
THE POWER

The burden of kindness

A paper-and-pencil narrative game by Roberto Sedda for 4 players. Powered by .

THANKS TO all the good people who took part in the Cagliari Global Game Jam 2018

*Dedicated to my wife
caregiver supreme
who, luckily for me,
took me aboard.*

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Introduction

The Power is a narrative game for 4 players. It has elements of competition, but is, on the whole, a cooperative experience: players will collaborate in creating a coherent narration – an entire family saga spanning the ages, in fact – until it reaches a satisfactory ending, or crashes around its characters bringing woe to them. It can all seem rather cryptic to you, but the mechanics of play will be explained exhaustively below; here I would like to share with you a little of the “whys” of the game.

Among the diversifiers suggested for the Global Game Jam of 2018 was **That Kind-a Game - (Sponsored by iThrive Games) - Create a game that explores how choosing kindness transforms the world.** There were some instructions to read, but I was a local organizer and rather pressed by a thousand incumbencies, our Jam was, well, *jamm*ing, iThrive’s site had some problems loading and so I never got to really reading the material. But the diversifier intrigued me, and I started to think: «What if someone had the power to influence positively the world? Would it be lucky for him? We all know that with great powers come great responsibilities: and great sorrows also? Could it be that what is good for the world is not so good for the person bringing it about?». These were intriguing questions per se, but they also mixed with other suggestions the Jam had given me; in fact, the Jam theme was «Transmission» and the idea of a Power replicating itself around the world and along the ages was both spontaneous and intriguing. And then a little sadness came suddenly over me: some long forgotten fantasy book tale of an ancestry of people with great powers, pointed noses, pale blue eyes and a shock of black hairs, all going lost to the world, their powers no longer available, their civilization deprived of them just when they were more sorely needed.

Strangely, it was the loss of the pointed nose that I felt more.

So, I had a little sadness, the idea of dynasties and families going lost with the characteristics that were peculiar to them, and an entire set of questions regarding the power for good and personal fate. This game comes of all these things and the answers I found.

Obviously, I never found out what the instructions for the diversifier were, if not too late, when the game was already written. In the spirit of the Jam – fun, and experimentation – I think we can agree that is not very important: the quest can be more meaningful than the goal, after all.

Goal of the game and player roles

Phases and turns

The game is played by four players and is divided in three **phases**; the first and the latter phases are straightforward; the middle one is divided in **turns**. During all phases players assume **roles**; these roles are rather different from normal role-playing games personae, being more some kind of **general forces** instead.

The four roles

The four roles are:

- The Yelder interpretes the man or woman holding the Power at any given time. The aims of the Yelder are to Donate, to Do Good, to Pass the Power On and to Survive.
- At the left of the Yelder sits The Changer. It is not a real person, but more of a general force. The Changer aims for Renovation, Shedding Away Old Things, Fertility, and Trying Out New Things. It is totally uninterested in Good or Evil.
- Opposite the Yelder, at the left of the Changer, sits The Burden. The Burden is interested in Remembering Past Deeds, Don't Letting Anything Pass Without Consequences, Don't Letting the Power Be Unused. The Burden is not inherently Good or Evil but is keenly interested in both good and evil action, to show what comes out of them.
- Opposite the Changer, left of The Burden, sits Fate. Fate aims for Perfect Balancing, to Draw a Story to its Perfect Ending, in Great Adventures and in Putting the Power at the Center of Pivotal Events.

Changing the roles

After each turn, the roles switch clockwise: the Changer becomes the new Yelder, the previous Burden is now The Changer, and so on (you will have a card with your role, pass it to the player to your left).

Aim of the game

The aim of the game is, put simply, to tell a tale. This will be done both competitively than collaboratively: at any given time, each player will be constrained by his or her role and will aim to try to shift the story according with its objectives. But the fact that the roles change each turn will give to the game a dimension of collaboration, too. In the end the aim of the game is to tell a story that is both entertaining and meaningful.

How to play?

How is the story told, effectively? This game is based entirely on conversation: there are no dice, no cards – apart from some memo cards – and no other way to resolve conflict except with conversation and mutual storytelling. If there is any doubt, or if there is no accord, the players get to vote: Fate vote breaks any ties.

There is an important exception to the rule of conflict resolution: sometimes (quite often, really) the players are required to make **moves** (the simplest of the moves is to decide the name and gender of the Yelder in a given moment of history): moves can never be contested; the other players may not like them, but have to accept them for what they are.

The conversation, inside *The Power*, is not totally free. How you can have guessed from the mention of moves, phases, turns and role-shifting, it is a **structured conversation**: you will be required to do some things at some times, and follow instructions on the appropriate game action sequence: except for this, however, you are totally free to insert into the tale what you like more.

I think you are wondering how all this will work, in practice. The answer is (relatively) simple: follow the instructions you will find below; you will initially **Set the game** (page 6), then play **The First Phase**

(page 6), then play as many turns of the **Second Phase** (page 7) as the rules allow (or until you feel the tale has reached a satisfying ending), and finally play the **Last Phase** (page 8).

A final word of caution: this *is* a role-playing narrative game, but is not your *usual* one. The best way to ruin it is to choose an objective at start and try to pursue it irrespectively of the role (Yelder, Changer, Burden and Fate) you are acting. Instead you should try to be fluid, and flow with the story.

Setting up the game

Give each player a role card (you will find them on page 9) according with their sitting; have them read their card. Put on the table twelve memo cards (you will one example on page 11). Put this booklet on the table, where it can be easily accessed and consulted. Discuss briefly the game and the rules, see if anyone has some doubts, resolve them best you can.

At this point you are ready to start: there is only another thing to do. Fate will choose a Power from the below list and puts it on The Yelder. This Power will not change anymore through the game.

The Powers

- The Power of Perform (voluntarily, but miraculously and inexplicably) Healing.
- The Power of Read Others' Minds.
- The Power of Soothing Others' Minds and to Project an Aura of Peace (it is not Reading the Mind).
- The Power of (totally involuntarily) Find Oneself Next to a Great Man or Woman and have the chance to push him or her to Induce a Pace Forward for Humanity or to Realize an Important Artistic Achievement.
- The Power of Foretell, accurately and precisely, the Future.
- The Power to Dream Travel and See Other Places.

These Power can seem rather vaguely defined. Beginning with The Yelder and proceeding clockwise each player will put a specification on the Power according with his or her role: for example, Healing could be extremely fatiguing, Reading Minds could have a range, Soothing Minds could be always accompanied by the smell of roses, and so on. The wording is important: have each player be precise. You cannot contradict the essence of the Power given; also, there is not open conflict here: each player is totally free and cannot be interrupted while he is speaking (he is making a move), but the subsequent players can try later to balance the specifications he has given. Write the Power and the limitation on the Power Card (page 10) and put it on the table where all can see it anytime.

The First Phase

The First Phase takes place at **The Dawn of Time**, just when humanity is emerging. In this time, The Yelder will be an unnamed female of the human race. Have The Yelder choose a physical characteristic of her: she could have red hairs, for instance, or be beautiful or have keen sight. Have the Yelder be careful: this characteristic will accompany the descendants of the woman for a long time. Have The Changer give a gift to the woman: it can be anything, physical, spiritual or in between, but it cannot be explicitly supernatural. Have The Burden put a curse on the woman: again, it should be more

realistic than overtly supernatural. Have Fate put forth a challenge for the tribe of the woman. Gift, curse and challenge will not be passed on to the woman's descendants (these all moves).

Write all on the special memo card for the First Phase (page 10), then discuss what you think the outcome will be. When you have decided, it is time to start the Second Phase, but firstly The Burden will give the woman descendants a characteristic: it could be a gift or a curse, but should be based on the events you told; it could be anything, from physical (*they will always be beautiful*) or moral (*they will always be proud and strong-willed*). Here the other players have no saying. Write the physical characteristic chosen by The Yelder and what The Burden gave on the first memo card: it will be the basis of the first turn of the Second Phase.

The Second Phase

The Second Phase is played by turns (see below the sequence of play). The memo cards provided are twelve: so the game should go on for twelve turns. However, everytime The Yelder dies without direct offspring or kills someone, then an Ending Point is reached: you can decide (by vote, if nothing else) to end there the game or continue. At the third ending point, the game ends automatically.

The turn sequence of play

1. Take a memo card (in the first turn, take that compiled at the end of the First Phase) and put it on the card used in the previous turn(s); let all cards stay in order, but be easily accessible for consultation, should anyone wish to do so. Take note of the characteristics of The Yelder, as have been determined in previous turns.
2. The Changer chooses a time and place; this must be nearer to our time than the previous turn and
 - a. in the first three turns it must be before the birth of Christ;
 - b. in turns 4-6 must be before year 1492 a.C. ("discovery" of America by Columbus);
 - c. in turns 7-9 must be before year 1870 a.C.;
 - d. in turns 10-12 it must be before year 2015 a.C..
3. The Yelder chooses (in this order): a name, a gender and a race (it's a move).
4. The Burden chooses what The Yelder is doing, his or her occupation, relations, age and so on. The Burden also proposes a **peril** that threatens The Yelder (both are moves).
5. Fate is the first player: he starts by narrating the story of The Yelder in the situation the other players have delineated. He or she ought not tell all the tale, but limit himself or herself to a bit of the story. Then he passes the story to another player of his or her choice, and the new storyteller modifies the tale a little bit, then passes the story on. No player can speak more than three times: when all have spoken three times the players should discuss freely how the story ends.
6. When the ending has been established, The Burden gives The Yelder a new characteristic, that is noted on the memo card (a move)). The Yelder can never have more than five characteristics: The Changer gets to choose which old characteristic should go away to give space to the new, should this limit be reached (it's a move).
7. Take a new memo card, transfer information and start a new turn.

AN EXAMPLE OF PLAY

Ok, so my *Fabbricastorie* ("storycrafters") are playing. Roberto is The Yelder, Andrea The Changer, Tino The Burden and Asso plays Fate. It is the first turn: The Yelder has the Power of Healing at the cost of her vital energy, fiery red hairs, and The Burden has established that she will always risk to be sexually harassed by men. Andrea established that we are in Egypt, when Ramses II is building the Pyramids. Roberto could choose that The Yelder is male, and so dodge the risk of harassment, but he rises to the challenge and chooses that The Yelder is called Maryiam and is an Hebrew female at the court of the Pharaoh. Tino decrees that she is the personal healer of the Pharaoh and that the Queen hates her for her beauty. Asso states that war with the Hittites is nearing, and gives back the word to Tino, who wants Maryiam to follow Ramses and the army towards fateful Qadesh. Now Tino could call again Asso in play, because their take on the story agree, but he wants to play easily and calls Andrea, who puts into the story Joshua, a young slave who loves Maryiam, and so on. Eventually the story ends in a bloodbath, Ramses is saved by Maryiam Power, she has a son Joshua sired forcefully on her and leaves her people becoming a true Egyptian, and Tino establishes that her descendants will always be strongly opposed to war. The new characteristic is noted on the new memo card and the second turn can start.

Remember always the Ending Point rule, should The Yelder commit a murder or die without direct offspring.

The Last Phase

The Last Phase is like a normal turn, but it takes place in the same date and town (or location) in which the game is held.

Variations

Setting up

You can opt for a longer or shorter game by putting on the table a different number of memo cards.

The Powers indicated are interesting but perhaps a little tame. If you aim for a more controversial game or for more pathetic effects you can substitute your own list of Powers: try, for example, the Power of Absolving Someone Dying from His or Her Sins.

Second Phase

Try to tinker with the time periods: stretch the turns dedicated to our times, for example, or have the game start in 1900 or end before the Age of Napoleon.

Last phase

Set the Last Phase in a different place and time: the day Hiroshima was bombed, for instance, or the day the Titanic started its inaugural voyage.

The role cards

Photocopy this page, cut out each card and distribute them to the players, according with their sitting. At the end of each turn, every player passes his or her card to his left.

THE YELDER

The Yelder interpretes the man or woman holding the Power at any given time. The aims of the Yelder are to Donate, to Do Good, to Pass the Power On and to Survive.

At Dawn of Time, The Yelder chooses a Physical characteristic for her and her descendants.

THE CHANGER

The Changer aims for Renovation, Shedding Away Old Things, Regeneration and Trying Out New Things. It is totally uninterested in Good or Evil.

THE BURDEN

The Burden in interested in Remembering Past Deeds, Don't Letting Anything Pass Without Consequences, Don't Letting the Power Be Unused. The Burden is not inherently Good or Evil, but is keenly interested in both good and evil action, to show everybody what comes out of them.

FATE

Fate aims for Perfect Balancing, to Draw a Story to its Perfect Consequences, in Great Adventures and in Putting the Power at the Center of Pivotal Events.

In Setting Up, Fate chooses the Power.

Fate's vote breaks any ties.

The Power card

POWER CARD

POWER CHOSEN: _____

The Yelder specification: _____

The Changer specification: _____

The Burden specification: _____

Fate specification: _____

The First Phase memo card

FIRST PHASE MEMO CARD

The Yelder physical characteristic: _____

The Changer's gift: _____

The Burden's curse: _____

Fate's challenge: _____

The characteristic given by the Burden: _____

The memo card

Photocopy as needed.

MEMO CARD

Characteristic 1: _____

Characteristic 2: _____

Characteristic 3: _____

Characteristic 4: _____

Characteristic 5: _____

Time and place: _____

Name and gender of Yelder: _____

Occupation and relations of The Yelder: _____

Peril menacing The Yelder: _____

What happened: _____

New characteristic assigned by The Burden: _____

Acknowledgments

I am indebted with two friends that, inadvertently, provided me with the concept of this game during Cagliari Global Game Jam 2018. Beniamino Sidoti firstly called my attention to the idea of a game in which the character would bear the burden of past actions, and Alessia Luca pitched a game in which hereditary traits would be passed on through generation and ages; she then went on to make a different type of game, while I had some time on my hands and thought to try to give my take on the subject; I am sure, however, than both Ben and Alessia would have made a better game out of it.

The fantasy novel with the sad departure of the people with the pointed noses that I vaguely remembered is probably the Fitz trilogy of Robin Hobb, I think. Another novel (or, rather, collection of short stories) that set the mood for this game, however also vaguely remembered, is *The Compleat Traveller in Black* by John Brunner. Recently I have thought a lot of the inspiration that the late Ursula K. LeGuin had for the boy that I was, and of the bittersweet taste of a lot of her books, and some of this went into the game, I think.

I understand that it is fashionable saying which music you listened to while doing your game. I listened to an epic metal compilation and then to some hours of Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan: I'm not sure what this means at all.

