

WHISPERERS

RPG

Written by Emmett O'Brian

Original concept by Bjorn O'Brian

Thanks to Jason Tocci for inventing the "THINGS" acronym and categories.

Whisperer RPG's gut reaction system makes each interaction in the game center around intuitive choices. This extends to the play being a conversation and the resolution mechanic being all about quick judgement calls. "You study long, you study wrong."

INTRODUCTION

In the Whisperers RPG players tell a story about monster hunters. You can play with a game master or distribute the responsibilities to all the players by setting scenes and taking ownership of those scenes. The players make a main character that they will guide through the story. One of them is an Agent, pretending to be like the others but may be secretly working against them. This agent gets a code name of one of the elements on the periodic table.

THE WHISPERERS

Report from agent Gallium

Two months ago I had a strange interaction with the subject designated AlphaTau8 before it was killed. Normally I would have ignored this as ramblings of a sick mind but something made me feel a need to report this.

AlphaTau8 said that it used to be agent Arsenic. I thought it was unusual for a subject to even know about us but given it's age, it could have run into us at some time in the past. Then it gave me a date, April 12th 2013 and a message. It said, "The Whisperers will destroy the world. You must not let them continue to kill our people."

April 12th 2013 was the date that the last agent Arsenic disappeared. I believe that the date was to prove it's claim that it used to be Arsenic.

As to who the Whispers are, at first I was confident it was a reference to how the creatures murmur while they trap a victim. That Tau8 still felt a kinship to when it was human.

Then three days ago while cornering BetaNu3 it sent a text message to an unknown number that read "The Whisperers are here!" Was it referring to the group of amateur hunters I'm with? Did it know that I was an agent? If so, how?

THE HUNTERS

"I tell ya' I thought I was the only one that knew about them before I met you. They took my son and then my husband before I knew what they were up to. At first I just thought my son was getting moody going through puberty but then when he disappeared and Aiden started to act the same way. Well then I put it all together.

I actually found the cocoon that they put Aiden in. What was left of it anyway. " She wiped away a tear. "I mean, he wasn't the best husband, but."

I found the thing that killed Josh. You know, my son? I found it. It had been using his identity for months. I mean, it looked like Josh, only it wasn't. It even called me 'mom'. But it wasn't him. I wasn't sure at first. It put on a good show but then it's eye's rolled up

and it started whispering. It nearly got me, I could smell that sweet metallic smell. It almost put me in one of those cocoons.

I'm just glad I had brought my .357 because the last thing I remember thinking was to pull the trigger.

I've killed five of those things now. I track them down. I hunt them."

THE AGENTS

"The Creatures will blend into a community for as long as they can. After a few months, they seek out a quiet place to form a nest and defend it from anyone snooping around until they're ready. If they can lure someone into their nest, they sedate them and form a cocoon around their target. What comes out are two creatures that look like the target. The original learns everything their target knows and keeps their old memories. The target usually wanders off not remembering the last week but thinking they're still the same person. Sometimes the process is interfered with by an insect or mouse chewing into the cocoon a particularly horrible and dangerous creature will emerge."

"Dude! Where are you getting all this information."

"I have contact with other hunters on the dark web, they're skittish and it's taken a long time to get them to trust me."

"So how do you know they're right."

"So far they haven't let me down. They've been doing this longer than we have."

"Ok, look, I'm tired, lets get some sleep and you can tell me all that stuff in the morning when I'll actually remember it."

fzzzt "This is agent Carbon reporting, I'm making progress with this new group, getting them on the right track." *fzzzt*

fzzzt "Understood Carbon, just remember your object is to keep them from exposing the creatures." *fzzzt*

fzzzt "This isn't my first rodeo, I put a post on Facebook that says the leader is a crazy conspiracy theorist and I paid off the local news anchor to run with the story if I have to pull the trigger. Carbon out." *fzzzt*

fzzzt "Ok just be careful. Even discredited kooks can get a following. If enough people talk about the same stories people will start wondering." *fzzzt*

THE CREATURES

"Who are you and what are you doing?"

"Hey man, I gotta make a living too you know. I let you keep your old life. Well, you'll keep it for a while anyway."

"But you look exactly like me? How? Are you my long lost twin or something?"

"No, no. That would be funny but, no. Seriously, I don't know what I am. I used to be me but now I'm you."

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m going to call the sheriff if you don’t give me some straight answers!”

“Ha! What’s Fernando going to do? I mean, yeah you grew up together but what’s he going to arrest me for? Looking too much like someone else? Besides, I can pretend that you’re the impostor and that you stole my wallet. My pin number on my ATM card is 1235! Not too imaginative bro, you should have that changed.”

“How, how do you know my pin number?”

“I know everything about you *and* everything about me! Well, up to about a month ago, that’s when you and I split and I let you have your life back. I could have taken it over you know, I didn’t have to be working as a stock boy in a grocery store. You’re body’s too old to be working like this.”

RULES

Whenever a player says something that is challenged by another player (GM or otherwise) by saying "Roll for that". The player who has been challenged rolls a die, player's choice, go with your gut feeling.

Ryan "I'm going to search the town and flush out the creature that's here."

Saul "That's not going to be easy. Roll for that."

Ryan picks out a six sided die and rolls

The number result is either low, average or high. The specific number doesn't matter, only the number relative to what could have been rolled. Higher numbers are better, lower numbers worse.

Ryan rolls a 4, it's an average roll on the high side

The player will then consider their character description and based on that will declare a success or a failure. Imagine your character and what they know and what they can do. Make this a quick a gut reaction to the roll and their character's background. If you have to think a long time about the factors that influence the roll, you're not relying on your gut. Describe why you think they succeeded or failed.

Ryan "Ok I'm pretty sure I'd pass that, I was in special ops in the first Iraq war, and I know how to conduct a systematic search."

If the player declared a success the challenger then considers the task at hand and the number rolled. They may describe one thing the speaker was not aware of that made the task harder than they expected it to be.

If they think the die roll was high enough, they agree to the success. If they think the roll was too low, they declare "THINGS". (See THINGS below) The character succeeds but with a complication. The challenger should go with their gut reaction to the roll, not a lengthy accounting of different factors.

Saul is not persuaded, "This creature is not like the other one you've faced before, you don't know it now but they're not all the same. THINGS happen."

If the player speaking decides they failed the roll they may briefly describe the failure on their character sheet. At the end of the game session these failures will be used to amend the character sheet with what was learned.

Amy "I'm going to ask about anyone behaving strangely at the truck stop we saw from the highway."

Saul "Asking about 'Strange behavior' could tip people off that you're poking around, I think you need to roll for that so you don't raise suspicion."

Amy picks up a twenty sided die and rolls. She gets a 5. "I'm going to just take the fail on that." and writes "Got intimidated by the dirty looking dude behind the counter."

THINGS

These are various complications that can happen. The character has succeeded in doing what they set out to do but with consequences. The player that was challenged chooses from Time, Harm, Impediments, Notice, Gear or Social. Remember to go with your gut feeling for your choice.

Time - The task takes longer than expected which makes things harder. If the player describes a time limit that the characters are up against, a quarter of it is lost. Travel might be slowed or the character has dropped behind.

Harm - The character, an ally or someone important to the character (someone they'd protect) gets hurt during the character's actions.

Impediments - A new obstacle is in your way. A fire starts, an advantageous position you had is now useless or you're cornered and unable to escape.

Notice - You draw unwanted attention to yourself, revealing you to people you didn't want to know you were there.

Gear - Supplies have been drained or something the character uses is damaged. Maybe a bag was ripped open and a substantial amount of money fell out, a weapon broke or a tool bent when using too much force.

Social - You've embarrassed yourself, offended someone important or possibly now owe a debt to someone.

These descriptions are not all inclusive, players can be creative in applying THINGS as consequences.

Ryan "I'm going to pick Social since that sounds pretty safe."

Once a category of THINGS is chosen, the challenger describes what the effect is. Any effects on the character should be noted on the character's sheet or on the setting sheet for NPCs.

When it comes to Harm, there are no hit points or wound tracking here. Describe what makes sense and it is recorded on the page. Any harm should be considered when rolling for challenges. The player controlling a character can declare that they have died at any time.

Saul laughs “Well, not exactly, you’re doing your systematic search through the town and bunch of people on the neighborhood watch think you’re a burglar and call the police. I’m writing down Kennithville neighborhood watch thinks you’re a burglar on the setting sheet.

Ryan “Wait, isn’t that more ‘Notice’?”

Saul “To make the distinction a little more clear, I’ll say that this does not tip off your quarry. It just makes the police not happy with you and you won’t be able to call on them if you need help.”

Ryan “But I’m successful right? I find the creature?”

Saul “Hmm, that’s true, but it’s an awfully big jump to just walk into town and find the thing. I’ll say you find the creature because it looks like the one in Fairport and you recognize it easily. Unfortunately it’s one of the police officers.”

Ryan “What!”

Saul “Hey Social can be rough.”

SETTING UP SETTING

Play with a Game Master or without. This depends on the feel that is desired for the game. Setting up a setting can be done by a single player (most often a GM) or as a group effort. If playing without a GM and if desirable even if you’re playing as a GM, discuss the setting with the other players. Write down any uncontested elements.

Saul “Okay guys, do you want me to run this as the GM or do you want to try sharing the job?”

Ryan “No, you GM.”

Amy “Wait, what if we had you GM most of the time but we could do little scenes?”

Saul “Uh, yeah I don’t see why not. I think it’ll be fun having you handle some scenes. To keep from stepping on each other’s toes, set up who controls what elements.”

Amy “It also means you’ll have to make a character. If you don’t there won’t be much for you to do when I take over a scene.”

During this conversation, if a player wants something for the game it should be included unless challenged. Run the challenge as normal using the written down aspects of the setting sheet.

Saul “Do you guys want to see anything that we haven’t done in our games before?”

Ryan “Yeah, I want aliens in this game. Like Grays.”

Amy “That’s not my idea of fun, I say roll for that.”

Ryan rolls a six sided die.

If a challenge goes to THINGS, use the following.

Time - The setting element described is not currently true, it was either true in the recent past or is moving in that direction.

Harm - The setting element described is in danger of destruction.

Impediments - The element described is surrounded by problems, like the police always investigating an organization or it's impossible to get to that mountain that was described.

Notice - Anyone involving themselves in the setting element makes them stick out like a sore thumb.

Gear - Too much material and wealth has been spent on the setting element involved leading to ruin.

Social - The setting element is embarrassing or offensive to many.

The element and THINGS associated with it are then recorded.

Ryan gets a 3. "I say that still passes, it's not a *bad* roll and this is like weird science, so Grays fit the setting."

Amy "I'd say it's more horror and spy drama. I say THINGS."

Ryan "Fine, I say Gear."

Amy "Gear? What am I supposed to do with that? Let me see the list."

Saul passes the THINGS list to her.

Amy "Okay I got it, a lot of hunters *think* there are aliens behind it and they spend most of their time and money building alien detection equipment only to come up empty."

Ryan "Wait, so I still succeed though, so does that mean there really are aliens or that there aren't?"

Saul "I'm writing down what Amy said. Maybe there are aliens, maybe there aren't. Won't it be more fun trying to find out?"

Much of *Whisperers* is about solving the mysteries of who the creatures are and what the agents want. The mystery has to be different and surprising to keep things interesting for the players. The GM can answer the following questions or the group can discuss them. Having a GM decide leaves it something to be discovered by the players but having the group decide can give more perspectives.

Why is it so hard to prove the creatures exist? - Do they melt once killed? Can forensic examination not reveal anything unusual? Do agents always seem to get to the body? Something else?

How many resources do the agents have? - Are they a poorly funded organization? Are they a small group with deep pockets? Are they pervasive, infiltrating governments and corporations everywhere? Or are they something else entirely?

What happens if the creatures take over a whole town? - Does their behavior change? Do they spread to neighboring towns? Do they all die? Something else?

Once each player has had a chance to contribute or pass, it's time to determine who each player character will be.

Using 3x5 cards or scraps of paper for each player that will make a character, write "Hunter" on all but one card and "Agent" on one. Shuffle and deal out the cards face down so that no one knows where the Agent card ends up.

On the back of the cards, without flipping them, have each player answer the following questions. Come up with creative answers whenever possible.

Who are the whisperers? - Does it mean the creatures that murmur in a low tone when they take a victim? Are they the hunters, whispering to each other as they close in? Is it the agents working from the shadows? Something else?

What is one thing that can tip you off that someone is one of the creatures? - They don't like music anymore? They smell different? They stomachs become distended when they get ready to take a victim? Something else?

What tools do agents have? - Sensor technology? High tech weapons? Immunizations from the creatures? Something else?

Now each player looks at their card without revealing it to others. The player with the Agent card is undercover and cannot reveal who they really are.

If playing with a GM, hand all the cards back to them. They then pick one answer from Hunter cards and write them on the setting sheet. Two answers are written down on the setting sheet from the Agent card to represent their secret knowledge.

If playing without a GM, shuffle the cards and deal them out again. Each player examines the card they receive. If it is a Hunter card, the player now holding the card selects one answer from the card and writes it on the setting sheet. If it is an Agent card, write down two of the answers to represent their secret knowledge.

If there are more than five players in a one shot, try putting a card that says "Creature" into the mix. The character may not know that they're a creature or maybe they're here to throw the hunters off their trail.

Once all these elements have been recorded, the set up is complete.

THE CHARACTERS

Imagine a character sheet with no numbers, no stats, no values. Just backstory. You are in charge of your character so there are no challenges during this process,

just some instructions to balance things out. However, your background may not be completely true and so saying you're the greatest that ever lived may just be hot air and the other players can call you on it.

Write out what your character has done in their lives so far. Make it as long or short as you like. Describe at least one triumph the character has had in their life and at least one terrible event. Triumphs are great accomplishments that the character has experienced and can draw strength from. Terrible events could be things like losing a loved one to the creatures that will torment the character. For every triumph there should be a terrible event.

Ryan "I'm Jack Falcone a veteran of the first Iraq war, I was decorated with a metal of valor. I started a successful business and made a lot of money."

Amy "What kind of business?"

Ryan "Eh, I dunno. Some kind of software company."

Amy "Software? Ok, that's not what I expected."

Ryan "Yeah, so I'm a hacker too."

Saul "That's two triumphs, what are your terrible events to go with them?"

Ryan "Do I have to do two?"

Saul "Yeah it's kind of important so there's some reason for you to be hunting down the creatures. It also gives hooks for you in the story."

If there are other player characters, work with at least one to describe a special relationship you have with them.

Amy "My relationship with Jack is he was the person who I met at the gun range and taught me how to shoot."

Describe at least two people that are not player characters and why they are important to your character. Also write them down on the setting sheet.

Saul "I have a twelve year old son Ezekiel that I had to leave behind with my brother and his girlfriend. I feel really bad about leaving him but I had to find the thing that took my wife. My other NPC is my brother James who is supportive but thinks I'm having a mental breakdown."

Now add any details you feel are missing.

The description for the Agent character is mostly cover story. The Agent will do their best to act out their cover story so it still makes sense to play the character as written.

You're ready to play.

PLAY INSTRUCTIONS

Select a durable and distinct object such as a shiny palm sized rock or a singularly large die. This is “the token” and signifies who will lead the conversation. The player with the token talks and other players can respond to them or call for a challenge. If the token is set in the middle of the table or floor, it is time for an open discussion. While in open discussion, there are no challenges and no actions taken. When the token is picked up by one person, it should not be set in the middle of the table until everyone has had a chance to have it.

The first job is to set the scene. If there is a GM, then they will take this job. They pick up the token and describe the scene. If playing without a GM, one player takes the token and starts describing the scene. Any NPCs or locations that are established are recorded on the setting sheet along with who is responsible for their creation. Scene setting can be challenged using the setting sheet as a gauge. The more closely the scene matches the setting the easier it should be to pass a challenge.

Once the scene is set, the token is either placed in the middle for discussion or handed to the scene setter’s left. Passing the token does not have to proceed directly around the table, but no player should ever be skipped. A player may take the token and then pass it if they desire.

Saul puts the token in the middle of the table.
“Okay lets talk about this situation.”

Ryan “Hey, Amy got to go but I haven’t had a chance!”

Saul “Oh you’re right, sorry, here you go.”

Challenges are used to add excitement to the conversation. Using them too frequently or punitively won’t make the game more fun. Allow simple and necessary things happen easily.

Conflicts can be negotiated instead of challenged. By warning of a challenge, a player may choose to adjust their story rather than face a roll. It may also be that a player does not see any obstacles in their way and assumes they can just accomplish a task without any interference.

When having a conversation about in game events, challenges may not work exactly as players initially expect. For example, if a player says that an NPC is going to stab a Player Character to death, the first reaction of the player may be to challenge that. However, if it’s done that way, unless the NPC’s roll is clearly a fail, the player character is now dead. The NPC may have to suffer THINGS, but they still succeed. It’s better to respond “I protect myself and pull the knife from his hand.” Now that action can be challenged. The player may have to suffer THINGS, but they can now live.

Amy "I'm going to walk into the police station and talk to this guy."

Saul "You can't just walk in, there's a booth that you can talk to an officer at, but they have to escort you in. If you want to get in by yourself, I'm going to say roll for that."

Amy "Oh, yeah that makes sense, no I'm not going to do that then. Ryan, we need to figure out a story for why we need to talk to the creature."

Ryan "We could just hang out and wait for him to go out on patrol or something."

Each player has responsibility over their own character. No player should say what another player's character will say or do. If a character is under an influence of someone or thing, they still retain control of their character but any action that goes against the influence should be challenged. This applies to player characters as well as NPCs created while setting a scene.

ENDING A SESSION

Once a session concludes, the token is passed to each player, including the GM if there is one. The status of characters that are not dead are reviewed.

If there is an NPC that is no longer relevant the creator of that NPC may take them out of play and any further consideration.

Any characters that have suffered Harm and are not declared dead have all their injuries reviewed. The character's owner may decide that the character dies. Now each player gives a thumbs up or down for the character. If the setting has powerful healing effects, this should make it easier to recover. If half or more players give the character a thumbs down based on if they think the character could have survived, the creator must decide between death or grievous harm. If opting for grievous harm, the other players offer a description of the harm choosing different THINGS. The creator may ask for different THINGS from each player but they have to write down one of the responses.

Any living characters with failures are now considered. The creator asks what the character might have learned from these failures. Each player can offer a new insight or suggest strengthening an existing description in the character's description.