



The House Always Wins

A new character and Storytelling Adventure System scene
for Geist: The Sin Eaters

Written by Stew Wilson Developed by Eddy Webb Edited by Genevieve Podleski
Layout by Jessica Mullins Art: Craig S Grant, J S Rossbach, John Wigley

STORYTELLING ADVENTURE SYSTEM

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| MENTAL | ●●○○○ |
| PHYSICAL | ●○○○○ |
| SOCIAL | ●●●○○ |

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| SCENES I | MENTAL ●●○○○ PHYSICAL ●○○○○ SOCIAL ●●●○○ | XP LEVEL 0-34 |



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Angelo looks around the joint, seeing only marks. Back-room poker is always a mug's game. Every card dealt brings the unlucky ones closer to losing everything—the shirt on their backs, next month's rent and more. Some schmucks end up with a gun in their hand, doing some of Lucky Joe's less pleasant work to pay off their debt.

The hand's over. One man smiles, greed painted across his face. With a nod from Joe, Angelo takes a seat at the table, in on the game. Time to take it all back. Someone knocks at the door and walks straight in – despite the three locks. Angelo registers little more than the stink of cheap cigars and the stains on his old overcoat. Joe's eyes go wide, sweat sparkles on his brow. And in a voice like rain falling into a freshly-dug grave, the newcomer speaks.

“Open a fresh pack, Joe. I got a hankering for a high-stakes game.”

Joe goes quiet for a second, then nods. His tongue darts over suddenly-dry lips. “Gentlemen, the game's seven-card stud. No limit.”

The newcomer turns to Angelo, smiling with a mouth full of yellow teeth. He sets down two chips from his pocket. They look like ivory in the light. “Two years.”

“What?”

“That's the ante. Two years of your life.”

And suddenly Angelo realizes why Lucky Joe's scared.



jean-sebastian ROSSBACH

The House Always Wins

MENTAL ••

PHYSICAL •

SOCIAL •••

Overview

Bill Montague and his geist the Puppet-Man wander the world, showing up wherever people bet on games of luck and skill. Whether it's back-room poker in Vegas or a quiet game of dominoes in a London pub, he'll get there eventually. Bill always plays for the same stakes: time. The characters might see him out socializing—he might even invite one or two into a game. Bigger fish lead to bigger prizes. He stakes his own life, but the months and the years he wins all go towards the woman he loves, a woman he's never so much as spoken to.

Description

One night out, a chance to relax and let your hair down, maybe paint the town red a little. That's when you see him: the Puppet-Man. The barbed wires jerking his limbs around are a dead giveaway. He's looking for a high-stakes game. Only thing is, most people won't know what they've really lost until he's won. He doesn't have many takers just yet, but he's coming your way.

Storyteller Goals

Bill's presence in a story adds a note of desperation and fatalism, along with some of the thrill of gambling for high stakes. A lot of things that a Sin-Eater does go well beyond the law—and not just human laws, but laws governing the Dead Dominions and the basic laws of life and death. It's only natural to revel in that glorious feeling of getting away with it, the same feeling as winning a game with everything riding on it. Encountering Bill and gambling with him puts the thrill front and center. For all that, the Puppet-Man is an isolated encounter. Some Storytellers might want to use him as no more than a reminder that the World of Darkness is a strange, scary place even when the characters aren't actively seeking the darkness.

The noble—stupid—truth is that Bill's mind is clouded. He's become obsessed with keeping "his girl" alive, and in his mind that means gambling for time, trying desperately to win a few more months. To do that, Bill goes for any game of chance where it's player against player: poker or liar's dice rather than blackjack or roulette. He wants to win big, and in his mind taking time from Sin-Eaters might give his girl enough juice to kick death's claws away for good. If the characters take him up on a game, or even if they just seem interested, he'll talk quite happily about the game. Mostly, he'll try to psych characters out, but he's obsessed enough that he'll let some things slip. One thing the Puppet-Man won't do is fight; if things start getting at all physical, he'll make his excuses and run like hell.

Character Goals

Find out what this guy's doing with the time he wins, and put a stop to it before he throws things too far out of balance.

Actions

Player characters can try a range of actions to influence the game at hand, mostly based on Larceny or Subterfuge. Resolving Bill's obsession involves convincing him that he can't save everyone.

Convincing Bill

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Persuasion vs. Bill's Wits + Composure (dice pool 7)

Action: Contested

Hindrances: Speaker appeals to authority or "the way it is" (-1), characters are winning (-1 to -3, depending on how much they're winning by), Bill is obsessed (-2), characters aren't gambling with him (-3)

Help: Speaker has lost someone close to him (+1), Bill is winning (+1 to +3, depending on how much he's winning by), speaker knows Bill has never spoken to the target of his affections (+3)

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The speaker provides an excellent straw man for the Puppet-Man to rail against. Bill becomes more reckless with his bets, and if he loses the next hand he may well die just to prove his point.

Failure: The speaker fails to convince Bill that some things just have to happen. He shrugs, and turns all his attention towards the next hand.



Success: The Puppet-Man folds, gathering up his chips with a sigh. For all that he's no longer hurting anyone, the speaker has convinced him to give up on something that has driven him for so long.

Exceptional Success: The speaker convinces Bill to cash out and walk away. He leaves one of the ivory poker chips on the table. If questioned, he tells the characters they won it fair and square. Maybe one day, he'll try to win it back.

Consequences

If the Puppet-Man wins the bet, he takes the stolen time right back to his lady-love. Time taken from a Sin-Eater is more effective than anything else (see the ceremony on p. 4 for more), but she probably only has scant weeks left before she dies. If the characters win, the Puppet-Man ages quite noticeably in front of them, and if they live long enough for old age to present a problem, they'll notice the time they won. Finding out about the girl might prompt some of the characters to find out what's going on: she should have died six months ago in a freak dog-walking accident, and deathmarks cover her body. Coincidences and near-misses happen around her all the time, often hurting the people near her. She doesn't know that she should be dead, but the wild swings of probability around her have turned her into a regular Calamity Jane. If asked, she's never heard of Bill Montague or the Puppet-Man, and doesn't recognize him if he's pointed out to her.



Bill Montague

Quotes: *You guys fancy a game? Nice and friendly, yeah? No money, none of that. And you get to pick the game. What've you got to lose?*

Ace showing? I'll raise. You only live once.

Heh. You wouldn't believe what I've got up my sleeve.

Virtue: Fortitude. Bill's got a righteous mission, and there's nothing in this world or the next that will sway him.

Vice: Gluttony. The Puppet-Man is addicted to gambling, and while he claims a noble motive, he's really just in it for the thrill.

Background: Show Bill Montague a game of chance, and he'll show you a wager. He was the kid in high school who'd do stupid things on a dare; drinking weeks-old milk or running naked through the homecoming dance. Thirty years on, the thrill of winning transformed into a bitter sense of loss. Even two years of wedded bliss—quickly followed by two more of shouted arguments and broken promises—didn't change him. The next score would be the one. That'd be his big win, and he could stop gambling. Drifting from job to job, most of his paychecks went on back-room poker and sports betting.

One big win changed that. Bill's system did him right, and he turned a twenty dollar bill into ten grand. Bill Montague took that win as a sign, and hauled ass to Reno. Stepping out of his car outside Circus Circus, he felt like he'd come home. That feeling lasted for six and a half seconds. A cleaner had snuck up onto the roof for a cigarette. Her cellphone slipped off her belt and fell, bouncing off the wall and landing square on the top of Bill's head. He remained dead for six minutes before the Puppet-Man brought him back.

Bill and the Puppet-Man both remember a face. Her face. She works in a casino in Reno. He doesn't know how he knows her, but she haunts his dreams. He's fixated on her, this girl who works as a maid at a hotel in Reno, halfway between love and obsession. Once, he worked up the balls to speak to her. As he opened his mouth, a car mounted the pavement. Jerked on the Puppet-Man's strings, Bill pushed the car away and saved her life. Now the world knows the maid should be dead, and Bill's got to keep winning time. He travels the world, trying to find someone who'll give him another week, another month. Enough time that he can be with her forever.

Once an addict, always an addict.

Description: Bill Montague is a run-down guy, but he's seen harder times. He may wear old, crumpled clothes, but they're mostly clean, and he remembers to shave most weeks. He's shorter than average and his mid-brown hair's starting to turn gray, though he keeps it close cropped to hide a growing bald patch. The deep lines on his face usually map out a grin edged with desperation, and his teeth—when he lets the world see them—are ugly yellowed tombstones jutting out of his gums. He smokes cheap cigars, more because the smell puts other people off their game. Set deep into his face and ringed with dark bags, his blue eyes occasionally sparkle with surprising intensity and wit.

The Puppet-Man, to those who can see such things, floats above Bill's head. Strings dangle from it, attached to Bill's limbs at the joints. Each string passes through a symbol of man's want for material things—a dollar bill, a toy car, the latest cellphone. Above Bill, the strings are attached to a crossed frame made of bone, with a membrane of skin stretched across



it like some demented kite. Occasionally, eyes or mouths open in the fleshy membrane to stare and grimace accusingly at people.

Storytelling Hints: Though his love—the woman who killed him—is in Reno, Bill can show up anywhere. He’s past the point where winning anything short of a couple of years from a normal person will help, so he’s traveling the world in order to find something with a bit more of a spiritual kick. Thus far he’s been successful, but by the time this scene plays out he could have scant days left before time runs out and the reaper takes what’s rightfully his.

Keep two things in mind when portraying Bill and the Puppet-Man: First, he’s a chronic gambler. He can quit while he’s ahead in the short term, but his lack of self-control means he will pour all his winnings back into his search for a bigger win. Even if he wins time from the characters, he’s just going to use that time to find more. Most likely, he’ll run out on the road somewhere miles away, and his love will die without him ever having spoken to her—and he’ll never know why he’s fascinated with her. That cowardice, the fear of confronting his problems and instead putting them off, is a running theme in his life.

Second, Bill is a Sin-Eater. He’s a little wrapped up in his own problems right now, but he follows the path of the Reaper: it’s his job to decide who lives and who dies at any given time. He’ll back down on a lot of things, but never that—he might admit to getting a certain case wrong, but that doesn’t invalidate the bigger picture. Characters who try to convince him that his basic philosophy is wrong will put his back up, and don’t stand much of a chance of convincing him of anything.

Ceremony: The Devil’s Bargain (•••)

Time, freely given, can be the most valuable commodity a person will ever know. This ceremony allows a Sin-Eater to use that time, keeping someone alive just that little longer—with the full and frank knowledge that the debt will be repaid in full down the line. Someone kept alive by this ceremony is haunted by the Threshold that would have claimed her, as death’s icy grasp clutches at those around her. A murder victim becomes a walking nexus of muggings, car crashes, and other expressions of violent death, while someone who would fall victim to illness instead becomes the center of a web of illness and disease. When death does find the target of the Devil’s Bargain the results are never less than spectacular.

Performing the Ceremony: The Sin-Eater must prepare a token made of ivory by writing a sigil on it in his own blood. He places that token onto a table and buries it in a pile of tobacco, along with a torn-up photograph of

whoever is to gain the donated time—a person who must not be a supernatural being. The person donating time writes the duration given on a sheet of paper in black ink. The Sin-Eater then sets that paper on fire and uses it to light the pile. The donor has to grab the token while the pile is burning for the ceremony to succeed. If it has, the skin on the donor’s palm begins to burn. After thirty seconds, the sigil on the token is burned into his skin.

Dice Pool: Psyche + Wits

Action: Extended

Time Increment: The Sin-Eater can roll for this ceremony once every 5 minutes

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The intended transfer happens, but the strange energies warp and twist. Both the donor and the target lose the donated time.

Failure: The donor might singe his fingers, but nothing more.

Success: The donor loses the stated amount off his lifespan, though he can’t give longer than he has. The person in the photograph—the target—cannot die until the donated time has elapsed, though she will remain incapacitated and unconscious once her Health track fills up with lethal and aggravated damage. If the target would have died during the donated time, she instead dies at the end, even if she’s in the full blush of health at the time. A given person can only donate time via this ceremony once, period. Any further attempts automatically fail. The target must be a normal human being; if she has a supernatural template of any kind, the ceremony automatically fails and the Sin-Eater takes one point of lethal damage due to feedback.

Worse, the ceremony offers diminishing returns. The first transfer is 1:1. The second time the ceremony is used on the same target, she only receives half the donated time. The third time it’s used, she receives a quarter, and so on. The only way to avoid this is if the donor is a supernatural creature, in which case the transfer is always 1:1.

Exceptional Success: The target of this ceremony regains a point of Willpower, in addition to temporary immortality.

Suggested Modifiers

Modifier Situation

- +2 Photograph was developed by hand
- 1 Photograph is a print-out of a digital photo
- 3 Donor will not naturally die of old age



