

When the Dark is Gone

When the Dark is Gone

By Becky Annison

Introduction

Imagine the children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. They visited a magical land, fought battles alongside talking animals and centaurs and won a war against a powerful and evil enemy. Then they returned home, no-one would believe them and they were back to war time rations and maths homework.

What does that feel like?

How do you live with the memories of what you saw?

How did Edmund deal with the fact that Aslan was tortured and killed for him? How did Susan and Lucy deal with watching Aslan die, even knowing he was later resurrected?

Did Edmund drown his sorrows in alcohol and drugs, did Lucy vent her repressed rage by being violent towards her loving husband?

Did they end up in therapy?

The players in this game are all Clients in a real-world, modern day setting undergoing group therapy. They all have serious psychological disorders which are damaging them and those closest to them. Everyone has come to the therapy session as a final attempt to get their lives back on track.

This game is recommended for 3-4 players.

The Clients have a shared history and childhood. Between the ages of 6 and 12 they spent most school Summer holidays together. None of them have clear memories of those holidays other than the knowledge that they were important and have somehow bound them together for life.

The Clients have all repressed memories of a magical world that they visited often in those Summer holidays. Many things happened in that far away land and those repressed memories hold the key as to why the Clients have all self-destructed so spectacularly in the years since. Players will build up and create the memories of what happened in that world; uncover the events that scarred them and work to resolve them to allow each client to heal.

You can use a pre-existing world from children's fantasy fiction or create your own entirely new fantasy world through play.

But the key driver for all the Clients is:

You are in the game to sort out and resolve your problems together.

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This is a game exploring the dark side of the human psyche. High levels of immersion are encouraged but please do be sensible, **there may be material in this game which could be triggering or upsetting so be thoughtful and respectful in how you approach it.** It is not cool to bring your real world issues and relationship problems to the game and expect the other players to deal with them.

The Only Truth that Counts is Your Truth.

Unlike many other low-prep games there is no system for determining who “wins” or is what is “true”. This means that if one player recounts a memory of an event and another player does not wish that event to have happened there is no dice roll or GM decision to make the final call on what really happened.

How are we going to manage role-playing without a way to make decisions?

Firstly there is an element of consensus world building: the players all agree before the start that there was a magical world you visited and you have forgotten it. Secondly, before the session begins (“Time In”), you agree some basic details about what happened, write them on the Seed Sheet.

After Time In the Therapist will guide the session but there will be no arbitration or mechanism to determine the Truth. Conflicting versions of the same events are encouraged, what is important is how the clients process and resolve how they feel about the events and that includes how they feel about the fact their memories may disagree.

The only Truth that counts is how you feel; that is the key to your Healing Process.

Guidance for Playing the Therapy Clients

Your goals in the game are:

1. Create the event(s) which occurred in the magical world that you have repressed.
2. Understand how those event(s) have led to your current psychological problems.
3. Work through resolving those problems.
4. Assist the other Clients in resolving their problems and your troubled relationships with them.

Find your trigger event/s and weave it into your redemption.

Character Set Up Phase

1. Who are you?

What is your:

Name

Age

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Occupation

Physical description

An interesting fun fact no-one knows about you.

2. What is your Psychological Disorder?

There is a list of psychological disorders below. Please feel free to invent your own.

Depression Obsession/Stalking Self-Harm Anger Issues Control Issues Domestic/other violence Anxiety Eating Disorders Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Phobias	Victim Complex White Knight Syndrome Paranoia Addiction: Drugs, Alcohol, Adrenalin, Gambling, Sex Unable to engage with others on an Emotional level. Suicidal Tendencies Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Separation Anxiety.
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Whatever you pick must be serious enough to be destroying your life and the lives of those closest to you.

If you want to create your own disorder then the following guidelines will help you to design something which works in this style of game.

A good disorder is one which is a recognisable and otherwise understandable human behaviour which has been taken to an extreme and destructive level. Choose a disorder which has obvious and many routes to improvement and resolution through the course of the session.

Playing a syndrome such as Schizophrenia is not recommended as conditions of this type are poorly understood by most people. Players may find it difficult to play or play with a character with such a disorder and the game may well become a disrespectful parody.

3. Who are the other players to you?

All of the Clients are childhood friends who spent long, halcyon Summers together from the ages of around 6 to 12. Of these childhood friends, you still have a particularly close relationship with two of them.

You need to define and agree these two relationships on your character sheet.

Suggested relationships are:

Partner/Civil Partner/Wife/Husband/Boyfriend/Girlfriend
Work Supervisor/Boss/Business Partners
Siblings/Cousins
Illicit Lovers
Best Friends
Drug Dealer and Customer

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Carer and person being cared for
Prostitute and Pimp
Priest & Parishioner

Your relationships should be complex and have two sides to them. On the one hand you will have hurt each other badly over the years; however there is always something in the other person which reminds you of how great your relationship could be/was.

There **MUST** be something redeeming in the person/relationship which means you can't give up on each other.

We always hurt those we love the most.

4. Why are you in Therapy?

For each relationship you have chosen please agree with the player of that character one or more events where you hurt, betrayed or damaged the other person.

Suggested events:

Lying or other manipulation.
Stealing money.
Being violent or otherwise abusive.
Selling drugs to someone they cared about.
Infidelity
Prostitution
Humiliating them in front of friends/family/publicly.
Stealing someone's partner
Ending up in Hospital
Any form of betrayal...

These are the tipping points which forced you to seek help.

5. What is your secret?

Write down one secret you have kept from each of your relationships.

Your aim is to bring these out at the most dramatic moment possible during the game.

6. The Many Paths to Redemption

No matter what you have done there is something good and worthy in you. Something the people in your life recognise; the reason they haven't given up on you. The good in you might have been buried for a long time, but it will resurface given half a chance.

What is your redeeming quality?

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7. “I do have one memory.”

All the players will share and agree on remembering one short/sketchy event from their Summer holidays together in the magical land. This will help create enough story scaffolding to get the game going in the early stages so be sure to seed the event with enough hooks to get the creative process flowing.

Write this memory on the Seed Sheet.

Playing the Game

This is a full immersion role-playing game. That means everything said and done is In Character including the Therapist. The Therapist cannot and will not make any GM calls during the game.

For example: you can answer the questions the Therapist asks but you **cannot** ask them to make any GM decisions e.g. what does the room look like?

The onus is on you to create stories about the magical land in play and use these as fodder for interesting conversations dealing with your problems and issues. There is a natural tendency to be cautious about just *making stuff up*. Especially stuff which involves other players.

Ignore this concern.

Make up what you like, they are only your memories and your memory can be fallible.

If another player disagrees with your memory of events, this is fantastic! Now you can explore in-character why you disagree. This is great fodder for exploring your relationship problems.

For example: Say you remember another Client betraying you by leaving you in the prison of an evil goblin. They remember having to make a terrible choice between letting you stay in the prison or staying with them and being hunted by The Wild Hunt. The space between these two versions of reality could spark a conversation about one character's infidelity in their current relationship.

Equally, don't feel upset if another Client makes up something about you. Just use the opportunity to have a cool conversation disagreeing with their memory.

In the first play-test two Clients disagreed about the role a 3rd Client played in the magical land. The 3rd Client didn't choose one version or the other. They simply allowed more story to develop from the fact of the ambiguity – this was far more interesting than just rolling a dice to establish the “Truth”.

Don't feel pressured to bring out all the plot elements and all the issues on your character sheet; make it into a campaign if you want instead.

Suggested Reading.

The following books are excellent examples of the genre:

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The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis

The Dark is Rising series by Susan Cooper

The Chrestomanci series by Dianne Wynne Jones

5 Children and It by E. Nesbit

Bad Blood by Rhiannon Lassiter

Verdigris Deep by Frances Hardinge

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Client File Notes

Full Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Description:

One Fun Fact That No-one Else Knows About You:

Psychological Disorder:

Cornerstone Relationship One (Name and Relationship Type):

Relationship One Challenges (Betrayals and Hurts):

Relationship One Secret:

Cornerstone Relationship Two (Name and Relationship Type):

Relationship Two Challenges (Betrayals and Hurts):

Relationship Two Secret:

My Best Quality (redeeming feature):

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Story Seed Sheet

Clients: As a group agree 10 phrases, words, short event descriptions of the fantasy world you visited as children. Use these as plot hooks and story seeds to kickstart the creative thinking process in the session.

[Examples could include: Name of the Fantasy World, Magic, Artifacts, Important Events, Important People, Enemies and Allies, Magical Creatures/Races etc.]

Write one agreed shared memory...albeit sketchy.

Guidance for the Therapist.

Your Role

This is a game created, in play, entirely by the Client players. The Therapist takes the role of a Game Facilitator rather than a traditional GM. The Therapist is there to keep the momentum going and to prompt the players with questions.

It is crucial that these questions do not refer to any details not already provided by the players – this is their story to tell, you are merely there to help them bring it out. The Therapist should not introduce any plot elements – they can only refer to plot elements already mentioned in play by the clients.

You are Therapist, you are there to listen, not to judge or create!

You have 5 key roles:

5. Establish an atmosphere of immersion (keep the players in character).

[Example: Only talk In Character as the Therapist. There is no need for GM calls so there is no need to break character. If the players make Out Of Character jokes or have conversations which are not on topic then as the character of the Therapist ignore this and ask them to rejoin the conversation of the group.]

6. Ask questions and make suggestions to move the story along if it appears to stall or the players are having trouble finding a resolution. Try to use open questions rather than closed questions (i.e. ones which can only have a yes or no answer) since these may encourage the Clients to clam up. Avoid leading questions. More on this in Pacing below.

[Do Say: “You mentioned someone called Aslan earlier? Can you tell us more about them?”]

Don't Say: “You mentioned someone called Aslan earlier? What happened to them, did they die?”]

7. Keep asking questions to encourage the players to reflect on their feelings and recollections, including their feelings about what other players say. Don't project your own feelings into the group.

[Do Say: “Edmund, what was going through your mind when you decided to eat the Turkish Delight?”]

Don't Say: “So after you ate the Turkish Delight, what happened next!!!!????!?”]

8. Ensure that all players get equal time in the spotlight

Use the Spotlight Sheet to keep track of conversations. If anyone seems to be lacking in spotlight time and other players are dominating the conversation then use questions to draw the quieter players back in.

[Do Say: “You are very quiet Lucy? Can you tell me how you feel about what Edmund just said?”]

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1. Pacing

There are 4 key aspects to pacing the game.

- a) Move the players through the set up stage in about an hour.
- b) Take 15 minutes to prelude each player as the Therapist to help them get into character (Skip this stage if you are short on time).
- c) Talk less not more.

As the Therapist character you have responsibility for pacing and maintaining the energy in the room. There is a huge temptation to fill any awkward silence with your voice. **Resist this.** Awkward silences can be hugely charged and evocative and are to be expected in the setting of a Therapy. When you encounter such a silence **hold off from talking for several beats longer than feels comfortable to you.** The longer you can hold off the greater the chance that a player will want to talk to fill the gap. In that space is where some of the most evocative scenes can happen.

- d) Build in an Out of Character comfort break of 5 mins after each hour. Signal this by saying as the Therapist *"I think we should all take a 5 minutes comfort break."*

Session Rules

At the start of the Out of Character session establish the House Rules for the game. These should include, but are not limited to:

Asking everyone to list items they don't want to be in the game e.g. out of character phobia, issues which might be triggering for people such as child abuse.

Setting rules for physical interaction (you may wish to ban it) in the session depending on what is appropriate for the player group.

If anyone feels like they need a break for whatever reason they should say *"I need to take a break"* and walk out. Once they are out of the room they are Out Of Character and the other players are not to follow them and continue In-Character discussions. Once the players come back into the room they are back In Character.

At the start of each In Character session establish the House Rules for the Therapy Group. This will set atmosphere and tone but also provide a framework for structuring the conversations. If the players get so into character that in a moment of anger they break the rules, that is all to the good – it means they are fully immersed. However the Therapist should bring the rules back on track so that the session can continue in a constructive way.

["We all agree:

*Not to Interrupt when another person is talking.
To Listen respectfully to each other."]*

Starting the In-Character Session.

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At the start of the session the players will probably sit in silence not knowing how to begin. This is where most of the Therapist's work will be in getting the session going.

The Therapist should go round the room asking everyone to introduce themselves, give their fun fact and explain why they have come to today's session. You may want to ask a few more questions at this point such as:

[“You mentioned [x], how does that make you feel?”

“Susan, Peter just described some feelings of blame and guilt he has. How do you feel about that?”

“Can you remember what is happening or what you are feeling just before your panic attacks start?”

“You mentioned Aslan just now. Can you explain what this figure meant to you?”]

Wrapping Up the In-Character Session.

There is no natural end point for this game. As there is no obvious climax or win condition. Even when it seems like a story thread might be finished another can always emerge.

Therefore deciding when to end the game is down to the Therapist. When you feel it is appropriate to end things (perhaps because a number of the players have progressed in their healing, or maybe the energy in the room is flagging) then you finish up by saying that the therapy session is drawing to a close.

I recommend going round the room once asking each player to expressed how they feel they have moved on in their healing process today, or give everyone a sense of closure. Then call Time Out.

IMPORTANT RULE.

This is a game about ordinary people talking through their problems and finding how to be at peace with themselves and each other. It is not about “getting back to the magical land”. The entire premise of the game is that they **cannot** go back and have to find a way to deal with it.

Other Options

Moving the Players towards exploring the magical land.

The Clients may be reluctant to mention the magical land for perfectly normal reasons e.g. not wanting to appear crazy to the Therapist.

This is the only time the “**do not introduce plot**” rule should be waived. You can assume that in previous one-to-one therapy sessions with the Therapist that someone mentioned the land. In which case ask a question about it and then leave it alone.

However in this case the “**hold off from talking for several beats longer than feels comfortable to you**” rule still applies.

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Be very cautious in using this option, in the first play-test no-one talked about the magical land for the first 45 minutes of the game and it was fine.

Periods of Reflection

Mid-way through the session you may wish to take an Out Of Character break to reflect on how the game is going and whether there is anything you could do improve it.

For example is a player having trouble bringing out an aspect of their plot.

This is optional because it will break the immersion and energy of the session. But it may well be worth it to ensure that you are able to reach more intense interactions later on.

Turning this into a Campaign

In the first play test it became clear that there was plenty of material for a campaign.

If you wanted to turn this into a short prep-less campaign. I would do a number of additional things.

5. Pre-agree a set number of short sessions. Six two-hour long In Character sessions would be ideal.
6. Take brief notes on what has been revealed (about the Clients emotions and about the magical land) during the game and do a short In Character recap at the start of each session.
7. Prepare one question to ask each Client at the start of the next session. This will help re-establish the momentum.
8. Make time at the end or beginning of a session to have the optional reflection period to make sure that next session is covering everything it needs to (done in this way it won't break the energy of the game).

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Spotlight Tracking Sheet

Therapist: Use this sheet to keep track of the spotlight time of each player. Write the name of each character in one of the ovals. During the game mark a line near the circle each time the player gets a reasonable amount of spotlight time. When one or two of the players are looking like they haven't got as many marks as the others then use questions as the Therapist to draw the action back to this player or a relationship between two players.

