

# After Dark

*An online larp, designed by Mo Holkar*

## Introduction

**After Dark** is a larp to be played online, via a video/text chat system such as Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, etc.

It is for 4–8 participants. It's intended that one of the participants will facilitate; but you can have a separate person do that, if you prefer.

The preparatory workshop should take somewhere between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the number of players.

Then the play session itself will probably be somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes.

You may wish to have a debrief/decompression afterwards.

## Requirements

Each participant needs their own video feed and connection. It's fine for two or more participants to be in the same residence (assuming there's enough bandwidth for their simultaneous connections), but they should be separated, so that their video and audio don't interfere.

For the play session, each participant needs to be in darkness, such that the only illumination in their video feed is that of the screen lighting their face. (This isn't necessary for the preparatory workshop, which can be in ordinary lighting conditions.)

They should also be in a place that's going to be reasonably quiet, and without the likelihood of interruption.

Participants should ideally be familiar with the video/text chat system that you're using, and with their own technical setup, in advance of the session – otherwise things are likely to get delayed.

Each participant will need a way of keeping track of their personal countdown. This could just be a piece of paper and a pen, or a private document that they can edit as they count. The countdown starts at 10, and will go down to 0.

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They may also want to make personal notes during the workshop, as aide-mémoire.

# Background

The facilitator should read this out at the start of the session:

**After Dark** takes place in a slightly-alternative present day. Humanity has been devastated by the Grey Plague, a roiling miasma that seems to almost knowingly seek people out and extinguish them. Those who still survive are holed up individually, knowing that they probably don't have long to live.

The Grey Plague leaves its victims lifeless but apparently unmarked. Its advance has been so swift and so terrible that it's not been possible to establish whether it's a poison, a bacterium, or what. There has been wild speculation about its source/cause, but no sound knowledge exists.

It's thought *[by the characters – the players know that this is not accurate]* to be attracted by light and by noise. Individuals are physically separated and enclosed, still connected together by what remains of the internet. But they know that they are almost certainly doomed – eventually the Grey Plague will find them, and snuff them out, one by one.

In the meantime, they chat online – remembering better times, saying the things that they wish that they'd said before.

# Safety

You should implement safety measures as appropriate for your group of participants, drawing on standard techniques for online larp. These might include [lines and veils](#); [cut](#); [brake](#); [the X-card](#) (best to represent this by typing 'X' into the chat); [the door is open](#). But most important is to make sure that everyone understands that there is to be [a shared culture of safety](#) among participants.

There may also be a need to debrief/decompress together after the larp is over, as it can be quite emotionally intense.

# Scenarios

**After Dark** can be used as a structure to play out a range of different scenarios. A scenario is basically: who are the group of characters who the larp will feature? The initial scenario, linked here, is called **Family Ties**, and is about members of an extended family. Another scenario, currently in development, is about scientists who are members of a research team.

You can create your own scenario, or use one of those that has been released and shared, as you wish. The larp's website will gather together any that people create and send in for public sharing.

A scenario consists of a set of relationships, a set of conversation prompts, and any instructions for use that are particular to that scenario rather than to **After Dark** in general. It's held in a Google spreadsheet.

You'll want to make your own copy of the scenario spreadsheet, so that you and your participants can write in it as you go through the workshop process. It'll also be useful if all the participants can read the scenario in advance of the larp session, so they can be at least a little familiar with what it contains, and not having to read everything from scratch on the day. But they shouldn't discuss it together, or start creating characters!

# Workshop

Once the players are (virtually) gathered together in whatever chat space has been chosen, the background has been read out, and any safety techniques explained, it's time to create the group of characters and their relationships. We'll go through this assuming that you're using the **Family Ties** scenario – if you're using a different scenario, the changes necessary should be either obvious or explained within it.

# Preparation

Start with each participant thinking individually and deciding what kind of role they would prefer to play in the group. In **Family Ties**, this means questions like: what generation do I want to be? Do I want to be a parent? Do I want to have a partner, a sibling, etc? Don't discuss these preferences with each other: keep them to yourselves, for now.

Participants should also each choose a name for their character.

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Once everyone's chosen, go around the group and introduce your character by name, and say what kind of role you would prefer to play within the group, just in a sentence or two. Again, don't yet start discussing these and how they might or might not fit together.

It will be helpful if people can write their character name on a badge or sticker that will be visible to the camera.

## Relationships and questions

In turn, as called upon by the facilitator, each of the participants should do the following:

Choose one of the relationships from column C, writing their character name in the corresponding cell in column B.

Offer it to one of the other participants, as a suggestion for the relationship between their two characters.

If that participant is happy to receive the offer, they write their character name in the corresponding cell in column E.

(If they refuse it, the offerer should instead offer a different relationship to a different participant.)

The offerer then asks the receiver the corresponding question in column D. The receiver answers it.

Both the relationship and the question can be tweaked by mutual agreement, if there's some detail that doesn't work for both of the participants.

Once that's settled, it's the next person's turn to do the same thing.

Keep going around the group until each character has exactly one relationship (either as offerer or as receiver) with each of the others. So, if there are five of you, then you'll end up with 10 relationships chosen and allocated from the list; if six, then 15; and so on. Some people may complete their 'set' before others, or some might end up receiving a lot of offers but not making many – that's all OK. As long as everyone ends up with the right number.

During this process, people may wish to keep personal notes of things that they want to remember relating to the relationships, the questions and answers, and the other characters.

They should also make a note that their countdown, at the start of play, is at 10.

# Play

Now you are ready to play **After Dark**. Everyone should get into darkness. The ideal is that the only illumination is the light of the screen on their face: this might not be achievable, but just try to get it as dark as you can.

Your character believes that light and noise attract the Grey Plague. So they will not speak – and if they make involuntary noises, such as gasping or sobbing or chuckling, they will probably look around very nervously.

(Not speaking is actually a game rule, not just a behaviour pattern. You might think that your character would like to end their miserable life quickly, by shouting and attracting the Grey Plague: but you are not allowed to do so, or to use any other kind of speech, or to make any other loud noise. Think of some reason why they change their mind.)

Once everyone is comfortable, the facilitator should announce that play is starting. After that, no-one speaks.

Play takes place by conversation in the text chat channel, and by observing people's faces as they think, react, and emote.

During play, when a character experiences a strong emotion (of any kind – love, hate, laughter, nausea, whatever), they should post an appropriate yellow-face-emoji into the chat, to mark this. And decrease their countdown by 1. The characters don't know, but the players do: the Grey Plague is actually drawn by emotion. When a character's countdown reaches 0, it will come for them.

(Each participant should decide for themselves what they consider to be a strong enough emotion to be worthy of an emoji and countdown. And this can change during play: you might feel that you're getting progressively numbed, or sensitized, for example. You can use this flexibility to pace your character's story, so that you don't find yourself going through your countdown quicker/slower than you wanted to.)

(Don't tell people what your current countdown number is. It's a meta thing, not an actual number that exists in the game reality. It is only for you to know. Of course you can try to keep track of other people's countdowns, if you like, by counting the number of yellow-face-emojis that they post – but we don't recommend doing so.)

The chat is just a general conversation among the group. If your character wished to address a remark to one person in particular, you should include their name, but the other characters will also see it. Characters should use the same kind of online chat behaviours as they would in normal life – but they should

avoid the use of yellow-face-emojis, except where they indicate a countdown as discussed above. Other emojis are fine to use.

The scenario includes a set of possible conversation prompts that can be used if the dialogue starts to flag, or if a participant can't think of anything spontaneous to say. But it's OK to have pauses, when people are thinking and feeling strongly – don't be too worried about leaving gaps between comments.

As your countdown decreases, your character will start to feel a growing dread – a sense that time is running out. They don't know why, they don't know how; but they increasingly feel that this may be the last conversation that they will be having.

So the general direction of the conversation is this: we can still talk to each other now, but before long we may all be dead. Let's think about experiences together, disputes that should be cleared, declarations that should be made – we don't want to go to our deaths leaving anything important unsaid.

## **Play after death**

When your countdown reaches 0, your character is dead. You should turn off your camera, and mute your microphone. You shouldn't scream, or go into death agonies, or collapse to the floor with a thump, or anything like that – your character just slides without warning from this life into the next.

But you will still keep playing, in the text chat – rather than representing your character, you now represent the other characters' memories of them.

When your character is dead, they can only talk about memories that other characters have of them, and things that have already happened – they can't say anything that didn't happen or wasn't said during their life.

(You can invent these memories, though – it doesn't have to be something that has actually come up already during play. "You remember when we took a bike ride together, last summer...")

You should put your comments, when dead, in square brackets, or italics, or the third person, or prefaced by the word "Memory:" or "You remember when...", or something like that – so that people can easily distinguish them from the comments of people who are still alive.

You should try and make them happy, or otherwise positive, memories – you want the others to remember the good things about your character.

If the memory that you write is something that is relevant to only one particular character ("You remember that secret thing we did together that no-one else knew about..."), rather something that the group as a whole can remember, then other characters should not react to it being posted.

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When dead, you no longer feel emotion, so you should no longer post any yellow-face-emojis.

# Summary of play

- Keep your camera on, with the screen lighting your face.
- Keep your audio on, but be quiet.
- Start your countdown at 10.
- Play happens by conversation in the text chat window, in real time.
- Don't be afraid of pauses where no-one writes anything for a while.
- If you want to write something but can't think of anything, use the conversation prompts.
- Each time your character feels a strong emotion, post an appropriate yellow-face-emoji, and decrement your countdown by 1.
- (Don't post your countdown number. That is just for you to know.)
- As your countdown decreases, your character feels an increasing dread and sense that time is running out.
- When your countdown reaches 0, you are dead. Turn off your camera and mute your microphone.
- Once dead, you are now playing as the others' memory of your character. Mark your comments accordingly, and try to make them positive.

# End of the larp

**After Dark** ends when the last person dies. The facilitator should type "THE END" into the chat.

Then everyone can turn their camera and microphone back on, and the participants can talk as normal again, as themselves rather than as their characters.

You will probably want to debrief/decompress a little. We aren't prescribing a particular routine: you should decide, together and individually, what is going to work best for you, to help process the feelings that have arisen during the larp, and to move back to your normal selves.

## Possible variants

- (Suggested by Lorraine: thank you!) – instead of all characters starting their countdown at 10, instead each starts with a random number, to represent different levels of resilience against the Grey Plague. It would probably be better not to have too low a minimum, or too wide a range: maybe 6–11, or something like that.
- Instead of deterministically counting down from 10 to 0 and then dying, participants roll a die each time they decrement the count, with an increasing chance of death. For example: if you roll over your current countdown number, on a d10, then you die. This introduces a random element, so no-one can be quite sure of exactly when they will die.
- (Suggested by Anne: thank you!) – rather than participants choosing relationships to offer and accept, instead assign them randomly. This would probably need the set of relationships to be thought through as a group, to make sure that they would work together.

## Acknowledgements

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## Scenarios

A scenario consists of a setting, a set of 28 (or more) relationships, a set of conversation prompts, and any questions and instructions that are specific to that scenario.

Here's the Family Ties scenario, which is about an extended family. You'll want to save a copy of this for your own use, if you want to try it out: [After Dark – scenarios](#)

Other scenarios might include:

- Dispersed research team
- Colleagues in a vital mission
- The biggest fans of [something]
- Members of a social group whose identity is hugely important to them
- Polycule