the dark corners of the dream house, but then the narrative switches to the players who get to decide on how to interpret these fragments and weave them into a cohesive story. The one requirement of each characters story as it will eventually stand, is that they have a dark secret or guilt that haunts them. Eventually they must face this head on as the dream becomes a nightmare.

This means that both GM and players get to create the plot. The storytelling in this way is much more of a collaborative process than a traditional RPG.

Stages of the Game

The game is broken down into three stages or acts.

In the first act, the players wander a neutral and passive environment, moving between the rooms, collecting fragments, and combining some to move deeper into the mysterious house in the hope of discovering more. Unbeknownst to the players, some of these fragments are not true memories, but *negatives* — lies the characters have told to cover up their own guilt or worries.

In the second act, the nagging guilt that is starting to grow in the characters causes apparitions of people or even objects from their past to appear and verbally attack them. These apparitions twist every little guilt or inadequacy of character into grave and hurtful accusations, sparing no quarter and going to great lengths of rhetoric and hyperbole in order to cow them. The players use scenes they have already created, or combine fragments into new scenes in order to defend themselves from these attacks. Between confronting the ghosts of the past, they are still exploring the house and can discover new fragments and make new scenes.

In the final act, the dream truly becomes nightmarish and the undefeated figures grow increasingly bestial until they have become terrifying monsters. The scenes the players have constructed turn into physical weapons, armour, and other survival tools; and the players must use force to overcome their macabre assailants and escape. The house, no longer a safe space, morphs and twists to hinder them.

Act I — Exploration

The players explore the dreamlike house. By finding certain items, seeing familiar images, or even just getting a 'feeling' at certain points in the house, the players collect memory fragments. A memory fragment is a simple idea or symbol, for example 'the image of a rose', or 'a forced admission of fault'.

For example, a player is in a shadowy bedroom and in the centre of the wall is a full length mirror in which they can see the reflection of the moon through the shuttered windows. The player moves to look in the mirror. The GM then tells the player they have found the fragment 'The Mirror'. (This could just have easily been 'The Moon' or 'Inner Reflection', or even something with a less obvious connection like 'Teenage Angst'.)

The trigger for finding the fragment might involve direct action on the part of the player as above, or something more involved such as actually getting into and lying in a bed, looking under a table or other furniture, leafing fully through a journal etc. When a player finds a fragment they should write it down. Fragments are not transferable.

A player may, when they wish to do so, combine two or more fragments that they hold into a scene from their memory. The scene should include manifestations of the ideas contained within the fragments. The player then describes narratively the scene from their past. So combining the example fragments above — 'image of a rose' and 'forced admission of fault' — a player might give the following narration:

I had been put out to play again. It was June, and I was ten, I think. My mother kept putting me outside to play, but I wanted attention and kept coming back inside the house. She was busy and wouldn't play with me, so I went into her bedroom and went through her things. Under her bed I found a wooden jewellery box with a fine inlaid rose, which I forced open; and inside was a lot of money, her spare keys, and a number of personal treasures. When she found it broken she forced me to confess and I cried for a long time.

The memory scene, thus combined and realised, forms a device the player can use to further explore the house, using memories of keys or secret passages, as well as a defence when later apparitions from their past appear and denounce them. Now the above memory has been discovered, for example, the player might find the box and the keys. Locked doors, locks on diaries or drawers, hidden passage behind bookcases, finding ladders to get into lofts, safes hidden behind paintings, all might be found or circumvented this way.

Two or more players can opt to pool a number of their fragments into a single shared scene which involves both of the characters and interweaves their stories. In this case one of the players elects to go first and narrates part of the scene, using their own fragments only, then points to another of the players to in the scene to take over the narration. This 'tagging' process continues until the fragments are all used and the players are satisfied with what has been described. This combined scene can then be used by any of these players, but might be weaker against certain obstacles or accusations. The more fragments are used at once the more likely that one is a negative.

Some of the fragments are negatives, but initially only the GM knows which. A negative fragment is not a true memory, rather it is an inverted, or even subverted, cover up for a memory the character has tried to forget. When a negative fragment is used to make a scene, the scene is therefore not actually a true representation of what occurred. The GM notes this down along with the darker, more troubling truth that the player or players have purposely misremembered to try and protect themselves.

ACT II — ELUCIDATION

After some time in the house, apparitions start to appear. Under control of the GM, they denounce the players, calling them out on their innermost fears. The players must use the details from their memory scenes to verbally defend themselves. If they roleplay this sufficiently well, the GM will reward them by having the most relevant scene become an item or weapon the player can use to defend themselves in the final act. These apparitions are most likely to be characters, alive or dead, from the characters past; people that they have wronged or worried that they have wronged. But they might be objects, such as an old abandoned violin or a discarded present from a jilted lover.

For example, a player goes to look inside a large oak chest hidden in a corner of the room and away from the firelight. But before he gets there, the chest opens, and from it rises the image of his mother in grave clothes.

THE MOTHER: *When you were little you broke my things, then you grew old and broke my heart. Why should I welcome you now? When you were five I dried your tears when little Martha called you names, when you were twelve I supported you when your teacher upset you. At twenty you came crying to me without a job or a house, and I helped you, nurtured you. But you have never helped me. Where were you when I was abandoned, hurt, alone. You left me to wither and rot, your own mother! I bore you but you renounced me.*

The player must stand up to the accusations by utilising details from the scenes he has already created, and roleplaying an appropriate response:

PLAYER: *Mother! I'm sorry I left. But I've always remembered you, written to you. You kept my letters in your rosewood box under your bed. Day on day I wrote and shared my fears with you and invited you to share with me. But you were always closed, you locked away your thoughts and wouldn't let me in to help. I could only watch as you withered away.*

If the GM decides that the player has roleplayed their own defence sufficiently, then the player is rewarded. The memory scene forms into a real tangible object inside the house, and the player takes it.

GM: *The apparition shrinks, cowed. The memory of the rose resonates within you, and lo — heralds come forward shouting your name and bearing before them an elegant sword of silver with roses adorning the hilt. They bow low before you and present you with this ancient heirloom of your house.*

Possible items include swords, shields, potions; anything from a more traditional fantasy setting. They are a precursor of the violence to come. The properties of the items will be ascertained by which fragments went into their making (as detailed in the next act). When shared scenes turn into items, all the players receive a similar item (although they needn't be exactly the same, as the GM can decide, but the whole will be greater than the some of the parts).

If the player cannot defend themselves then the must flee in terror. The GM will take over their character during this time, and the focus can shift to the other players.

New scenes can still be formed during this act, and new fragments can still be found as the players continue to explore the rooms. The items cannot be used until the next act.

ACT III — ESCAPE!

The apparitions grow angrier, and the house grows darker and more menacing. Creeping in the shadows, the figures transform into the stuff of nightmares; vicious beasts with red eyes and claws, they stalk and attack the players. The characters know instinctively there is a way out and so they turn and flee; but the house, once neutral, turns against them — rooms twist onto their side, doors and windows slam open and shut repeatedly, corridors stretch out to mind boggling length, and dark chasms open in the floor. Fighting they monsters as they go, the players near the exit, but they cannot cross until they defeat their greatest fears waiting for them at the threshold.

This last act bridges the emotional narrative side of the game into a more traditional action sequence. In the house-dream, metaphor becomes reality. The plight of the sleepers has led to the chance of a physical catharsis.

No more memory scenes can be made now: the players now have only the items they gained in the last act. Players can fight the monsters with these, but if they hang around long they will get devoured. The players know where the exit has appeared, and they know where it is in the house. So they must head there, fighting only the monsters in the way.

Each player starts with 50 hit points (HP). The monsters should have 10 - 20. An attack has a base chance of 40% on a D100 of hitting, and will deal damage equal to the sum of the digits rolled. A roll of 39 hits and deals 12 damage. A roll of 45 misses. The players do not know their own HP count until the final encounter.

Note that because different items have different modifiers that the players don't know (to both hit chance, damage, and possibly other aspects) the player rolls the dice and the GM tells them whether the attack hit and describes the damage.

The properties of the items are defined by the fragments that went in to create them. It is most interesting if the properties tied to each fragment have been predecided, but the GM should feel free to fudge if the combination would be boring or unlikely. For a weapon these properties might be +10% to hit, +3 damage, etc; for armour it might be -3 damage to hits against you; a health potion might restore 10 HP. The GM keeps these details secret, the players must work them out by seeing what happens when they try and use them.

An item made from a scene containing negatives either causes D6 damage to the user when invoked, or has a strong negative effect like -20% to hit. (Again these are best pre-decided.) The players do not know they are receiving this damage — it is tracked by the GM and revealed at the start of the final encounter.

This final encounter happens in front of the grand and foreseen exit-way. All that is between them and egress into safety is a final monster each, formed of their greatest fear.

These final monsters have forty HP each. The fear they represent will be chosen for that player by the GM, taking into account all that has happened, and the form of the beast will be its physical embodiment. The GM should award the players additional combat buffs for each part of the fear the can roleplay the character overcoming as he fights. The players can help each other, especially those who are burdened by negatives. Will they be able to escape, or will their fear ultimately conquer them?

PLAYER ADVICE — FRAMING SCENES

Remember, despite there being a win condition at the end, the true winners are those who create meaningful stories, the kind you will remember for years to come as you retell the amazing things that happened that time in your game. Everyone has a stake in the game going well.

When roleplaying a scene a number of things should be borne in mind. The two modes of expression — the exploration of the dark and mostly unknown interior of the house of the night, and the brighter snatches of memory framed around dramatic events and taking place largely in the light of day — are part of what makes the game exciting and different.

Framing a scene is the process of starting and ending it. The principle of show don't tell applies here, but it is possible to go too far. Scenes can start *in media res* (i.e. in the middle of the action) or with a simple description: *It was dark, I was alone*. Similarly it is better to end the scene partway through action and thus maintain more mystery and drama. This is a game about emotions and symbolism, so making use of well known tropes and simple bookending techniques is a good thing.

GM ADVICE — NARRATING DREAMS

This game is a collaborative storytelling process. In most RPGs the GM crafts a story, and directs, and sometimes even coerces the PCs along his plot as he covertly reads it out from behind a screen. In this game, however, both the players and the GM are responsible for creating the story. The stories created are also largely stories of the past. The rooms are not the stage of drama, instead the house is a metaphor for the characters own personalities and memories.

Maintaining the dreamlike experience of the rooms is very important to keep the feel of the game, and part of that quality comes from shifting emotions attached to the different aspects of each room. Description is a vital part of this. Each room should have its own feel, its own tone, and there should be a definite and tangible change as the players move between them. Use of different styles of language can really help, both in describing the rooms, and in playing the various apparitions. Some might use old language and manners of address, others might snarl and spit. Some may use cunning logic and strong wording to cow the player, others might use a pitiful sadness to make them feel the guilt. Your imagination is the limit, (but be aware that some themes might be too much for some players — communication beforehand is key here). Take the time you need, and let the players have the time they need too.

Prepare the fragment names and their eventual properties; ideas for rooms, and concepts for apparitions beforehand. Many horror films, TV tropes, and authors can provide plenty of inspiration. (The Circe chapter from James Joyce's *Ulysses* has lots of great ideas, for example.)

Every time the players are narrating a scene, take notes on it in gloss form. Eg "Age 5, ignored by mother, broke jewellery box and found keys." When the scene has a negative, gloss a possible true memory. Whenever ideas for apparitions come, write the down immediately.

Running, and playing, this game can be challenging — but ultimately very rewarding. Let your mind sink down into the realm of dreams in order to truly know yourself.