

## **SWORDS OF THE SKULL-TAKERS 0.3**

A solo RPG of survival horror.

I am Legend meets Play Your (tarot) Cards Right.

*By Joe J Prince (www.princeofdarknessgames.com), for the Solitaire RPG challenge Jan 2011 (rpgsolitairechallenge.blogspot.com).*

**Challenges attempted:** *ARG! RPGS! Sharing Challenge, Un-lonely Your Fun & Scheherazade Challenge.*

This game was also an entry in the Ronnies (www.indie-rpgs.com), using the terms 'Sword' and 'Skull' for inspiration. It was nearly called Skull Soldiers though!

This is the first ever solitaire RPG I have tried to devise. I find the solo concept appealing, strange but when I think about it the vast majority of RPG games I play are solo games - on a computer. I was also into Fighting Fantasy back in the day (House of Hell led to my first ever role-playing game in Dungeoneer).

The biggest obstacle to actual play is finding other actual players. So a solo RPG game could see a lot of play...But I digress. Let me tell you about this game...

*You are the sole survivor of the Skull-Taker incursion. With only your journal to keep you sane, you must hold out as long as possible against the encroaching horror.*

*The swords are out for you...*

### **Requirements**

To play you need: a journal and a writing implement. Or a voice recorder I guess.

Also a deck of tarot cards or a deck of playing cards and a D20 (not as cool).

### **Play**

Quick - think about these questions -

- Who are you?
- Where and when do you find yourself?
- What are the Skull-Takers?
- Why are they more active at night?

## First entry

Get your journal out and complete your first entry - in the voice of your character. Make sure to include your name, hideout, assessment of the situation and that your health is fine, despite the circumstances.

During the game, health declines through six levels: fine - shaken - hurt - grievously wounded - at death's door - deceased.

Also choose your speciality, one of: fighter, worker, explorer or leader

*My name is Alfredo Bosch. I am a corporal of the Marienberg 2nd Halberdiers. If they even exist anymore. It is autumn, November 15th I believe. I've lost track of time. I've lost everything and now I'm trapped in Marienberg city. I'm holed up at a jewellers on Giberge Platz. For now I feel well - but I know not how long I will last. The Skull-Takers are everywhere like a plague. They are more active in the darkness. Daytime is my only chance, perhaps I could locate supplies - other survivors and make it through this hell hole...*

So I'm a fighter. Although I didn't explicitly mention it in the entry I've got an idea on the Skull-Takers. They are demonic servants of a forgotten god here to harvest fresh skulls. They are weaker by day because by day they must battle the other dark gods.

## Set up

Separate the Major Arcana from the rest of the Tarot deck. The minor arcana become the play deck, the majors become the Boon deck. Always deal from the play deck.

Set the Fool in front of you - this is your character, the journalist. If using a standard deck, remove the jokers and place one of them as your character.

## Daytime

Deal two cards face up, Explorers deal three cards.

These cards represent the places you can explore during the day and tell you what resources you may find there.

- Swords (spades) indicate weapons.
- Coins (diamonds) mean defensive materials which can be used to build barricades.
- Wands (clubs) indicate essential supplies, food, medicine & hope.
- Cups (hearts) represent survivors.

Decide which one of the cards you will try for.

## Exploration phase

Set the card you are trying for in front of you. Now try and guess whether the next card will be lower or higher than the current card (aces are high).

- If you guess correctly then the search begins promisingly (move the card up as a reminder).
- If you guess incorrectly, your exploration runs into trouble (move the card down to indicate things going downhill).

Then guess whether the next card you turn over will be higher or lower than the second card.

- If you get one card right and the other wrong then your search falters, you find nothing of value.
- If you get both wrong, then your search has led you into peril - in this case your health decreases one level.
- If you get both cards correct, then the exploration has gone well - and there's a chance it could go even better. Now decide whether you want to take the card you were trying for or wager it for a major boon. If you take the card place it face up in your cache.
  - If you opt to gamble, then once again try to guess whether the next card will be higher or lower than the previous one (the second card you drew in the exploration, not the card you are trying for).
  - If you get it correct then you discover a major boon, this replaces the wagered card. Draw a random major boon from the boon deck and place it face up in your cache. If using a standard deck then roll D20 and refer to the major boon table. If you ever draw death then either you or an NPC with you must die - a skull is taken.
  - If you get it wrong then you lose the minor card you wagered.

You can keep one of the minor cards you didn't try for face up, so it's available for the next day. If you do this, deal one less card tomorrow. Discard the rest of the minor cards.

## Day entry

Record in your journal the happenings of the day. Make sure to note down any cards added to your cache and who or what they represent. Also record any changes to your health.

*November 13th, Day 1*

*Today I made it to the market square. I recognised the heraldry on one of the nearby manors as House Chalistes, which kept me on track. I saw a dead Skull-Taker, run through with cold steel. They can die after all! I find myself filled with a new courage (7 of wands).*

## **Night**

During the night Skull-Takers sweep through the area. It's only a matter of time until their swords come for you.

Deal out one card for every day that has passed. Each sword represents a Skull-Taker attack wave.

You can sacrifice one or more barricades (see below) to negate the same number of sword cards.

Each wave will make three strikes against you. You must guess high or low for each strike, use the sword card's own value for guessing the first strike. Every one you get wrong causes your health to deteriorate by a level. A Fighter can re-flip one card per night.

## **Night Entry**

Record the events of the night in your journal. Then another day begins...

*I heard terrible howls in the night, but naught else, god be praised.*

## **Cache**

You can hold up to 5 cards in your cache. If you find yourself with more, then discard down to 5 before making your next draw. These cards may represent weapons (swords), materials (coins), supplies (wands) or minor characters (cups). Or cards in your cache may represent Major Boons, crucial to completing the game.

## **Weapons**

Weapons can be used during the night, or when trying for a sword card. Instead of flipping over the next card in the deck, place the sword card from your cache. Obviously as you know the value you will get it right! The weapon card does not return to your cache.

## **Barricades and Healing**

Instead of exploring, you can discard a coins card to build a barricade. Workers can build a barricade and still explore. You can never have more than 3 barricades. You can decide what defences the barricades represent, they don't literally have to be barricades.

Instead of exploring, you can discard one or more wands cards to recover your health by one step per card used.

## Non-Player Characters (NPCs)

NPCs are either minor NPCs, from the suit of cups (hearts) or they are one of the following major NPCs: The Magician, The Empress, The Emperor, The High Priestess, The Hierophant, The Hermit, The Hanged Man or The Devil.

During the day each NPC can either: stay with you, search alone or build a barricade (if you have a coins card to discard).

You can send an NPC out to explore during the day, but they might not make it back. During the exploration phase deal an extra card for each Non Player Character you send out alone.

Set the NPC card next to the card they are going to explore. Guess high/low and turn over the next card.

- If you guess wrong then the NPC meets the Skull-Takers, this means death for a minor NPC. A major NPC can escape death by getting the next card right - though such a narrow escape leaves him useless for the next day, turn his card face down.
- If you guess correctly then the search begins well for the NPC. Guess again.
  - If you now guess wrong then things go bad. This spells death for a minor NPC, or miss a turn for a major. If however, you guessed right then you win the card the NPC was exploring. You can opt to wager the card for a major boon, but the NPC's health will be wagered as well - death for a minor or a turn lost for a major.

If an NPC is with you then you may have them die instead of you losing a health level. All NPCs are with you during the night.

A Leader gains one re-flip per turn for an NPC exploration draw or exploration draw made when trying for a cup (heart) card.

## Major Boons

Any Major Boon can be discarded to prevent you losing a health level. Once discarded, Boons are removed from play. Each Boon also has a specific effect.

| D20 roll | Major Arcana       | Game Boon                           |
|----------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1        | The Magician       | NPC, can heal you a level once only |
| 2        | The High Priestess | NPC, Spiritual Victory              |
| 3        | The Empress        | NPC, Worldly Victory                |
| 4        | The Emperor        | NPC, Worldly Victory                |
| 5        | The Hierophant     | NPC, Spiritual Victory              |

|    |                      |                                                         |
|----|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 6  | The Lovers           | Worldly Victory                                         |
| 7  | The Chariot          | +1 Exploration card                                     |
| 8  | Justice              | Gain another Major Boon if you are at death's door      |
| 9  | The Hermit           | NPC, can build a barricade (with materials) and explore |
| 10 | The Wheel of Fortune | +1 re-flip per day                                      |
| 11 | Strength             | Gain a barricade                                        |
| 12 | The Hanged-Man       | NPC, Diabolic Victory                                   |
| 13 | Temperance           | Spiritual Victory                                       |
| 14 | The Devil            | NPC, Diabolic Victory                                   |
| 15 | The Tower            | Diabolic Victory                                        |
| 16 | The Star             | Cosmic Victory                                          |
| 17 | The Moon             | Cosmic Victory                                          |
| 18 | The Sun              | Cosmic Victory                                          |
| 19 | Judgement            | You win ties                                            |
| 20 | The World            | +1 cache size                                           |

Note that if using a D20, after acquiring your first Major Boon, death will replace it on the table. For example, if you rolled 13, you would gain Temperance, but any further rolls of 13 would result in death.

### Interludes

Instead of a normal day and night, you can opt for an interlude scene to catch your breath. Discard half the cards in your cache (round up) – note if you have zero cards you can discard zero to trigger an Interlude. Then you may either search the play deck for any minor card and put it into your cache or you may relocate to another hideout. Relocating reduces the night draw by 4.

After at least 3 days you can opt for another Interlude. You can take a maximum of 3 Interludes per game.

Record a paragraph in your journal to explain the nature of the interlude.

### Death

If you lose a health level at death's door then you die. If you draw the death card you may also die, unless a NPC dies in your stead. Take your journal, read it one last time then set it aside. If you have an

NPC available, then he or she may become your main character and you can continue from where the previous journalist died. Your new character finds the old one's journal and inherits the cache.

If you later play Swords of the Skull-Takers using the same setting, then your new character may choose to find your old character's journal, instead of acquiring a Major Boon. When you find someone else's journal, you may add any of the cards that were in their cache into your own.

### **Reshuffle**

Reshuffle the deck after gaining a Major Boon or when exhausted.

If you take a break from the game and come back to it later it's fine to reshuffle the deck too!

### **Endgame**

You will notice that a dozen of the Major Boons are Victory cards. By collecting all three Victory cards in a set, you can complete the game (I originally was going to require 5 cards for victory, but I relented). If you are fortunate enough to complete the game then record your final triumphant journal entry. There are 4 different types of victory. These types are intended as thematic suggestions - it's more important that the ending makes sense for your narrative. However, the Skull-Takers can only be truly defeated with a cosmic victory.

**Cosmic Victory:** The Skull-Takers are smashed, driven back from whence they came, the world returns to a state of nature.

**Worldly Victory:** With your love for the Emperor, The Empress or theirs for one another, you manage to escape. You get far away from this cursed place to start a new life.

**Diabolic Victory:** The Skull-Takers are gone, replaced by a greater evil. But an evil at your beck and call.

**Spiritual Victory:** You come to terms with the invasion, make peace with your gods and understand why the Skull-Takers had to come. Your third eye opens and you journey to the next realm of existence.

### **Journal**

Keeping a journal is the heart of Swords of the Skull-Takers and what makes it a role-playing game. You have to step inside the mind of a fictional character to complete each journal entry.

## Un-lonely Fun

Post your character's journal on the internet. Anyone else playing in the same setting can choose to find your character's journal instead of gaining a Major Boon. After someone has claimed a journal, no-one else can find that one. Who can complete the game in the fewest days? Who will be the first diabolist? Maybe I could make a facebook app, that'd be cool!

## Inspiration

Tarot cards can really aid creativity when playing Swords of the Skull-Takers. Both the images on the cards and the interpretations provided with the deck offer a wealth of inspiration. A suitable deck can really help set the genre and tone too. I recommend using the tarot over and above a standard deck, but hey needs must!

One trick you can use with either deck is to tie certain cards to characters or themes - for example the great demon Alfredo saw on day 5 became associated with the ace of swords (spades), and mounted Skull-Takers were the knights of swords.

*Computer games:* Last Stand 2, Resident Evil

*Solo-play:* Space Hulk, Advanced Heroquest, Fighting Fantasy

*Indie RPGs:* How to Host a Dungeon, S/Lay with Me, Dread (Jenga)

*My stuff:* Hell 4 Leather, Labyrinths & Lycanthropes

*True horror revealed:* I am Legend, Bruce Forsyth's Play Your Cards Right

One other option I toyed with but left out was the ability to ditch some of your cache in order to relocate elsewhere - this would lower the number of night cards. Any thoughts?

Here is Alfredo's journal from my first game - He did pretty well...

*14<sup>th</sup> November, day 11*

*I returned to house Chalistes today, hoping to find supplies. I broke in but was startled to see a figure ahead of me. I thought it was lady Chalistes herself, perhaps it had been once. But now she was a twisted demon thing, clutching a fresh skull as some sort of unholy offering. I launched myself at the creature but her riposte was stronger than I anticipated. It took all of my training to best her, but in the end I triumphed and acquired a fine rapier from her claws (Queen of swords).*

*Again, there were howls in the night but the creatures have not yet found me!*

\* \* \*



15<sup>th</sup> November, day III

I determined to search the courthouse, close to the market, thinking there may be some record of what was going on. I entered boldly but a bloodcurdling scream caused me to falter. Screwing up my courage I pressed on. Thankfully I avoided any encounters and made a major discovery in Judge Reginald's private quarters. I found a detailed proposal for the surrender of Marienberg, not yet completed and more importantly I found a dusty leather bound tome - *The Book of Light*. According to the judge's hasty scrawl somehow this volume holds the key to defeating the Skull-Takers, but how? *(The Sun)*

I encountered two of them tonight! Hideous horned creatures with crimson skin, skulking through the streets. This bodes ill, though with my hideout well scouted I was able to take the brutes by surprise and eviscerate them. Has my acquisition of the book drawn their attention? I must try and locate some help.

\* \* \*

16<sup>th</sup> November, day IV

Today I tried the mission of Jaal, a well defended building, hoping to find some other poor souls. Alas, nothing. Two dead guards were all I found.

I fear they are on to me. I ambushed a patrol of them tonight. My halberd slew them all but the fight has left me *shaken*. It may not be wise to remain but where else can I go?

\* \* \*

17<sup>th</sup> November, day V

Today I witnessed a horrific sight. I was by the canal, searching for lumber. I saw three women across the opposite side. There was nothing I could do as they were flayed then beheaded by a huge winged demon. The screams haunt me still. I cannot venture West of the canal.

I tarried for too long in my caution to avoid the demon. On my return to Gilberg platz, I was spotted by a Skull-Taker astride a colossal bronze beast. The thing was half-bull half nightmare. Their charge knocked the wind out of me, but somehow I managed to strike a weak point with my spear tip. I decapitated the skull-taker, in revenge for those poor women, but not before he dealt me a *grievous wound*. I fear I am not long for this world.

\* \* \*

18<sup>th</sup> November, day VI

I spent today hidden away - too weak to venture forth. I heard no sounds of life outside.

In the twilight I saw a Skull-Taker cultist, an unholy demagogue approaching under a mock flag of truce. Unfooled by this deception I ran the blaggard through with the fine Chalstices rapier. *(Queen of Swords)*

\* \* \*

19<sup>th</sup> November, day VII

Overcome with a sudden nostalgia I made it back to Sackcloth Row, my old house. Whereupon I saw a cowed figure dart into a derelict house. Following I found him cowering behind a table. He introduced himself as Xercus Hume, a bright wizard no-less! Perhaps with his aid I can begin to decipher the book...*(The Magician)*

Death came for me tonight - the great demon I saw by the canal leading a host of skull-takers. Needing to protect the wizard, I marched out to meet them and my doom. But the great demon bellowed at his underlings - he meant me to fight them one-on-one. And so they came and so I slew them! Until only I remained facing the great beast. I smote him thrice but to no avail. I thought I was finished but then an immense ball of energy exploded, sending the creature skyward. Hume and I ran for our very lives - I cannot believe I am still here.

\* \* \*

20<sup>th</sup> November, day VIII

I desperately need medical supplies. Hume & I searched the infirmary today. I found nothing and the wizard managed to poison himself with old alchemical supplies, the fool. Will our luck hold? What does this night bring?

Two more patrols of the bastards. My crude traps and dead-falls took most of them out, enabling me to finish off the remnants. Ha, you Skull-Takers will never get me...

\* \* \*

21<sup>st</sup> November, day IX

What a day today! I set out to walk the streets, looking for a discarded weapon, as I'm concerned about my halberd's condition without my whetstone. Hume was set on exploring the library. At about noon I heard what sounded like sobbing - to my surprise it was a child! A blonde scraggly urchin hiding in a sewer. Her name is Sarah. I have no idea how she managed to survive this long. The poor girl clung to me all the way back to the Jeweller's shop (~~High~~ Priestess). Hume arrived soon after us babbling madly, I had to shake him to calm him down. It seems he located an arcane text, *The Book of The Night-Time (The Moon)*. Within it lies the key to understanding the Skull-Takers. The magician says that with it's companion text, *The Book of Light*, there is hope we may yet be saved! But first I must make it through another night.

I sat awake all night, watching over Sarah. I heard nothing - the quietness was eerie. Hume was up late, pouring over the texts. Seeing him work gives me hope, though I am still hurt.

\* \* \*

22<sup>nd</sup> November, Day X

Sarah tells me there may be more survivors; she thinks there were noises by the courthouse. We set out together avoiding the skull-taker patrols. After a rudimentary search we found no sign of life - but I did discover the maul of the justicar. The emeralds and rubies encrusting it are worthless to me now, but it is a passable weapon and more-so a symbol (Justice). Hume revisited the library and I feared we had lost him. He returned just after sun-down, bedraggled and bruised. He had barely managed to escape a mounted skull-taker. I only hope he has not led them back to our hiding place.

Like a fool I ventured out and was set upon by a pack of the beasts! My cuirass was shattered by a blow from one of their ungodly swords. My skin bloodied and torn. Lingered at *death's door* I saw the huge demon return - hovering above the rooftops. With a shout of rage - for justice I lashed out with the maul, caving in the heads of those skull-takers around me. I screamed a challenge at the huge winged one - but it just flew away, leaving me to collapse into the dawn. And so Alfredo Bosch lives to see another day.

\* \* \*

23<sup>rd</sup> November, Day XI

*By the time I awoke, Sarah was already out exploring. I wish she would stay here. I found her in the guardhouse, struggling to lift a tower shield from the White Lion's order. In other circumstances it would be comical. In the guard's supply room I found food and - we brought them back as a matter of urgency (**King of Wands**). On our return Xercus Hume was gone, with all his belongings (~~The Magician~~). Curiously he left the books behind. Does Hume know something I don't?*

...

Anyway, thanks for reading - please let me know how you get on with my game.

Beware the swords and beware death's head...

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