

My Life with Master



a roleplaying game
by Paul Czege

MY LIFE WITH MASTER

a roleplaying game of villainy, self-loathing,
and unrequited love

by Paul Czege



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So I find it to be a law (rule of action of my being)
that when I want to do what is right and good, evil is
ever present with me and I am subject to its insistent
demands.

Romans 7:21 (Amplified Bible)

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A FAIR WARNING

Dear Reader take warning...go not incautiously forward into these pages, for they describe a roleplaying game about the horrific and dysfunctional ties that bind a monstrous Master and his or her minions. It is a game with a not-so-traditional style of play that could well give you the creeps...though other games may have not.

Now having weighed this caution, should you proceed with these rules I think you'll find the most chilling events of your games aren't so much inflicted by the GM upon the players, but rather, produced by *them* to the horror of all.

Will you laugh?...If you like that sort of thing.



Minions do horrific things

CH. I: PERVADED BY FEAR

The desperate struggle to be decidedly human in the face of monsterizing forces and adverse circumstances is a timeless horror not restricted to any specific range of cultures or geographic locales. MY LIFE WITH MASTER, however, expresses this struggle in the vague setting of an unspecified central European country, somewhere around 1805, in and around an unnamed town.

It is an environment pervaded by fear.

Fear and Reason

The Master to whom the minion characters of the players are bound has no traits, per se. *Fear* is a representation of the whole of the Master's presence and its penetration as a threatening force into the environment. Minions are in some respects empowered by *Fear*, and also victimized by it.

Reason is a representation of the influence of the Townspeople within the environment.



Carlotta is dressed and primped by her minions

Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws.

— Jhn. Adams to Tho. Jefferson

CH. 2: THE MAKING OF A MASTER

The horror of playing MY LIFE WITH MASTER begins with a setup session, in which the players and GM collectively conceptualize a Master, determining *Aspect* and *Type*, *Wants* and *Needs*, the nature of the Outsiders, and decide on values for *Fear* and *Reason*. This chapter details the choices to be made in laying out the Master's conceptual anatomy. But let no notion of ordered process be inferred from the presentation herein. Master-making at its most effective is simply informal discussion, in which *Type* and *Aspect* and the other elements are explained to participants who are new to them, and the group finds itself considering combinations of possibilities, swapping options in and out, negotiating a Master of mutual interest.

That said, there are two characteristics which should apply to all Masters, and should not be willfully invalidated by a group's efforts to fashion one:

1. Masters are always single. Perhaps widowed. Perhaps engaged. But never currently married.
2. A well constructed Master has good grounds for insecurity, a passion to transcend it, and a certain amount of egomania.

EX. Aloysius Dees, a Master who makes living homunculi from the bones of children, is the middle-aged, never married son of a British civil servant and a Kashmiri laundress. He was ejected from the university at Ingolstadt for 'lack of academic rigor' at the age of 23, and has been consumed since then with active resentment for both his ignoble upbringing and unfairly aborted academic career.

Brain or Beast

One choice facing the play group is that of the Master's *Aspect*: Brain or Beast. *Aspect* is about whether the Master is immersed in the world of thoughts and words or the world of sensation, and how that colors the Master's understanding of what motivates others.

A Brain *Aspected* Master is influenced by conversation, and acts to influence others via language. His pleasures and manner are perhaps veneered with gentility, and more

importantly, his personality is colored by a rationalization that there's some objective good embedded in his monstrous endeavors.

A *Beast Aspected* Master is influenced more by physical and primal interactions, by sexual contacts, curious gustatory pleasures, and sadistic and masochistic exchanges. He will act to influence others in physical, more primal ways, perhaps through inflicting pain.

Needs and Wants

Another decision facing the group is that of the nature of the *Needs* and *Wants* of the Master. These are best decided in conjunction with considering the Master's *Type* and *Aspect*, but in short, *Needs* are understood to be what the Master would have from the Townspeople. And *Needs* are something that necessarily threaten the Townspeople in some way...even if only by representing new ideas.

It is the role of the minions to pursue these *Needs* on behalf of the Master, a role which positions the minion both situationally and thematically between the Townspeople and the Master.

Needs also inform the roles the minions will play in the Master's household. A Master who *Needs* human tissue samples for his work on the creation of artificial life might,

for instance, have a minion who is a trusted homunculus. Perhaps he has a coachman and bodyguard for when he does field work. Or a lab assistant.

And whereas *Needs* directly trigger instability in the society of the Townspeople, *Wants* are what the Master would have from the Outsiders.

The Outsiders

What ultimately drives a Master is the opinions of a group of other people. And the play group must decide, in collective terms, who these Outsiders are. A Master who endeavors at the creation of artificial life might ultimately be seeking the recognition and inclusion of a group of bizarre alchemists...or perhaps alternately, to disprove the abiding negative opinions of his more worldly siblings. An aging Master who pursues horrific means of sustaining his youthful stage talents would likely be courting the opinions of the sophisticated theatre-going elite. A Master may *Need* to draw the blood of the living for sustenance, but *Want* the romantic interest of select victims.

The Feeder

The four *Types* are simple classifications of the horrific endeavors of Masters: Feeder, Breeder, Collector, and Teacher.

And although some few examples from history, film and literature will be given for each of the *Types*, it should be noted that thinking of the *Types* as a rigid classification scheme is counter-productive, and ultimately unsatisfying. Fictional characters, historical figures, and even finalized Masters will defy classification, when considered in retrospect. Your group may realize, for instance, after having settled on specific *Needs* and *Wants*, that the Collector Master you thought you were creating is actually more of a Feeder.

Don't be concerned if something like this happens. Allow *Type* and *Aspect* to get the conversation started and the more game-impacting details of a Master's *Needs* and *Wants* will be produced from the discussion almost without conscious effort.

So, that said, the Feeder *Type* is pretty much about personal sustenance, at the expense of the Townspeople. A Feeder's *Need* might, like that of a vampire, be for nourishment to sustain physical vitality, or it might be a monstrous addiction, perhaps borne out of vanity, like the Countess Elizabeth Bathory's obsession with the topical application of blood to counteract aging. She is unarguably a Feeder of the Beast *Type*.

But vampires have to be considered the archetype of Feeder. Though when you start thinking about *Aspect* relative to cinematic and literary vampires, you begin to see why it's a

bad idea to treat *Type-Aspect* combinations as a classification system for sorting established Masters. Their *Aspects* seem to depend on the movie. Bela Lugosi's interpretation of Dracula is pretty much Feeder-Brain. You can almost imagine him swabbing Mina's neck with alcohol before he bites her. For Feeder-Beasts, you have both Antonio Banderas' sensual interpretation of Armand in *Interview with the Vampire*, and the vicious Jared Nomak in *Blade II*. And when you consider that Dracula is also engaged in the creation of horrific 'children,' it's not hard to imagine a vampire who's actually more Breeder than Feeder.

The Breeder

Aloysius Dees, who appears as an example earlier in this chapter, is a Breeder. He's a maker of life, in the form of homonculi constructed from the bones of children. Dr. Victor Frankenstein is also a Breeder. And both of them are Brain *Aspected*. Theirs are cerebral endeavors, journeys into the hidden recesses of the natural world driven by instinct. Dr. Moreau is also certainly a Breeder, but his *Aspect* is a hard one to determine. As played by Charles Laughton in *The Island of Lost Souls*, he has the gentility and rationalization of objective or scientific good that you get with a Brain *Aspected* Master. But his method is primal and brutal and personal. And his *Wants* are the same as those of Dees and Frankenstein, for the respect of his peers, which should be considered atypical for a Beast.

The Collector

The absolute best example of a Collector *Type* Master has to be P.T. Barnum. The distinction between the Brain and Beast *Aspects* for Collector *Type* Masters is at the level of why they collect what they collect. Barnum personifies the Brain *Aspect* by his aggregation of freaks seemingly out of twisted cerebral motives simply to have and be known for having the most impressive collection. In contrast, a Beast *Aspected* Collector is typically working toward some kind of monstrous self-reinvention. Buffalo Bill, from *Silence of the Lambs*, just barely qualifies, in that he has very specific requirements for each of the components of his collection, and criteria for determining when the collection is complete. This is what differentiates the Collector from the Feeder. The extent to which Countess Bathory is indiscriminate in who she gets blood from, and lacks a vision of somehow achieving an aesthetically satisfying state of completeness, is the extent to which she falls more into the Feeder *Type*.

The Teacher

The Teacher, in Brain *Aspect*, is about evangelizing their own monstrous and dysfunctional view of the world, and when Beast, focuses on instructing others to develop an appreciation for the flawed and horrific things in which they

personally take pleasure. Miss Havisham, from *Great Expectations*, exemplifies Brain through her dysfunctional tutelage of Estella. And Anthony Hopkins' portrayal of Dr. Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* is a good example of a Teacher-Beast.

Geoffrey Rush's Marquis de Sade in *Quills* is a Teacher as well, though difficult to categorize definitively as either Brain or Beast. Perhaps it bears re-stating that you should expect the Masters you create and destroy to be just as classification-defying in retrospect. *Type* and *Aspect* again, despite efforts in this text to elucidate them with examples from literature, film, and history, are most emphatically not a categorization system, but instead a framework for the collaborative endeavor of Master creation.

The Demesne

The default setting for MY LIFE WITH MASTER is a genericized area of early 19th century Europe, little more than a single town and the surrounding rough, hilly wilderness. It is a setting characterized by a pronounced conflict between reason and romanticism, with the Master as one of the primary agents of romanticism to threaten the setting. A Master is a glorious force of emotion and imagination, whose priorities stand in distinct opposition to

common sense, and whose world is alive with conspicuous forces of nature, decay, and life that is sometimes not brought to an end with corporeal destruction. And out in the wilderness surrounding town, the residence of the Master and his household should be evocative of this threatening role. In deciding on an appropriate *Demesne*, the play group should consider such things as crumbling old castles and churches, dank underground crypts, overgrown estate buildings, natural caves, mouldering theatres, and dense grottoes.

Fear and Reason

And finally, the group must decide on starting numeric values for *Fear* and *Reason*. As a general guideline, a particularly horrific and fearsome Master projects a *Fear* of 5 or more, and a weaker Master projects a *Fear* of 3 or less. High values for *Reason* relative to *Fear* make for shorter games, and *Reason* greater than *Fear* will increase the incidence of Connections responding favorably to emotional overtures from minions.



Minions want love

CH. 3: IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

The life of a minion is not an easy one. They are shunned for their frightening visages and disfigured bodies, for their mental and physical scars and their horrific afflictions, and for their bizarre, asocial behaviors. They are literally, in the most cinematic sense...the creatures of darkness. Yet foremost, it should be understood, they are *human*. They have feelings like we do. They long desperately to be happy. And they suffer horribly under control of the Master. So despite appearances, they are not vicious or inhuman monsters, but rather tragic in their way.

EX: The hunchback of Notre Dame is perhaps the archetypal minion. He's misshapen, but he's human, and he suffers terribly under the control of Dom Frolo.

Self-loathing and Weariness

Self-loathing and *Weariness* are two of the three numeric stats that describe minions in MY LIFE WITH MASTER. The third is *Love*, which is covered later in this chapter. All three will fluctuate over the course of play, so the task of character creation is about setting their initial values. And as it is with

Fear and *Reason*, minions will be both empowered and victimized by their *Self-loathing* and *Weariness*.

Self-loathing measures how much a minion has come to think he really is a monster. It will hinder a minion from resisting the commands of the Master, but aid when a minion would commit violence against Townspeople, Outsiders, or other minions, or otherwise act in ways that create horror among the polite folk. And it will tend to produce painful and tragic outcomes when a minion makes overtures to Connections.

Weariness provides a more subtle benefit. It both increases the likelihood a minion will fail and sustain wounds when committing acts of violence, and it hinders resisting the Master. But it doesn't have any negative effect on making overtures to Connections, which is significant, since the Master will likely die at the hands of the minion who gains the most *Love* from overtures with nice outcomes.

A player divides three points between *Weariness* and *Self-loathing* for his minion character, and may put all three points into one of them, if he so wishes, leaving the other to start at 0.

More and Less than Human

A defining characteristic of minions is that their nature is, on one hand, very much greater than that of normal men, and

on the other, very much less. A minion's unique manifestation of this dualism is described by two statements, a *More than Human* and a *Less than Human*, written by the player as part of character generation.

The *Less than Human* should describe an excessive, crippling limitation, qualified by a very narrow 'except' or 'unless' condition.

EX: Is mute, except when singing hymns.

EX: Walks with an uncontrollable limp, moving slowly and awkwardly, except when swinging from the ropes and rafters of the belfry.

EX: Will transform into a stone every evening, unless fed by a child that day.

And to be clear, players should expect the negative effects of the *Less than Human* to be interpreted with some excessiveness during gameplay. Any notions about just how crippled a normal human might be by a given handicap should be abandoned in favor of far more surreal expectations. For example, a human with an open wound in his thigh should succeed in chasing down a spastically limping minion, and a mute minion should routinely find it almost impossible to communicate. When a *Less than Human* is relevant, the game's conflict resolution system is not even

consulted. The outcome is simply automatic failure, on a cinematic scale, described by the GM.

That is, of course, for situations not within the scope of the second ‘except/unless’ half of the statement. Inside the scope of the except/unless, the minion should be understood to have a generous human level of ability

A minion also gets one similarly-structured *More than Human*, which describes a powerful and surreal ability. It is automatically successful, and impressive, outside the scope of the except/unless condition. Within the scope of the except/unless, the minion is understood to have an ordinary human level of ability.

EX. Powerfully truthful and persuasive, except between midnight and 2:00 a.m.

EX. Can heal the sick with the power of his mind, except not animals.

Connections and Love

And finally, minion generation entails the player creating two Connections, each of which conceives into existence an NPC from town and describes how the minion is connected personally to that character. These relationships are

presumed to have for the minion an emotional context of love, protective concern, or curiosity, though the emotion need not be exactly specified. And the relationships are understood to be unrequited at the start of play, or otherwise entirely outside the awarenesses of the NPCs. So, for example, a Frankenstein's monster type minion might have a Connection like, 'My hands are those of the deceased carpenter whose widow lives in town.' And it is understood that the minion is somehow emotionally tethered to the widow. A different minion might have a Connection like, 'I love the little girl who plays ball in the cemetery.'

In play, minions will acquire *Love* points attached to their Connections when they act on or make overtures related to them. Players will need to track *Love* against their individual Connections, even though the only value ever used by the game's resolution mechanics is a minion's total *Love* points across all Connections. This is because the death of a Connection results in the minion losing the *Love* associated with that character.

And because of the initially unrequited nature of Connections, minions start with no *Love*.



Carlotta uses Intimacy

In every man who is healthy and natural there is a germinating force as in a grain of wheat. And so natural life is germination. What the germinating force is in the grain of wheat, love is in us.

Vincent van Gogh to his sister Wil,
summer or autumn, 1887

CH. 4: BOUND BY MATERIAL FORCES

The core mechanic of conflict resolution in MY LIFE WITH MASTER is opposed rolls of d4 pools. Rolled fours are discarded. Totals of the remaining dice are compared, with victory going to the highest total.

The game is nuanced by the use of differently calculated pools for the various types of conflict, and by a mechanic that reflects one side or the other trying to influence conflict outcomes by playing upon the emotions of the opposition.

Negative Pools

Some conflicts require a subtraction to determine the size of one of the opposed pools (e.g. *Love* minus *Weariness*). If a subtraction would result in a negative pool, that side of the conflict rolls a single die.

Ties

A tie result means the conflict was interrupted in some way. The exact nature of the interruption is entirely at the discretion of the GM, though if he wishes, an informal consultation with the play group is his prerogative. Perhaps a scream is heard from the parlor, delaying the immediate conflict until later. Possibly the Master arrives unexpectedly, in a dangerous frame of mind. Or maybe characters trying to kill each other are separated by the collapse of roof or wall.

Yes, Masster

A Master controls his minions with fear, and by withholding affection. So, mechanically, the Master rolls *Fear* plus the minion's *Self-loathing* to command it, and the minion resists by rolling dice equal to the total of all his *Love* points, across all his *Connections*, minus his *Weariness*:

Master (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
minion (LOVE minus WEARINESS)

If the Master wins, the minion is obliged to carry out the command. Players are never required to have their minions resist, but choosing not to do so leaves the minion just as

compelled to carry out the command as if the Master had won the dice roll.

EX: Prue, one of the minions of Carlotta von Gali, is asked by her Master over breakfast to go to town and convince some of the young ladies to pay a visit. The player decides that Prue will resist. So Prue, with *Love* 0 minus *Weariness* 1 will roll one d4 in her effort to resist Carlotta's command. The GM, on behalf of Carlotta, rolls *Fear* 5 plus Prue's *Self-loathing* of 2, a total of 7d4, and gets three 4s, which are discarded, one 3, two 2s and one 1, for a total of 8. Prue's player rolls a 4, which is discarded, so her total is 0. And Prue heads off to town.

And to be specific, a minion's obligation to act on a command is lifted after a single dice roll is performed in service to it. This isn't to say that the Master will be pleased to hear of an unsuccessful attempt to prosecute the entirety of a command, and won't consequence the minion somehow for failing, just that the player is no longer required to keep the minion working on that particular command.

Endgame, which is a climactic sequence of scenes that culminates with the death of the Master, is initiated when a minion successfully resists a command and is possessed of *Love* greater than *Fear* plus *Weariness*. It is covered in detail later in this chapter.

Getting the Love You Want

Absent *Love*, the life of a minion is a hard one. You don't have the strength to resist the Master, or the ability to aid other minions in their struggles. And it's almost certain that you'll have an unhappy ending.

A minion gains a point of *Love* attached to a Connection by making an overture to that character. Essentially, the player informs the GM that the minion wants to act on a specific Connection, and the GM frames the scene, putting the characters into a location together and describing the circumstances as he sees fit. From there, the minion's effort of emotional risk is roleplayed by the player, and the dice are thrown. The minion rolls *Reason* minus *Self-loathing* against the target of the overture rolling *Fear* minus *Reason*:

minion (REASON minus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
connection (FEAR minus REASON)

If the minion fails the roll, he gets a point of *Self-loathing*, and the scene is roleplayed with a shared understanding that the NPC's reaction should deliver a blow to the minion's self-esteem. However, failing the roll or not, the minion still gets the *Love* point he was after. He has demonstrated his humanity, regardless of the outcome. And of course, if the minion's roll was successful, the scene

is roleplayed out to reflect incremental development of a shared emotional bond.

EX: Gregor the hunchback's player tells the GM he wants a scene with one of his Connections, an NPC named Catharine whose singing Gregor enjoys. The GM describes Gregor coming upon Catharine at the well in the center of town, singing as she draws water. The player considers the situation for a moment, and then roleplays Gregor approaching Catharine and presenting her with a skinned rabbit. The dice are thrown and the GM's roll is higher. 'Meat, on a Friday?' improvises the GM. The player increments the *Love* Gregor has attached to Catharine, and his *Self-loathing*. 'Make it on Saturday,' blurts Gregor, his lip quivering, before he flees the clearing.

Players can invent new Connections, or declare previously revealed NPCs to be Connections, at any time. And this includes NPCs that might already be Connections for the minion characters of other players. But they remain empty of *Love* for the minion naming them until an overture is made.

Violence and Villainy

To act with hostility or violence against anyone besides the Master, a minion rolls *Fear* plus *Self-loathing*. Outsiders and

Townspeople resist by rolling *Reason* plus the minion's *Weariness*:

minion (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
opponent (REASON plus WEARINESS)

Another player's minion resists by rolling his own *Fear* plus *Self-loathing*:

minion (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
minion opponent (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING)

If the attacking minion is successful, his *Self-loathing* increases. If he fails, he takes a wound, which is represented by an increase in *Weariness*.

EX: Having been commanded to do so, Prue enters the bedchamber of a young military lieutenant who rebuffed Carlotta's romantic attentions the prior evening, arms herself with his own dagger, and attempts his murder. Prue's player rolls *Fear* 5 plus Prue's *Self-loathing* of 2, so 7d4, against the GM's roll of *Reason* 2 plus Prue's *Weariness* of 3, so 5d4. The GM wins, with a total of 9 to the player's total of 7, and describes the lieutenant's sudden and surprising emergence from sleep, and the open-handed blow to Prue's face that shatters her nose, sends the knife flying across the room, and throws her back against the basin. Prue's player

increments her *Weariness* by a point, and the scene is over. Prue could try again to kill the lieutenant in her next scene, if her player wishes, but because the influence of a command expires after a single die roll is prosecuted in service to it, is under no obligation to do so.

To act in a non-violent, but still villainous way against someone besides the Master, a minion rolls *Fear* plus *Self-loathing* as above. However, the action is resisted by the GM rolling *Reason* alone:

minion (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
opponent (REASON)

EX. Gregor the hunchback attempts to steal a corpse for his Master, before a proper funeral. This is acting against the townspeople who have an interest in the deceased, so Gregor's player must roll *Fear* plus *Self-loathing* against the GM rolling straight *Reason*.

And again, success results in an increase in the minion's *Self-loathing*. But unlike violent acts, a minion does not take an increase in *Weariness* for failure.

Note how both the Master's *Fear* and the minion's own failed efforts at human contact contribute to its hostile and

violent effectiveness. The Master shapes the world with his threatening presence through his creatures.

Intimacy/Desperation/Sincerity

The Intimacy, Desperation, and Sincerity mechanics in MY LIFE WITH MASTER are intended to reflect impact on conflict resolutions arising specifically from ways a character influences the emotional responses of the opposing party.

The way it works is the GM has three dice, a burgundy d4 representing Intimacy, an orange d6 representing Desperation, and a white d8 representing Sincerity. All gameplay leading up to a conflict resolution roll is taken into account, and one of these dice is introduced to the roll on either side of the conflict, at the option of the GM.

Because only one of these dice can be assigned into a single conflict, participants are always given the option of escalating their roleplay to the emotional context associated with a larger sized die, and thereby causing a prior allocation of a smaller die to the opposing side to be revoked. Additionally, it should be understood, a Master can never be Sincere, and so is precluded from ever earning the d8. This means a player always has an available option for trumping whatever context of emotional influence the GM may have worked up on behalf of the Master in a conflict.

And to be clear, it is the whole value rolled on the Intimacy, Desperation, or Sincerity die that is added to the sum of the non-4s rolled on the rest of the dice.

Breaking down the concepts more specifically, Intimacy, represented by the burgundy d4, is a potentially emotionless effort to provoke favorable emotions from another person by making use of some combination of physical proximity, touching, shared physical comfort, spontaneous grooming behaviors, shared food or drink, gifts, or approbatory language. A few roleplayed behaviors that fit the bill include: combing another character's hair, sharing a glass of wine, having a conversation under the same quilt, and gripping another character by the deltoid to say, 'You're my number one.'

Desperation, represented by the orange d6, is an emotional effort to provoke a more favorable outcome from a conflict through sheer emotional distress. The character uses language, primarily, in an effort to give ownership of his or her emotional distress to the other person: 'Master, no! Don't make me. Twice already this evening I have crossed the swamp. I shall not survive another encounter with the hounds!' Unlike Intimacy, Desperation works just as well on animals and inanimate objects.

Sincerity, represented by the white d8, is the real deal. It's showing genuine concern and feelings for the other person.

It can be demonstrated through actions that destabilize a minion's tenuous situation with the townspeople or the Master, or acts of self-sacrifice, but it doesn't have to be. It's *having* influence over the outcome, rather than provoking it, if that makes sense. All I can say is, you'll know it when you see it. And the Master is incapable of it.

Finally though, despite the detailed guidelines, GMs are encouraged to be generous when deciding whether to allocate an Intimacy/Desperation/Sincerity die to a player. MY LIFE WITH MASTER is a creatively demanding game, and it is quite unrealistic to expect ongoing and consistent creative brilliance from player efforts to roleplay Intimacy, Desperation, and Sincerity. So, bluntly, don't be a discouraging tightwad with these dice. If a player makes an honest attempt, give up the goods and let the opposition be trumped. You'll easily be able to tell the difference between half-hearted efforts and honest attempts.

Providing Aid

Minions can also provide aid to each other, contributing dice equal to their total *Love* minus *Weariness* to another player's roll:

contribute LOVE minus WEARINESS in dice

But they suffer the same consequence of failure as the minion making the roll, whether that's an increase in *Self-loathing*, or *Weariness*, or being subject to a command from the Master.

EX: Prue's player decides to make an overture to one of her Connections, a blind cobbler who tells fun stories that sometimes make Prue smile. Not liking the odds, the player has Prue ask Sebastian for help. 'He needs catgut to make shoes. Carlotta has so many cats she doesn't need...' Sebastian's *Love* is 4 and his *Weariness* is 3. If his player agrees to kill one of Carlotta's cats, Prue will roll one additional dice when she makes her overture to the cobbler. If she fails, she still gets the *Love*, as usual, but both she *and Sebastian* will get increases in *Self-loathing*.

Being Captured

When ever a conflict resolution results in a minion's *Weariness* increasing to a value greater than *Reason*, the minion is captured by the Townspeople or Outsiders:

WEARINESS > REASON

This is a temporary situation, however, basically a lead-in to the next scene.

Innocents

The GM will, optionally, populate the setting with one or two ‘innocents.’ These are NPCs who embody pureness of heart, whose souls are untarnished by sin. When one or more of the Innocents is in a scene, *Reason* is increased by one point for each of them. Essentially, their presence acts to bolster and galvanize the moral strength and resolve of the environment, which has its source in the decency and goodness of the Townspeople. Having an Innocent around makes it easier for everyone present to do what’s humanly decent in the face of opposition, and harder to do what’s not. And when an Innocent is killed or violated, *Fear* goes up by a point.

The Horror Revealed

If a roll would ever result in a minion’s *Self-loathing* growing greater than *Love* plus *Reason*, a revelation of horror and consequences in the environment is triggered instead.

SELF-LOATHING > LOVE plus REASON

The resolution of the current scene is roleplayed just as if *Self-loathing* were gained, but *Self-loathing* actually remains the same, and the minion misses his next scene. Instead of

that scene, the player of the minion narrates a scene of horror among NPCs, with two restrictions: neither the Master, nor other PC minions can be part of the scene, and no NPC carrying *Love* for one of the PC minions can be killed. It is as if the horrific psychological forces within the minion have overcome their containment and bled out into the environment.

Endgame

Endgame is a climactic series of scenes that culminates with the dramatic death of the Master at the hands of a minion. It is triggered when a minion successfully resists a command from the Master, and the sum total of the minion's *Love* is greater than *Fear* plus his own *Weariness*.

LOVE > FEAR plus WEARINESS

From that point forward the Master's fate is sealed; the triggering minion and the Master are locked in a violent conflict that will likely comprise several scenes, intercut with the struggles of the other minions, before producing the death of the Master. It is the only situation in which violence perpetrated upon the Master has a tangible effect.

So, when the above-described triggering occurs, the GM dramatically suspends the conflict with the Master and cuts

to each of the other players in sequence, aggressively framing them into dangerous and threatening scenes of their own, which they must resolve *without the benefit of Fear*. If they're in a fight with Townspeople, for instance, during Endgame they roll only *Self-loathing* to act with hostility. *Fear* no longer contributes to their effectiveness. One round of scenes that way, and the action returns to the minion locked in conflict with the Master, with the minion's player testing for death of the Master by rolling *Love* minus *Weariness* against the Master rolling *Fear* plus the minion's *Self-loathing*.

minion (LOVE minus WEARINESS) vs.
Master (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING)

If the minion wins, the Master is killed, and the game proceeds to Epilogues. If the minion does not win the roll, another round of scenes is had with the other characters, except that this time the players get to call for scenes. And then another test for the death of the Master. Each time the Master wins the roll against the minion, the minion gains a point of *Weariness*, and the GM and player negotiate the events of that scene. The GM alternates, after each such roll, between rounds of framing scenes without player input and rounds of framing scenes called for by the players. Presumably it could take a few cycles of this before the Master is dead, all the while the players are sorting out the



A minion will cause the demise of the Master

final trait values that will inform their individual Epilogues, likely working with intent toward having certain desired outcomes available to their characters.

And note that there is nothing precluding a player from using his turn for a scene request to ask for entry into the conflict with the Master, so that his character can provide aid to one side or the other. The player is effectively delaying and foregoing his own scene until things get around to the minion vs. Master action again, but it's a choice that makes a lot of sense for a player who's concerned perhaps about the creep of *Self-loathing* his character might be experiencing from the GM's framing of threatening scenes, and how protracted it could become if the *Weariness* of the minion grappling with the Master were to continue to grow. And it's an option that tends to produce quite dramatic and *Othello*-esque Endgames, with minions, and Connections, and mobs of townspeople and outsiders showing up for the throw-down.

Epilogues

The final act of play for each player, including the one that just ended the Master's life, is to narrate an Epilogue for their character.

There is one global constraint on Epilogues: the narrations may not deprotagonize another minion. That is, an Epilogue

cannot be narrated in such a way that undermines the emotional and intellectual investment that other game participants might have in a given minion's endeavors. Most typically, a violation of this constraint would be a player trying to say how the minion of another player is killed off, or how significant foils of that minion are killed or ruined in some way.

And there is one interpreted constraint, which is determined according to the following scheme:

1. *Weariness* greater than *Reason* plus *Self-loathing*: The minion flees/runs/wanders off, giving up on his struggle. Long work for the Master has discouraged the minion to where it just cannot bear to go on.
2. *Self-loathing* plus *Weariness* greater than *Love* plus *Reason*: The minion is killed
3. *Self-loathing* greater than *Weariness* plus *Reason*: The minion destroys itself
4. *Love* plus *Reason* greater than *Self-loathing* plus *Weariness*: The minion integrates itself into the society of Townspeople
5. *Love* equals zero: The minion emerges from the ashes of the Endgame as a force of *Fear* in his/her own right



Volya is torn apart by a mob

If two or more of these five conditions are satisfied by a given minion's traits, the choice of which one of them to use for the character's Epilogue rests entirely with the player. It's also not a bad idea to figure out which of these five conditions apply to the minion responsible for the death of the Master before that death actually gets described, just in case that minion's player wants to incorporate his character's self-destruction or something in with the Master's own final scene.

And note that beyond the two constraints, a minion's Epilogue is entirely open to whatever the player wishes to include. So, the minion destroys itself. How does it do that? Who discovers the body? The minion is killed. Who does the deed? Love letters can be discovered by favored Connections, whatever the player wishes, as long as the constraints are satisfied.

When the real horror of roleplaying is a game that doesn't convey how to play it, how could you ever be scared of access to the designer's brain? Don't be scared...

Scenes and Sessions

MY LIFE WITH MASTER is a game in which the player character minions are an ensemble of individual protagonists, not a group working together, but independent characters whose stories happen to intersect at times. And so the mechanics consciously empower the gamemaster's use of an aggressive scene framing technique to deliver pacing and dramatic tension across a series of game sessions comprised of individual scenes with these characters.

So as a GM, you should frame aggressively, just as if the game events were a movie. Put the characters directly into the midst of personally relevant conflicts. Advantage yourself of the lack of individual ability scores for NPCs by improvising them into existence as necessary. And generally you should cut to a new player and a new scene after the dice have been thrown and the outcome described; use the one-roll conflict resolution system as a tool for getting out of a scene when its closure is still wet. Cycle through the play

group like this, resisting the urge to give a second scene to any character before you've done one with each of the rest.

Mechanics like 'The Horror Revealed' and the player's ability to request a scene for making an overture to a Connection pretty much depend on this 'individual scenes' dynamic.

Mastering the Master

The whole situation is horribly dysfunctional. The Master is a being with a tenuous grip on his or her own circumstances. And is simply not functional without the minions. They protect him. They fetch things for him. They make his intellectualism, obsessiveness, vanity, survival, and comfort possible. He inhabits an insecure position at the crux of consuming desire and lack of self-sufficiency, and it is from this that fear and horror flow out into the game.

So perhaps the GM begins events with the Master blaming one of the minions for being incompetent about something specific, and then commanding the minion to implement some monstrous 'solution' to the problem. Or maybe the Master reveals the details of a grotesque plan for impressing Outsiders, a plan that also threatens some of the minions' Connections. Whatever you do, it should be about the Master's repulsive self-absorption creating conflicts for the

minions. It is imperative that a game's opening events not divert attention from the Master as the primary antagonist. Don't start a game with an attempt by the town constable to settle an old grudge with one of the minions, a tribe of bandits laying siege to the Master's household, or a mysterious figure's attempt to poison the town water supply.

And remember always that the primary yardstick against which the Master measures his own endeavors is the perceptions of the Outsiders. When Dr. Victor Frankenstein has the scientists over for dinner, he is courting the perceptions of Outsiders. He desperately wants to impress them, to capture their respect. Use the arrival of Outsiders to provoke new horrors. Any disobedience from minions when he or she is courting Outsiders will be embarrassing and enraging to the Master. And for those games where the Outsiders are a cadre of malevolent figures in their own right, their excesses can provoke a horrific competitiveness from the Master.

Be also advised that as a Master's desperation increases, he may begin to use the minions to sabotage themselves and each other with commands forcing the elimination of Connections from which they're gaining *Love*, crippling their ability to further resist him. And in reaching this point, there is no need to explain or justify how the Master knows

of a minion's secret Connections. He just does. A Master should often interrogate his minions about their actions, but never to actually discover what happened when he wasn't around. It's just to see if the minion reports what the Master already knows.

Use the Intimacy/Desperation/Sincerity mechanics to create tension in scenes leading up to conflict resolution rolls. Since the criteria are known to everyone, if the Master invites a minion up to his chambers for dinner, asks the minion to sit with him on the couch, perhaps gives him a glass of wine, and maybe reads aloud to him, the player will apprehend the Master's obvious angling for the Intimacy die, and will potentially be provoked to circumvent that by snagging Desperation or Sincerity.

Create tension also over the issue of just how exactly the Master's efforts will fail ultimately to get him what he *Wants*. Genre expectations demand that a Master's *Wants* go forever denied, that a Master cannot ever get what he wants and become satisfied. But a constant barrage of failed endeavors, frustration, and cruelty inflicted upon hapless minions isn't nearly as dramatic as letting the Master get close...allowing him to actually distill his long-sought mind-expanding elixir...and then playing somewhat conspiratorially as a group with the timing and details of the failure that everyone knows is coming.

Managing Minion Creation

In MY LIFE WITH MASTER, the desired outcome of minion creation is player characters already strongly positioned at the start of gameplay to be interesting to the other players. It is the energy produced by squeezing and releasing these audience interests over the course of multiple scenes that fuels the game's emotional intensity. And so it is recommended that, like Master creation, player minion making also occur as a face-to-face group activity. Each player then has the benefit of tone of voice, and body language from the other players as they present their character notions conversationally, share and accept input, and work to produce a minion character whose issues are well exposed and whose struggles during play will keep everyone else on the edge of their seats.

Understanding More and Less

Creating the *More* and *Less than Humans* is almost always the greatest challenge of making a minion. Players recognize that the dramatic significance of characters should emerge from their *More/Less thans*, but groups sometimes struggle with the implementation. The key to success here is that the in game situation must apprehend and incorporate the content of the *More/Less thans* of the minion characters in a meaningful way.

Consider these *More thans*, written for the minions of a monstrous thespian Master who believes he can rarefy his acting ability by consuming the flesh of townspeople selected for their experiences:

Writes powerful, emotionally moving plays, unless he's been praised by the actors for whom he is writing.

Can remake anyone to look like anyone else, but only for a half-hour at a time.

Appears to be female, in voice and figure, except when walking.

Note how each of them establishes the character as somehow being a key factor in the Master getting his *Wants* or *Needs*, almost defining by implication part of what it will take for those *Wants* and *Needs* to be met. The first minion invites abuse for not mingling with the actors the Master would like to recruit for his productions. The second is positioned to factor into the Master's efforts at orchestrating experiences for townspeople that would make them suitable to be cannibalized for specific roles. The third will play female roles in the productions of the theatre group, and suffer the alienation and disconnects of mistaken identity in his regular dealings.

Now look at these *Less than Humans*:

Is most comfortable in the company of the dead, who neither judge nor expect much of anyone. She is incapable of doing anything amidst a crowd, unless accompanied in some way by the dead.

Suffers from blurry vision that makes him incapable of recognizing anyone at all, except by voice.

Relentlessly insulting in conversations, unless the town's church bells are ringing.

Each of them problematizes the minion's ability to interact with normal human beings.

This is a pattern that can be seen in the *More* and *Less thans* of some experienced players, a trading away of automatic successes at things like thievery, fighting, and stealth, things that might be considered traditional RPG tasks, in favor of powerfully establishing unique, nontraditional tasks as being significant to meeting the Master's needs, and for unique interpersonal challenges for their characters. MY LIFE WITH MASTER gives the player the power to do this.

Which is not to say that you should prohibit *More thans* that are more traditionally task-specific:

His strength is ten-fold, except when other people are around.

Stealthy and undetectable, except when distracted by food.

Instead, recognize that by creating one of these the player is asking the GM to be the one who positions the character for significance within the in game situation.

And when you look at a *Less than*, and can't figure out how any activation of consequences stemming from it won't seem unfair, understand that the player is asking for thematically meaningful challenges:

Hideously ugly, except when seen in reflection.

Is nourished only by the blood of animals, except if fed by a child.

Look how much less problematic the 'ugly' one seems to be if the in game situation were to include the daughter of a mirror maker, whose residence has hundreds of them on the walls. And see how the blood-consuming minion's *Less than* must be aggravated during play as some kind of situation where children or animals are scarce, linked ultimately to the activities of the Master?

Single-session Play

Because MY LIFE WITH MASTER is designed for games that play out to completion over the course of several sessions, some small adjustments are necessary if a group is to have a game that concludes in a single evening. Most importantly, don't allow yourself to think that low values for *Fear* and *Reason* alone are going to produce a one session game. You need to start the minions with a few *Love* points.

And forget any notions you might have of starting game events with character-building scenes. You need to begin at the point where absolute breakdown of the social order has occurred. Start by framing individual scenes for the characters with the Master commanding each of them to take some kind of action against the Connections of one of the other minions. Have the Master order them to be murdered and such. There's no time for anything else.

NPC Minions

NPC minions should not be described with attribute values. Mechanically, non-PC minions should be the same as Townspeople or Outsiders, interacting in conflicts with player characters solely via *Reason*, and bonus dice. If you were to give attribute values to NPC minions, you would

risk the undesirable possibility that one of them might emerge as the one to bring about the demise of the Master. And you would take story significance away from the player characters by giving the Master power in the game that isn't derived from them. To be clear, this means Connections cannot die except as the consequence of actions by player characters.

Sebastian and Carlotta

A short descriptive example, showing the kind of interconnectedness you'll see in play across individual scenes with a single minion:

Having witnessed a travelling magistrate holding forth on the law and rendering judgements in the town square while wearing a magnificent and exotic symbol of office, a wig of albino animal hair, Countess Carlotta von Gali has found herself consumed by the need to own it. So she orders her minion Sebastian to steal it for her.

'No Countess,' cries Sebastian, 'Did you see the man's oaken walking stick? He'll beat me!'

Fear is 3 and *Reason* is 4. Sebastian has no *Love*, 4 *Self-loathing*, and 3 *Weariness*. So the GM rolls 7

d4s on behalf of Carlotta, against Sebastian's player rolling one d4. Carlotta wins the roll, compelling Sebastian to attempt the thievery.

The GM resolves individual scenes with each of the other players before returning to Sebastian's player and asking if he wants to go ahead with the wig theft scene, or if he wants some other scene, with a Connection or something. The player doesn't really have anything else in mind, so the GM proceeds to frame Sebastian into a situation where he is watching from across the room as the aforementioned magistrate consumes a greasy roast duckling in a booth at the local inn.

The player goes for the Intimacy die by having Sebastian throw himself at the man's feet and kiss the hem of his robe. 'Master, I was so impressed with your command of jurisprudence today. The Lord has truly blessed your lawgiving with wisdom indistinguishable from his own. Please...allow a humble servant to do something small for you? Allow this wretch to...to...de-louse your magnificent wig.'

On behalf of Sebastian's villainous intent to take possession of the magistrate's wig, the player will roll 7 d4s, plus a d4 for the Intimacy, against the GM rolling 4 d4s. Note that because this is villainy, not violence, there actually is no chance of the

magistrate beating a point of *Weariness* into Sebastian with his walking stick.

Sebastian wins the roll. The GM reminds the player to increment Sebastian's *Self-loathing*, and then roleplays the magistrate ordering the minion to draw the curtain on the booth. He describes him handing over his wig, 'Fine, but be quick about it,' and then cuts from the scene.

Again, the GM does scenes with the other minions before getting back to Sebastian's player. 'Anything you want?' he asks. 'You pretty much have the wig. Maybe you heard the magistrate yelling after you as you ran off with it. So we'll move on with a whole new scene.'

'Okay, yes' says the player. 'Remember the prostitutes you mentioned before? I want there to be one named Jacqueline, who is a Connection for Sebastian. She's maybe 40 years old. And I want a scene where I can make an overture to her.'

'Okay,' says the GM, 'Let me think. Hmm. How about Sebastian has entered the parlor of the bordello unnoticed, and she's there?'

The player agrees, and then roleplays Sebastian revealing the magistrate's stolen wig to Jacqueline, and inviting her to try it on. 'He thinks she's

beautiful,' says the player. 'She reminds him of his mom.'

The dice are thrown, and Sebastian's roll is better than the GM's. 'You get the *Love*, and no *Self-loathing*,' says the GM. 'She looks into her hand mirror for a few moments, and then kisses you on the forehead. Cut.'

The other minions have their scenes, and then the GM begins a new one with Sebastian. 'You're still in the bordello. Is it okay if you fell asleep in Jacqueline's room?'

'Yes, she let me go upstairs for a nap.'

'Yeah, that's cool. That's what happened. And just so you know, you haven't somehow lost your control of the wig. Unless we have a conflict roll over your control of it, you can just say later that you got it back from Jacqueline.'

'So it's not in the room?'

'No, it might be. We just haven't established that yet, and I didn't want you to think you'd been somehow screwed over.'

'Okay...good to know.'

‘Right. So, you wake up in Jacqueline’s bed, maybe even not quite sure where you are...with the magistrate’s steely fingers clenched into your throat. ‘Where is my wig you duplicitous little turd!’”

The player thinks for a bit before ultimately deciding on a violent course of action. Then he describes Sebastian’s terrified delivery of an awkward twisting grip to the magistrate’s crotch.

‘Ouch,’ says one of the other players. And the GM hands Sebastian’s player the Desperation die.

So the player rolls *Fear* 3 plus *Self-loathing* 5, which is 8 d4s, plus the d6 for Desperation, vs. the GM’s roll of 7 d4s. The player wins, which would ordinarily mean an increase in *Self-loathing*, but because ‘The Horror Revealed’ is triggered if ever a minion’s *Self-loathing* would go over *Love* plus *Reason*, Sebastian’s *Self-loathing* actually stays the same.

The scene, however, is roleplayed as if *Self-loathing* went up. Sebastian flees the room, leaving the magistrate to bleed to death on Jacqueline’s bed with her silver scissors in his stomach.

And when the game returns its attention to

Sebastian's player for a new scene, he narrates a horror among NPCs:

'Remember the magistrate's ruling on the claim dispute between the two brothers? He gave the land to the younger brother, because he was married, with children who could inherit as heirs. He reasoned that if he gave it to the older brother, who has no family, it would just go into dispute again in a few years. That older brother's name is Lewis.

'So, feeling horribly wronged by the magistrate's justice, Lewis goes to his brother's house. The younger man's wife is sweeping the front stoop when she sees Lewis coming up the path. And there's something in the way he's walking that puts fear into her. She turns quickly into the house, but Lewis is too fast. He's inside the door before she can set the bar.

'Her face is red and streaked with tears, but she doesn't make a sound when he forces her to the floor...the baby is sleeping.

'If James wants heirs, he'll have heirs,' Lewis thinks.'

Last words...

Well, not exactly. The conversation continues at The Forge (<http://www.indie-rpgs.com>), an online community committed to creator ownership of games and to satisfying gameplay through design coherence. Join us. Post about your play experiences with MY LIFE WITH MASTER. Ask questions about the rules.

Or email me directly: paul@halfmeme.com

I'd love to hear from you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul C. Z." with a stylized flourish at the end.



Sebastian has a happy ending

FORMULAE

When the Master issues a Command

Master (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
minion (LOVE minus WEARINESS)

Making Overtures to Connections

minion (REASON minus SELF-LOATHING)
vs.
connection (FEAR minus REASON)

Violence against NPC opponents

minion (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
opponent (REASON plus WEARINESS)

Villainy against NPC opponents

minion (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
opponent (REASON)

Violence or Villainy against a PC minion

minion (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING) vs.
minion opponent (FEAR plus SELF-
LOATHING)

Providing aid

contribute LOVE minus WEARINESS in
dice

Being captured

WEARINESS > REASON

The Horror Revealed

SELF-LOATHING > LOVE plus REASON

Triggering Endgame

the minion resists a command, and
LOVE > FEAR plus WEARINESS

Testing for the death of the Master during Endgame

minion (LOVE minus WEARINESS) vs.
Master (FEAR plus SELF-LOATHING)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MY LIFE WITH MASTER would not exist were it not for the support and enthusiasm of friends and loved ones, and the influence of other game designers. I can't possibly thank them enough:

Puppetland, the roleplaying game by John Tynes. The mechanics for additions to what a puppet can do, and what a puppet can't do were a direct influence on the *More than Human/Less than Human* mechanics in MY LIFE WITH MASTER.

The Pool, a roleplaying game by James V. West. Assignment of pre-roll bonus dice for Intimacy, Desperation, and Sincerity in MY LIFE WITH MASTER is a direct outgrowth of the bonus dice mechanics in *The Pool*.

Trollbabe, a roleplaying game by Ron Edwards, has mechanics for defined Relationships with NPCs that arise from similar ideas about narrative as the Connection mechanics in MY LIFE WITH MASTER.

Hungry, Desperate and Alone, three experimental vampire roleplaying games under one title, by Vincent Baker. The first has an Intimacy stat for NPCs. The second has both Intimacy and a Self-Loathing stats.

Christine Battin, Scott Benker, Kirt 'Loki' Dankmyer, Shawn Eastley, Ron Edwards, Thomas Fitch, Terry Gant, Matt Gwinn, Danielle Hall, Mike Holmes, Blake Hutchins,

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Artists Colin Theriot, Will Terrell, and Ben Morgan were fantastic to work with, talented, consummate professionals who took my art direction and brought it to life beyond my wildest dreams.

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Mike Holmes, who proposed the game’s d4 mechanic as better suited to my scheme of trait calculations than what I had originally.

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And above all, Danielle Hall, whose love and support keeps me going. Her glorious creativity and wisdom have shaped MY LIFE WITH MASTER from the very first playtest at GenCon 2002, to the ‘Sebastian and Carlotta’ example.

MY LIFE WITH MASTER

PLAYER SHEET



SELF-LOATHING

WEARINESS

More than Human

Less than Human

Connection

Love

FEAR
REASON

Captured

If WEARINESS
is greater than
REASON

The Horror Revealed

If SELF-LOATHING
would be greater than
LOVE plus REASON

Endgame is possible

If LOVE
is greater than
FEAR plus WEARINESS

Epilogue Constraints

1. WEARINESS greater than REASON plus SELF-LOATHING: The minion flees/runs/wanders off, giving up on his struggle.
2. SELF-LOATHING plus WEARINESS greater than LOVE plus REASON: The minion is killed.
3. SELF-LOATHING greater than WEARINESS plus REASON: The minion destroys itself.
4. LOVE plus REASON greater than SELF-LOATHING plus WEARINESS: The minion integrates itself into the society of Townspeople.
5. LOVE equals zero: The minion emerges from the ashes of the Endgame as a force of Fear in his/her own right.

VILLAINY AND SELF-LOATHING

The life of a minion is a hard one.

The horrific things
you do make it
difficult to feel
good about
yourself.

If only someone
loved you...



Prue



Carlotta



Sebastian and Volya

MY LIFE WITH MASTER

a roleplaying game

