

The Parasite Project

© 2006 Filip Łuszczczyk
All Rights Reserved

The **Parasite Project** is a compact RPG following the theme of Technological Horror. It is about normal people who become infected by technological parasitic larvae and gradually metamorphose into biomechanical terrors. The system uses stopwatches to limit players' narration time as their characters desperately struggle to regain control over themselves.

Present day...

Human territories are being threatened by an insidious enemy, one that the modern civilization invited without any suspicions. In the sprawling electronic jungle of technological devices, perfectly camouflaged in the environment filled with TV-sets, computers, and microwave ovens, a new species is born. **The Parasite**.

Its larval form is a repulsive two-inch long caricature of a bug, its body entirely composed of random electronic parts, with a dozen or so wires sticking out obscenely. The Parasite attacks like a bloodthirsty tick, painfully attaching itself to the unsuspecting victim. Its wires pierce the flesh and find their way to the nerves and brain, taking control of the host's body like a puppet. Then The Parasite becomes almost unstoppable as it follows its incomprehensible instincts - or maybe some strange agenda - and slowly grows, augmenting physical capabilities of the taken body and granting it a terrifying resilience. The host can only watch the events in helpless dread, being gradually transformed into a biomechanical terror and forced to do terrible things to his family, friends and everyone the malevolent electronic being targets.

Some people are strong enough to struggle for short moments of self-control, but sooner or later such resistance is suppressed by the incubating Parasite. Is there enough time to save others from the danger? Is there a hope to stop the horrifying infection? Who's responsible for the birth of The Parasite? Government? Scientists? Aliens? Evolution? God?

These questions are yet to be answered.

Prepare for the ride

To play **The Parasite Project** you need the following things:

- Three to six players, one of whom becomes the Parasite Master (aka Game Master) while others play the Hosts.
- Copies of the character sheet.
- One stopwatch or chess timer per player.
- A number of coins or glass beads to represent Hope Tokens.
- Some pencils and sheets of scratch paper.

Meet the Host

To create the Host character, take a copy of the character sheet and write a name.

Decide who your character is and what he or she does in life. Write it down as a one sentence summing up the **Identity** of the Host. It will be later used to adjudicate the character's competences in play.

If you are not sure what kind of person you'd like to play, consider one of the following Identity choices:

Host: _____	Player: _____
Identity: _____	Instinct: _____
_____	_____
_____	_____
Concerns: _____	Parasite Powers: _____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	Incubation Time: _____
_____	Hope Tokens: _____
_____	Deliverance Threshold: _____

government agent, scientist, medic, criminal, common citizen, student or teenager (you know, for some reason horror movies are full of them randomly getting themselves into trouble and then dying terrible deaths).

Write down five things your character cares about as the **Concerns**. These will usually indicate at his or her relationships with people like family members, friends, love interests or co-workers. Concerns can also represent important places, objects, dreams, goals and various beliefs.

Finally, choose one **Instinct** - an automatic response to a specific situation. Define the character's reaction and the circumstance that triggers it. It's impossible to suppress the Instinct, both for the Host and The Parasite.

And better don't attach yourself to the character too much. Chances are, by the end of the game he'll be either a corpse or a monster.

Infection

Before the actual game starts, your group needs to establish some numbers: **Incubation Time**, **Hope Tokens** and **Deliverance Threshold**. For ease of reference write them down on your character sheet.

First, decide how long you want the session to last, at most. Divide that time by three, and then divide the result by the number of Hosts in the game to get the **Incubation Time**. This is how long, in total, each of the players will be able to keep control over the actions of his or her character throughout the session. Use stopwatches or chess timers to track how much of the time is used. If you're out of time - you're done for.

Next each player, as well as the Parasite Master, takes one **Hope Token** per every two full minutes of Incubation Time (but minimum five). How they work will be explained later - everything you need to know for now is that these little shiny things are your only hope.

After everyone has his pool of tokens, calculate the **Deliverance Threshold**. It is equal to twice the base number of Hope Tokens. Now, this is how many Hope Tokens you want to have, since without them you will never get yourself out of this mess. And face it, not all of you will be saved in this game.

When you have all these numbers, shortly describe how the Hosts got themselves infected by The Parasites. This is the first and the last bit of narration you get for free. The moment

it's done, the proper play starts and you're on the mercy of the Parasite Master.

Pulling their strings

If you're the Parasite Master, you're in charge of the game most of the time, describing events and moderating the session. You have near total narrative power, until one of the players **interrupts**. You decide what The Parasites want and consequently control the infected characters' actions - although you still have to keep in mind the Hosts' capabilities. Also, you can't speak for the Hosts - under The Parasites' control they are mute (The Parasites communicate using some sort of binary code, but don't expect nice, intelligent conversation from them).

As the Parasite Master, you should constantly put the Hosts in tough situations. The Parasite is a natural born killer, and its out for blood. The infected characters will do terrible things to their families and friends, not to mention innocent bystanders. Threaten the players' Concerns, and try to force them to wrest control and act. Create difficult life or death choices. Be cruel. Test their limits and see how much they can take.

Whenever you want, you can set **Objectives** for the players - big red arrows pointing at clues waiting to be discovered and ways to defeat The Parasites. Write the Objective on a piece of paper and put 1-3 of your Hope Tokens on top. The first player to complete the Objective takes all those tokens. Don't lead the Hosts towards finishing the Objectives, though - instead, present them with options to try that, but make their choice a dilemma if possible.

Struggling for control

If you're the Host player, most of the time you'll be sitting with a stopwatch in your hand and listening to the Parasite Master's narration, ready to **interrupt**. Whenever you want to do it, start the clock to wrest control over your character from the Parasite. When your clock is ticking, the Parasite Master keeps silent and you hold the narrative power until you decide to stop the time, run out of it, or another Host player interrupts.

Your control over the events is constrained, though. You can work only with stuff that was earlier introduced to the story by the Parasite Master and other players. If you want to bring up anything new, it must have something to do with Identity or

Concerns of one of the Hosts, or with already established Objectives. You can decide how characters act, within the limits of their capabilities, and you can speak for your Host – but remember that the remaining Hosts are still dominated by The Parasites and try to describe their behavior accordingly. Finally, you can't affect The Parasites in any way, until the number of your **Hope Tokens** is equal to the **Deliverance Threshold**. As long as you have that many or more, you can remove five tokens from the game to narrate a successful action against one of The Parasites or a fact about them, possibly saving the infected character or otherwise stopping the monster.

It's possible for the Host players to interrupt while another player's clock is ticking. The interrupting player can block and override the narration of anyone who held the narrative power in the moment of the interruption. This means that as long as you're the last one to interrupt, you're in charge. If the interrupted players decide to keep their clocks ticking, they still hold their narrative power – but yours is always stronger. You can allow others to narrate things, but as long as you keep your stopwatch on you can interject and simply say "no" to anyone who interrupted before you. In order to block a declared action of another Host you have to immediately take an appropriate counter-action yourself, though, or narrate an event that stops him or her.

If you are interrupted, you can stop your clock whenever you wish, but if you do so, you won't be able to interrupt and wrest the narrative power again until the player who was the first to interrupt you also stops his or her clock. Consequently, sometimes you may find it useful to keep your clock ticking – otherwise you risk being completely blocked by the others.

Notice that the Parasite Master doesn't have a stopwatch. If he's interrupted, he can only wait until the Host players stop their clocks. He should observe the interruptions carefully, though, and be ready to moderate things when needed.

When no Host player holds narrative power, feel free to comment things and discuss play with the group. You can't affect the events that way, though, and everything you say is out of game. Also, the Parasite Master can interject whenever he wants to continue narration.

But what can be done?

In this game the characters either can or can't do certain things. You can't narrate anyone performing a feat that is outside of his or her capabilities, even if you're the Parasite Master. However, as long as something is logically achievable for the character, you can simply decide that he or she succeeds – and only another player's immediate interruption can change the result. When in doubt, use the following guidelines to adjudicate what things are possible.

As for the character's skills and knowledge, keep in mind his or her **Identity**. Things that can't be directly connected to the Identity are outside of that person's competences and can't be achieved. When the character is under the control of The Parasite, it doesn't really matter,

though – the rampaging monster won't use any sophisticated skills anyway.

The Parasite augments its Host physically, allowing for routine performance at the top level realistically attainable for a human being. If it's a documented record, it obviously can be done. If you've seen a stuntman doing it in a movie and it didn't seem like any FX were involved, consider it plausible. Non-infected humans obviously don't compare – think about people you know in real life.

The Hosts are also granted an incredible resilience. An automatic fire, an acid bath or a non-nuclear explosion can be pretty painful for the character, but won't stop his body for longer than a few moments. If you don't want to lose time narrating how the Host avoids being hurt, you can spend one Hope Token to resist all the damage for the rest of the scene (you don't have to be in control over your Host to resist damage). Otherwise, the Host can be temporarily taken out of action. It will take one scene for The Parasite to regenerate the infected body – by replacing lost tissue with a disgusting spaghetti of wires and electronic stuff – but the character won't get killed regardless of the damage source. Like some troll, you know. On the contrary, non-infected people are rather... fragile.

Fight fire with fire

Sometimes, The Parasite evolves and starts manifesting some freakish abilities. At any moment when the Parasite Master is in control of the Host, the player can spend one Hope Token in order to manifest a new **Parasite Power**. It should be rather specific, like super-strength, flying, telepathy, control technological devices, something-kinesis and the like. Your average superhero abilities only – no omnipotence, omniscience or omni-anything allowed. Keep in mind that the Parasite Powers should be rather creepy in nature, and narrate their usage accordingly. Most preferably as painful to the Host or the recipient. Or both.

When a new ability is manifested, note it on the character sheet – no Host can manifest more than three different Parasite Powers during the game.

The Parasite Master always narrates the effects of the first manifestation, and The Parasite can use that power with no cost from now on. However, the Host can access already manifested abilities when the player is in control of his or her character. This makes the Parasite more powerful, though – every single use of the power costs the player one Hope Token.

Time is running out!

As a Host player you can narrate things only when your stopwatch is on – and you won't be able to do it indefinitely. **Incubation Time** determines how long you can remain in control, in total, throughout the whole session. When you run out of time, tough luck. The Parasite larva completely overcomes your Host and transforms him or her into a biomechanical monster. Game Over. Give all your Hope Tokens to the Parasite Master. You can watch the rest of the game and comment stuff, but your character is irrevocably lost.

On the other hand, you gain nothing by saving up your time. When the session ends, unless your group

decided to play more than one, every character remaining infected is either transformed or dies in the process. Feel free to narrate your Host's painful demise.

Catch your breath...

At any moment any player, including the Parasite Master, can call for a break. It is usually done in order to demand clarifications or veto implausible narration. If so, immediately cease narrating and stop all the clocks. Take your time and discuss everything you need. When ready, those of you who had clocks ticking start them again, at the same moment. If it was decided that you should repeat something slower, clarify the declarations or change your narration, do it with your stopwatch on.

There is always Hope

Needless to say, as a Host player you want to get as many **Hope Tokens** as you can. It's possible to gain them by completing the Objectives, but it's not the only way. Whenever your Host hurts another Host's Concern, take one token from his or her player. It doesn't matter whether you're in control of the character or not. Whenever another Host cries for your help, and you refuse, take one token from his or her player. Whenever your Host defends another Host's Concern, take one token from the Parasite Master. Whenever your Host takes successful steps to make his or her Concern secure, take one token from the Parasite Master (once per Concern per game, at most). Whenever your Host hurts his or her own Concern, give one token to the Parasite Master.

Spent Hope Tokens are given to the Parasite Master, unless removed from the game by a rule. Obviously, it's impossible to spend or lose tokens if you don't have any, or to take a token that isn't there.

Is this the end?

If your Host gets saved from The Parasite, he or she loses access to Parasite Powers and damage resistance, and performs physically as appropriate to the Identity. You gain five additional minutes of narration time, and you can use the remaining time to help others or narrate your character reaching safety – but if you're out of time, the ex-Host falls from exhaustion. If you don't make your character safe by the end of the session, too bad – narrate his or her demise, as usual.

The nightmare returns...

Although **The Parasite Project** works best for one-shots, you might want to play more than one session. If so, every Host who survived till the end of the session can continue to the next and gains one additional Concern. In case your character is saved, create a new Host, unless you want to re-infect your old one.

At the end of the session note down how many Hope Tokens each of the Host players has. When you meet again, go through the Infection phase once more. After establishing all the numbers, each Host player can take one Hope Token from every other Host player who had less of them at the end of the previous meeting.

Text and photo manipulation by Filip Łuszczuk. Image source: Wikipedia. Special thanks to Dave M (dindenver) for comments and redlining the draft.