

PONY EXPRESS

An epistolary game about friendly ponies and the challenges they face

WORLD'S FAIR!

MARVELOUS WONDERS

GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCES

FANTASTIC INVENTIONS

THRILLING RIDES

AWARDS FOR BEST DEMONSTRATION

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION!

Dear Juniper,

I really wish I could afford a train ticket to go to the World's Fair with you! I'm so envious! Promise you'll send me a postcard and tell me all about what you see? I want to know the craziest invention you find there!

Love,

Green Star

NOTICE:

All ponies missing school to attend the World's Fair must make up all absences through an extra credit project.

The project may be in the form of a report, diorama, or memorabilia from the World's Fair. Preferably something with almonds. I like almonds.

Signed,
Professor Snip

SEE THE ASTOUNDING
PONY OF WISDOM!
FORTUNES TOLD DAILY!

KNOCK KNOCK JOKES, TOO.

What is Pony Express?

Pony Express is a diceless role-playing game about overcoming hardship through the bonds of friendship and family. Set in the magical kingdom of Greater Cabaila (pronounced ca-BYE-ya), players take on the role of *caballeros* – a race of sentient, talking horses who live their happy, friendship-filled lives.

This game tells “slice of life” level stories in the style of classic American novels like *Black Beauty* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, mixed with elements of the fantastic, as found in books like *American Gods* or *Alan the Maker*. These stories revolve around the lives of *caballeros* who are all swept up in a kingdom-wide event which happens in the background of the tale, and the players are not directly involved in its resolution. They are simple mares and stallions who now must rely upon their distant friends scattered near and far over Cabaila for advice, aid, and comfort in these troubling times.

The game is played in the style of an epistolary story – a story told entirely through a series of documents, called Missives. Most Missives are letters written from one *caballero* to another. There may also be journals, diary entries, newspaper articles, radio broadcast transcripts, and telegraphs.

Pony Express is played remotely and asynchronously-- the players do not need to be in the same room, or even the same country as each other. All Missives are sent between players via email, text messaging, and instant messaging. You could even use a forum, wiki, or Storium to set up and play the game.

Some Terms

Cabaila: The kingdom where this game takes place.

Caballero: A player's character

Cabie Mark: A special keyword for a character, related to a marking on their flank

Color: The dominant color of a pony, used to determine a keyword they can use

Keyword: A beneficial trait that players can use to affect the story

Master Keyword: A keyword that players acquire after they have served as Postmaster.

Missive: The official documents that make up the story of the game. These might be letters, articles, postcards, transcripts, public notices, telegrams, flyers, advertisements, etc., which are sent to the Postmaster and to other players to tell the story.

Non-player Character (NPC): Any character the *caballeros* interact with who is played by the Postmaster instead of another player.

Ponies: The sentient species of Cabaila

Postmaster: The person in charge of the current Round of the game.

Round: A span of time during which players can send their Missives and contribute to the story arc.

Story arc: A big-picture event that affects the kingdom and the world. *Caballeros* might not have direct influence over the story arc. The story arc resolves after everyone serves as Postmaster for one round.

Starting the Game

To play *Pony Express*, follow these steps:

1. Set up the Story Arc
2. Create Characters
3. Choose the first Postmaster
4. Play rounds until each player has served as the Postmaster once
5. End the Story Arc
6. If desired, start a new Story Arc.

Setting up the Story Arc

First, decide who is playing in this story arc. You might have a few players, or several. The more players you have, the longer the story arc will be, because everyone will serve as the Postmaster at least once.

For your first story arc, try not to have more than 3 or 4 players, which will mean you play for about 4-8 weeks. New players can join in between story arcs.

Next, decide as a group on a big event that affects the world and the kingdom as a whole, but which most *caballeros* won't directly experience.

Here are some suggestions:

- ✪ A natural disaster affects the whole kingdom
- ✪ A drought affects all the farms and farmland
- ✪ A war in neighboring kingdoms challenges Cabaila's neutrality
- ✪ A new continent is discovered
- ✪ A scientific discovery captivates everyone's imagination
- ✪ A magical portal opens up to a new world, with new dangers beyond
- ✪ A new transportation system changes how ponies communicate and visit each other

Finally, pick the first player to act as Postmaster. The Postmaster still creates a *caballero*, but they do not play their character in the first round.

Ending a Story Arc Early

Although not recommended, the whole group can decide to end a story arc early. You might choose to do this if the story arc has resolved, if players want to leave the group or new players want to join, or if the story arc has gone in a direction that the players really dislike, and they want to kind of "reboot" the story.

In this case, end the story arc as if the story had ended and start a new one as normal. However, anyone who has not acted as Postmaster in this arc will be first to act as Postmasters in the next story arc, followed by any new players who are joining the story. The last players to act as Postmasters in the new story arc are the players who were already Postmaster in the first story arc.

Story Arcs and Rounds

A Story Arc is a big storyline that affects the whole kingdom. It might be a war, a drought, an election, an historic event, or a big discovery (such as a new continent or a new race of ponies) that changes the kingdom and its place in the world.

Each Round lasts approximately 2 weeks and is told by a different Postmaster. Every player serves as Postmaster once during a Story Arc, then the Story Arc ends (the big event is resolved or changes in nature).

Creating Characters

Pony Express is a diceless system, so you will use keywords to affect the story in specific ways.

- ✦ You begin with a **Color** and a **Cabie Mark**, each of which provides a keyword you can use in the game.
- ✦ You gain a **Master Keyword** after you have played the role of the Postmaster and the Postmaster has passed to the next player.
- ✦ You can invoke any of your keywords once per Story Arc.
- ✦ You can invoke a keyword in any Missive. The Postmaster must note the presence of these keywords and abide by the rules that apply to each when describing the outcome of the players' decisions.

A Pony of a Different Color

Each pony color grants a different ability unique to that color.

- ✦ **Golden:** Are especially good at feats of labor or stamina. A golden *caballero* has access to the key phrase "going the extra mile." If the golden character declares they are doing this, whatever action they attach it to must generate some beneficial outcome during the resolution phase.
- ✦ **Black:** Have a unique understanding of death and the creatures of the night. If a black *caballero* suspects that supernatural creatures are involved, they can describe their suspicions in their journal, and the Post must tell them whether or not they are correct.
- ✦ **Orange:** Supernaturally attract love and wealth to anyone associated with them. Once per story, an orange *caballero* can mention another player or NPC in his or her journal, and the Post must ensure that some small measure of love or fortune befalls the one named.
- ✦ **Lilac:** Have a unique ability to detect magic and an oracular sense. If a lilac *caballero* suspects that magic is involved, they can describe their suspicions in their journal, and the Post must tell them whether or not they are correct. Alternatively, a lilac *caballero* can openly wonder about the future in their journal, and the Post must give them some small hint about what is to come.
- ✦ **Pink:** Are naturally courageous and have a warrior's spirit. If they declare their intention to personally stand against a threat or a foe in order to protect someone else, then one bad consequence or misfortune that would have befallen the target must befall the roan *caballero* instead.
- ✦ **Blue:** Light-spirited, natural-born tricksters with a magical humor. A blue *caballero* has access to either the "confused" or "amused" keyword, chosen at the start of a story. They may use this in addition to the general keywords they know. A *confused* target cannot function normally. An *amused* target cannot perform any hostile acts during this story.
- ✦ **White:** Have a unique connection to the forces of good. Once per story, a white *caballero* can muse about the true intentions of another character and must receive some true information from the Post in return.

Caballero Keywords

Each caballero gets three keywords. Each keyword grants a special ability you can use once per story arc.

Color: The color of your hide determines some spiritual or magical connection you have.

Cabie Mark: A mark that appears on your flank.

Master Keyword: A keyword you get after you serve as Postmaster once.

Your Cabie Mark

Your Cabie Mark is a mark, similar to a brand, which appears on your rear flank when you come of age and know more about yourself. The coming of age happens in your background, before the game begins.

When you invoke your Cabie Mark in a Missive, you compel the Postmaster to influence the story as described by the rules of the mark. Cabie Marks may not be applied to other *caballero*, only to NPCs, objects, events, or places.

- ✧ **Butterflies:** NPCs must look more favorably upon the target.
- ✧ **Stars:** The target is able to resist or oppose the supernatural. Or the target generates a beneficial magical effect. The Postmaster decides which and how this manifests.
- ✧ **Hearts:** The target is personally important to the *caballero*. Information on the target must include more details than normal during the Final Missive.
- ✧ **Moon:** Characters are motivated to ensure the safety of the target, guarding the target against being lost, abandoned, or forgotten.
- ✧ **Teardrops:** a magical effect on the target is nullified and removed.
- ✧ **Lightning Bolt:** The target cannot be physically harmed, or acts directly to oppose a problem or a danger. The Postmaster chooses which and how it occurs.
- ✧ **Apples:** The target performs one action as described by the *caballero* during the Final Missive.

The Master Keyword

After you play the Postmaster, you may select a Master Keyword, or replace the Master Keyword you already have. You can select a second Cabie Mark (which will appear on the flank not marked by your Cabie Mark), or choose a new Master Keyword from the list below. Master Keywords work just like Cabie Marks and Caballero Colors; you can invoke them one time during a Missive to cause an in-story effect.

- ✧ **Compass:** The target cannot be affected by fear, and acts rationally for the greater good.
- ✧ **Dice:** Something fortunate must happen to the target, of the Postmaster's choice.
- ✧ **Balloons:** The target raises the spirits of good characters who see it or causes bad characters to treat the target less harshly. The Postmaster decides which.
- ✧ **Music Notes:** the target can de-escalate a bad situation through a public performance or speech
- ✧ **Gems:** The target gets an unexpected influx of wealth that resolves a problem for them.
- ✧ **Umbrella:** The target is affected positively by a weather event.
- ✧ **Shields:** Nothing bad can happen to the target.
- ✧ **Horseshoe:** The target has increased stamina and can travel quite far without tiring

Playing the Postmaster

The Postmaster has control over how the larger events afflicting Cabaila unfold, so when you are Postmaster, it is your responsibility to set the scene and provide your players a challenge or crisis they must confront or react to.

Your first step is to set the scene by describing what challenges and developments face the kingdom, which you do in the first Missives you send to the players.

Your second job is to show how this larger problem has come to affect the daily lives of the players, and how the non-player characters respond to the *caballeros* during the round.

Finally, your last job is to write the Final Missive, which is sent to everyone and gives a big-picture view of how they interacted with the world, and how it has changed because of the *caballeros'* actions or inaction.

Always, when acting as Postmaster, use the following guidelines for how to guide a round of the game:

- ✪ **Be Challenging:** Provide challenges that are interesting and thought-provoking to the players.
- ✪ **Be Fair:** Always respect the keywords your players have invoked in their Missives. These keywords are how players most directly affect the story. Never undermine a player's keyword, even if their keyword completely obliterates the challenge you set up.
- ✪ **Be Truthful:** The Postmaster respects each player's intentions on how they would resolve the problem.
- ✪ **Be Optimistic:** The Final Missive demonstrates at least a partial success for players.
- ✪ **Be Good-Intentioned:** All NPCs involved have good intentions, even if they do stupid things or lash out when hurt.
- ✪ **Be Adaptable:** The Final Missive provides something interesting that happens in the wider background of the kingdom, or within the regions where the player's characters live. In this way, the next Postmaster has a story hook they can use, or something colorful and amusing to entertain the group. The world around the *caballeros* changes in reaction to the things they do.

Non-Player Characters

NPCs are the adversaries, allies, support characters, and background characters the *caballeros* encounter in the game.

When making an NPC, think of their color and Cabie Mark, and any special abilities they might have. Because you control them, NPCs don't have keywords, but you can give them 3 traits that help guide what kind of characters they are.

The First Missive

The First Missive sets up the challenge your players will interact with in the course of this round. The challenge should be something they might respond to, or something that worries them about the world at large. Here are some challenges you can use:

- ✪ The World's Fair is coming! How will you participate? Are you competing for Best Demonstration?
- ✪ Soldiers from a nearby kingdom have become lost and wind up barracked in nearby towns. Are they nice? Mean? Should you help them?
- ✪ Election Day is coming for local mayors and the Caballa Council. Who are you voting for, and can you convince your friends to vote for them, too?
- ✪ The first day of school is coming up. All caballeros report to Orientation next week!
- ✪ A flu sweeps through town, laying everyone low. What advice can you share with each other to cure your illnesses, and who's trying to follow it?
- ✪ Mysterious creatures have been spotted out in the farms, and there are strange circle patterns cut into the crops. What's going on?

TIP: When you write the First Missive, decide what happens at the mid-point and at the Final Missive if the characters don't do anything to affect the challenge. This is useful in case your players don't send any Missives at all during the five days they have to respond to your First Missive and the Mid-round Missive. Be prepared, even hopeful, that you will never use those notes, because your players will change everything!

Send an initial set of letters written in the voice of non-player characters whom the player characters know – neighbors, relatives, friends, and so on. You can also use public missives, such as radio transcripts, telegrams, newspaper articles, advertisements, Wanted posters, and other public decrees.

The players will react by writing to each other, to NPCs, and perhaps to you directly to ask questions or describe what they do. Remember that all "official" Missives must be in the form of a document-- the players cannot send you a description of what they want to do, it must be written out as something they already did.

Continuing the Story

After players have had five days to respond, take into account their actions, including effects for any keywords they have sent you. then describes the results. You may create, modify, or destroy anything in the game except the *caballeros*, and you must respect the keywords your players invoke in their Missives.

Write a mid-round Public Missive that goes out to everyone, presenting how the challenge has been shaped by the players in the first half of the round. Like the Final Missive, this should be a public document, like a notice or advertisement or newspaper article.

The players then have five more days to respond to the challenge and continue the story before you write the Final Missive.

The Final Missive: Ending the Round

Prepare the Final Missive as a public broadcast of some kind. It might be a newspaper article, or an excerpt of a future history book, a public notice, a radio broadcast transcript, or even a new law of the land passed as a result of the challenge and the players' reactions to it. Send the Final Missive to all players and announce the next Postmaster, choosing from any players who haven't been the Postmaster yet.

The Final Missive should contain all the story hooks that the next Postmaster might use; you should never feel like you need to send the next Postmaster a special message with notes or secrets they should use. At the end of the round, anything that is going to be carried forward is either public, or no longer relevant.

After you have sent the Final Missive to all players and the next Postmaster has taken over, you may refresh all your previously-used keywords (from previous rounds of the game). In addition, you may add your Master Keyword or replace it if you already have one. You can only have one Master Keyword at a time.

Playing a Round

Players take on the roles of *caballeros* and one takes on the role of the Postmaster. The players must use letters written to each other and NPCs to perform all actions. All Missives must be copied to the Postmaster in order to count for the round. All official Missives from players must be in the form of a personal document-- a letter, a journal entry, a travel itinerary-- in order to "count" towards the story. **Do not write a narrative story to the Postmaster saying what your character wants to do. Just write the document that shows you already did it.**

You have five days to send Missives to each other and to the Postmaster before the Postmaster produces a mid-round report of some kind – a newspaper article or radio broadcast transcript for example - that summarizes the result of all the player's actions and the consequences that follow. Then the players have an additional five days to send Missives to each other and the Postmaster before the round ends and the Postmaster sends the Final Missive.

Order of Play

1. The Postmaster sends a public Missive to all players, and may follow up with some personal Missives from NPCs to set up the round.
2. For 5 days, players send Missives to each other and to NPCs to talk about and interact with what's going on. The Postmaster can respond as NPCs.
3. After 5 days, the Postmaster sends another public Missive to all players reflecting what has happened so far.
4. The players have 5 more days to interact with the events and resolve them.
5. Finally, the Postmaster sends a Final Missive wrapping up this part of the story.
6. The Postmaster chooses a Master Keyword and selects a new Postmaster to start the next round.

You may write letters to each other, to non-player characters (NPCs), or the Postmaster directly in the form of a journal or diary entry. These can be used to build character backstory, elaborate on the local setting where their character lives, or express a PC's secret motives for actions they are performing.

Once a full round of posts have been made and the Postmaster has sent the Final Missive, play shifts so that a new player becomes the Postmaster and the previous Postmaster has a chance to play a *caballero*.

Writing a Missive

As a *caballero*, your Missives will be entirely personal documents. You will write letters to other *caballeros* and to non-player characters. You might also write a journal entry for yourself.

Missives must always be in the form of a document you might write or create in course of your life. They are not short stories. If there is a story in them, it's a story that you're telling someone else (which means it's told from your point of view, and might be embellished by your perspective!)

When you write a Missive, make sure you send a copy to the Postmaster. Missives that you don't send to the Postmaster don't count!

Using Colors, Cabie Marks, and Master Keywords

As a *caballero*, when writing a Missive, you can invoke your Color, Cabie Mark, or Master Keyword, to compel the Postmaster to affect the story in the manner specified by the character trait you invoked.

To invoke a keyword, include a note at the top of the Missive that says "keyword:" followed by the type of keyword, the target, and what your intention is. For example:

Keyword: Color: Orange. Target: Green Star. I want Green Star to come into enough money to join us at the World's Fair.

Dear Green Star,

Juniper and I are so excited about the World's Fair this year! It's so close, I can hardly believe it's practically walking distance. Juniper says there are some rides we can go on, and a radio broadcast going all day through the fair.

I really hope you can find a way to make it out for it! You can stay with me when you visit, and Juniper says he'll make his special honey bread just for you.

Best,

Orange Clover

● ● ●

*Dear Snowleaper,
Juniper and Orange Clover
and I had a wonderful time
yesterday at the World's Fair!
We rode the new standing
Ferris Wheel and munched on
some really sweet oats. I wish
you'd been there to see it all--
you would have loved the
vaudeville show we saw with
the talking ducks! Thank you
so much for paying me back
for those magic spells. It was
just in time for me to get a
train ticket to go!*

● ● ●

Ending a Story Arc

After everyone has been the Postmaster one time, it's time to end the Story Arc. As a group, decide how the big event has changed during the time. It may have changed in response to the *caballeros*, or it might have resolved naturally (for example, natural disasters usually end naturally). A Story Arc might completely go away, such as an election that ends with the incumbent. More often, though, it will resolve in a way that changes Cabaiilla permanently. A war resolves when one side loses. A new continent's discovery resolves when trade routes are established with it, or a map is completed of the new land. A technological change resolves when the technology becomes commonplace. And so on.

After the story arc ends, each player writes a personal diary entry for their *caballero*, which is posted to all the players, describing how they feel about the new changes in the world, and what they might want to do next.

If desired, the group can start a new Story Arc, or end the game there. Players can leave the game now, and new players can come in.

Exploring Greater Cabaiilla

The magical kingdom of Greater Cabaiilla stretches across most of the continent. The kingdom is ruled by a council of four elders – two mares and two stallions. Local cities and towns have their own governments controlled by mayors.

Technology is at the level of 1930's Western America. Electricity is uncommon outside of urban areas. Long-distance communication takes place via modified telegraphs, which allow a *caballero* in one location to operate extra large telegraph transmitters with their hooves to be received by a telegraph operator on the other end. Overland travel is largely by rail, though there are express postal routes carried by swift ponies relaying important documents from station to station.

Most of the population still live in small towns and work the land to produce food. Owning weapons is not normal (firearms do not exist), and Greater Cabaiilla is – by default – almost entirely peaceful.

By default, there are no humans in Cabaiilla, though discovering an unknown part of the world where such creatures exist could be a story arc to explore.

Greater Cabaiilla has a Latin American cultural look and feel to it. It's physical geography is meant to be a blend of the United States and various Latin American countries. Players and the Postmaster are free to use as much or as little of these many landscapes as they wish.

Magic and the Supernatural

The supernatural entities and mythology present in the game also come from Latin American cultures, and you are free to present them in the game as possible threats, allies, or curiosities. The following is by no means an exhaustive list, only the most well-known:

- ✧ **alligatormen:** the original Killer Croc
- ✧ **blessed virgins:** goddess figures who watch over specific towns or regions.
- ✧ **chanque:** elementals, spirits of natural forces
- ✧ **chonchon:** magical bird people
- ✧ **chupacabras:** blood-sucking possessed pinata-looking creatures with razor sharp fangs.
- ✧ **curandero:** magical healers. A mixture of shaman and saint.
- ✧ **darkumles:** black mules who can summon storms. The sight of one is bad luck.
- ✧ **Day of the Dead:** The day when the spirits of all those who have died in the year or been put down are permanently laid to rest. They are guided into the Underworld to make way for all the souls of those yet to be born. A time of celebration, like waving off of a new ship on its maiden voyage.
- ✧ **devil oil:** a good luck charm that wards off evil
- ✧ **duendue:** dwarf or gnome-like fair folk who grant wishes
- ✧ **flying snakes:** Magical flying snakes.
- ✧ **feathered serpents:** providing visions of the future
- ✧ **imbuche:** twisted warlocks with patchwork
- ✧ **llorna:** weeping ghost-fae type figures who capture children.
- ✧ **luz mala:** aggressive wil-o-wisp type spirits
- ✧ **magical dances:** many magic rituals take the form of special folk dances performed in elaborate costumes.
- ✧ **mohana:** river spirits who take the form of freshwater dolphins
- ✧ **nahual:** sorcerers who can shift into deadly animals
- ✧ **papa bois:** hulking satyr-like figures with leaves in place of hair who guard animals and trees.
- ✧ **sack men:** terrifying boogie-men type creatures
- ✧ **seguas:** horse-headed vampires with blood-shot eyes who feed on fear.
- ✧ **sibons:** whistling ghosts who eat horse flesh. The farther away the whistle, the closer they are.
- ✧ **sombrerons:** black-skinned goblin-like figures who's heads are hidden by their large dark hats. Bewitch people into being unable to eat or sleep.
- ✧ **viuditas:** black-veiled seductress tricksters who seek out unfaithful men to play pranks on. Have no mouth or hair.
- ✧ **Vivoron:** a massive black snake who makes pacts with corrupt rulers to devour sacrifices in exchange for favors.
- ✧ **wekufe:** summoned creatures who's morality reflects the true morality of their summoner. Used by sorcerers as servants and assassins.
- ✧ **xtabays:** supernatural prostitutes combining a succubui and Santa Claus. Give what their lovers pay them with to the poor and helpless, are guarded by neighborhood dogs, and when one is killed, beautiful flowers will grow where one is buried.
- ✧ **xolotl:** Sentient talking dogs who can hear and deliver messages from the dead.

Recommended Music for Inspiration

The soundtracks for *Carnivale* (the television series), *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Legends of the Fall*, *Medicine Man*, *A River Runs Through It*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Village*, and *Warhorse*.

Traditional music from Central America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and South America are also excellent contribution to your *Pony Express* soundtrack.

Credits

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