Overlook

A game of journeys and world-building

by

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Introduction

Overlook is a game in which you and 2-3 of your friends will construct a fantasy world by following the journey of a group of explorers and adventurers as they travel though that world. You'll describe sinister city streets, ancient temples overgrown with horrific death vines, and the Prison of Demons hiding just below the surface of an idyllic lake. You'll generate factions and communities to fill that world, striving for both good and evil. By the end, you'll tell the story of your explorer's discoveries, and her triumph or failure – and you'll be left with a dynamic world full of adventure possibilities. *Overlook* can thus be used to generate a setting that your group will explore with another game. But it can also be played as a self-contained game for an evening's entertainment. The game should take about 45 minutes per player.

Overlook is a *role-playing game* in the sense that you will invent characters to inhabit as you play the game, characters you should care about and cheer for. But it is also a *story-telling game* in the sense that you will often step away from those characters to author details of the world – many of which will conflict with your character's goals. It is not always easy to move between these viewpoints, but keep the dichotomy in mind as you play.

The last two pages of this document contains a Quick Reference summary of the rules of the game. It's meant to be printed out (preferably on a double-sided page) as a guide during play.

Please note that this game was submitted as an entry to the 2014 RPG Geek 24-Hour RPG contest. As such, it was created in less than a single day. It undoubtedly has some clunky explanations and mechanics. If you read (or especially if you play!) the game, I very much welcome any feedback. Feel free to post on the game's page at RPG Geek or to Geekmail me directly (my username is vestige).

Part 1: Setup

To play *Overlook*, you'll need a few supplies: a sheet of paper (preferably large, as this will hold a map), index cards (a few for each player), pencils, and at least three Fudge dice. It's best to play around a table where you can place the map within everyone's easy reach.

World Creation

To begin *Overlook*, the group should have a short discussion about the parameters of the world they wish to build. Through consensus, you should develop a *theme* for the world: a short phrase that describes the big picture at which you are aiming, or a unique facet upon which the stories can center. Something as simple as *Rare and dangerous magic* will work just fine, as will *Endless ocean, dotted by islands connected with magical teleporters*. The important thing is that **everyone in the group agrees on this theme**.

Next, you should decide on the *tone* of the game. This is a single adjective or short phrase that encapsulates the feel of the game: *gritty, epic,* or *pseudo-medieval* are all fine choices. Often this will be obvious from the theme, but if it is not be sure to come to a consensus

After this, you should drill down another level in detail. Beginning with the youngest player, each player should add one *detail* to the world. These can amplify or contextualize the tagline, or they can introduce a new and unrelated element. The only restriction is that these should not introduce specific locations. Note that these details do **not** require consensus: each player is free to add any detail they would like, so long as it does not contradict the theme or introduce a location.

It's a good idea to record the theme, tone, and details on an index card and place it where everyone can see it.

Character Creation

With the basics of the world created, the next step is for each player to create their character. Characters don't have statistics in *Overlook*. Instead, they are defined by a set of simple descriptors.

- A *name* (though you might want to choose this last)

- A *concept*, which is a short phrase that encapsulates the basics of your character. It should be simple enough for everyone at the table to remember without any trouble. Something like *orc warrior* or *swashbuckling noble* will do just fine

- A *drive*, or a goal for your character over the course of the game. This could be abstract (*to find true love*) or concrete (*to find my father's murderer*). You don't need to define it beyond a single phrase at this point: you could list your goal as *to find Hearthbreaker* without knowing what *Hearthbreaker* really is. But if you do have some concrete idea in mind, be sure to tell the group.

- Two more *qualities*, or additional phrases to describe other important aspects of your character. These can be simple (*tattooed*) or elaborate (*cursed to walk backward until she learns to fly*). You'll use them in play to inspire your role-playing and to create advantages during scene resolution. They can be positive or negative, however: the advantage is created simply by working the quality into the narrative.

- Finally, draw three small boxes across the bottom of the card (like checkboxes). These will be filled in during play.

As you go through the different steps of character creation, be sure to keep the theme and tone of the world in mind. Try to work within those bounds. If you feel another players has crossed those lines, be sure to talk it out like adults.

The characters can be allies, enemies, or anywhere in between. They don't need to have any explicit connections, but there's no problem if they do.

These elements aren't secret, and this phase should end with each player introducing their character to the table.

Faction Creation

Next, each player creates a *faction*. This is an organization or community connected in some way to your character. It could be a secret society that your character has just joined, a cult they have been battling for years, a merchant company that employs your beloved, or a rival group of explorers.

Each faction should have a few details:

- A *name*
- A *drive* or agenda. Use your character's goal to inform this choice. They don't need to align or conflict directly, but centering the agendas around the characters' goals helps to focus some of the decisions later on.

- A *symbol*. This need not be elaborate: in fact, it is probably better if it isn't, as you'll be using the symbol to mark the faction's presence on the map.

Record these details on an index card; be sure to leave some extra space for additional notes during play.

The Map

Finally, the players set the map in the middle of the table. Each player names a *location* where their character begins the game and marks it on the map. Other than the names, players need not provide any more details about these starting locations (though they may be discovered in play). Then, each player connects the faction they invented in the previous step with one of these locations (not necessarily their character's starting location). In one or two sentences, they should describe the faction's interest in the location, and they should write the faction's symbol next to that location on the map.

Part 2: Gameplay

Scenes

The core element of gameplay is the *scene*. Unlike many role-playing games, *Overlook* does not have a "gamemaster" directing these scenes. Instead, responsibility for generating and resolving them will pass between the players, taking turns as the *focus player*. The youngest player at the table takes the first turn as focus player, and then play proceeds to the left. Each player will get three regular turns as focus player, one in each phase of the game, and then an epilogue. (Phases will be explained shortly.)

Scenes proceeds in several steps:

1. The focus player describes their character's journey to a new location. At the end of this narration, they **name the location** and mark it on the map, along with any other features encountered on their journey. Be creative when you mark the map: add a picture, a symbol, or an icon that evokes the name. You can of course adjust your picture as the location develops, and it might change during later scenes as well.

2. The focus player then chooses to answer one of the following questions about the location:
   a. *What's it like?*
   b. *What's at stake?*

   The player seated to the right of the focus player will answer the other question.

3. The player responsible for answering "*What's it like?*" describes the location in a few sentences. What makes this place special? The answer to this question should be colorful and unique, but there are no restrictions on it other than the theme and tone of the game. Remember that the location already has a name at this stage. Use that as inspiration if you can.

4. Next, the player responsible for answering the second question, "*What's at stake?*" defines the terms of the conflict generated by this location. The scope and importance of the conflict depend on the current phase of the game, to be discussed below.

5. The focus player then resolves the scene by rolling three Fudge dice. He or she chooses to answer *one* of the following questions:
   a. *What does it mean for me?*
   b. *How is a faction involved?*
   c. *What does this mean for our world?*

6. The focus player then picks up one of the dice on the table and answers their question with a short narration. The result of the die colors this narration. For the first two questions, a + indicates progress toward the character's goal, while a – result indicates a setback. A blank can indicate no particular progress or a conflicted result.

   If you answer the first question, mark the result of the die in one of the checkboxes at the bottom of your character card.

   If you answer the second question, be sure to mark the location with the faction's symbol

(you are free to choose *any* named faction when you answer this question). Also, note any new details revealed about the faction on its card.

The interpretation of the third question depends on the current phase of the game. *Very important note:* The answers in this and following steps are ***not*** meant to resolve the conflict at this location. Rather, they resolve the parts that a particular character or faction play in the conflict: the conflicts themselves should be much bigger than the concerns of one particular character. One of *Overlook*'s goals is to generate a world rife with tension, so preserving that tension is essential to the gameplay!

If you dislike the result of the roll, you may describe how one of your character's qualities affected events at this location and reroll one die. If you do so, cross off this quality on your character card, or otherwise mark it.

7. Next, the focus player passes the remaining dice to the left. That player chooses one of remaining questions and answers it, using the same procedure outlined in step 6. (Note that the first question always refers to the focus player's character as "me.") This player may "spend" their character's quality to trigger a reroll, but they still must narrate how that quality somehow affected the location.

8. Finally, the last die is again passed to the left, and that player answers the remaining question following all the same rules as step 6.

9. The focus player should note the location, and its pertinent facts, on a new index card.

The focus now shifts one seat to the left, and play begins again at step 1 with a new journey, location, and scene.

The structure of a scene requires the focus player's character to be at the location of interest. Other characters *may* be there, with their player's permission, even if no journey to get them there has been narrated. However, even if a player's character is not present, they will still contribute to the scene by answering at least one question.

Even if your character is present at the scene, answers should not come from their perspective but should instead represent the viewpoint of the player. What adds drama and excitement to the location, the world, or the narrative? Don't be afraid to put characters in tough spots, but also don't narrate their deaths.

Game Phases

The game proceeds through three normal phases and then an epilogue. The three normal phases affect the sorts of locations that should be encountered and the conflict that arises at each of these locations.

- ***Phase 1: The World As It Is***

  The purpose of the first phase is to establish the current state of the world. As you generate locations, consider questions like: Where do people (or other creatures) live? What do they care about? How do they get along with each other? How do they interact with their environment?

  During this phase, locations should tell us where people – or whatever passes for people in your world – live and know. You need not confine yourselves to "civilization" – a dungeon full of orcs, or a hidden

civilization of serpent people, also tell us about the residents of your world – but the focus should remain on the present, and how those people interact with each other.

As such, the conflicts defined by, "*What are the stakes?*" should tell us about how these residents interact with each other. Is war brewing between the orcs and humans? Or are the serpent people poised to take over the illicit drug trade?

During this phase, the final question, "*What does this mean for our world?*" has the following meanings:

- If the die's result is **+**, the answer should introduce a faction that works to positively improve the world. The player who answers the question should create a faction card for this group, as described in the **Setup** section, and mark their symbol on the current location.

- If the die's result is a **blank**, the answer should introduce a schism in an otherwise positive faction, with the resulting strife making the world more dangerous. Note the schism on the faction's card.

- If the die's result is **-**, the answer should introduce a faction that works to disrupt the world in a negative way. Again, the player who answers the question should create a faction card for this group.

- ***Phase 2: The World As It Was***

  The second phase shows us what inhabited the world in the past and how that may influence or threaten the present. Some questions to consider as you play through this phase are: What ancient civilizations populated the world? Where do we find their remnants? Do their secrets power the magic of new civilizations, or have they been hidden for Ages? Why did they vanish? You shouldn't expect to solve all these mysteries, but these are the kinds of issues you may wish to explore.

  During Phase 2, locations should be ancient ruins, hidden tombs, iconic monuments, or geographical features that might have some connection to these civilizations. They could be small sites in the midst of cities (like Rome's Forum in our day), exotic ruins far from civilization (like the Mayan cities in our world), or fantastical

  The conflicts generated by, *"What are the stakes?"* should show how these locations generate threats to locations or factions that have already been described. In general, they should make the world a more dangerous place, threatening the current wave of civilization.

  The final question, *"What does this mean for our world?"* should be interpreted in the following ways:

  - If the die's result is **+**, the answer should describe how a faction or location holds this threat in check. This should not *remove* the threat entirely, simply explain how the world's inhabitants keep it from growing. The answer could involve magical rituals that contain the ocean's dangers, sacrifices to appease

the dragon, or a tower of elite guards securing the location.

- If the die's result is a **blank**, the answer should describe how the threat damages (but does not, yet, destroy) an existing location. Mark the damage on the map in some way, and note it on the location's card.

- If the die's result is -, the answer should subvert an existing faction to support this threat. This need not be open or complete – perhaps a splinter group of a fertility goddess's priest become frustrated with a drought and secretly switch their allegiance to a malevolent nature god. But it should remove some force for stability in the world and replace it with a danger.

- ***Phase 3: The World We Don't See***

  The last phase of the game focuses on building the "big picture" issues that define the world. Depending on your theme and tone, these could be dormant gods, massive invasions, ancient evils, tears in the fabric of magic, or any other issue that might drive a campaign.

  The locations during this phase should reflect the big questions being asked by the players: courts of great magic or intrigue, alternate dimensions, valleys in which great battles will occur, etc.

  The stakes emerging from these locations should hint at high-level mysteries within the world. They may not be conflicts with direct and obvious ramifications, but they create threads that suggest trouble in the future. Remember, these won't be resolved in play, but they should

suggest what might happen in the future. Thus the question "*What are the stakes?*" should ask whether The Others are going to invade, how deeply the Far Realm has touched the nation of Onek, etc.

During this phase, the final question, *"What does this mean for our world?"* should be interpreted in the following ways:

- If the die's result is **+**, the answer should describe how the removal of this element will benefit society in some way. This could transform the new element from a threat to a potential boon – but only if a group of heroes undertakes a great quest.

- If the die's result is a **blank**, the answer should describe how the threat amplifies another existing danger.

- If the die's result is **-**, the answer should describe how the threat has already affected the world. The answer should *both* harm a location and threaten a faction.

The Epilogue

After these phases have been completed (so that each player has taken three turns as the focus), the game shifts into the epilogue phase, where the group resolves the characters' goals. Like the three regular phases, each player describes a scene for their character. However, this scene should not add a new location but rather revisit an old one (either introduced by that character's player or by another). Additionally, the focus player has complete freedom in describing the scene (so long as it is consistent with the rest of the story, of course) and in setting the stakes, so long as those stakes will resolve the character's goal.

Once those stakes are set, the focus player rolls the three Fudge dice. Unlike the normal phases, they then total up the result (with each + corresponding to +1, each – corresponding to negative 1, and each blank corresponding to zero) and then add the values from the checkboxes at the bottom of their character card.

This total is compared to the goal's difficulty, which is equal to the number of qualities that have been crossed off from the character's card. That is, if the player has not used any of these qualities to trigger a re-roll during the game, the difficulty is zero. However, the difficulty is +2.

- If the total of the dice and the checkboxes *exceeds* this threshold, the character successfully achieves their goal. The player then narrates the conclusion of the character's story.

- If the total *equals* the difficulty, the character can achieve their goal, but only at great cost. The character's player may decide whether to be successful or forego the goal. If they forego it, they narrate a concluding scene for their character.

If they choose to succeed, the rest of the table decides (by consensus) the cost of that success. This should damage a location, advance a danger, or harm a faction allied to the focus character. Be sure to mark such changes on the map and faction cards.

- If the total falls below the difficulty, the character fails to achieve their goal. Their player can narrate the failure. It need not have any negative repercussions for the world (though it can).

Once all characters have had a concluding scene, the game ends. Give your world a name, and feel free to discuss what might happen to it! Or, leave the questions open – perhaps you'll want to return to this setting for more adventures in the future, maybe even resolving some of the dangers and threats around you in a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Dungeon World* (or your fantasy game of choice!).

Part 3: Final Thoughts and Advice

Overlook is meant to balance two goals: to tell compelling stories about the "heroes" journeying through the world and to generate a dangerous fantasy world poised between a host of dangers. Both of these aspects are fun on their own, but I personally find the threads provided by identifiable characters to support a session's cohesion. The mechanics are intended to strike a difficult balance between the two: achieving your character's goals will likely make the world a more dangerous place. Keep that balance in mind as you play, and consider how the two parts of the game interact and inspire each other. Perhaps your character succeeds in their goal – but at the cost of agreeing to lead the demon prince's armies in their journey of conquest!

In contrast to most role-playing games, *Overlook* is also not "immersive" in the sense of encouraging you to speak in your

character's voice or choose their actions moment-by-moment. If you'd like, you can add those elements as you set the scene and resolve parts of it, but they aren't necessary. Instead, you'll generally have to take a "bird's-eye" view and look more clinically at how to generate the dangers that might threaten the world.

Overlook provides a mixture of collaborative play (especially at the beginning of the game) and structure that prevents collaboration (during the three main phases, when narrative authority is explicitly split). Still, even in the latter phase, the game should be played with a collaborative mindset. Build off each other's answers and additions, as that will create a richer, more cohesive world, and ideally even a linked narrative between the characters.

A key technique for collaborative storytelling is *reincorporation*, or referring to elements added to the world earlier. *Overlook* has some mechanics that explicitly support reincorporation (generally inflicting harm on existing locations or factions!) but it is also a good idea during all phases that involve narration, if you can manage it.

The trickiest part of the game is likely to be steps 6-8 of scene resolution, when the dice are distributed. There is one question to answer – the stakes – but three pieces to that answer. Be sure to build on each other's contributions, and if you are the first to answer, be sure to leave space for the contributions of others! Remember, the threats and dangers should generally not reach a resolution during play, so leave mysteries throughout!

Another challenging element will be generating the names required for locations, factions, and faces. There will be a lot of those in this game! You may want to have a thesaurus or online resource available for inspiration. Books like *Ultimate Toolbox* and the *Tome of*

Adventure Design offer lots of tables geared toward fantasy gaming conventions as well.

The game is framed as a set of journeys across the world. Though there is no mechanical expression of these journeys, they are key to developing the feel and scope of the world. The focus player should consider what sort of locations would naturally occur as the characters strive for their goal. The game's phases are meant to embroil these characters and their personal goals into bigger and bigger issues that will provide obstacles toward their resolution. Avoid the temptation to wrap these threats up in the narration!

Acknowledgments and Further Reading

Thanks to RPG Geek admin Stelio for running the 2014 RPG Geek 24-Hour RPG contest, which inspired this entry. This year's theme was *traveling*, which I have perhaps not emphasized as clearly as I would have liked. The game was begun on September 29, 2014 at 8 pm PDT and submitted (but not completed…) on September 30, 2014 at 8 pm PDT. All told, I spent about five hours creating and writing it.

This work very clearly draws on a number of games far, far superior to *Overlook*. Anything interesting about this game ultimately comes from them, so please check them out! Their much cleaner texts will also probably give you a much better idea of how this game should be played.

- Other "world-creation" games like *Microscope* (by Ben Robbins) and *The Quiet Year* (by Avery Mcdaldno) inspired me to build structures that prevent explicit collaboration.
- The scene resolution system was originally inspired by the *Otherkind Dice* mechanic of D. Vincent Baker.
- The balance of character goals and world dangers was inspired by *Questlandia* by Hannah Schaffer.
- The importance of locations, factions, and the map was inspired by *Intrepid: A Storytelling Adventure*, by John Keyworth.
- The character qualities were inspired by the *Fate* family of games, for whom Fred Hicks and Rob Donoghue deserve much credit.

All of the art is drawn from public domain entries on Wikipedia.
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Quick Reference

Scene Structure:

1. Focus player names a location.
2. Focus player chooses to complete *either* step 3 or step 4. Player to their right completes other step
3. Answer *What's it like?*
4. Answer *What's at stake?*
5. Roll three Fudge dice.
6. The focus player chooses to answer one of these questions:
   a. *What does it mean for me?*
   b. *How is a faction involved?*
   c. *What does this mean for our world?*

   To answer, choose a die and resolve according to its result. Cross off a character's quality to re-roll.
7. The player to the focus player's left answers one of the remaining questions.
8. The player two seats to the focus player's left answers the last question.
9. Record new information.

Phases:

1. The World As It Is
   -Inhabited locations
   -Stakes are their interactions
   -Die results:
      +: New positive faction
      Blank: Strife within existing faction.
      -: New disruptive faction
2. The World As It Was
   -Lost locations
   -Stakes are their impact on present
   -Die results:
      +: Held in check
      Blank: Harm location
      -: Harm faction
3. The World We Do Not See
   -Mythical or major locations
   -Stakes are epic mysteries or threats
   -Die results:
      +: Boon through removal
      Blank: Amplify existing danger
      -: Harm location and faction

Epilogue

1. Set scene to resolve goal
2. Roll dice and add checkboxes
3. Difficulty is number of crossed-off qualities
   -Exceed difficulty: narrate success
   -Equal difficulty: narrate success AND other players narrate cost, or narrate failure
   -Below difficulty: narrate failure

Setup

1. World Creation
   -Theme
   -Tone
   -1 detail/player
2. Character Creation
   -Name
   -Concept
   -Goal
   -2 Qualities
3. Faction Creation
   -Name
   -Agenda
   -Face
   -Symbol
4. The Map
   -1 starting location/player