

The Red Token

A Role-Playing Game about Choices, Consequences, and Redemption

Introduction

We all like to believe that given a difficult choice we would do the right thing. That we would choose the moral path over self-preservation and that there are things we wouldn't do for power or money. *The Red Token* gives you the opportunity to explore these choices and their consequences. How does one deal with their shameful past and is there a chance for redemption? Should there be?

The players take on the roles of former participants of an oppressive, totalitarian regime that now lies in pieces. The setting can be anything from real-life post-war society to a fantasy world after a dark wizard has been defeated. The setting should satisfy these points:

- The characters were complicit--if not active participants--in the horrible actions of the former regime.
- The political winds have changed and each of characters are under suspicion for their role in the former regime.

It is not clear from the outset what each character knows or thinks about the others' actions. These are things which will be explored through gameplay.

Tone

The main focus of *The Red Token* is to explore the concept of redemption after the fall of an oppressive regime, maybe one that has committed atrocities or perhaps they "merely" silenced dissent. This puts your characters in the middle of very sensitive issues. Your character may have been complicit in genocide or an active participant in the enslavement of others.

Some of these issues may be triggering to you or other players. Have an ongoing conversation about the boundaries of the scenario and the comfort of you and your friends. Don't let things get too real -- if

someone is uncomfortable respect their feelings and reward their courage to speak up by moving on to another part of the story. Take frequent breaks--such as after a particularly emotional scene or after each round--in order to release tension.

That's not to say you can't have fun or even laugh while playing this game. Games are *meant* to be fun, even games that deal with serious issues. Fun doesn't necessarily mean you are laughing the entire time; some people find fun in being scared by horror films and other people find fun in debating unwinnable arguments.

You may find it easier to play in a fictional universe at first. For instance playing Alpha Betas in the aftermath of Revenge of the Nerds or members of the Capitol post-Hunger Games. Even the most ridiculous setting has kernels of RealTruth in it.

Important Note: This game is not intended to condone or glorify egregious acts nor exonerate with those that commit them. Somewhere someone will play a session that deals with the role of a Nazi soldier in post-war WWII Germany. This character may or may not find redemption and their situation may or may not be pitiable. Explore why that is the case and the nuances of the situation while realizing that the goal is not to make Nazis into heroes or to justify their actions.

*"Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum."
- Augustine of Hippo*

Getting Started

The Red Token is a tabletop role-playing game for 3-5 players. It is a short-form RPG and as such most games can be played in a single session. The story is told in a collaborative way with players choosing scenes or aspects of the setting to explore in role play.

You will need the following items:

- A standard deck of playing cards, well-shuffled; 52-cards and 2 jokers
- 5 tokens per player; 4 white and 1 red
- A stack of note (index) cards
- A sheet of paper for a shared map
- Pens, pencils, markers, and/or crayons as desired

The Setting

Decide amongst yourselves on a setting for your play. Nearly any setting will work provided a regime has waned in power and society looks back on them with contempt. They can be real, imaginary, or even take place in an existing fictional universe. Some examples:

- Real-world: post-Nazi Germany, post-Khmer Rouge Kampuchea, or Iraq (post-Hussein or post-US-occupation)
- Fantasy: the fallen Kingdom of Flup, post-Sauron middle earth
- Sci-Fi: after the fall of the Galactic Empire to the rebels, post-mutiny starship
- Speculative Fiction: post-Hunger Games, after the takeover of a post-apocalyptic stronghold

Discuss these choices openly and with consideration for the comfort of others. Players should be free to express concerns about the topic and a desire for fictional distance, especially for topics that may hit too close to home. You may wish to fictionalize a real-life event rather than play in the literal universe.

Optional-- Defining a World from Scratch

Rather than picking an existing fictional or real-life scenario you can make one up. You may freestyle this or for those that want a more rigid process for world creation you can follow these guidelines.

Choose a genre for the setting (contemporary, swords and sandals, sci-fi, fantasy, true-crime, etc) then choose other aspects of the world such as the tech level, whether or not magic exists, etc. This is an

opportunity to ask each other questions and decide what will and won't be in the world.

The group decides they want to play a space setting with faster-than-light travel. Annie suggests a colonial outpost several light years from home.

Take a note card to represent the fallen regime. To define the fallen regime draw a card and write down:

- **Clubs:** The regime ruled with an iron fist.
- **Hearts:** The regime had good intentions but was misguided or clamped down in the face of rival forces.
- **Spades:** The regime was protecting a secret. *Define the secret or explore through play.*
- **Diamonds:** Those in power were driven by greed. *Choose: power, money, or something else.*

The first card drawn is a 2 of Clubs, this indicates that the fallen regime ruled with an iron fist. Gavin offers a suggestion that there was a mutiny mid-voyage and the security team took command of the colony ship, maintaining power even after the colony was formed.

Someone or something toppled the regime. Draw a card to find out and write it down:

- **Clubs:** The regime was toppled by revolution, civil war, or external military intervention.
- **Hearts:** The regime was taken down from within or through election.
- **Spades:** The regime was undone by a secret revealed.
- **Diamonds:** The regime went bankrupt.

The next card drawn is a 2 of Diamonds meaning the regime went bankrupt. It is decided that the regime spent so much time on keeping power they were unable to sustain the security force and lost the war of attrition.

Ask the following questions and write down the answers:

- What benefit did the regime bring to the region?
- What is the legacy that haunts the regime?
- How, if at all, were those in charge punished?

- Was the regime overtly bad or were their crimes only revealed when they were gone?

The group answers the questions:

- *The regime kept people in line so the colony kept focus on building rather than bickering.*
- *The regime is haunted by a fear and torture campaign driven by paranoia of another mutiny.*
- *Those in charge were exiled from the colony with only what they could carry on their backs.*
- *Originally good and well-intentioned; driven evil by paranoia and the lust of power.*

Give a name to the regime and perhaps one or two key figures such as the king or the high council. If a force brought down the regime give them a name as well.

The regime is called The Directorate of Colony Security and the head of security is named--ironically--Paxis.

The Deck

Shuffle the deck of cards and have each player choose two cards. These cards will be used to build both the world and their character based on the suit. A joker is wild and allows for a free selection from the list or outside of it.

	Secret Location	Former Role
Clubs	prison or military base	military
Hearts	government facility	journalist or party member
Spades	burial site	secret police
Diamonds	hidden records	banker or businessman

The World

When building the world players will use sheets of paper and notecards to describe the world that they inhabit.

- Choose a name for the world (city, kingdom, moonbase, planet, etc) and write it at the top of a sheet of paper. This is the map.

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- Determine the current seat of government and mark it on the map.
- Each player chooses one of their cards to represent a secret location, describes the location, and marks its location on the map. Generally most locations are secret.
 - **Clubs** denote a military base or secret prison
 - **Hearts** is a former government facility, such as a research center
 - **Spades** represent a secret burial site
 - **Diamonds** point to the location of a hidden records
- For each location write its name at the top of a note card. This card will be used to store information collected about the location.

The group decides on the name Callowsun for the name of the planet and mark the center of the colony, where the bridge of the colony ship still remains, as the current seat of government.

Annie goes first and draws the Jack of Hearts and the 7 of Spades. She chooses the 7♥ to represent a research center, named The Institute of Body and Medicine, and marks its location on the map. Gavin draws a 5 of Clubs and a 6 of Spades. He chooses the 5♣ to become a secret prison, Titheland. Francine draws a 9 of Diamonds and a 9 of Clubs and the 9♠ becomes a military base, Camp Golthad.

The Characters

Each player takes on a character to explore their role in the regime. Write the following on a blank note card.

- A name for your character.
- The role your character had in the previous regime based on the remaining playing-card you drew:
 - **Clubs** was a member of the military: soldier (2-4), sergeant (5-7), officer (8-10), general (JQKA)
 - **Hearts** was a journalist (2-10) or a doctor (JQKA)
 - **Spades** was a member of the secret police (2-10) or a member of the party (JQKA)
 - **Diamonds** was a financier, either a banker (2-10) or a businessman (JQKA)
- A brief description for your character including gender, age, etc. If important to the scenario choose a race, ethnicity and/or species.

Annie uses the remaining Jack of Hearts to make her character a doctor, Doctor Lothiar. Gavin makes his character a member of the secret police name Nawan using the 6 of spades. Francine, with a 9 of diamonds, makes her character a banker named Tristy.

When complete go around the table and introduce your characters.

The Questions

At this point you have a world and characters which reside in it. There is also a surplus of missing information and unanswered questions. Each player should take a note card and write a question, placing it on the table next to the map. Examples of good questions:

- Who is buried at the secret burial site?
- What did the journalist trade his integrity for?
- How much did the businesswoman know about the activities she was funding?
- Why did the previous regime fall?

These questions will drive the game forward and are kept in plain view.

The group creates the following questions:

- *What is Doctor Lothiar's connection to the secret burial site?*
- *What happened at the secret prison?*
- *Why wasn't Paxis able to keep control of the colony?*
- *Who else was a member of the secret police network or an informant?*
- *What caused the original mutiny?*

Done

Return all cards to the deck and reshuffle. Place the deck in an accessible location. Choose one player to go first.

Playing the Game

Play progresses clockwise from player to player giving each person an equal opportunity to define the world and add to the story.

Constraining the Scene

The active player draws two cards from the deck and chooses one to use for this scene. *During the first round discard any hearts that are drawn and draw a new card to replace it.* The cards have a different bearing on the scene based on their value and their suit. 2-10 is character building, face cards are moral challenges, and aces bring changes to the map. If the player chooses a joker they may treat it as any card they wish.

Character Building

When the chosen card has a value of 2-10 the player has an opportunity to add detail to their character. Each suit represents a different theme that will be played out in a scene.

- **Clubs:** A moment of violence hidden or recalled
- **Hearts:** A chance for redemption sought or squashed
- **Spades:** A dark agreement made or challenged
- **Diamonds:** A secret shared or revealed

Before beginning their scene the player states what the question they would like answered from the scene; it should relate to the card that was drawn. It can be one of the existing questions on the table or a different question entirely. For example, (secret) *"I want Alexis to find out what role Andrew had in the disappearance of her sister,"* or (dark agreement) *"I want to find out the terms of Marco's faustian deal with the Prime Minister."*

Moral Challenges

When a face card is chosen (Jack, Queen, King) the player is faced with a moral challenge and must resolve the question *"Should one act in their own self-interest or act for the good of the community?"* This may seem like a simple question but this game wouldn't exist if it were. It offers the opportunity for players to reflect on their character's actions when faced a difficult choice.

The subsequent scene(s) must incorporate a particular action based on the card chosen.

- **Clubs**
 - **King:** An act of physical violence.
 - **Queen:** An act to control someone's will.
 - **Jack:** An act of intimidation.
- **Hearts:**
 - **King:** An act of contrition.
 - **Queen:** An action of selflessness.
 - **Jack:** An act of compassion.
- **Spades:**
 - **King:** An act of torture (physical or psychological)
 - **Queen:** An act to strip away someone's relationships.
 - **Jack:** A act of deliberate trauma.
- **Diamonds:**
 - **King:** An act to deprive resources.
 - **Queen:** An act of theft.
 - **Jack:** An act of petty greed.

Expanding the World

If the player chooses an Ace then a new location is added to the board. Each location includes a question that must be answered in the subsequent scene. This moves the story forward and gives characters the opportunity to grow. Characters may be faced with the choice of saving their skin or atoning for past crimes.

- **Clubs:** Add a conflict to the map. *What will the characters gain or lose from this conflict?*
- **Hearts:** Add an important community site or memorial to the map. *How might this prompt a revealed secret?*
- **Spades:** Add something new that is hidden or secret. *Who knows about it and why?*
- **Diamonds:** Add something that is in the process of construction or choose something that is in the process of destruction. *How do the other characters react to this?*

Annie goes first and draws the 4 and 5 of Spades. Since it doesn't matter she chooses the 4♠. The scene must contain "a dark agreement made or challenged." She decides on her question, a variation of one already on the board, "What did the doctor agree to do at the secret burial site?"

Playing the Scene

Time

First the player decides when the scene occurs. It can be during the regime's reign, as the regime is falling, or any time after the fall of the regime. Scenes do not need to be played in chronological order. In fact an act mentioned as history in one scene can be played out in a later scene.

Place

If the player is using an Ace they use the location affected by the card otherwise they may choose an existing place on the map or spend a white token to create a new location. Spending a white token can create a location of any type, such as the captain's stateroom or the local pub.

Players

The player chooses one or more players to join him or her in the scene and defines their roles. A player might play their own character or they may play some other character in the universe. Additional players may be tapped during the scene as their own characters or supporting cast.

Action

The scene is played out until the characters agree that the original question has been answered. In rare situations the scene may need to jump time or location in order to answer the question; feel free to follow the scene where it wants to go.

Anything defined in the scene becomes canon. This could be anything from the King's favorite food to a tactic used by the war machine. New locations can be mentioned, but they are not added to the map--and not available for scenes--unless a white token is spent.

Annie sets the location at the site of the research center and chooses Gavin to be in the scene to play the role of Paxis. She also indicates to Francine that there is a third person there, but isn't sure who it is yet.

Dr. Lothiar: "I didn't realize we could spare so many bulldozers for this project."

Paxis: "We were able to secure funding, this is an important project."

Dr. Lothiar: *"I'm a fan of my work, to be sure, but I'm surprised to hear you call it important. Last time we spoke you did not seem enthused."*

Paxis: *"I've decided to alter your project somewhat."
...and the scene continues.*

Once over the group decides that they found the answer to the question: Doctor Lothiar agreed to a light torture program to root out mutineers and in exchange would receive the resources necessary to pursue her research into the promising medicinal properties of a local plant species.

Spending Tokens

Each player has 4 white tokens and 1 red token to spend; once they are spent they are gone and players do not receive any additional tokens to spend. Each color token has a special role and at the end of the scene players may spend their tokens as outlined below.

White

Each player has--through their white tokens--four opportunities to outright change the world or the story. As mentioned above, before a scene as it is being framed the player may spend their white token to add a new location to the map.

In addition, after a scene is complete any other player, if they feel that the scene ends in a way that does not align with their character, may spend a white token to augment the ending adding a "yes, and..." to the scene. This change may not cancel the scene but can reframe the scene in a new light, for instance John may say, *"Yes, Andrew was responsible for killing Alexis' sister, and my character Gryphon ordered the killing."* These changes are binding as the player feels so strongly about the change that they are spending a limited resource.

Francine spends a white token to add that her banker, Tristy, provided the funds for the new research/torture center.

Red

The red tokens represent the concept of redemption. After every scene all players should consider the following questions:

- Has another player's character performed actions in the present that have *redeemed* their past actions?

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- Has another player's character shown that they are *incapable of redemption*?

If a player believes either of the statements to be true about another player's character he or she holds up their red token and states the answer to the question and why they believe it. The token is then placed on the card of the redeemed/unredeemable character. A red token can only be spent once so only give it after great consideration. The red tokens you receive are added to your character and can not be spent by the player.

Dr. Lothiar works tirelessly after the fall of the regime, using work to occupy her mind and drive away the memories of the atrocities she committed. In one scene, after an epidemic breaks out, she is able to tap the properties of her magical plant to cure hundreds and save thousands from death. Francine hands Anna a red token and states, "While the atrocities the Lothiar committed are unforgivable, she has helped far more than she hurt and has redeemed herself. Her good deeds outweigh her bad ones."

Characters can receive more than one token but only if they show themselves in a new light. For instance, a character thought unredeemable by one player may later find the point of redemption in another player's eyes.

Passing Play

Continue playing scenes in clockwise order until all red tokens have been spent.

Epilogue

When the last red token has been spent each player goes gives a brief epilogue of their character in that character's voice as if writing the final thoughts of a memoir.

Spend some time talking about the story you just created. Discuss scenes that were particularly emotional or caused you to think differently, even if briefly. Explore the ramifications for your own life.

Finally, dispose of your character cards and the world in an appropriate way. If your character was a monster, feel free to tear up the card or throw it in the fireplace. Or perhaps just quietly fold it up and place it in a drawer to be reflected upon later. Either way, thank your character for giving you the opportunity to explore this topic.