

WEIRD STORIES

A storytelling RPG by Gil Hova

Weird Stories is a one-shot, zero-prep, dice-less, and GM-less story-editing roleplaying game where players tell stories similar to the films of David Lynch, novels by Haruki Murakami or Jeff VanderMeer, and the TV series *Lost*. These stories have many more questions than answers, and remain shrouded in mystery throughout.

You know those books that are creepy thrillers two-thirds of the way through, and then the author turns on the lights and gives names and explanations to everything, and the last third is straight-up action? Nothing against those kinds of stories, but in *Weird Stories*, the lights never come on, and you never get a full explanation about what happened.

Weird Stories is capable of giving you a cryptic allegory, or a dreamy tale of illogic, or a nightmarish fantasy, or a hilarious fever dream, or straight-up horror. Any of these stories are able to hit us on a subconscious level and stick with us long after playing.

Let's get weird.

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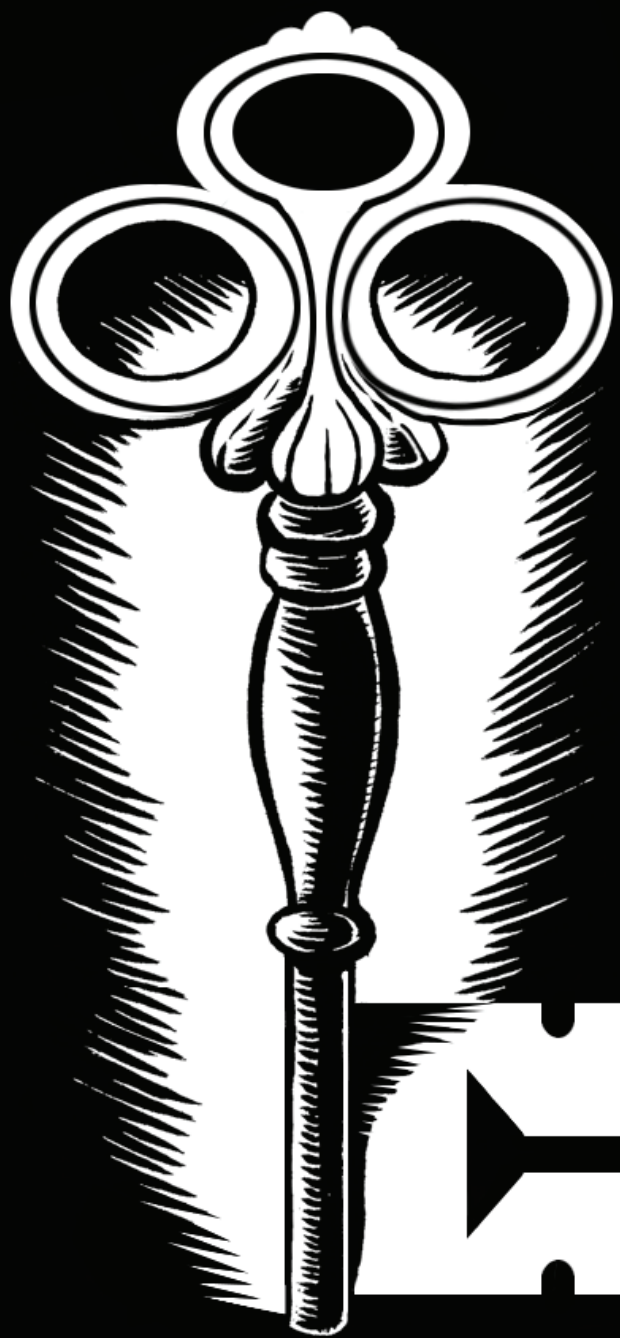


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Components

Weird Stories is played primarily with cards. If you don't have the *Weird Stories* cards, you can visit <https://formalferretgames.com/products/weird-stories> to find out where to buy or download them.

- 32x Scene Cards that track that provide prompts and tell you where you are in the story.
 - ◇ 1x Act I Setup card
 - ◇ 1x Act I Start card
 - ◇ 9x Act I Question cards
 - ◇ 1x Act I Intermission card
 - ◇ 9x Act II Question cards
 - ◇ 1x Act II Intermission card
 - ◇ 9x Act III Question cards
 - ◇ 1x Act III Denouement card
- 33x Prompt Cards.
 - ◇ 11x Act I Prompt cards
 - ◇ 11x Act II Prompt cards
 - ◇ 11x Act III Prompt cards
- 10x Connection Cards for use in setup.
- 20x Control Cards (5x copies of 4x cards)
- 3x Setting Packs. Each Settings Pack contains:
 - ◇ A few Instruction Cards. The number of Instruction Cards depends on the Settings Pack.
 - ◇ 8x Weird Cards
 - ◇ 10x Character Cards

We also recommend you have some blank paper, index cards, or sticky notes, and a bunch of pens or pencils.

If you've played the game before, you can create your own setting! Extra setup information is later in this book, under **Rolling Your Own** on page 20.

Overview

Weird Stories will run its course over 3 Acts. Each act is designed to escalate tension and create interactions between the characters and the mystery they are dealing with.

At the start of the game, you'll choose The Weird, which is something mysterious that presents as an object, person, or a location, and through which all of the game's weirdness will pour through.

You'll also choose human Characters who will encounter and deal with The Weird. Each player will control their Character for the entire game. You'll all take turns controlling The Weird.

Throughout the game, you'll create a story in which weird things will happen, but you will keep your focus on the Characters and the Weird, instead of trying to explain what's going on.

There are no winners or losers in this game. The goal is to tell an amazing story.



Starting the game

You don't need any preparation before the game to begin! Just 2-5 players, and a few hours.

Setup

Shuffle the Act I Prompt cards, and put them face-down as a deck. Do the same thing with the Act II and Act III Prompt cards.

Next, we will build the **timeline**. Place the Act I Setup and Act I Start cards face-up near the Act I Prompt cards. Shuffle the Act I Question cards and deal out 4 Question Cards face-up in a row next to the Act I Start card. Place the Act I Intermission card face-up at the end of that row. Return the remaining Act I Question cards to the game box; you will not use them this game.

Keep the Act II and Act III cards nearby; you will need them later in the game.

Give each player a set of 4 Control Cards. Each player should put the Control Cards face-up in front of them.

Shuffle the Connections deck and keep it handy. You'll use it in a moment.

Place any index cards, sticky notes, pens, and/or pencils within reach of all players.

In most games of *Weird Stories*, you'll be playing with Settings Packs. These are pregenerated sets of cards that will create a cohesive setting. It's far easier to learn the game, and to start a new game, with a Settings Pack.

However, if you want to try something different, you can generate your own setting! There's no preparation needed for this; it's handled during setup. See **Rolling Your Own** below for more information on how to do this.



Setting Packs

Weird Stories comes with 3 Settings Packs (*Creaking Branches*, *Happyland*, and *Dark Ramble Manor*), with more available separately.

- Choose the setting you want to play with. Each setting will determine the tone of your game; some settings produce more of a horror game, while others are more of a surreal dream/nightmare, while still others are more humorous. Each Settings Pack has a few Instruction Cards that explain what you can expect when playing with it.

There are two kinds of cards in each Settings Pack: Weird Cards and Character Cards. Shuffle each separately into their own deck.

- Reveal 3 Weird Cards. Each player should simultaneously vote for their favorite Weird to play with. If there's a tie, shuffle the tied cards together and draw one randomly.

Players are welcome to take any Weird Cards that were not picked and leave them face-up in front of them, if they want to try to incorporate it into the story later. Remove all other Weird Cards; you won't use them in this game.



- Reveal a number of Character Cards equal to the number of players, plus two. For example, in a 4-player game, reveal 6 Character Cards. In any order, players choose a Character they want to play, placing the chosen card face-up in front of them.

If a player is unhappy with the selection of Characters available, they may draw from the top of the Character deck, one card at a time, until they find something more suitable. Leave unchosen cards face-up with the other Character Cards, so other players can choose from them.

Remove all other Character Cards. You won't use them in this game.

- Reveal a number of Connection Cards equal to the number of players, plus two. For example, in a 4-player game, reveal 6 Connection Cards. In any order, players choose a Connection card and place it between them and the player to their left. This describes how their Character is connected to the Character that belongs to the player on their left.

In a 2-player game, each player chooses a Connection Card that describes how their Character is connected to the other Character, from their perspective.

If a player is unhappy with the selection of Connections available, they may draw from the top of the Connection deck, one card at a time, until they find something more suitable. Leave unchosen cards face-up with the other Connection Cards, so other players can choose from them.

Flip the Setup card in the timeline face-down. You can now start telling your *Weird Stories!*

Safety Tools

Weird Stories is a game with twists that can be unexpected and possibly unpleasant. But the overall intention of the game isn't to push players past their comfort levels; it's for everyone to have a good time telling bizarre tales.

No player is expected to have to soldier through things that make them overly uncomfortable, especially if they risk unpleasant psychological consequences. Therefore, *Weird Stories* has two important safety tools in place: **Lines & Veils**, and the **X-Card**.

Lines & Veils

You'll create your Lines & Veils after choosing your Settings Pack. This is a way of pre-emptively establishing boundaries for your story's subject matter.

A **Line** is a firm declaration that a certain element has no place in the story, like gore, sexual assault, or violence to children or animals. If someone establishes a Line, it must never come up in the story at all, not even as a passing reference.

A **Veil** is a commitment to only mention something in general detail, cutting away instead of zooming in. For example, if there's a Veil on torture, then it's okay to have a scene with someone trying to torture someone else, so long as it's not described in any detail. In other words, a Veil does not prevent an occurrence from happening; it simply abstracts it out of the game. Think of it as a movie cutting away just before something awful happens.

If you're using the downloadable Line & Veil Cards, each player circles LINE or VEIL at the top of a card, writes a few words describing the Line or Veil in the box, and then puts the card face-up in the middle of the table. You may use as many or as few Line & Veil cards as you feel like you need. Then everyone should take a moment to read all the accumulated Lines and Veils.

If you're not using the downloadable Line & Veil Cards, you may use a shared piece of paper passed around, a piece of paper submitted by each player, or a shared online spreadsheet.

If there is any overlap between a Line and a Veil, the Line takes precedence.

There should be no negotiation of Lines or Veils. You are under no obligation to explain why you are establishing a Line or a Veil. If you don't want it in the story, you don't want it in the story. That is all the reason people need.

If you absolutely must ask for clarity about a submitted Line or Veil, please do so with grace and care, and be prepared to not receive any answer at all. Remember that the other players are establishing these boundaries for personal reasons, and inquiring about the boundary can be just as harmful as deliberately trying to cross it.

If anyone at any point in the game draws a Prompt Card that they feel violates a Line, they should immediately discard it face-down out of the game without discussion and draw a replacement. We recommend you play the Stop Card (see below) while you do this, to normalize its usage.

Players may add to, edit, and refine the list of Lines & Veils at any time during the game.

Control Cards

Each player has 4 Control Cards. These Cards offer a simple, low-effort way to indicate to other players what you want from each scene.

You'll have the Control Cards laid out face-up in front of you at the start of the game. Think of them as buttons on a control panel in front of you. If you want to use one, simply touch it. If the other players don't see you touching it, you may want to move the card to the middle of the table.



The Stop Card

Weird Stories comes with a Stop Card. This is adapted from the X-Card, which is a well-known safety tool used in many games. This is a last line of defense for player safety.

If something comes up during the game that makes you uncomfortable and you would like it to stop, simply touch your Stop Card. All players must stop and change the story.

The player touching the Stop Card is not obligated to defend their action or explain why. Just assume they have a bad experience with the current subject matter.

After someone has touched the Stop Card, it's a good idea for someone to create a new Line to make sure players understand the new boundary in the game.

You may play 20 games of *Weird Stories* and never have anyone touch the Stop Card. Be sure you bring it out for your 21st game, and any games past that. It's an important safety net. It's there if you need it.

The Go Card

If you're really enjoying something a player contributed, touch your Go Card. That tells everyone to keep going in that direction.





The Suggest Card

This is the most commonly-touched card in *Weird Stories*. When you touch this card, you will have the opportunity to offer a suggestion to the other players.

In *Weird Stories*, only the player controlling a Primary Character can decide whether something happens to that Character, and the player controlling The Weird has full power over all Characters when invoking The Weird.

But you are free to make suggestions by

touching your Edit Card. When you do so, politely make your proposal. The players controlling those characters are free to accept or deny your edit.

Important: If a player is abusing their Edit Card, stop the game and talk to them. *Weird Stories* is a game of collaboration. If one player is drowning out the others, make sure they know that they need to give the other players room to work.

The Close Card

Only the player controlling The Weird has the power to close a scene. The other players may tap their Close Cards to suggest that this is a good time to close the scene.

If you are controlling The Weird and you see the other players tapping this card, you should close the scene unless there's something specific you'd still like to do in the scene.



One size does not necessarily fit all!

Lines & Veils and the X-Card are techniques that have been in the RPG world for a long time. However, they are not guaranteed to work 100% of the time. There are people who will experience trauma despite (or in some cases, because of) their presence. If a player is struggling for any reason because of something that came up in the game, and none of the built-in safety tools are working, stop and figure out the best thing to do in the moment.

In a situation like this, giving full agency to the traumatized player is a very good idea. If the player wants to talk about anything, it's now the other players' responsibility to listen. For more information about this, search the internet for "The Luxton Technique."

It's also important to know that if a player is uncomfortable with what's happening in the game, they will not necessarily tell you. Sometimes a player will become quiet or withdrawn. Remember that it is everyone's responsibility to make sure everyone else is enjoying the game. If a player seems to be uncomfortable, it's good to check in on them, as gently and unobtrusively as possible.

For more information about player safety in tabletop roleplaying games, check out the TTRPG Safety Kit, by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk.

One more note on player safety

Each player is responsible for everyone's fun and safety at the table. Your enjoyment of the game must never come before anyone else's. If there's a player who doesn't honor this basic tenet, you should not be playing *Weird Stories* with them, and perhaps you should not be playing any game with them.

Gameplay

Gameplay in *Weird Stories* is split across 3 Acts. Each Act consists of 3 Questions, out of 4 available. Each Question is usually answered in a single Scene, although some Questions will require more than one Scene to answer.

Each scene will be initiated by one player; we'll call them the Framing Player. The first player to take this role should be the player most experienced with the game.

The Start Scene

The first Scene played in *Weird Stories* is always the Start Scene. In this Scene, the players must answer the following questions:

- How do the Primary Characters know each other?
- What do the Primary Characters want from each other?

These may be answered on your Character cards, but the Start Scene is an opportunity to play out these questions and watch the Characters' behavior in playing out their connections and wants.

The Start Scene is different from the rest of the game in that **The Weird cannot be invoked in this Scene**. This will likely be the most grounded scene in the game. It's important to play this scene as straight and grounded as possible.

Choosing a Question

If it's the start of a Scene that is not the first Scene of the game, then The Weird player must choose one of the 4 face-up Questions to answer. Players are free to discuss this, but the final decision belongs to The Weird player.

You are not obligated to answer this Question now. The important thing is that you find an answer while playing out the Scene.

Framing a Scene

The Framing Player now announces a framing for the Scene. They give a general idea of where the Primary Characters are. They are allowed to suggest which Primary Characters they want in this Scene, and what those Primary Characters are doing, but the players controlling the Primary Characters may decline those suggestions.

It's okay if the Characters do not start the Scene in the same location. If the Framing Player splits Characters between various locations, they must clearly indicate where each Character is. It's best if each Scene should have some mention of every Primary Character, even if it's a quick cutaway.

If this is not the first Scene of the game, then The Weird player should change the location of the Scene from the previous Scene, and/or announce enough time to have passed between the old Scene and the new Scene for things to have changed. There are times when it's good to start the next Scene immediately where the last one finished, but if you're new to the game, consider putting some distance between the end of the last Scene and the start of the next Scene.

The amount of distance or time can be large or small, but it should be significant enough to change the context of the scene. For example, in a situation where every second counts, setting the next Scene five minutes later could make a big difference.

At the same time, the Framing Player should be sure to establish the Scene at a point where the story is going. If the story is building towards an interesting encounter, then the Framing Player should advance closer to the encounter, or frame the encounter itself. They should not skip the encounter, unless jumbling things up and disorienting the Characters is interesting and serves that specific story well.

For example, if you have the Characters rushing to defuse a bomb in fewer than 10 minutes, in most situations, the Framing Player should not set the next Scene 30 minutes later. We should see how the bomb defusal goes!

Playing the Scene

You'll now play the scene out, with each player playing a Character.

You can play the game in-character (“I open the door and scream. EEEEEEEK!”) or out of character (“Alex opens the door and screams.”) Both approaches are fine, and switching back and forth will not hurt the game.

If you're playing a Primary Character, you have full responsibility over them, as long as you are dealing with another Character and not The Weird. For example, if another Character tries to punch you, you get to say whether you are hurt or not.

Remember that you are not trying to “win” this game. If the story calls for your character to get injured, or for bad things to happen to them, then do it! You're trying to tell an amazing story.

Invoking The Weird

If you're the Framing Player, you have full responsibility over The Weird **and** all other Primary and Secondary Characters in the game. If The Weird is a location that Characters are in, you get to say how the location affects them. If your The Weird is an object, you get to say how the object appears to the Characters, and how it affects them. If your The Weird presents as a person, you describe how the person moves, talks, and acts.

You are only bound by Lines & Veils and Stop Cards, although other players may use their Suggest Cards to make suggestions to you.

Splitting Scenes

Characters don't need to be in the same location or meet up during a Scene. But the Framing Player should make sure that each Character is mentioned during a Scene. It could even just be a quick “still-life” that establishes something the character is doing while the other Characters are busy. Or you can switch back and forth between parallel scenes.

The No-Removal Rule

A critical rule of *Weird Stories* is the No Removal rule. **No player may remove the ability of a Primary Character or The Weird to affect the story through their words and/or actions.**

For example, if it's the middle of the game, you can't say, "Brenda is fed up with everything. She packs a suitcase and takes the first bus out of town. She's gone now."

However, you can say, "Brenda is fed up. She packs a suitcase and tries to leave everything behind. But..." and detail how the events of the story follow her.

Another example: you can't put a Primary Character into a coma and leave them inert in a hospital bed. But perhaps a character falls into a coma and you play out a Scene in their head as they face The Weird on the astral plane. They wake up in the next Scene, but they have changed somehow...

Finally, you can kill Primary Characters, but you can't *kill them off* before the end of the story. For example, maybe Joseph dies when he falls from his balcony. But no one can find his body. In the next scene, he staggers through the doorway of a fast-food restaurant. Perhaps he has no serious injuries. Perhaps he is covered in blood. Perhaps he is perfectly normal, except that he keeps feeling for an object in his pocket. Perhaps he is levitating six inches off the ground.

The No-Removal Rule does not apply during the final scenes of the game or the Denouement. Also, the No-Removal Rule does not apply to Secondary Characters or Objects. Do with them what you will.

The Weird Prompt Cards

The Weird Prompt Cards will help give you ideas to push the story in weird and interesting directions. There are 3 different decks of The Weird Prompt Cards, one for each Act. As you go through the game, you'll swap out one deck with another. This will keep the story heightening.

If you're the Framing Player, and you're stuck and don't know what to do, draw the top 2 cards from The Weird Prompt deck. These cards are meant to be prompts, so you don't need to follow them exactly; take any inspiration you need from either (or both) of them, and then discard them both to the bottom of the appropriate deck. You're not obligated to show them to the other players.

At any time, if you don't like what's on a Prompt Card for any reason, you're free to discard it to the bottom of the deck (if you think you can draw another card that you can work with better) or out of the game entirely (if you don't want to see the card played at all). If you discard a card out of the game entirely, we recommend you touch the X-Card as you do so (see **The X-Card** above).

Secondary Characters and Objects

During the game, players may introduce Secondary Characters and Objects. If you have access to a Secondary Character sheet, you may fill it in at any time and place it in the middle of the table. If you don't, it's a good idea to use a sticky note or index card to keep the Secondary Characters and Objects visible to the players.

Secondary Characters and Objects do not need to be announced at the start of a scene; they can be pulled in at will at any time. However, the Framing Player may want to assign Secondary Characters to specific players at the start of a Scene.

Secondary Characters and Objects are **not** subject to the No-Removal Rule. You can be merciless with them!

Becoming Weird

There may be times in the game where one of the Primary Characters “becomes” weird. Perhaps someone turns into a giant bird. Perhaps someone becomes all-knowing. Perhaps someone becomes a sentient pile of telepathic goo.

If you are new to story games, you may want to make sure that the Primary Character returns to *mostly* human at the end of the Scene. You don’t want the character to fully reset; it’s good to have the event have consequences! Even though the character appears to be back to normal, they should be somehow changed permanently by their journey, be it physically, emotionally, or both. But for new players, being able to make sure the character remains human throughout most of the story is important.

If you are story game veterans, you may want to explore this a bit further, especially if the Primary Character’s new nature is strongly aligned with The Weird. Still, playing the game may get tricky. Follow these rules of thumb to keep things straight:

- The player responsible for this Primary Character still has final say over everything about this Character, unless the Weird Player is affecting them by invoking The Weird.
- The player responsible for this Primary Character does not have final say over anything involving other Primary Characters, unless it is their turn to be the Weird Player, and they are invoking The Weird.
- Remember that this Primary Character must remain in the game, and must still be able to affect the story through their words and/or actions. If this transformation would deny the Primary Character either or both of these, then it violates the No-Removal Rule.

These plot twists can be difficult to manage, but they can also be immensely rewarding, pushing your story into fascinating territory.

Reminder

Weird Stories works best when the story is strange and ineffable. There shouldn’t be a point where a player starts explaining exactly what is happening. Be sure that there’s enough vagueness and unexplained events that the story retains an air of mystery!

Ending the Scene

It is up to the Framing Player to decide when to end a Scene. The other players may indicate that they want the Scene to end by touching their Close Cards. If the Framing Player sees this from one player, they should consider ending the Scene, unless they have a good idea of where to go. If the Framing Player sees this from multiple players, they are **strongly advised** to end the scene.

If a Character or Characters has not been included in a Scene that is about to close, it's a good idea for the Framing Player to give those players an opportunity to cut away to a quick still life that explains what those other Characters are doing. Think of it as describing a photograph instead of a full scene; a quick snapshot of what those Characters are doing while the action is happening elsewhere.

Usually, it's clear to the group when to end a Scene. If you're not sure, but you feel the Question chosen by the Weird player has been answered, that's usually a good time to end a Scene. You don't need to end the Scene on a snappy quip or a bit of dramatic action (although that helps, and you'll get better at this as you play more).

It's generally best to keep Scenes short and snappy. It's okay if a Scene only had a few actions or lines of dialogue, so long as it answered the Question selected by the Framing Player.

Once the Scene is over, all players decide as a group whether they have answered the Question that the Framing Player chose at the beginning of the Scene. You don't need to be unanimous, but the Framing Player has final say over whether the question has been answered or not.

If you feel there is another Question on the table that has already been answered, you can propose that it gets flipped as well. This must be a unanimous decision.

If you haven't answered the Question, that's okay! You've likely gotten closer to the answer.

At this point, the role of the Framing Player will pass clockwise to the next player on the left.

If there are at least **3 face-down Question Cards** for this Act, then the Act is over! Proceed to *End of Act*, below.

Otherwise, start a new Scene. If the last Question chosen was not answered, the new Framing Player may choose that Question again, or may choose a different Question.

End of Acts I or II

If this is the end of Act I or II, you will go to an Intermission. Each Intermission is a list of Questions, but instead of acting these Questions out as your characters, you will answer them as a group of players.

The Intermission Questions are designed to make sure the group is telling the story at a good pace, and making sure everyone agrees on whether the game needs grounding or heightening.

Talk over these questions and make sure that everyone agrees on the answers. You may need to find a compromise to answer some of the questions.

Once you've answered the questions, this is a good time to take a quick break and stretch your legs. Then, return all of this Act's cards to the game box.

Take the next Act Cards; they consist of Prompts, Question, Start, and Intermission/Denouement Cards.

Shuffle the next Act's Prompt Cards and place them face-down within reach of all players. Shuffle the next Act's Question Cards and deal 4 of them face-up to the middle of the table. Place this Act's Start card face-up next to the Question Cards, and place this Act's Intermission or Denouement Card face-up on the other side of the Question Cards. You can return the remaining Question Cards to the game box; you will not need them.

You can now start the next Scene!

The Final Scenes

If this is **Act III**, and there are **2 face-down Question Cards**, then you have come to the story's **final scenes**. These have some important changes relative to the rest of the game.

First off, the Primary Characters and The Weird are no longer protected by the No-Removal Rule. They can be freely removed from the story.

Secondly, during the Final Scenes, a player may choose to **sacrifice** their Primary Character in order to briefly gain full agency over the game, including The Weird. This is the only time in the game that any player controlling a Character may dictate what happens to The Weird!

A sacrifice does not necessarily mean their Primary Character dies. However, it means that **the game will end** after this Scene, regardless of whether the third Question got answered this Scene or not!

Finally, the Final Scenes shouldn't explain everything; in fact, they should explain as little as you can get away with! But your group should be able to find a balance where you explain just enough to provide closure, but not so much that the incomprehensible becomes comprehensible.

The Denouement

Tip: *It's pronounced DAY-new-MAHN.*

The final scene should be climactic, but will often not be a satisfying end by itself. That's where the Denouement comes in. It means "falling action," and describes the part of a story that follows the climax, when it's time to wrap things up.

To start the Denouement, the Framing Player from the final Scene should briefly describe what happened to their Primary Character after the Scene ended. This could be a few minutes or many years later. If their Primary Character did not survive the final Scene, the player should describe the legacy of the Primary Character, and what effect they left on the world.

This should only be a few sentences; it's a glimpse, like a "Where They Are Now" from the end of an old movie.

Once the Framing Player has done this, the next player in clockwise order should describe what happened to their Primary Character, and so on. After all players have done this, the game is over!

Rolling Your Own

You don't have to be limited to Setting Packs; you're free to create your own Settings, Characters, and Weird in the game! Here are some tips to keep in mind.

When playing this way, you'll need the following extra components...

- One Setting Sheet.
- One Weird Sheet.
- One Primary Character Sheet for every player.

These sheets are all available online at <https://formalferretgames.com/products>.



Setting

Everyone should unanimously agree on a setting where the story will begin. A setting is both a location and a general timeframe when the story is happening. When you agree on a setting, write it on the Setup Sheet.

It's important that this setting be as grounded and mundane as possible. It's okay to set the story in the past instead of the present, so long as everyone agrees on the same framing and presentation of the story. For example, perhaps the players will decide on medieval England, but through a pulpy King Arthur interpretation (minus the fantasy elements) rather than a more historically-accurate interpretation.

It's almost always a bad idea to set a game of *Weird Stories* in the future. You don't want weird things in the settings competing with all the weird things The Weird will bring in.

Unusual settings set in the present might be okay, if the players are comfortable working in that setting. So a futuristic space station is not a good idea, but having something set in the International Space Station in modern day may be all right, as long as the players are all comfortable with the details involved. Still, it may be tricky to pull off, so make sure everyone is okay with the unusual setting before starting.

It's okay if the setting changes at some point in the game, and it's even okay for the setting to change during the game to a futuristic or otherwise heightened setting. For example, perhaps characters playing ancient Romans discover a portal to a terraformed Martian city in the year 2150. Or characters in a modern-day setting come across a corporation that's secretly developing transhumanist body modifications. The important thing is that the game begins in a grounded setting, so that the story has the potential to heighten.

Genres as settings

One good way to establish a setting in *Weird Stories* is to establish a genre along with the setting. Many stories that have influenced this game begin as commonly-established genres, which helps ground the story and introduces the audience into the world.

For example, *Twin Peaks* begins as a police procedural before becoming a supernatural mystery. *Annihilation* begins as a military adventure before leaning into climatepunk.

You can start a game as a romantic comedy, family drama, reality cooking show, or any genre that's traditionally grounded. For reasons mentioned above, anything based in horror, science fiction, or fantasy may not work as well in this context.

Story elements

Now, players have the opportunity to establish and negotiate story elements. These will describe the story's tone and overall direction. These are different from Lines & Veils, in that they are story-level edits, and are completely negotiable.

If one player knows an element they want to include, and the table agrees to it, that player takes the Setup sheet and writes a few words describing the element at the top of a card. The next player to suggest an element that everyone agrees with takes the sheet and writes their element next. Keep going, with players suggesting elements in any order, until everyone is happy.

Some sample story element negotiations follow. These exact elements shouldn't and won't be in every game, but are provided as examples of how this process can proceed.

- One player suggests, "I want this story to be dramatic. It's okay if there are individual moments of levity and humor, but the overall feel of the story should trend towards drama." The other players agree, so this player writes "Dramatic story" on the Setup sheet.
- Another player suggests, "I think the story should have a really gritty feel."

"How gritty are we talking?" another player asks. "Like, some blood, a ton of gore, or full-on torture porn?"

"Certainly not torture porn! Some blood and a bit of gore would be fine with me."

Everyone agrees, so this player writes "Gritty - some blood and gore" on the sheet.

- Another player suggests, “I would love to see ghosts in the story. I’m in the mood for a good old-fashioned ghost story.”

“Well, I don’t want this story to be cliché. Like, certainly no one wearing bedsheets going boo, but even semi-transparent figures are a bit kitsch.”

“Maybe some poltergeist action?”

Everyone agrees to this, and this player writes “Poltergeist” on the sheet.

Weird Stories is really good at horror, so your first few games will likely be firmly in that genre. But you don’t need to stick to horror, and the Story Elements stage is a good time to establish a different kind of story to tell. You can push the story more to feature magical realism, or establish it as more of a Lynchian nightmare, or a cartoonish adventure. The game system is very flexible, so you can explore it in a multitude of directions.



Creating The Weird

The Weird will be the focus of the weirdness in the story. It is the mysterious person always showing up in the background of your photos, or a bird of a species you've never seen before appearing in your backyard, or the basement of a creepy mansion.

The Weird must be something that presents as a person, location, or object. In other words, The Weird must be something that the Characters can directly interact with, affect, and be affected by. The actual nature of The Weird will be a mystery at the start of the game, and in all likelihood, will remain a mystery at the end of the game. But it must present as something that the players can encounter and interact with directly.

To choose The Weird, give each player an index card or a sticky note. Each player should write down a proposal for The Weird. This should be 1-2 sentences describing what The Weird looks like, including something that indicates that it is not normal. There's no need to go into too much detail here; ambiguity is a good thing at the start of the game!

For most games, The Weird should fit in the setting of the game. But this is The Weird, so if you want it to be anachronistic or ill-fitting, that can be okay. Still, a Weird that starts by not belonging in the Setting will likely lead to a heightened game, so we only recommend a non-fitting Weird with more experienced players.

Sample Weird suggestions:

- A door to a room in a mansion that was sealed shut 150 years ago.
- A mysterious package that always shows up in front of the same house, regardless of what the house's occupants do with it.
- A new stranger in town who is always immaculately dressed, regardless of the weather.
- A wizened old tree in a forest, surrounded by a circle of dead grass.

Once everyone has their suggestion written down, take turns pitching your suggestion. Once everyone has read their suggestion, the players vote for their favorite suggestion. Do this by counting to three and pointing to the player with your favorite suggestion; you may not vote for yourself. If there's a tie for most votes, re-vote with only those tied players. If there's still a tie, choose randomly between the tied players.

The player with the selected Weird takes the Weird sheet and rewrites their suggestion on it, circling whether The Weird presents as a person, location, or object, and then writes down one sentence describing how it appears. Place the other submissions in the middle of the table. Players are encouraged to use these suggestions as inspiration during the game.

TIP: If you're new to *Weird Stories*, your idea for The Weird will probably act as an antagonist or a villain. That always makes for a good story! However, experienced players may wish to come up with an idea for The Weird that is not necessarily opposed to the players. For example, you can come up with something that has full control of the setting but is completely indifferent to the players (like Area X in the *Southern Reach* trilogy), or one that is benevolent but so excessively strong that they upend the Characters' lives anyway (like a powerful but naive wish-granting genie).



Creating the Primary Characters

Each player will have responsibility for one Primary Character. This is a Character who will be around for the duration of the story. You will have full control over the Character, unless the Character is interacting with The Weird.

All players write down the name of their character, their pronouns, and what the character is known to do.

Pronouns are important because some characters may fit better as “they/ them,” and many players will experience a better connection to the story with a non-binary or genderfluid character. It’s perfectly okay to put a non-binary character into a historical setting.

The question “What do I do?” on the Character sheets could refer to the Character’s occupation, or how they’re known about town, or something else about their identity. For example, the same person could be an investment banker, a mother of two, or a diehard fan of the local football team. That all depends on the context of the story, determined by the setting the players chose at the start of the game.

It’s important to keep the Characters grounded, just like the Setting. It’s okay if they’re a bit quirky (for example, they play the zither, ride a unicycle, or keep a possum as a pet), but they should not start the game with any unrealistic or supernatural powers (for example, they should not read minds, teleport, or shoot fireballs out their fingertips at the start of the game). This ensures that The Weird will have an effect on them throughout the game. Of course, Characters may gain these supernatural powers during the game, but it’s important that they don’t start with them.

It’s okay to ask other players for guidance, advice, or clarification. For example, if you want to create a town sheriff, it’s a good idea to ask if anyone else was planning on doing that. Also, asking this sort of thing may help another player who might be blocked.

This is now a good time for the players to share what's in front of them so far. It's important to know the other Primary Characters in the game.

At this point, everyone chooses another Primary Character for their Primary Character to be connected to. The characters could be family members, lovers, co-workers, rivals... anything that fits the setting and that binds the Characters together is fair game.

To create your Character's connection, write down the name of the connected Character, and then write down what your Character wants from them. This could be money, affection, respect, a material object, or anything else. One sentence is usually good enough here.

It's completely okay if one Character has more or fewer connections than other characters. The important thing is that each Primary Character will have at least one connection to another Primary Character, and that will be enough to drive the start of the story.



Important Concepts

Here are some important things to keep in mind when you play.

Grounding and Heightening

Grounding is when a scene or moment is perfectly relatable and ordinary. It's vital that players ground as much as possible in the game, for as long as possible. The better you ground the action, the more effective that heightened moments will be.

Heightening is the opposite of grounding, when a scene or moment is unbelievable, weird, and beyond ordinary reality. Your heightened scenes will likely be your most memorable. However, if everything in the game is heightened, then nothing will be. Heightening and grounding rely on contrast; you cannot heighten without grounding.

Think of a Stephen King book. King takes great pains to meticulously describe the setting and characters with incredible detail. It takes a long time, but the payoff is having a much stronger relationship to the characters and story when the fur begins to fly.

Playing to lose

Unlike other games you may have played, *Weird Stories* is a game that works best when everyone is playing to lose. We suggest you don't pay any mind to how well-off your character is at the end of the game. Instead, try to make their lives as difficult as possible. Throw them complications, dilemmas, and problems on top of problems. Make them react to situations in ways that create bigger messes down the roads. When they succeed at something, try to introduce some compromise they must do that will unravel down the road.

As story gamers are fond of saying, "Drive 'em like stolen cars."

Keep no secrets

If you are considering a plot twist for a character, don't hide it, no matter how dazzling it would be when you spring it on the other players! Instead, let the other players know you're considering it. If they like your idea, everyone can guide the story that way.

Even though the players won't be surprised by the twist when it happens, your Characters will. That's what counts.

A note on player agency and immersion for players used to other story games

Note: *If you have not played other story games, feel free to skip this section.*

Weird Stories is a story-editing game. That makes it different from many story games.

Most storytelling games offer one player complete agency over the story during their turn, or as a result of succeeding a dice roll. In *Weird Stories*, each player will control a Primary Character. You don't just have agency over this Primary Character; you have *responsibility* for them.

During the game, other players are allowed to touch an Edit card and make suggestions for your character. You, and only you, may approve or decline each suggestion for your Primary Character; however, other players are free to offer other suggestions.

If you accept many suggestions, you might feel like you don't have as much agency over your Primary Character as you'd have in other games. This is a characteristic of *Weird Stories*; just roll with it. You have power to make suggestions on other player's characters; feel free to use it!

This is why the characters in this game are called "Primary Characters" and "Secondary Characters," instead of "Player Characters" and "Non-Player Characters." *Weird Stories* doesn't play as a game where the players all share the responsibility of a single GM; instead, it plays as a game where *everyone* is a GM and all characters are, in a way, NPCs.

You may also suspect that this is not an immersive game. This is correct; *Weird Stories* does not feel immersive by design. The players are in a position to tell a story, but not necessarily to connect with their characters. This gives players emotional distance to allow truly weird, irreversible, and perhaps tragic things to happen to their Primary Characters.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with immersive games; that's simply not the territory this game is designed to explore. It's about telling a memorable story, not living in that story. The idea is to feel like you're in something resembling a writer's room, while being far more supportive and accepting than a real-life writer's room.

If you're interested in playing a storytelling game that makes you feel like you're *in* a David Lynch film instead of feeling like you're *writing* a David Lynch film, we recommend Kira Magrann's *Something Is Wrong Here*.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Jason Morningstar for *Fiasco*, and to Ben Robbins for *Microscope*. Both of these games are enormous influences on *Weird Stories*, and are foundationally important story games in their own right.

Thanks to Banana Chan for helping me assemble an outstanding crew to put this game together.

Thanks to John Stavropoulos for creating the X-Card mechanism. You can read more about it here: <https://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>.

Thanks to Ron Edwards for creating the terminology of Lines and Veils. I've adapted it here for a GM-less game.

Thanks to Beau Sheldon for creating the Script Change tool, which inspired *Weird Stories'* Control Cards.

Thanks to Ben Lehman for writing about the limitations of X-Cards and Lines & Veils, and for introducing the Luxton Technique. I've adapted his advice to this game as best as I could.

The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a resource co-curated by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk. It is a compilation of safety tools that have been designed by members of the tabletop RPG community for use by players and GMs at the table. You can find it at bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit. Thanks to Kienna and Lauren for all their work establishing a safe culture of play in TTRPGs.

Thanks to Avonelle Wing and Vinny Salzillo for helping guide me through my first foray in the world of indie RPGs.

Thanks to Joshua A.C. Newman for suggesting Genres as Settings, and for all his amazing feedback. I'm sorry the "Gonzometer" didn't make it into the game!

Thanks to the NYC-Playtest group for staying late on Saturdays to test this game.

Thanks to Robin David for not getting too upset after I named my game *Weird Stories*, not realizing that he already has an RPG called *Weird Fiction*. Robin's game is very different from mine, despite their similarities in name. His game is a generic RPG system that can adapt to many modules, with some interesting dice-rolling mechanisms. It's definitely worth your attention! You can get it at <https://robindavid.itch.io>.

And thanks to you for playing this game!

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