

Monsterhearts

2



Credits

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For more visit www.buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts

∞ Contents ∞

5	Chapter One: How The Game Works
57	Chapter Two: Preparing to Play
73	Chapter Three: Keeping Your Heart Safe
83	Chapter Four: MCing
113	Chapter Five: The Skins
155	Chapter Six: Making It Your Own
167	Chapter Seven: Taking Inspiration

By the time they hit adolescence, most people have gotten over their fear of the dark. They spend their midnight hour on gushy phone calls, diary ramblings, and wet dreams. They fall asleep peacefully, assured that the shadows hold no monsters.

But the shadows do hold monsters. You know because you're one of them. Wickedness dwells within your heart, hunger courses through your veins. High school weighs on you and teen drama puts you on edge, but you have power. What will you do next?

Chapter 1:

How The Game Works





Audience

Monsterhearts 2 is intended for 3-5 players, and a session takes 2-4 hours. One of the players sitting down at the table takes on the role of the MC, and plays by a different set of rules. You can choose to play this game as a one-shot or across a short campaign of several sessions.

This game is queer, meaning that it pushes back against the heterosexist framework that underlies so many of our culture's stories. When you play, you contend with all the chaotic possibility and uncertainty of desire.



High School Horror Show



Monsterhearts 2 is about the messy lives of teenagers who are secretly monsters. It explores the terror and confusion of having a body that is changing without your permission. The monstrosity of these characters is literal: they are vampires, werewolves, witches, and more. But their monstrosity is also allegorical, standing in for experiences of alienation, shame, queerness, and self-destruction.

Aside from the MC, each player is in charge of creating and playing a single main character. Each of those main characters starts with a Skin that defines what kind of monster they are. Skins are both literal and allegorical. 'The Vampire' is an actual vampire, an immortal being who drinks blood. But they are also a manipulative person who treats consent like a game. They're both things at once, and the ebb and flow between them will help define the character's story.

Throughout the book you will find a series of examples, demonstrating the intricacies of the game. The first is below.

Josh gathers together three friends to play Monsterhearts. He takes on the role of the MC.

*Cody creates a Werewolf named **Cassidy**, a jock who lives way out by the woods. Gabriela creates a Witch named **Gerard**, bedecked in eyeliner and combat boots, who learned his first spell from the liner notes of the most recent Jackals of Disorder album. Lorraine creates a Mortal named **Laeli**, an aspiring writer who keeps having nightmares about being eaten alive. Laeli's dating Gerard, whereas Cassidy hates him because he listens to whinge metal.*





The Conversation

Monsterhearts was built on the framework of another game: Apocalypse World by D. Vincent Baker and Meguey Baker. Apocalypse World is about sexy badasses in post-apoc community, and it's worth getting your hands on. In its pages, the Bakers introduce the idea of the conversation:

You probably know this already: roleplaying is a conversation. You and the other players go back and forth, talking about these fictional characters in their fictional circumstances doing whatever it is that they do. Like any conversation, you take turns, but it's not like taking turns, right? Sometimes you talk over each other, interrupt, build on each other's ideas, monopolize. All fine.

All these rules do is mediate the conversation. They kick in when someone says some particular things, and they impose constraints on what everyone should say after. Makes sense, right?

8

Monsterhearts is also a conversation. It meanders sometimes, but it goes somewhere. You build off the things that other people say. Each player is in charge of one main character: what they think, say, and do. As those main characters live their lives, the players interact with rules that help to sculpt the story as well as shake it up at key moments. The exception to all this is the MC, a player who fills a different role in the conversation. The MC is in charge of all the side characters, as well as framing scenes and managing the setting. The MC has a different role, but it's not you against the MC. It's a conversation, and you're in it together.



The Agenda

Everyone sitting down at the table shares this four-part Agenda:

- ✦ Make each main character's life not boring.
- ✦ Keep the story feral.
- ✦ Say what the rules demand.
- ✦ Say what honesty demands.

This isn't a list that you need to memorize or check off. Instead, it's four ideas that reinforce one another and help communicate the spirit of the game.

Make each main character's life not boring.

As a player, part of your job is to advocate for your character. But being their advocate doesn't mean it's your job to keep them safe. It's not. It's your job to make their life not boring. It's about figuring out who they are, what they want, and what they'll do to get it – even if that exposes them to danger. Your character can't emerge triumphant if you aren't willing to see them through some shit.

Unlike some roleplaying games, *Monsterhearts* doesn't have an endgame or an explicit goal to shoot for. You are left to determine what it is that your character wants, and pursue that in any way that makes sense to you. Since the default setting is a high school, there are a few goals that nearly everyone is going to have: saving face, gaining friends and social security, figuring out who their enemies are, getting social leverage on others, dumping their pain on other people. If you aren't sure who your character is, start with those things and build from there. Soon, you'll likely find yourself embroiled in situations that demand action, and what your character wants will emerge from that.



***Keep the story feral.***

The conversation that you have with the other players and with the rules create a story that couldn't have existed in your head alone. As you play, you might feel an impulse to domesticate that story. You form an awesome plan for exactly what could happen next, and where the story could go. In your head, it's spectacular. All you'd need to do is dictate what the other players should do, ignore the dice once or twice, and force your idea into existence. In short: you'd have to take control.

The game loses its magic when any one player attempts to take control of the story. It becomes small enough to fit inside one person's head. The other players turn into audience members instead of participants. Nobody's experience is enriched when one person turns the collective conversation into their own private story.

So avoid this impulse. Let the story's messy, chaotic momentum guide it forward. In any given moment, focus on reacting to the other players. Allow others to foil your plans, or improve upon them. Trust that good story emerges from wildness. Play to find out what happens next. Let yourself be surprised.

Say what the rules demand.

The dice are there on purpose. They aren't for ambiance, or as an obstacle to clear before getting to the real story. The rules for moves exist because constraints lead to creativity and chance leads to unexpected twists. You're supposed to fail sometimes. You're supposed to be caught off guard.

The rules will interrupt you, and thank goodness that they do. Every time you pick up the dice, you invite a little bit of the wild unknown in to your story. You are taking all the plans that have been shaping up in your head, all the expectations you've attached to this moment, and you are putting them at risk. The dice are there on purpose. They help keep the story feral.

When you say something that triggers a move, you follow through. When you pick up the dice, you invite them to change everything. Listen to them, and say what the rules demand.



***Say what honesty demands.***

Cultivating an air of mystery can be fun, but it's important to communicate with your fellow players, even if your character is doing their best to keep secrets. If people don't know what your character wants, what they're hiding, or who they really are, then it becomes hard to actually engage that character. Remember that this is a conversation. Actually saying the things you're thinking is important if you want people to be able to respond to them. Sometimes that means saying, "My character is furious, though he's doing his best to keep it suppressed." Sometimes it means saying, "I think my character died down by the railyard a year ago, but so far nobody knows she's a ghoul. They think she's still just Becky." Trust your fellow players and give them the information they need to tell a good story with you.

Communicate what you're feeling and needing, too! If a scene is going down that you're not comfortable with, you have every right to say something. While it's important to say what the rules demand, it's also important to make sure we all feel safe and grounded when we play.

MC, another kind of honesty is demanded of you. When you give players information, be generous and helpful. When someone's fate is in your hands, be scrupulous. Resist pettiness. Honour the strengths and resources of every character, and don't play gotcha. At the same time, trust yourself to introduce real consequences. Be honest with those consequences, too – go for the throat when the moment demands it.



Framing Scenes

Play is divided into scenes, just like in a movie or TV show. And just like in a movie or TV show, not every moment has to happen 'on screen.' The MC and the players make decisions about what's important enough to show, when the scene should end, and what the group should skip to next. As you play, the MC will ask a lot of questions, and some of the answers will become the foundation for new scenes.

The process of starting a new scene is called scene framing. Often, it's a very simple process. After one scene ends, the MC can turn to a player and say something like, "So, Amylen, while those two are fighting in the change room, where are you?" The player who is playing Amylen can respond, then, with action taking place in a new scene: "Yeah, I've ditched out of my next class, and am walking around the mall. I think I plan to steal something - maybe a handbag." The MC can respond by fleshing out the scene a bit more, describing the crowds and the mall itself. Or, the MC can ask questions about those topics, and Amylen's player can fill in those details. Or, another player can suggest that they're there too, and jump in with their character.

The MC has authority over scene framing. This means that the MC is the one who ultimately decides where the next scene starts and what is happening. However, the MC is invited to share that authority and responsibility whenever doing so makes sense. If it's clear to the MC what the next moment of action or brooding gloom will be, they can dive into that scene. If it isn't clear, they can ask questions in order to give others an opportunity to introduce interesting situations.





Moves and Rolling

During scenes, you contribute to the conversation. Describe what your character is feeling, say what they say. Describe their actions and how they move through their environment. It's fine to talk in the first person ("I squeeze between the two desks while muttering under my breath") or in the third ("Jane squeezes between the two desks while muttering under her breath"). Most people slip in and out of these different approaches, organically and sometimes without even noticing. It's also fine to borrow narrative techniques from other mediums, perhaps describing how the camera pans across your bedroom as if it was a movie, or describing a character's internal monologue, as though they were in a book.

14

Sometimes, you'll say something that triggers a move. Moves are rules for doing particular things, and many involve rolling dice once they kick in. There are basic moves that every main character has, like *Turn Someone On* and *Lash Out Physically*. There are also moves that are specific to each Skin, like the Vampire's *Feeding* or the Werewolf's *Heightened Senses*. When you narrate your character doing something described by a move, you follow the rules for that move. On the other hand, if you want the benefit of a certain move, you need to first describe your character taking appropriate action. Either way, you end up with rules and story inseparably entwined.

Sometimes, there isn't a 'right move' – sometimes you can't get what you want, at least not directly. Don't try to bend every situation to cram in moves. Sometimes the conversation is just a conversation. There are lots of things that can happen in this game without any moves being triggered. If you find yourself studying the list of basic moves to figure out which one 'fits' the current situation, consider that it might not be any of them. That's totally fine.





If a move involves rolling dice, it'll specify which of your four stats to use: Hot, Cold, Volatile, or Dark. Roll two dice and add your stat to the sum. If your Hot is 2 and you're asked to 'roll with hot', then you roll two dice and add 2. If you roll a 3 and a 4, then your final total would be 9.

A result of 10 or higher is good. A result of 7 to 9 is often complicated. You may be asked to make some hard choices or pay a price, but you will probably still get what you want out of the deal. A 6 or less means you're unsuccessful, and the MC will likely introduce some unpleasant consequences.

Moves emerge from the conversation and the results of the move become part of it, too. When something happens because of a move, make sure to go around the scene, to see how things have changed as a result. How do others feel about what just happened? How do they react? Who is caught off guard and who seizes a moment of opportunity? If someone just *Lashed Out Physically* at your character, it might be tempting to automatically reach for the dice to *Lash Out Physically* right back. But the conversation isn't there just yet. We need to see how the outcomes of that first move play out - what the other characters actually think and do in response, even if only a moment passes in the action of the story.

Moves and the MC

The MC doesn't play by the same set of rules as everyone else. Their side characters don't trigger moves, and they don't roll dice. Instead, part of the MC's job is setting up situations that push the other players to make moves and roll dice. The MC role is explained in chapter 4.





Strings

Strings represent the emotional power that you have over others. You gain Strings on specific individuals, and can then spend them as a sort of currency during interactions with those individuals. Strings can be earned by *Turning Someone On*, *Shutting Someone Down*, or in ways specific to each Skin. Strings are abstract, reflecting a general shift in power within a relationship. There is no specific response demanded when someone gains a String, other than playing your character with authenticity as power dynamics are shifting.

There is a space to keep track of Strings on the character sheet. The best way to use that space is to list the other characters, and then whenever you gain a String on one of them draw a little circle next to their name. When you spend the String, fill in the circle.

16

Whenever you spend a String, there should be something in the fiction to explain the mechanical effect. If you're adding 1 to a roll against them, what's causing that effect? Do you utter some snide remark that throws them off balance? Or if you're tempting them to do your bidding, how do you use your emotional hold to do that? Do you dangle a juicy secret in return for their obedience, or is it your seductive allure drawing them in? Sometimes it can help to think back to how you got the String in the first place.

Strings are spent using the *Pulling Strings* basic move, detailed on page 26.

Side characters can also gain Strings on main characters. That's covered on page 100.





As they walk across town together after school, Laeli tells Gerard about all the assignments and projects she has due. She's clearly nervous about it, checking the time on her phone repeatedly as they walk toward her house. Gerard tries to reassure her: "Babe, you need to lighten up. You're always freaking out about school, but it's just not that big of a deal. You get good grades, you'd still get good grades if you relaxed and coasted a little." But Laeli barely hears him. She's still focused on talking herself through her to-do list.

"I'm serious. Forget about your assignments for the day. Come down to the cove with me. We can pick up some food. We can make out on the beach as the tide slowly washes over us." Gerard is trying his best to sway Laeli, and Gabriella decides that he's spending a String to **tempt her to do what he wants**. On Gerard's character sheet it notes that he has several Strings on Laeli, represented by little circles next to her name. Gabriella fills one of them in.

17

Gabriella remembers a little detail about how Gerard gained one of those Strings: how their intimacy had grown the day that Laeli had helped Gerard dye his hair, staining the whole bathtub black. For good measure, she works in a sidelong reference to that memory: "As Gerard waits for your answer, he brushes his greasy, raven-black hair out of his face, suddenly revealing his piercing amber eyes."

Lorraine smiles at that detail. "Well, how could Laeli say no to that? She gives in to the temptation."





Turn Someone On

When you turn someone on, roll with Hot. On a 10 up, gain a String on them and they choose a reaction from below. • On a 7-9, they can either give you a String or choose one of the reactions.

- ✦ I give myself to you,
- ✦ I promise something I think you want, or
- ✦ I get embarrassed and act awkward.

All kinds of things can Turn Someone On, especially if that person is a teenager. Maybe this is a flirtatious glance, a whispered promise for later, or a goofy smile at the right moment. Maybe it's just something they notice about you as you walk past them in the hall. When you use this move, feel free to take the opportunity to step outside your character, to speak like an author would: describing your character's pouty lips or moonlit silhouette. Unlike the other basic moves, *Turning Someone On* can be triggered even if there's no specific action being taken; your character doesn't have to intend to *Turn Someone On* – sometimes, it just happens.

This move is at the heart of how Monsterhearts understands sexuality, especially teen sexuality. We don't get to decide what turns us on, or who. Part of your agenda is keeping the story feral, and that means letting your character's sexuality emerge in all of its confusing and unexpected glory.

When someone turns your character on, the emotional dynamic between them shifts. If a String is gained, the power dynamic shifts a little bit as well. How you react to that is up to you. What honesty demands is that you acknowledge the shift, imagine what your character might be feeling, and play from there. If Julia turns Monique on, it doesn't mean Monique has to throw herself at her. Just play out how Monique would naturally respond. Maybe Monique blushes and turns to leave, or maybe she suddenly gets nervous and starts stammering.



For more on sexuality and attraction, see page 48.



Laeli is sitting in the corner of the cafeteria, eating lunch with her boyfriend. Cassidy sidles up to their table and sits down next to Laeli. "Lae, I heard you were thinking about joining soccer this year. Last day for sign ups – are you in?" Cassidy's leaning in to Laeli's personal space just a little bit, a hopeful smile on her face. Laeli used to play, but lately her focus has shifted to academics, and her writing. "I don't know? I haven't done sports for a few years now. I'm a little spooked by the idea of having to go through tryouts, I guess?"

Cassidy breaks into a grin as she replies, "Oh, no tryouts this year. Everyone's included. It's, like, district policy. I know sports haven't been your thing the past couple years, but I really want you on the team. Get to spend some time with you." Laeli blushes at that last comment, and squirms a little in her seat. Gerard glowers from the other side of the table. Cassidy presses further, saying with a cocky smirk, "Plus, you'd look hot in cleats, hair back in a ponytail. Say yes?"

*The players agree that Cassidy is trying to **Turn Someone On**, so Cody picks up two dice and rolls. Combined with Cassidy's Hot score of 2, the end result is an 11. "Alright," Cody says, "It says here that I gain a String on you, and that you also have to choose a reaction from this list." As Cody draws a little circle on Cassidy's character sheet to represent the String, Lorraine glances at the options. She settles on 'I promise something I think you want' and narrates Laeli turning beet red as she nods and mumbles, "Okay, yeah, I'll join." And with that, Cassidy skips away.*





Shut Someone Down

When you shut someone down, roll with Cold. On a 10 up, choose one from below. • On a 7-9, choose one from below, but you come across poorly, and they give you a Condition in return.

- ✦ They lose a String on you,
- ✦ If they have no Strings on you, gain one on them,
- ✦ They gain a Condition, or
- ✦ You take 1 Forward.

Maybe this is a cruel remark in the locker room, a death threat, or an embarrassing prank pulled in front of the entire school. *Shutting Someone Down* is an attempt to take their power and confidence away, usually in front of an audience. The difference between the 10 up result and the 7 to 9 is whether or not you manage to pull it off looking cool and suave, or tarnish your own reputation a little bit in the process.

Conditions affect how your character is seen by others, and are explained on page 31.

Taking 1 Forward is a bonus to a future roll, and is explained on page 31.



Keep your Cool



When you keep your cool and act despite fear, name what you're afraid of and roll with Cold. On a 10 up, you keep your cool and gain insight: ask the MC a question about the situation and take 1 Forward to acting on that information. • On a 7-9, the MC will tell you how your actions would leave you vulnerable, and you can choose to back down or go through with it.

Charging into a burning building to save a loved one, shoplifting a handgun, or facing down a school bully. *Keeping Your Cool* comes up when a character attempts to push past their fear and nerves in order to act. Acting is essential - your character needs to be proactively doing something in the scary or tense situation before this move is triggered.

The trigger for this move is admittedly one of the most subjective in the game. It's up to the people at the table, but especially the MC and the active player, whether acting in a specific situation requires *Keeping Your Cool*.

When you ask the MC a question about the situation, the MC will answer truthfully and generously, even if it would require preternatural intuition for your character to figure out. The question could involve assessing risks ("What's the biggest threat in the room?"), uncovering true motivations ("Why did Deirdre come here tonight?"), or developing a better picture of the situation ("Are there any other people in the house right now?"). Your question should pertain to the immediate situation, and the bonus you take Forward should resolve within the next couple scenes.





Lash Out Physically

When you lash out physically, roll with Volatile. On a 10 up, you deal them harm, and they choke up momentarily before they can react. • On a 7-9, you harm them but choose one:

- ✦ They learn something about your true nature and gain a String on you,
- ✦ The MC decides how bad the harm turns out, or
- ✦ You become your Darkest Self.

Maybe you're punching someone in the face, or biting down with lupine fangs. Maybe you're shoving your boyfriend angrily off a 2nd story balcony. *Lashing Out Physically* is triggered when you attempt to do real harm to another person. It only applies when you're looking to actually rough someone up, which means that a threatening shove into a locker is better handled as *shutting Someone Down*.

22

A few different moves in the game can lead a character to choke up momentarily. What this means varies depending on the context of the specific situation, but generally involves a temporary faltering or inability to act. It might mean a character going beet red and stuttering, experiencing a moment of panic-related blackout, or letting out a terrified scream and shielding themselves from further danger. The consequences vary situationally as well – this might be an embarrassing moment in which a character loses esteem, or a dangerous opening for an enemy during a fist-fight.

Harm is mostly just what it sounds like. It is explained in more detail on page 27.



Run Away

When you run away, roll with Volatile. On a 10 up, you get away to a safe place. On a 7-9, you get away but choose one:

- ✦ You run into something worse,
- ✦ You cause a big scene, or
- ✦ You leave something behind.

When bullies have you cornered and you try to bolt for the door, or a strange wolf-like creature is chasing you down a woody path, you are Running Away. Coupled with *Lashing Out Physically*, your Volatile stat is all about fight-or-flight instincts.

If you roll a 7-9 result and decide to leave something behind, the MC will tell you what – though feel free to suggest something. Maybe it's your cell phone, full of private conversations and mischief potential. Maybe it's the science textbook you borrowed from a temperamental friend. Whatever it is, it's likely going to cause problems, sooner or later.





Gaze Into the Abyss

When you gaze into the abyss, name what you're looking for and roll with Dark. On a 10 up, the abyss shows you lucid visions, and you take 1 Forward to addressing them. On a 7-9, the abyss shows you confusing and alarming visions, but you get your answer nonetheless.

Maybe you draw a pentacle in the earth and step in while chanting. Maybe you get high and slip into an alternate consciousness, or commune with demonic voices in the woods, or simply black out during history class. Whenever you lose yourself in brooding introspection, that's *Gazing Into the Abyss*.

Before reaching for the dice to *Gaze Into the Abyss*, ask yourself: what is my character actually doing? What does the audience see? The answers will be different for every character, and often vary each time the move is used. That's great! What's important is to understand what's actually going on in the story.

There's an iconic scene that happens over and over again in teen paranormal romances. A young girl finds herself more and more intrigued by a mysterious, brooding classmate. But clues keep piling up that there is something unnatural about them, maybe even sinister. When she can no longer dismiss the clues out of hand, when she can no longer feign disinterest, she turns on her computer. The camera watches over her shoulder as she types nervously into the search engine. A flood of images and captions appear before her, and we can see her eyes widen. She knows. She can't deny it any longer: vampire! That whole scene is *Gazing Into The Abyss*.







Pulling Strings

When you spend a String on someone, choose one:

- ✦ Tempt them to do what you want,
- ✦ Give them a Condition,
- ✦ Add 1 to your roll against them, or
- ✦ Add 1 to the harm you deal them.

When you tempt another player's character, it counts as offering them an experience point if they do what you want. When you tempt one of the MC's characters, the MC will tell you what sort of bribe, threat, or coaxing it'll take to get that character to do what you want right now.

The first two options on that list are your proverbial carrot and stick. You can tempt people to do what you want, offering incentives for bending to your will. Or you can punish the people who have wronged you or let you down, generating nasty rumours about them or otherwise using your leverage to mess with their social standing.

When you tempt a character to do what you want, if it's not something that they can reasonably do in that scene, simply agreeing to do it counts. Whether they follow through on that agreement is up to them.

A character doesn't need to be present for you to give them a Condition. Talking behind somebody's back is a tried and true method for working out your resentment and bitterness.

Have you watched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? Think about the fights that Buffy has against named villains, like Spike or Glory. They circle one another, taunting. They drag up old history between high kicks. Buffy will be fighting for her life against a terrifying demon and then all of a sudden that demon will say something that hurts her feelings. She'll lose her cool, lose her footing, and get thrown into a wall. And it hurts, not just



because being thrown into a wall hurts, but because in that moment things became personal. Spending a string to add +1 to a roll or +1 to the harm you deal is just like that. Things hurt more when they're personal.

Harm

When characters get hurt, they take harm. Harm is tracked on the character sheet, by filling in those dagger-like triangles in pencil.

Your character dies when all four harm are filled in. The MC's characters can take whatever amount of harm seems appropriate. Maybe the dorky class wimp gets hospitalized or killed at 2 Harm. Maybe the MC's were-wolf biker kingpin can take 5 Harm and stay on his feet.

If you hurt someone using your bare fists, it's 1 Harm. If you shove them down a small flight of stairs or throw a chair at them, it's 1 Harm. 1 Harm is the kind of stuff that people gossip about in the change room.

If you have giant fucking claws, or you get a solid hit to the temple with an aluminum bat, it's 2 Harm. If you set fire to their house and they escape just in time, maybe having to body-check a smoldering door in the process, it's 2 Harm. 2 Harm is enough to require medical treatment. It'll have the cops at your door, if it's reported.

If it's worse than all that, it's 3 Harm. Running someone over at full speed in your dad's station wagon is probably 3 Harm.

Harm can be amplified in a few ways. Certain skin moves add 1 Harm, and you can add 1 Harm by spending a String.





Healing

When you take time to tend to your wounds, once per session you may heal 1 Harm. If someone else is there with you, tending to your wounds delicately and intimately - and perhaps with erotic subtext - you may heal an additional 1 Harm.

Healing requires time, care, and intention. It isn't just about staunching the bleeding, but also attending to the emotional aftermath and trauma that come along with physical wounds.

By all means, skew toward unrealistic and cinematic notions of recovery time, but think about what healing means for your character. Maybe you frame a scene where your character cries on the bathroom floor, or one where she finally lets her guard down so that Carly can help her.



Cassidy is walking out toward the parking lot, on her way to go skip class, when she runs into Gerard. Gerard is laying down on a bench, his face badly smashed up, blood smeared all over his shirt. "Holy shit, Gerard. What happened?" The players sitting around the table already know what happened, since they were there for the whole ugly scene, but that doesn't mean Cassidy or Laeli do.

Cassidy swoops in to try to take care of him, pulling a spare sweater out of her duffle bag to mop away some of the blood. Gerard winces and shakes a little, but lets her continue. There aren't any answers forthcoming.

Gabriela says, "Okay, it sounds like you're taking time to tend to my wounds, which means I can heal 1 Harm." She starts erasing the pencil marks from one of the harm triangles filled in on Gerard's character sheet. Cody glances at the **Healing** move, noting that, "Hey, it says that if I tend to these wounds delicately and intimately, you can heal that other harm as well. Let's see... Maybe Cassidy leans in really close, whispering gently for you to stay still." Gabriela shakes her head, "Uh-uh, no way. Gerard is fine with letting you sop up some of the blood, but the minute you get too tender on him he jerks away defensively. He's still pissed that you were hitting on his girlfriend earlier. And for the record, he remains tight-lipped about who beat him up so bad."





Skirting Death

When you take your fourth harm, die.

To avoid death, erase all harm and choose one:

- ✦ Become your Darkest Self,
- ✦ Lose all Strings you have on everybody.

The two options for avoiding death present two very different ways that people can survive violence and trauma. The first is to double down on your monstrosity, giving in to the terrifying voice within you that tells you how much more powerful you could be. Becoming your Darkest Self in this situation is a way of saying that you will do anything to survive, even if it changes who you are. The other option is to give up your power, to so thoroughly exhaust yourself putting up defenses that you emerge alive but with nothing left. Losing all your Strings means you need to rebuild your confidence and social capacity.

30

Of course, there's always death. While the rules give you ample means to dodge your final fate, it's worth considering the option, even if you could avoid it. Your agenda includes keeping the story feral, and saying what honesty demands. When you pencil in that final harm triangle, you have an opportunity to steer the story toward a few dramatically different possibilities. Sometimes, the best choice is going to be saying, "Lu reaches a finger up to her temple, to where the blood is flowing. It takes a few seconds before her legs buckle, but then she falls to the moonlit ground. She doesn't get back up. She doesn't move at all."

If your character dies, talk with the MC about what to do next. Maybe you'll pick one of the side characters entangled in the story and turn them into your next main character. Maybe you'll introduce a new kid who just moved to town. If the story is already approaching its end, it might make sense to just lean back and watch it all unfold.



Forward

Some moves will tell you to take 1 Forward. This means that you add +1 to your next die roll. A few will be more specific, perhaps telling you to take 1 Forward toward a certain type of action. In those cases, you'll save the +1 until you find yourself in the specified situation.

When you take 1 Forward, the bonus is always used on just one roll, and then it gets erased or crossed off.

Conditions

Conditions represent your character's social situation and weaknesses. They're the things that people are saying and thinking about you that shape how you're treated, or even how you see yourself. Conditions take the form of gossip, unsavory opinions, and interpersonal labels. Conditions are given to people through *Shutting Someone Down*, *Pulling Strings*, and a few other avenues.

If you take advantage of a Condition that someone has while making a move against them, add +1 to your roll. In order to take advantage of a Condition mechanically, though, you need to explain what that looks like in the story.

It's important to note that Conditions are things that the other characters think about a particular character. So if Monique gets labeled a **slut** or a **preening diva**, it doesn't mean that the players think she is those things, or that they think it would be a problem if she were. That said, it's important to be careful and thoughtful about brandishing harmful words, even in play. As a white woman, I'm okay with making Conditions out of misogynist language, but I'm not going to be invoking racial slurs in my storytelling. Everyone draws their





boundaries in different places. For more on figuring out personal and group boundaries, see chapter 3.

Cassidy eventually learns who it was that beat up Gerard: Vic and her girls. She zeroes in on Vic at a party, and starts yelling. "Listen, I don't know who you think you are, Vic, but it's about fucking time you drop the psycho act! If I have to see another kid limping down the hall because of your weird vigilante make-believe, you're done, okay? Done." Cassidy's the captain of the soccer team, and she's got a lot of sway at Mooney High. Her face is flush with anger. The whole party is watching.

*"I'm **Shutting Someone Down**," Cody declares, rolling dice and adding Cassidy's Cold score for a total of 7. "Okay, I'm choosing the option to give you a Condition. But since I rolled a 7, no matter what I choose, you get to give me a Condition in return. I think I give you the Condition of **out of control**."*

32

*Vic is a side character, one of the many controlled by the MC. "Okay, in exchange, Vic gives you the Condition **dead meat**, because everyone at the party knows that she's going to want revenge. She's furious, and the only reason she's not retaliating right this second is that you've got her cornered and isolated." And with that, Cassidy storms out.*

Removing Conditions

Conditions can be taken advantage of repeatedly, for as long as they remain on the character sheet. Being a 'Nerd' doesn't wear off just because you got stuffed into a locker.



A Condition goes away when the character takes appropriate action to get rid of it, or when it just no longer matters to the wider social group. What counts as “appropriate action” really depends on the particular Condition, and it’s not always clear ahead of time what will count. When the MC and the rest of the group feel like a Condition has been resolved, it gets crossed off. A few different moves can also resolve Conditions mechanically.

At school on Monday, Cassidy ducks out of history to smoke up on the school roof. The MC decides that it’s a perfect opportunity for one of Vic’s friends, Jessalyn, to stumble across her.

“O-oh, I didn’t think anyone else was going to be up here!” Jessalyn’s tone is slightly hostile, and she crosses her arms. The MC goes on to describe: “She’s eyeing Cassidy up, thinking about the yelling match that took place at the party just the other day. She’s wondering whether her loyalty to Vic means needing to get mean in this situation. Really though, she just came up here to cry.”

Cody describes how Cassidy’s reactions are a little slow, and an easy smile rests upon her face. “Yeah, it’s okay. There’s room. There’s, like, so much room.” She extends the joint toward Jessalyn, who hesitates before moving in to join her. The two girls share a few minutes in silence together.

*“You know, Cass, most of us still like you. Even after what you said.” Cassidy just nods, watching as the clouds swirl overhead. The group agrees that this scene is enough to get rid of Cassidy’s **dead meat** Condition, and so Cody crosses it out.*





Experience and Advancement

Experience allows main characters to become more powerful over time, gaining access to new moves, increasing stats, or expanding their influence over the world.

You gain a point of experience whenever you fail a roll (a result of 6 or lower), as failure and adversity nudge your character toward growth. A number of the Skins also have a move option which gains experience.

The final way that experience is gained is when someone uses *Pulling Strings* on your character and chooses “tempt them to do what you want”. When this is used on your character, you can gain a point of experience by going along with their desired course of action.

34

Experience is marked on the character sheet by filling in dots. When you’ve filled in all five dots on the experience track, you can choose one of the advancement options from the list provided just below it. Once you’ve chosen an advancement, erase all five experience points and start anew.

The advancement options allow you to improve and expand your character in several ways. You can improve a stat by +1, learn new moves, and more. Every Skin except for The Mortal also has an advancement option that involves joining or starting a gang, with the specific type of gang shown in bold. For example, the Werewolf can join a **wolf pack**, the Witch can join a **coven**, and the Ghost can reside in a **haunted house**.



Gangs

With the exception of *The Mortal*, every Skin has the option to start or join a gang as an advancement (noted in bold). The Queen starts with a gang at the outset of the game.

Every gang makes demands of its members and its leaders. These demands sometimes push characters out of their comfort zones and into the territory of hard decisions. If your character is part of a gang, expect some chaos as a result. One of the jobs of the MC is to give voice to gang members, and to look for situations where they might suddenly get demanding.

But your gang can also help you. When they help you carry out a task, add 1 to your relevant rolls. When they join you in an act of violence, they inflict an additional 1 Harm.

Remember that the characters in your gang are still individuals under the MC's authority. Their power, personality, and ambitions aren't inherently under your control.





Queer Content

Queer content will make your game more interesting. It gives you new dimensions of shame, confusion, and desire to explore. It dismantles stale genre conventions and builds new stories out of the pieces. It breathes life into the monstrous.

Queer youth are often forgotten or erased in media. When their stories are told, it's either dis-empowering tragedy tourism or a sanitized and toothless portrayal that fails to capture the chaos of lived experience. *Monsterhearts* gives you an opportunity to tell some intriguing, messy stories that are largely missing from our cultural milieu.

There are also practical benefits. Introducing queer content means more possible romantic pairings in a small group, which lets you build relationship webs that are dense and ever-changing. When queer attraction proves to be unrequited, additional tensions are thrown into the mix: the fear of being outed, the risk of gay panic, the resentment of “but you’re literally the only other dyke in town, how can you do this to me?” Working with queer assumptions means putting more opportunities and more risks on the table, giving you a wider range of potential stories with the same number of characters.

So, what does introducing queer content actually mean? There are a few answers. The first is simply trusting and taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the mechanics. A main character can roll to *Turn Someone On* regardless of respective genders, and the incentive to do so is baked into the core of the game. In situations where a character has embraced a certain sexual identity or label, gay or straight, *Turn Someone On* can challenge it. Let the dice surprise you and introduce new twists.



Beyond trusting the mechanics to do interesting things, think about representation and look opportunities to explore queer possibilities. Here are some examples:

- ✦ Be willing to be surprised about what your character turns out to want.
- ✦ Think about how what your character turns out to want interacts with how they see themselves, and what labels and identities they might self-apply as a result.
- ✦ Explore what it means to be betrayed by your body, whether it's becoming a flesh-eating monster that stalks the night, or being trans and experiencing the wrong puberty, or both.
- ✦ If you're a vampire, ask yourself: does feeding on boys feel the same as feeding on girls? How are your feeding preferences different from your romantic preferences? Do you think of feeding as, like, a sexual thing?
- ✦ If you're the MC, introduce queer characters, and make them fundamentally different from one another. Let their sexuality and gender be incidental in some cases, and let it be the chaotic thing that drives the story forward in others.

Use the game to explore and challenge your own ideas about gender, sexuality, relationships, what's normal and what's monstrous.





Belonging and Difference

During adolescence, having a sense of belonging and a coherent social identity is so, so important. When that sense is lacking, self-esteem and physical well-being often suffer. People will go to great lengths to feel like they belong, even if it means making self-destructive choices along the way.

For the main characters of *Monsterhearts*, who are struggling with monstrosity, belonging can feel like an uphill battle. Maybe they want to hide or suppress their difference, and shame hangs over them like a storm cloud. Maybe they act brash and mean in order to mask their insecurities. Maybe they zero in on the one person they think they can trust in the whole wide world, and then say too much too soon, eager to finally catch up on all the validation they've been thirsting for. There are a lot of dangerous patterns available.

38

Part of your agenda is to say what honesty demands, which includes sitting with these anxieties about belonging and difference, and channelling them into the choices you make for your character. Further, it means challenging yourself to see additional dimensions of difference that might exist for them. Is your character a cultural or racial outsider in this community? Is your character flunking their classes? Does your character come from a split family? Are they pretty? Is their family wealthy or are they living off food stamps? Is their dad in jail? While monstrosity and queerness stand out as the obvious types of difference that *Monsterhearts* puts on the table, that doesn't mean they are the only ones.







Experiencing Race

This section is guest-authored by Ciel Sainte-Marie, James Mendez Hodes, and Jeeyon Shim.

Compared to a thirst for blood, having a dark skin tone, heavy accent, or epicanthic folds might seem innocuous... unless you've experienced a lifetime of racism. You can hide the former. The latter can lead to bullying, ostracism, and violence in game and out.

Race, ethnicity, national origin, and religion affect almost every narrative or interaction. Exploring their dynamics not only makes for vivid, engaging games, but also helps to protect and support players in the real world. Regardless of your identity, you'd do well to represent cultural diversity in your game. But you need to strike a balance between erasure (pretending racial dynamics don't exist) and overstepping boundaries (harming players in real life with content from the fiction).

40

Monsterhearts purposefully engages negative, painful, and harmful elements of teenage social experience in a safe, controlled way. Accordingly, it's okay (and perhaps inevitable) to create a racist character; after all, even the most staunchly anti-racist character will have unconscious prejudices of their own. But if you fail to clear that choice with your entire table, you put players whom racism has hurt at risk. The more these negative character traits are an active, public choice on your part, the safer the table will be; they won't be an awkward or harmful surprise when they arise mid-game. Consent before the game allows players to speak up more readily, helping you modulate these characters' behaviors, so they can express bad qualities without weakening your table's atmosphere of love and trust.

Satisfying, productive conversation on this topic begins with taking care in the vocabulary you use. Folks who experience racism have more lived wisdom about how these things affect them than those who haven't. They



may or may not feel ready or willing to educate you, so take your cues from them.

It's difficult. You'll fuck it up some. It's cool, so have we. But the questions below can help. Tap into care, tenderness, integrity, and active listening here. Take risks in gentleness, shame, integrity, forgiveness, and creating change. Refer to Chapter 3 to help navigate this together.

Your Town

These questions have to do with your assumptions and attitudes towards the setting, and the setting's assumptions and attitudes towards its denizens.

What is the racial composition of the place where you all live? What about the religious composition? How diverse is it?

Consider how cultural experience shapes social norms and views. Members of a systemically dominant group experience life very differently than those on the margins.

What assumptions do people make about the “average” inhabitant of your town?

Scrutinize the concept of a “normal teenager.” If you're not seen as normal, you're at greater risk of stress at best, violence and loss at worst.

How will marginalized experiences influence important spaces in the fiction?

What kinds of tensions arise if one race dominates advanced classes or an extracurricular activity? What challenges does someone who is marginalized face if they go against that grain?





Your Characters

These questions have to do with your main and side characters.

What is your character's ethnicity?

It's okay to play a character of a race that isn't your own, but take care to represent cultural expressions, not cultural stereotypes. Realistic characters have some experiences and traits which relate to their race, and some which don't. A character becomes nuanced (rather than a token or negative stereotype) when the way they're created and role-played expresses both parts of their identity.

What assumptions do others make about your character?

Every race has behaviours, jobs, hobbies, or preferences that are or aren't associated with it. These unexamined biases can shape collective reality in alarming or distressing ways, like limiting access to occupations, social services, education, etc. They can create emotional dissonance between how we experience ourselves and how the outer world treats us.

How does this background affect your character's thoughts and perceptions?

What does your character's culture value? Is that similar to other cultures' values in your town? Do your character's personal values align with or push back against their culture's traditions? How do they shape relationships with family and friends?

For the MC

These questions have to do with the tropes and structures which underlie your storytelling.

How can you diversify play using your principles, agenda, and reactions?

For example, have name lists at hand that aren't common European American names. Learn about supernatural phenomena from cultures outside the mainstream. A culture's myths and storytelling shape its reactions to monsters and magic: Eastern versus Western attitudes towards dragons are a good example.

What power dynamics underlie the reactions you choose and the villains you introduce?

Monsters of color are often at a greater risk of discovery. The police are more likely to search your car and find your selkie pelt. Kids at school are more likely to bully you into losing your temper and revealing a supernatural power. Monster hunters have fewer compunctions about disappearing you because they know people are less likely to come looking for you.

How can you diversify the cultural influences on your storytelling?

In your free time, look for books, movies, and other media created by people outside your background. Pursue sources that let people tell you about themselves. Someone whose background isn't from a culture won't have the same nuanced and deep understanding of the culture as someone who is.





Blending In

Unless a player says otherwise, it's assumed that all the main characters are able to blend in to regular human society. Everyone looks normal enough to go to high school, or to the movie theatre, or wherever it is that kids go these days. Sometimes they trip up and do something that attracts suspicion. Sometimes, their secrets get exposed to the wrong people. But generally, their peers and teachers should be oblivious to their monstrosity until something happens to reveal it.

One of the MC's jobs is to ask questions, and this includes questions about how blending in works for each character. Far-fetched answers are totally okay! If someone playing a Vampire doesn't want to deal with the whole sunlight situation, accept their answer when they say, "I dunno, maybe I have a magic ring that protects me from the sun?" That example was used on a real television show with millions of viewers! It's okay to set a low bar.

The main characters blend in, but sometimes just barely. Everyone has little tells, and occasionally a side character will pick up on them. Some main characters will know about each other's monstrosity at the start of the game, and others will be revealed through play. When someone learns about your true nature, the situation becomes charged with potential. What do you do next?



The Darkest Self

These characters are monsters, yes, but at the same time they're just teenagers trying to figure out their shit. They've got hopes, fears, friends to please, and maladaptive coping strategies.

Sometimes a character will be pushed to transform into their Darkest Self, whether by pain, temptation, or chaotic circumstance. In that moment, a shift occurs. They stop trying to keep their monstrosity in check; instead, they embrace or give in to it. A character in their Darkest Self is no longer conflicted about who they really are – they have embraced real, overt monstrosity. The Darkest Self is an expression of the character's most monstrous desires.

The Darkest Self can be triggered through a 7-9 roll on *Lashing Out Physically*, through certain Skin Moves, as a way of *Skirting Death*, or by MC choice (as a Reaction).

Each Skin has a different Darkest Self, described on the inside left page. The Werewolf is all fur and claws and violence. The Witch punishes anyone who slights her. The Infernal falls into trembling servitude of their dark power. The Ghoul craves flesh and shambles toward it. The Fae must re-balance the scales of justice, in accordance with a merciless, otherworldly logic of justice.

When at your Darkest Self, your priorities as a player shift. Revel in the destructive impulses that this script whispers into your ear. Indulge your character's suppressed wants and flex their secret might. Explore what it means to go too far.





Escaping Your Darkest Self

If you're playing in a one-shot and you become your Darkest Self during the escalating action of late game, you might decide to embrace villainy and remain your Darkest Self until death or the end of the session, whichever comes first.

But in most cases, you will at some point want to escape your Darkest Self. This might happen almost immediately, or it might take quite a while. Trust your intuition about when it's time to work toward escape. Each Darkest Self has an escape clause, and your character returns to normal once that condition has been met.

Part of the agenda of the game is saying what honesty demands. When someone is their Darkest Self, that means the MC needs to avoid pulling punches. If The Werewolf becomes its Darkest Self in the middle of the supermarket, then of course there are going to be innocent bystanders within mauling distance. Consequences happen. That said, it's definitely not the MC's job to line up a series of tragedies or make things artificially "edgy." Just be real to the fiction, and say what honesty demands.



Violence

Monsterhearts doesn't have a combat system. That's a departure from lots of other roleplaying games. But it does have rules about physical violence, primarily the basic move *Lashing Out Physically*.

The reason that physical violence is tied to the Volatile stat is that it's often impulsive, accompanied by a surge of adrenaline and nerves. When violence occurs, there are more consequences than just bruises and blood. Think about the social and emotional ramifications. If you just got punched in the face, or if you just punched someone in the face, how does your body feel? Are you seething with anger, fear, or betrayal? Who's watching and who's intervening? Violence changes a lot of things really quickly.

The story can sometimes involve a character *Lashing Out Physically* in retaliation after someone *Lashed Out Physically* at them, sure, but if a scene devolves into a round-by-round exchange of blows, take a step back. Remember that part of the Agenda is to make the main characters' lives not boring, and dispassionately trading punches to the face is boring. The outcomes of every move need to feed back in to the conversation and add something to the fiction. Violence has consequences on relationships and emotions, not just bodies, and a single act of violence is often enough to completely change the situation.

If you're the MC, use your Reactions to keep the story feral in these moments. Have the gym teacher burst into the locker room and *separate them*. Have a boyfriend watching anxiously, squeamish at the thought of more blood, so that you can *tell them the possible consequences and ask*.





Sexuality

While characters might be presumed straight at the beginning of the game, it is only a presumption. The rules for *Turning Someone On* leave desire and arousal as contested terrain during play. Teenagers don't get to decide what turns them on, and part of adolescence is contending with the confusion that arises when your body behaves in ways you never anticipated. Your Agenda includes keeping the story feral and saying what the rules demand, which means accepting that your character's sexuality is still emerging.

With all of that said, it's important to draw a line: you aren't in control of what turns your character on, but you are in control of what they do with that information. If you're playing Jackson, and Jackson just got a hard-on for another guy, you're still in control of what he does with that feeling. Maybe Jackson is relatively chill about it, and it doesn't throw his straight identity off the rails. Maybe he's confused about it, and starts acting weird around this other guy for a couple weeks. Maybe he gets aggressive. Maybe he cheats on his girlfriend. Maybe he has a big gay awakening. You need to say what honesty demands, which is that Jackson gets this hard-on and thinks something of it. But you get to decide what happens next.

Every main character has a sex move, located at the bottom of the inside right page. Most of them are triggered in the exact same way, by having sex with someone. A few work under different terms, like the Fae and the Vampire. For something to count as sex, there needs to be consent.



Asexuality

Monsterhearts is designed around the idea that sexuality can be fluid, shifting, and sometimes confusing. The mechanics aim to challenge a dominant narrative that our culture has about how sexuality works, namely that it is fixed and predictable.

At the same time, it's important that the game doesn't fall into the trap of reinforcing another dominant narrative: that everyone is sexual, and that everyone is open to sex with the right person. That's not a universal experience.

If your character is on the asexual spectrum, or alternately is unable to access attraction due to sexual trauma, the following move is available to you as an option. You can use this option selectively, on a situation-by-situation basis, if that's what feels right for your character.

Non-Attraction

If someone targets your character with *Turn Someone On* but it's not possible for your character to get turned on in that situation, let them know. Instead, it counts as a roll to *Shut Someone Down* using hot.

The shift to *Shutting Someone Down* reflects the ways that social pressure and compulsory sexuality pervade much of our teenage experiences, and the tension that people experience in trying to work against dominant social narratives without singling themselves out as strange or other.

These characters still have the option to turn someone on, and still have a sex move should they decide to have sex at some point in the game. Ace identities are varied, and people make all sorts of decisions as they navigate the messy business of living.





Texting

Smartphones exist. When you play *Monsterhearts*, remember that these characters have the ability to reach out to each other constantly. They can text, send snaps, and livestream. *Shutting Someone Down* is just as easy to do on a call that's secretly on speaker-phone as it is in person, face to face. Your character may well have several apps built entirely for the purpose of *Turning Someone On*.

MC, smartphones introduce a perfect tool for using your *put them together* Reaction. Have a friend in need call at the worst moment, and see whether that call gets answered. Phones also give you ample means to *leap to the worst possible conclusion*. If a jealous boyfriend's calls aren't being answered, imagine all the stories he could latch onto about why that was the case. A lot of context gets lost when scrolling through party pictures on Instagram.

50

Not every group is going to want to tell stories that hinge upon these devices. It's fine to set your game in a time before smartphones, or in a town so remote that there isn't any service, or to just conveniently omit them from the fiction. But it's worth thinking over, at the very least. Smartphones introduce a lot of possibility for chaotic, cross-informed, overlapping drama.

Can vampires take selfies? Do centuries-dead ghosts even know how to use kik? What happens when your best friend texts you in distress but you're right in the middle of steamy makeouts with an older boy?



Seasons

If you're playing for a single session, you'll find that conflicts escalate and get messy, and that some characters will have lots of crossover. But chances are that things won't feel "finished," in that neatly-packaged-up sense of the word. That's fine! A single-session game should be about glimpsing into the lives of the main characters, exploring their world, and following through on a couple of messy conflicts.

In a multi-session game, you'll find that small goals will sometimes gain momentum and evolve into major plot arcs. Maybe the main characters rally around a common goal or enemy. Often, they'll just naturally turn to infighting and it leads to rooftop knife-fights and racy affairs and dead bodies.

While that constantly unfurling action and unpredictable momentum is very fun, it can get tiring to follow it on without rest, ad nauseum. For that reason, *Monsterhearts* has seasons - like the seasons in a television show. Momentum builds across sessions, conflicts evolve in unexpected directions, and everything builds towards a series of climactic moments. And then, the dust begins to settle. That's where the season ends.

Seasons work like this: once someone has taken their fifth advance, the Season Advances are unlocked for everybody. There's one more session left after the current one, and then the season ends.

Season Advances are another way to spend your experience, and each character can take a maximum of one in a given season.





Season Advances are a big deal. They allow a character to rewrite their nature, to become a different kind of monster, or to grow up a little bit. They allow a player to change characters altogether, or to take on a second character.

Unlocking the Season Advances also signals to everyone that the current story arc is coming to an end. You've got the current session, and one session after that, to bring things to their climax and resolution. Anything that isn't resolved at the end of next session is left hanging in mid-air.

At the end of the Season, take a break and play something new! Honestly, stop playing Monsterhearts for a while. If you decide to return to the game and do another Season, skip forward in time. Set it at the start of the next school year, or months later, or after some other logical gap in time. This "reset" allows you to build up that same momentum all over again.

52

If you return for another season, characters keep everything they gained through their advances, but players can erase all the filled-in advancement bubbles. The options are available to select for a second time, now. Some won't make sense to take again, so don't take them again.



Season Advances



The Season Advances are:

- ✦ Change your character's Skin.
- ✦ Rewrite your Darkest Self.
- ✦ Retire your character and start a new one.
- ✦ Gain two of the Growing Up moves.

Change your character's Skin.

When you change your character's Skin, they become a totally different type of monster. Perhaps they were a Mortal before, but were bitten and become a Vampire. Perhaps they were once Fae, but have died and come back as a Ghost. Perhaps they were a Ghost, but were given a new body and are now a Ghoul.

When you change Skins, your character keeps everything that belongs to their intrinsic self. They leave behind any possessions, friends, Strings, or Skin Moves that it would no longer make sense to have. They choose a new stat line, and select some Skin Moves according to the standard instructions for that Skin. Skip over the Backstory bit, since they've already got one.

53

Rewrite your Darkest Self.

This one is subject to collaboration with the MC. Talk about your idea and accept feedback. Your Darkest Self reveals something about your destructive impulses, the parts of your own nature that you are sometimes afraid of, and the things that make you feel righteously justified in causing harm to others.

Retire your character and start a new one.

This advance let you start a new character from scratch. Retire your original character to a place of safety and acceptance, removing them from the picture. Then, choose a different Skin and create a new character to replace them. Be sure to follow all the usual steps for your new character, including setting up their Backstory and initial Strings.



***Gain two of the Growing Up moves.***

There are four Growing Up moves, detailed in the next section. These are powerful moves that let you navigate or even put a stop to all the teenage bullshit going on around you. Each Growing Up move allows characters to partially transcend a different pattern of dysfunctional behavior, getting closer to a place of being able to really take care of themselves and those around them. When you choose this Season Advance, pick two of these moves. In a future Season, you could take this advance again in order to gain the remaining two.

Growing Up Moves

The four Growing Up moves are: *Make Others Feel Beautiful*, *Call People On Their Shit*, *Intervene In an Act of Violence*, and *Share Your Pain*.

54

Make Others Feel Beautiful

When you make others feel beautiful, roll with Hot. On a 10 up, choose two from below.

- ✦ they take 1 Forward,
- ✦ they remove a Condition,
- ✦ they mark experience, or
- ✦ you take 1 Forward.

On a 7-9, you can tempt them to do what you want, as if you'd just spent a String.

Instead of charisma being a tool for gaining power over people, you can use it to support others and help them grow. You can use it to make people feel good about themselves and accepted for who they are. Without this move, these kinds of gestures can only ever be conditional and partial. When you make others feel beautiful, however, a 10 up helps them see the parts of themselves that are powerful and true. This move can break the pattern of mind games and conditional acceptance.



Call People On Their Shit

When you call people on their shit, roll with Cold. On a 10 up, choose one from below. • On a 7-9, choose one from below, but you come across poorly, and they give you a Condition in return.

- ✦ they lose a String against someone else, or
- ✦ they choke up, break down, or bail.

This move allows you to take a stand against bullying and abuse. While other moves (shutting someone down, lashing out physically) might otherwise take effect when you take such a stand, calling people on their shit gives you the tools to take power away from the abuser or the bully. You can cause them to lose emotional hold over someone. When you force someone to lose a String using this move, you get to choose who they lose a String on. If you choose to have them choke up, break down, or bail, they still get to decide which of those three things happens and how it goes down. This move can break the pattern of bullying and domination.





Intervene in an Act of Violence

When you intervene in an act of violence against someone else, roll with Volatile. On a 10 up, you get in the way and they need to deal with you first. Whoever you're protecting gets to react, and takes 1 Forward to whatever they decide to do. • On a 7-9, you're in the middle of it, and the assailant chooses from below.

- ✦ I back off,
- ✦ I take whatever harm you want to give me as I push past, or
- ✦ I redirect the violence to you.

This move allows you to defend others. When someone is lunging forward to attack, you can intervene and get in the way. Doing so can help you to protect the vulnerable and potentially even save a life. This is the only move in the game that supersedes someone else's already-declared action. On a 10 up, you effectively block an act of violence from happening, and hand the initiative to the person you're protecting. On a 7-9, you force the attacker to make a decision. This move can break the pattern of violence and fear.

Share Your Pain

When you share your pain, roll with Dark. On a 10 up, choose two. On a 7-9, choose one:

- ✦ remove a Condition from yourself,
- ✦ remove a Condition from someone who listened,
- ✦ take 1 Forward toward helping yourself, or
- ✦ those who listened take 1 Forward to helping you.

This move allows you to reach out to others and ask for support. It allows you to articulate your needs and connect with a community of people capable of meeting them. This move can break the pattern of isolation and confusion.

Chapter 2:

Preparing to Play





Gather Supplies

Before you start a game of Monsterhearts, you'll need to do some setup. First, arrange a dedicated time to play with 2-4 of your friends. Be clear on how big of a time commitment you're expecting.

This chapter assumes that if you're the person doing the preparation and teaching work, you'll also be the MC. As such, this chapter is addressed to the MC. This is the most common setup, but it's also totally possible to have different people taking on each of these roles.

There's some printing to do before getting together. Start by choosing the Skins that you want to present at the table. These are the monster archetypes that players can choose from, and each serves as a workbook to set up and play a character. Print and fold the Skins you'll be using. If you're not sure which Skins to include, start with the basic set contained within this book: the Fae, the Ghost, the Ghoul, the Hollow, the Infernal, the Mortal, the Queen, the Vampire, the Werewolf, and the Witch. If you visit the website you'll see a few more options, like the Chosen and the Serpentine.

You'll also need to print off the MC Handout, and a copy of the Player Handout for each player.

You may also be interested in printing off a Small Town - one of the single-page settings for the game that help you get started playing as quickly as possible. If you choose a Small Town, it'll tell you which 5-6 Skins to bring to the table.

All these materials can be found at www.buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts

You'll also need pencils, erasers, and dice (the regular kind with six sides). At a minimum, you need two dice, but two per player may be preferable.



Explain Premise and Roles



Once your group of players has arrived and is settled, start things off by explaining the premise of the game. Everyone at the table probably already knows what they showed up for, but it's still helpful to ensure that everyone is on the same page and in the right head space. If you're not sure what to say, you can read the teaser from the opening pages of this book.

Introduce your own role as MC. While everyone else is in charge of playing a main character, your job is more expansive. Your role is distinct, and has its own set of rules to support it. You might say something like: "Each of you is going to create a character, a teenage monster of some kind. This is your main character, and your role is to play them with curiosity and fierceness. My role in the game is different. I'm the Master of Ceremonies, or MC. As the MC, I will be playing all the side characters in the world. I'll be your teachers, parents, and classmates. On top of that, it's my job to set scenes and introduce twists. I play by a different set of rules, but ultimately I'm here to help make sure your characters' stories are interesting."

Explain that everyone shares the same agenda when they sit down to play Monsterhearts, including the MC. Name the four parts of that agenda: make each main character's life not boring, keep the story feral, say what the rules demand, and say what honesty demands. If players want to know more about these phrases, explain them in whatever words come naturally to you, or read aloud from pages 9-12.





Introduce Safety Tools

It's important to talk about boundaries and safety upfront. Acknowledge the fraught, sensitive subject matter that *Monsterhearts* is built upon. Talk to everyone sitting down to play about the importance of noticing and respecting one another's boundaries. Introduce one or two simple tools for ensuring a sense of safety for everybody playing.

If you're not sure where to start, or aren't convinced that being trauma-informed is all that important, chapter 3 is dedicated to a thorough treatment of the topic. It explores two safety tools that you could opt to introduce: the X-Card, and fading to black.

Option: Small Town

If you've chosen to use one of the quick-start Small Towns for your game of *Monsterhearts*, introduce it now. Read aloud its name and tagline. Ask someone to read the Background section, and encourage them to tap into their best melodramatic narrator voice-over. Ask someone to read the list of recommended Scene Locations. Then take the page back, and read the list of Skins to Include out loud. As you read out each one, add that Skin to the options on the table. Those 5-6 Skins are the total set of options available for this session.

Small Towns are available for download from www.buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts

If you'd prefer to create your own setting as a group, that's great! The guidelines for doing that are coming up. It doesn't take much work at all.



Pick Skins

Hand out the Skins that you've brought with you, evenly distributed around the table. Tell people not to write on these pages just yet. Point out the section of italicized flavour text on the front page. Go around the table and take turns reading out those italicized sections in melodramatic, over-the-top voices. Maybe The Werewolf gets read with a growl, while The Witch gets read with an air of preening chagrin. This step is important! Reading these Skins aloud will serve as an icebreaker for the group, helping them to move beyond their bashful uncertainty and into the creative, melodramatic spirit of the game. That said, if anyone is uncomfortable reading the paragraph out loud, you should feel free to skip them, passing their Skin on to one of the other players to read. Once all the Skins have been read aloud, toss them all into the center of the table.

Next, everyone but the MC chooses a Skin to play. There's no need to worry about the mechanics while making this choice. Each player should simply pick the Skin that they're most compelled by, based on the picture, flavour text, and anything else that catches their eye.





Choose Identities

Once everyone has chosen their Skins, direct their attention to the Identity section on the inside left page. Explain that a character's Identity has four components: name, look, eyes, and origin. Players should circle one option for each component.

The eyes are an important detail in paranormal romance - they're a telling hint about a person's true nature, for anyone who should be so brave as to hold their gaze.

The origin explains how your character came to be the type of monster (or person) that they are today. If there's any uncertainty about what an origin means, it's up to the player to define it. There's no definitive answer about what it means for a Ghoul to be "rejected".

Everyone should share their choices aloud, and answer any questions that bubble up in response.

A helpful device for play is to give each player an index card, or half card. Have each player fold it in half to make a little tent, and write their name, look, and what type of monster they are on the side facing towards the rest of the table. If there's more room available, they can write out the rest of their Identity too.



Establish Setting

If you've already introduced a Small Town, skip this step. Otherwise, it's time to establish more details about the setting, now that we have a broad sense of who the main characters are.

Start by getting input from the players about what setting details are already implied or required by virtue of the Skins chosen. If there's a Werewolf, does the game need to be set in a heavily forested area? If there's a Selkie, does it need to be oceanside? If there's a Witch, does that player dream of a particular practitioner community in the local underground economy? Maybe you need bodegas with backroom Santeria practitioners, or a mountain village in the rural northwest where neopagan bonfires take place at every lunar event. Let the main characters serve as a starting place for deciding where the game will be set.

Collectively establish a vague idea. Then, as MC, turn to the player on your left. Ask them a question about the setting. Proceed to the next player, working your way clockwise around the table. If after one round you feel satisfied, move on. If it feels like your setting is still bare and underdeveloped, go around the table once more. It's fine for people to interject ideas and riff off one another, but make sure that the person you ask a question to has the final say. Now is a great time to nudge the social dynamics at the table, and a well-timed "okay, these are all great ideas, but ultimately I asked Kate this question, and I want to hear Kate's answer" can go a long way toward ensuring that everyone has equal input.





Ask questions that give you a better sense of the physical environment, the broader socio-political context, and how race and class issues manifest themselves in the local culture. Ask questions about what teens do around here for fun. Ask questions that establish key landmarks that you can incorporate into scene framing down the road, like the gigantic bulldog statue outside the school, or the rustic chalet-style lodge down at the end of Voleski Street. Feel free to add a few of your own ideas into the mix along the way. Make sure you have a sense of the approximate size of the community, and its most important industries.

Don't attempt to create an exhaustive and definitive portrait of the setting. Leave lots of room to discover more during play, or to add details when doing so would offer a convenient opportunity. Get enough details so that everyone is excited and on a similar page, and then move on.



Discuss Roleplaying



Before moving on to teaching everyone about the nitty-gritty mechanics of the game, it's important to establish some context: roleplaying is a conversation, the conversation is broken into scenes, the MC has a unique role in that conversation, and the rules exist to sculpt the story as well as shake it up at key moments. How to talk through that context really depends on your players' existing levels of experience with this sort of game. If everyone at the table has already played games that are strikingly similar in theme and structure to *Monsterhearts*, then you can get away with simply reading the above list aloud and then moving on. In most cases, you'll want to say a little bit more.

If the people you're playing with are new to roleplaying games, be thorough as you build this context. Even if it's second nature to you at this point, because you've played a hundred different games and own dozens of fancy dice, don't overlook the importance of building a foundation with new players. Talk about what roleplaying is, and provide an example of how two people might go back-and-forth to play out a scene together.

If you're playing with people who are veteran roleplayers, but who have mostly stuck to adventure games and the high fantasy genre, emphasize what's different here. *Monsterhearts* isn't about rallying together as a party. It's about exploring relationships and internal strife. It's not exactly player-versus-player, but it is certainly a game where characters hurt one another, make mistakes, and navigate social fallout.

Part of your job is to do your best to make the game accessible and intelligible to everyone at the table. Try to adjust your teaching style to accommodate the needs of the people you're playing with.





Discuss Moves and Strings

Explain what a move is, how it emerges from the conversation, and how the results of the move feed back in to that same conversation. Explain how rolling dice and adding up scores works. Explain the broad differences between results of 10 up, 7 to 9, and 6 or less. Mention that there are basic moves that every main character shares, and additional options available to each Skin.

This is a great time to make sure that everyone has a Player Handout in front of them, directing their attention to the list of basic moves. Answer any questions that people have.

Mention that as the MC you don't have moves, and instead your guidelines and rules are about reacting to the things that their characters say and do. Mention that you'll mostly be setting up situations but that occasionally – particularly if they roll 6 or less on a move -- you'll also bring them crashing down. Reactions are explained on page 92, but all you need to say to the other players at this point is a brief mention of the fact that you play by a different set of rules.

Explain what Strings are, both symbolically and mechanically. You can read from page 16 if you're not sure how best to explain.

At this point, your players have just taken in a lot of information, and it's a perfect time to consolidate that information with an example. Using the names of the main characters being created around the table, launch into an example of Turning Someone On. Pick up dice, suggest a potential Hot score that the character might have, and roll. Explain how the character might gain a String through the move, and then give an example of how they might later spend it using *Pulling Strings* to tempt someone to do what they want. This example will help to synthesize a lot of different mechanics all



at once: conversational flow, a move trigger, rolling dice, the way that sexuality is handled in this game, the taking and spending of Strings, and how power dynamics shift between characters throughout play.

Choose Stats and Moves

After discussing Moves and Strings, direct the players to select their stats as well as their Skin Moves. These choices can be made in either order, and can potentially inform one another.

Each Skin has two potential lines of stats. Players should choose the one they want, and cross out the other. They're both good choices given the nature of the Skin, but point toward different sets of strengths and flaws. If a player seems uncertain, reassure them that there's no wrong choice.

On the inside right page of the character sheet, there is a list of Skin Moves. Each Skin has slightly different instructions for choosing their moves, given in italics at the top of the list. For example, with some Skins you start out with an already-selected move and get to choose one more. The Infernal and The Witch are also prompted to choose a couple other things (Bargains and Hexes respectively).

Ask that once someone has made all their choices, they share them aloud. Players don't need to read the word-for-word text of each move, but a little bit of explanation is always appreciated. For example, someone might say, "As the Werewolf, I chose *Heightened Senses* and *Unstable*. So I have a super keen awareness of my surroundings, but I sometimes lose it and wolf out."





Teach Reactively

It can be tempting to explain every single mechanic upfront, and to point out all their interactions and implications, but doing so isn't necessary. At this point, you've already given players a solid foundation of understanding about how the game operates. Shift to teaching reactively, answering questions as they arise, and informing players about new mechanics as they encounter them.

Some of the mechanics are quite straightforward and intuitive, and so little explanation is required even when they do come up in play for the first time. When someone takes 1 Forward for the first time, simply point out the spot on the character sheet where they can record it. The next time they roll dice, mention that they cross it off and add +1 to their roll. You only need to say more if players ask.

68

In other cases, the mechanics are a little less intuitive and will need more explanation. For example, the first time that someone asks about Conditions or one is about to be given out during play, explain how they function mechanically and what they reflect about the teenage social world. Turn to page 31 if you need help explaining.

The first time that someone earns an experience point, make sure to show them where to record it. You don't need to explain advancement right away, unless someone asks about it. The next few times that a roll is failed, it can be helpful to remind the player to mark experience – it's a rule that can easily be overlooked if only mentioned once.



Establish Backstories

Once everyone has chosen their stats and moves, make sure all of the main characters have been introduced. Encourage each player to share a few details about their character's personality and family life. Let questions bubble up if there are any.

Now that the whole table has a handle on who the main characters are, it's time to establish their Backstories. Backstories are located on the inside left page of the character sheet. Anyone can volunteer to go first, with the exception of the Mortal. If there's a Mortal, they always go last.

Turn to whoever volunteered to go first, and explain how to set up their Backstory and record Strings. You can say: "When it's your turn, read out the text for Your Backstory. You'll need to make some decisions that involve Strings being given out. You'll gain some Strings on other characters, and others will gain Strings on you. Don't try to keep track of who has Strings on you - it's a lot of bookkeeping and it's not necessary. Just keep track of the Strings you have on others." Point out that there is a place to record Strings on their character sheet, and suggest some ways to record gaining and using those Strings.

Players should usually choose other main characters for the prompts in their Backstories, rather than side characters controlled by the MC. The more people there are at your table, the more important this becomes. That said, some Backstories clearly reference side characters controlled by the MC, like the Infernal's dark power or the Queen's clique.





Set Up Seating Chart

The seating chart depicts a high school homeroom, showing where everybody sits and how they are seen by others. The seating chart is important for a few reasons: it introduces new characters, it allows you to establish additional relationships, and it draws out the petty high school drama early.

The MC is in charge of the seating chart process, but it depends on back-and-forth collaboration. The MC starts by drawing a simple classroom - a teacher's desk at the front, and several rows of student desks. The ideal is three rows of five, or four rows of four, despite the fact that real high school classrooms typically have double that many desks. Each desk should be a square that you can write a name and details inside, and the squares should be drawn as big as your paper will allow.

70

The process of filling in the seating chart brings to life one of the MC's Principles: ask provocative questions and build on the answers. A great starting point is to turn to the players and ask, "Which one of you is the most popular?" Give that player first pick of where their character sits. After that, maybe ask, "And who sits next to you, right here?" Tap the next desk. Pencil that name in and then turn to the next player. "So, why is this Todd character so untrustworthy?" Skip between players, asking questions that tease out drama, insecurities, talents, and relationships. In addition to their name, ask two questions about each character, and ask them of different players. Take this opportunity to create conflicting accounts and conflicting interests. This will help you create messy triangles between characters during play, and ensure that no relationship exists in a vacuum. Write down the two details about the character in that little box, alongside their name, then move on and fill another desk.





Once you've filled a few desks, ask another player to decide where their character sits. I usually do this by asking, "So, which one of you is the next most popular? Great! Where do you sit?" With fewer desks available every time I ask that question, the least popular of the main characters is only left with a couple options.

Continue to create new classmates and ask provocative questions about them until the chart is full. Think about gender and race as you spring forward with names, to make sure you don't accidentally fill a classroom up with sixteen Jessicas. Make sure that a bunch of these side characters have obvious hooks into the main characters. If there's a Werewolf character on the football team, one of the classmates you create should be Aseem, star quarterback. Then ask the Werewolf, "What did Aseem do to piss you off, last practice?"

Further examples of provocative questions include:

- ✦ Why did Jenna miss so much school last year?
- ✦ Last summer, what did Lucia get arrested for?
- ✦ What are the rumours about Miguel's family? Are they true?
- ✦ Is Desmond actually gay?
- ✦ Why are you so smitten with Lu?

The prototypical seating chart is a high school homeroom, showing who sits next to whom. Other possibilities might emerge from your particular setting: bunks in a boarding school dormitory, a daily shift schedule at the local fast food restaurant, or something else altogether.





Start Playing

At this point, the characters are finished and the players are ready! Remind people about the four parts of the Agenda, and then dive into your first scene.

Further MC advice for how to get the first session rolling is on pages 102-104.



Chapter 3:

Keeping Your Heart Safe





Risks

Monsterhearts does not approach its subject matter gently. It is a game about being both human and inhuman, about dysfunction, abuse, shame, isolation, queerness, violence, and occasionally transcendence. Sometimes, playing the game feels scary and potentially unsafe - maybe when a vampire becomes a dangerous sexual predator, or when an innocent person is about to die. Since roleplaying involves improvising, we don't always know ahead of time what to brace ourselves for. This chapter exists to support you through those fraught moments, making sure that you feel safe even as the story shifts into unsafe territory.

This chapter talks about the people you have responsibility to in your narration, and what is included in those responsibilities. It offers some approaches for setting boundaries and re-evaluating them as you play. While a game of Monsterhearts can be really rewarding, especially when it explores our vulnerabilities and holds a mirror up to us as players, it can also overwhelm or go sideways. It's important to know how to handle those possibilities: checking in, taking breaks, calling upon each other for support, and taking care of one another.



Responsibilities

Words have a lot of power. In a game like *Monsterhearts*, your words have the power to cause harm, just as much as they have the power to delight. When you play a roleplaying game, your words carry with them three circles of responsibility. The innermost circle is a responsibility to yourself. It's important that you feel safe, that you set boundaries, and that you continue to check in with whether you're feeling okay. The middle circle is a responsibility to the other people at the table (and others in the room). It's important that you listen to their boundaries, assess their reactions, and collaborate to create something awesome together. The outermost circle is a responsibility to the people you are portraying, both the fictional characters and the people who inspired them. It's important to remember that all people have agency, strength, and complexity, even if we can't see it clearly from wherever we're standing. It's our responsibility to find the agency, strength, and complexity that exist within our characters, and to demonstrate it to everyone else at the table.

These are our responsibilities: to ourselves, to the others at the table, and to the people we're portraying. They're a series of nested circles, with a responsibility to ourselves at the core.

We're going to make mistakes along the way. Being responsible doesn't require an absence of mistakes. It does involve a sincere recognition of our mistakes, though, and an attempt to remedy them. This can even be part of why we play *Monsterhearts* - to test the waters, exploring human urges and fears, to make mistakes and learn from them. To safely explore that sort of terrain, we must be responsible and not callous.





Setting Boundaries

The tricky thing is that we're constantly learning about our own boundaries. They change and evolve in response to what we need to feel safe and what we want to experience in a given moment.

Sometimes it's helpful to name boundaries upfront, before the first scene of the game. When you think about the kind of story you'll be telling with Monsterhearts, if there's an element of that story that you find particularly upsetting or triggering, you can ask to leave it off the table altogether. Some themes and elements are too thoroughly woven into the mechanics to be dodged, but others are easy enough to separate out. When I play, I usually ask that student-teacher sexual relationships of any kind be off limits.

76

Think also about the individual Skins that each player is considering playing. Skins tend to center on certain patterns of dysfunction or crisis. The Vampire centers on consent issues and emotional denial, while the Ghoul centers on addiction and erratic violence. Each Skin brings a different array of problematic content to the table. If a Skin is centered on an issue you find upsetting or triggering, one strategy is to ask that it be left off the table. Another is to talk to the player considering the Skin, and let them know where your boundaries are in terms of those issues, and let them make a choice about whether they are prepared to play that Skin while maintaining those boundaries. A third option is that if you feel concerned about a particular Skin, you can opt to play it yourself, ensuring that it is handled in a way you find honest and acceptable.

Boundaries let your fellow players know what story elements you don't want to approach, but it can be really helpful to state the opposite as well: what types of problematic content you're specifically interested in exploring through play.





Stating boundaries before you start play isn't a replacement for evaluating them during play. Throughout play it's important to check in with yourself. Pay attention to how you're feeling about the contents of the scene. Does an event in the game leave you feeling panicked, trapped, hurt, or mistrustful? It may be time to express some new boundaries or request a new approach.

You've spent your whole life collecting tools and strategies for expressing boundaries and keeping yourself safe. Don't feel limited to using new tools and mechanics introduced at the gaming table. New tools introduced at the table exist to make communicating your boundaries easier, not to replace the self-care techniques you already know and use. The biggest strength of these tools, like the X-Card, is that they provide the group with a common language for dealing with player concerns.

Since *Monsterhearts* is a game that thrives on problematic relationships and perspectives, it can sometimes be tricky to know where to draw your lines. In this context, there's good discomfort and bad discomfort. Part of the allure of *Monsterhearts* is stumbling through that good discomfort - like one does with a well-crafted horror movie. But in order to do that, you need to sort out which feelings of discomfort are exciting to explore, and which leave you feeling unsafe. It's up to you to determine how discomforted you want to feel, and where your boundaries lie.

You may find that boundaries shift during play. What began as an exciting and provocative topic might turn into an unsettling and undesired one. Good discomfort can become bad discomfort. The inverse is true, too - what initially seemed painful or undesirable may become interesting and safe to explore.





The X-Card

The X-Card is a tool designed by John Stavropolous, and further developed by many others. It's an option for supporting players with problematic or otherwise undesired content at the table.

To introduce the X-Card to your table, start by drawing a thick X onto an index card. Use the following script to explain it, or come up with your own: "I'd like your help making sure the game stays fun for everyone. If something comes up that you find upsetting or disturbing, you can lift this card up - or even just tap it. It can be a little thing or a big thing. We'll edit out any content that gets X-Carded. You don't have to explain why you don't want it in the game. It doesn't matter why, we're happy to replace it with something else. Anyone can use the X-Card at any time."

78

As you play, occasionally take a moment to notice the body language of other players at your table. When an intense plot twist arises, do they suddenly seem squirmy or uncertain? Sometimes people will forget to use the tools at their disposal when they need them. It's always okay to ask, "Hey, does everyone feel comfortable with that, or should we X-Card it?" Try not to put others on the spot and single them out, but do pay attention to the vibes at the table.

To learn more about the X-Card, visit <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg>



Fading to Black



Another tool at your disposal comes from film: fading to black. Sometimes there's a plot twist that you're okay with, but you don't want to narrate it out 'on screen'. In that case, you're always welcome to say, "Hey y'all, I'd like to fade to black at this point." Typically that's all that needs to be said, because it will be clear to everyone at the table that the characters go on to have sex, or commit some act of violence, or whatever the case might be.

If you fade to black as two characters start having sex, their sex moves still take effect (presuming they would if you continued to narrate on in vivid detail).

Laeli comes up to Cassidy in the locker room, after a soccer practice. "Hey, I heard about how you called Vic out, like, after she attacked Gerard. That was really solid. I'm still not entirely sure why you stood up for him like that, but I wanted to say thank you."

Cassidy takes a slight step in to Laeli, putting a hand on her arm. "I mean, in a way, I did it for you. Because Gerard is yours. And even if I don't particularly like him, I still want you to have all the things you want." Laeli feels her breath catch a little bit, meeting Cassidy's intense gaze. Soon enough, the two girls are making out in the locker room.

Lorraine narrates how Laeli lifts her shirt up over her head, and then nervously moves to help Cassidy out of hers. Gabriela decides that this is as far as she wants to hear the narration go, and suggests that they fade to black. "Sounds good," Lorraine and Cody agree. "Our characters probably have sex, yeah? What's your sex move?"





Breathing

When you play Monsterhearts, take breaks. After an intense scene, give people a minute to crack jokes and release some of their feelings. Throughout the session, at least once or twice, call for a water break where people actually leave the table. When you finish a Season, follow the advice in the text and play a different game as a palette cleanser before deciding whether you will return to Monsterhearts.

Breaks give you room to breathe, to reflect upon how the contents of each scene made you feel, and to think more about the boundaries that you've expressed. If you are unsatisfied with the direction the story is moving in, breaks let you decide upon an approach or response - do you talk about it with the other players, play your character differently, or excuse yourself from the game? Maybe you realize that you need to say, "hey folks, that scene was really emotional and scary for me, but I'm glad it happened the way it did."

Recovering

Monsterhearts has the potential to leave people feeling hurt. What should you do when this happens to you? Since you know yourself better than anyone else could, you are the ultimate authority on your own needs in that moment. This guide can offer strategies and suggestions, but none of it trumps your own intuition.

As mentioned earlier, you have three circles of responsibility: to yourself, to the other people at your table, and to the people you're portraying. The innermost circle is your first priority. Your safety comes first. Maybe you don't have the capacity to do more than take care of yourself in that moment. That's okay. Move outward as you are able.





Remember that you can ask people to pause. If you don't, they might keep rolling forward while you remain stuck in a past moment, still trying to sort out your feelings. Sometimes it'll be unclear what you need from a situation. Your needs are valid even if you don't yet know what they are, and asking people to pause momentarily can help you get more clarity. If you see others looking distressed, you can check in with them, or ask to pull something from the fiction on their behalf.

If you're playing in a convention environment, people might be reticent or unwilling to talk through your discomforts with you. Since you are your own first priority, you get to make a choice about whether you're prepared to keep playing, to call for a break, to ask for support, or to excuse yourself from the session.

If you realize that someone else needs support, and they haven't voiced that yet, be careful not to put them on the spot in a way that adds pressure and anxiety. If you've got a tool like the X-Card, you can ask a group question like "Hey, does everyone feel comfortable with that, or should we X-Card it?" You can ask to pause the current scene and suggest that a five-minute break would be good, and use that break to check in with the other player.

There are lots of strategies for recovering a story when it crosses someone's boundaries, each tailored to a different set of needs. You can take a break and return after you've had a moment to digest the turn of events. You can keep something in the story but fade to black and move on to another scene rather than dwelling any longer. You can remove an element from the story, and ask its author to introduce a replacement instead. You can stop the game and have a bigger conversation about goals and boundaries. You can brainstorm additional solutions. Sometimes it will be obvious what strategy is needed, sometimes it'll take a bit more discussion to figure it out.





Reasons to Play

After a big talk about risk and care, it's important to remind ourselves why we're taking the risk in the first place. Why play Monsterhearts?

You play because these characters are magnetic and flawed, and you want to see how they grapple with things like shame, uncertainty, and power. They are easy to love and easy to hate. Amazing stories can emerge from that sort of complexity.

You play because outsiders are important. You play because queer youth are routinely erased from the world, and monsterhood serves as a messy metaphor for bringing them back. You want to know whether these characters continue working to blend in, or eventually bare their fangs to the world. You want to know how they reconcile their power and their vulnerability.

You play because adolescence is a confusing time and you're still making sense of your own. The stories you tell in this game will probably bear little similarity to your own experiences, but they'll still tackle the same themes. Despite their fangs and their bartered souls and their boiling cauldrons, these aren't just monsters. They're burgeoning adults, trying to learn how to meet their needs. They're who we used to be - who we still are sometimes. You play to get lost and to remember.



Chapter 4:

MCing





Your Role

You share the same four-point Agenda as everyone else at the table, outlined on page 9:

- ✦ Make each main character's life not boring.
- ✦ Keep the story feral.
- ✦ Say what the rules demand.
- ✦ Say what honesty demands.

But despite what you have in common with the other players, you have a unique role and play by different rules.

When setting up to play, the MC is typically the person who acts as facilitator and teacher. This chapter is addressed to you, and walks you through that role.

During play, you're in charge of all of the side characters - everyone other than the main characters. You're in charge of describing most of the setting details, from the stormy skies to the abandoned movie theater. You follow a set of Principles, which are best practices to guide you in MCing. You don't ever roll dice. Instead, you make use of a list of Reactions, prompts that help you decide what to say to ensure that the game is full of messy, complicated situations for the main characters to respond to.

You play the rest of the world and get to see how the main characters deal with it.



Principles

Principles guide the choices you make throughout play, helping you bring the genre and the story to fruition. They're best practices to keep in the back of your head, to let seep into the way that you MC. You share the same four-point agenda as everybody else, and your principles are built on top of it. Manifesting them will make sure the game is thematic, compelling, and rife with drama.

- ✦ Embrace melodrama.
- ✦ Address yourself to the characters, not the players.
- ✦ Make monsters seem human, and vice versa.
- ✦ Make labels matter.
- ✦ Give everyone a messy life.
- ✦ Find the catch.
- ✦ Ask provocative questions and build on the answers.
- ✦ Be a fan of the main characters.
- ✦ Treat side characters like stolen cars.
- ✦ Give side characters simple, divisive motivations.
- ✦ Sometimes, disclaim decision making.

Embrace melodrama

Blanket the world in overwrought darkness. If a scene could take place in a cemetery, set it there. In fact, think about setting it there on the night of the full moon, with your vampire queen leaning up against a tombstone to take a drag of her cigarette as the scene starts. Give yourself permission to be campy and melodramatic.

Address yourself to the characters, not the players

Once the game starts, address your players by their characters' names. It's just a small wording shift, but it will create a more vivid experience at the table, by encouraging them to think and respond as those characters. Each character will become more than a pawn in a game. Instead, they'll be a conduit for feeling all those melodramatic, beautiful, and hideous teenage things.



***Make monsters seem human, and vice versa***

When you start the game, there will be monsters and there will be humans, and they'll seem like two separate groups with distinct members. Your players will assume that adult humans have their shit together, and that adult monsters are evil-hearted parasites. Whenever possible, make the situation more complicated than that. Have monsters demonstrate unbelievable altruism, sometimes, before retreating into pathology once again. Show how "good people" have their clandestine and perverse natures, too. The moment someone draws a line in the fiction, start thinking about ways to blur and bend it. Work to apply this thinking everywhere: authority, gender and loyalty are only some of the ideas worth tampering with.

Make labels matter

An essential part of the teenage experience is dealing with labels and prejudice. This is the point in a person's life when sex, gender, race, class, beauty, talent - they become acutely aware of all of it. They feel controlled by labels which only ever half-apply, but they also use those labels to try and control and understand each other, or to define themselves against. Make sure those labels are omnipresent. Make sure they have teeth.



Give everyone a messy life

You've got all these characters to play - the members of the football team, the guardians and siblings of the monster teens, teachers, librarians, others. It's important to remember that when these characters are off-screen they don't just power down or go on standby. They're off living their lives. That means that they're sleeping around, stealing money from one another, snooping into matters that don't concern them, and all the other things that people do.

You don't need to chart out the days of all of your various characters. But every once in a while, ask yourself what they might be up to. If it's been a session since you saw Jeremy, wonder what mischief he might have gotten into. Occasionally, surprise the other players by reminding them that every character that touches the fiction has a vibrant and messy life going on, even if we don't usually see it.

Find the catch

When acceptance is offered between two people, look for clues that it might be lopsided or conditional. When one of your side characters offers someone a gift, make sure there's a twist, or a debt to be repaid. When a character is happy, think about who might be unhappy because of the same things. Salina's relationship with Jackson might seem blissful and secure, but Rocko's in the shadows brooding over it. How far would he go to get her back? Find the Rocko in every situation. Then, use your questions and your choice of scenes to draw attention to the catch. Find out which of these catches people are willing to overlook, and which will force their hand.





Ask provocative questions and build on the answers

Ask questions all the time. Ask questions in order to build up sensory details (“What does your room smell like?”). Ask questions in order to reveal perspectives (“So, what do you think about this bush party?”). Ask questions to highlight potential story directions (“Have you and Lorna ever hooked up? Have you ever thought about the possibility?”). Ask questions to reveal insecurities and fears (“Why don’t you want to sneak back into Jake’s place?”). Ask questions to reveal sources of tension (“He’s never seen you with a girl, but Brandon keeps calling you a dyke. Why?”)

Whatever answer you get, trust it and build upon it. Add your own details to the answers that players give, and incorporate whatever they say into future descriptions. If someone answers a question with something provocative and interesting, maybe even something that changes the game, go with it. Let their answers steer the story in new and unexpected directions. Ask questions in the hope that you’ll be surprised by what you hear. This is part of how you keep the story feral.

Be a fan of the main characters

You share the same agenda as everyone else: make each main character’s life not boring. As the MC, that often means introducing struggle and adversity into their lives. Just remember that your goal is not to thwart them, or to gain some sort of unspoken power over them. The whole reason you’re introducing struggle and adversity is to see how they change under pressure, to watch their brilliance and flaws bubbling up, and to enjoy their story. You’re not here to coddle these characters or to bully them. You’re here to be their fan.



Treat side characters like stolen cars

Think of it like this: between “make each main character’s life not boring” and “keep the story feral”, half of your agenda in this game is to make exciting, messy choices and see what happens next. Your side characters are part of that equation. Treat them like stolen cars on a joyride. You control them for the present moment, but it’s not like you get to keep them when the night’s over. Play them recklessly, and abandon them when they’re dead weight. You don’t necessarily need to kill your darlings, but you do need to accept that they are precarious, auxiliary, and yes, killable. Beyond just accepting it, revel in it.

Give side characters simple, divisive motivations

Make your characters straightforward and obvious enough that other players know how to react to them. Give them obvious goals and obvious means to achieve them. Make sure that their goals divide the main characters, pitting them against one another in messy triangles. By making your characters’ motivations transparent, you ensure that the game isn’t about endlessly dragging information out of people. By giving them divisive goals, you help focus the game on the dramatic conflict between the main characters and everyone they encounter in the world. For example: Tommy and Fawzi are main characters who’re dating. Tommy’s neighbour Luna is a solid friend who loves spending time with him, and is always there to be a sympathetic shoulder when Tommy feels sad. The only problem is she hates Fawzi, and she’s always looking to drive a wedge into their relationship. Luna isn’t that complicated: she wants Tommy all to herself.



***Sometimes, disclaim decision making.***

In order to keep the story feral, give away your decision-making power from time to time. You're doing this already when you ask provocative questions and build upon the answers, but you can go a step further. You can put the decision-making power into the hands of a side character, by asking "forget about my own ideas for a second, would Mr. Bellgrave really expel a kid over this?" You're still making the decision, but now you've got a perspective from which to make it. You can also put the decision-making power into the hands of another player, by asking "okay so, it sounds like you shove her pretty hard, and this is a slippery roof when it's raining. She loses her balance, teetering right near the edge. What do you do?" If they don't intervene, Becky falls three stories. Just like that.







MC Reactions

Reactions are the things you do whenever the players look at you expectantly, waiting to see what happens next. When somebody fails a roll (rolling 6 or lower), or a character wanders into harm's way, you have an opportunity to react.

When the main characters are already at one another's throats, creating their own compelling drama, back off. Make sure the game's Agenda is thriving, make sure your Principles are alive in the story, and otherwise just relax and enjoy the show. When the dust starts to settle again, scan your list of Reactions and figure out where to push the story next.

You will be called upon frequently to react, and that generally involves choosing from the list below. Don't announce the Reaction that you're choosing by name. Instead, weave it into the conversation, so that it feels like a natural response to what was just said or a natural consequence of what was just done.

Every once in a while, there will be a moment of dead air. The scene falters and nobody's sure where the story should go next. Eyes will invariably look to you for guidance. This is a great time to react.



Setting It Up, Knocking It Down

Most of the time, you'll use Reactions to set it up: putting something at risk, making a dangerous proposition, implying the immediate threat of violence, edging toward serious consequences. When you use a Reaction to set it up, you call the other players to action. Something needs to be said or done. What happens next?

Some of the time, you'll use Reactions to knock it down: bridges burnt, damage done, havoc had. When you use a Reaction to knock it down, you force the players to deal with the consequences of something that just happened. Does the situation continue to escalate? Is the teen social hierarchy restored or disrupted? How do you stop the bleeding? What happens next?

Picture Lily, the spurned cheerleading captain sworn to revenge. Putting a gun in her hand is setting it up. Putting a bullet in someone's shoulder is knocking it down.

So how do you know which to do, moment to moment? The cheeky answer is: you'll know. The other answer is: if you've already set something up, and now people are looking at you expectantly again, knock it down.





The List

- ✦ Put them together.
- ✦ Separate them.
- ✦ Tell them the possible consequences and ask.
- ✦ Inflict harm (as established).
- ✦ Enact drastic measures.
- ✦ Turn their move back on them.
- ✦ Leap to the worst possible conclusion.
- ✦ Expose a dangerous secret to the wrong person.
- ✦ Take a String on someone.
- ✦ Herald the abyss.
- ✦ Trigger their Darkest Self.
- ✦ At every turn: “What do you do?”

Put them together

Pick two characters with major gripes. Pick two characters that are afraid of one another. Pick a predator and a prey. Pick any interesting combination of characters, and put them together. Set the situation up so that it'll be difficult for either of them to just walk away gracefully. And then see what happens. If Jack and Huxley got into a furious yelling match the last time that they were in the same room, it's a great time to have their families get together for a big shared meal. After all, their mothers work together at a law firm that just got an acquittal for a major client, right? Now they're pushing tables together at Federici's. Will Jack and Huxley make it through the scrutiny and awkwardness of a fancy family dinner, or will their tempers flair again?

Separate them

If two characters are working on a science project together, or nervously hooking up, whatever the case might be, separate them. Have a friend call from the ER to demand care. Pull the fire alarm. Figure out how to divide them, and then take advantage of the fact that they are isolated.



Tell them the possible consequences and ask

When one of the main characters is after something, and there are obstacles in their way, you can make it clear what price they'll need to pay to get what they want. Maybe they're trying to get into a new club with fake IDs and the bouncer sees through their bluff. He'll let them in, but it'll cost them: maybe money, maybe favours. Or instead of a price, it's a risk: they can try to sneak in the back door, but if they get caught there could be cop trouble or worse. If you're setting it up, tell them the possible consequences if they go through with their plan. If you're knocking it down, tell them what is being demanded of them, a little too late to back out now.

Inflict harm

Say Rico's standing in the middle of the courtyard, and one of your undead motorcycle gangsters has a gun pointed at him. Rico takes the stupid way out, and bolts toward shelter. He rolls a 6. You've already set it up that Rico's in danger of getting shot, and a gun would probably do 2 harm at this distance. So, bang. Rico's been hit for 2 harm, with a bullet tearing into the back of his thigh and dropping him to muddy ground.

Enact drastic measures

Imagine there's a dead sophomore, or mysterious animal sightings by the old mill, or a new drug that some kids are selling between classes. People tend to talk about these things. You know how they say that drastic times call for drastic measures? Introduce some from time to time. Detentions, expulsions, police inquiries, having your phone confiscated, a media crew arriving from the big city to delve deeper into these strange disappearances, smear campaigns carried out by rival cliques, and threats of violence by the school flagpole are all ways that the world might respond to the chaotic drama radiating out from the main characters.

***Turn their move back on them***

Often, characters create their own trouble, and all you need to do is take advantage of it. Have their actions create unexpected consequences that put them in dire straits. So, Logan takes a swing at the leader of a gang? That swing knocks her off her feet, and her head lands on the pavement with a dull thud. It's gushing blood, and she's not moving. The rest of the gang looks bewildered and furious. Now what?

Leap to the worst possible conclusion

When one of your side characters has an incomplete understanding of the situation (which should be the case most of the time), have them leap to the worst possible conclusion. If Jake's mom knows that he wasn't home during Bryah's murder, and she finds a gun in his bedroom, maybe she becomes convinced that her son is a killer. Have her leap to the worst possible conclusion. Then, communicate those conclusions clearly and directly -- either through a short aside or by framing a new scene about it.

Expose a dangerous secret to the wrong person

Sometimes, the wrong person will just happen to witness something. Like, Jake transforms into a werewolf and bounds off into the darkness, and all you need to do is narrate Sergeant Davis standing there, wide-eyed and trembling. Sometimes, the wrong person will finally put together all the clues. Jake's mom has probably been pulling fur out of the dryer lint trap for months, and noticing strange disturbances, and hearing her son howling like a wild dog late at night. Sooner or later, she realizes what's happening.



Take a String on someone

Any character can hold Strings. When a main character reveals something of their true nature, gives their power away, or somehow lets a side character gain some leverage over them, you have a perfect opportunity for one of your side characters to take a String on them. When Jake asks Roca out to the Spring Formal, and Roca turns the offer down, have Roca take a String on Jake. She knows he likes her, and she can use that to her advantage.

Don't have side characters take Strings on other side characters. Strings should always involve a main character.

Herald the abyss

The players can choose to have their characters *Gaze Into the Abyss*, and doing so establishes a sort of dialogue with it. But sometimes, the abyss is going to reach out and start that dialogue on its own. The abyss is a personal affair, different for every character, and so what it means for the abyss to reach out and contact them will be different as well. Maybe voices follow them around. Maybe they have fever dreams. Maybe phantoms show up and ask for tea.

Trigger their Darkest Self

Use this choice sparingly, and only when the situation is perfect. Tell someone what makes them snap, what pushes them into the darkest corner of their nature. Then let them run wild with their Darkest Self.



At every turn: “What do you do?”

Whenever you use one of these Reactions, do so to create interesting situations that others can respond to, and then actively invite their response. After every Reaction you introduce, ask this question, over and over again: “What do you do?” Eventually, the question will become so ingrained that players will instinctively leap to answer it before you’ve even gotten the words out. There will be chain reactions, everyone eagerly barrelling forward in the story, spring-boarding off one another’s ideas. Splendid.

Since hooking up with her, Cassidy has gotten all territorial about Laeli. When everyone in science class is told to grab a lab partner and get to work, Cassidy tries to swoop in and claim Laeli. Gerard butts in to say, “Sorry Cass, we’re already working together.” A squabble ensues, and Gerard tries to shut Cassidy down. Gabriella rolls a 5. It’s an opportunity for the MC to react.

98

*The MC decides to **put them together**, curious to see what happens when Gerard and Cassidy are forced to work as a team. The grumpy science teacher bellows, “Enough! You three are acting like children. Gerard, you’re with Cassidy. Laeli, you can join Jessalyn’s group. You’ll all pipe down and get to work, or I’m giving you a zero on this project.”*

The scene continues forward, with the spotlight following Gerard and Cassidy. The MC asks, “Cassidy, this clueless teacher has you paired up with Gerard now. All the other groups are bustling about and getting to work. I’m curious: what do you do?” Cody thinks about it for a second before replying, “You know, I think this whole situation rubs her the wrong way. She’s just going to leave. Like, grab her things and walk right out the door.”



Managing Side Characters

You're going to have a fairly large number of side characters, including classmates, teachers, parents, and other people in the community. The best way to do keep track of them all is with a few pieces of blank paper and a pencil. Write down the names of these characters as they crop up. Jot down their key relationships and defining quirks if they feel important enough to warrant it. A lot of the side characters are already listed on the seating chart, so don't worry about writing them on another sheet of paper unless they start gaining Strings on people, or they become so pivotal to the story that you want to keep more expansive notes on them.

Don't try to write the names out in a neat and orderly fashion, like you're making an attendance chart. Just jot things down wherever it makes sense. Write just enough to prompt your memory.





Side Character Strings

Any character can gain Strings. But Strings always involve a main character, and side characters can't have Strings on other side characters. As the MC, it's your job to keep track of the Strings that each of your side characters have gained on the main characters. On the pages where you're jotting down notes about your characters, make sure to also list any Strings that they hold.

Just like with main characters, a side character having Strings on someone means they have emotional leverage on that person. Spending one of those Strings means they're cashing in on that emotional leverage in some way.

You can spend a side character's Strings on a main character in four ways:

- ✦ Offer them an experience point to do what you want.
- ✦ Place a Condition on them.
- ✦ Add 1 to the harm you're dealing them.
- ✦ Ambush them with a Reaction, setting it up and knocking it down in one fell swoop.

The first three options on this list mirror the list that the other players use for their main characters. The top two are a sort of carrot and stick, tempting people to do your will or punishing them for crossing you. If a side character creates a Condition for a main character through gossip and subterfuge, it's important to clarify how the main character eventually learns about their new reputation.

The fourth option is a unique tool for you as the MC. Selecting it means that you can come out of nowhere with a big plot twist, or push one of your characters into a momentary position of power. Remember, this String represents the power of a specific side character



over a specific main character, so the Reaction needs to reflect that relationship.

Despite getting his ass kicked, Gerard remains fascinated by Vic. He saw her in a strange dream, holding a chalice of blood and flanked by acolytes. He knows she's involved in some kind of satanic group. He wants desperately to be a part of it.

*Gerard puts himself out there more than once, hungry for clues and invitations. Vic gains a String on him, and then another. The MC decides that Vic is finally willing to give Gerard a chance to prove himself. "You're such a fool, Gerard. You don't even know what you're getting yourself into. But fine. If you want in, here's what you have to do for me. You have to bring me Laeli. Either as a willing initiate, or as a lamb. Deal?" The MC uses up one of Vic's Strings to **offer them an experience point to do what you want.***

Gerard gulps. Laeli has been good to him. But he wants this more than he's ever wanted anything else. "Yeah... okay, deal. I'll see what I can do." The experience point gets recorded.





Using the Seating Chart

The seating chart is an important MC tool. You create it while setting up to play, as detailed on pages 70-71. Throughout play, it serves as a bank of opportunities. When you want to react by *putting them together*, you can glance down and find a character to toss into the scene. When you want to *expose a dangerous secret to the wrong person*, the seating chart probably contains just such a person. Not only does it have a host of usable characters, but it lists some juicy gossip about each. Those details are invaluable in helping you put your Principles into motion.

Picture a web built out of all the relationships in the game. If each of the main characters has their own disparate group of friends and crushes, the web doesn't criss-cross very much. It's just loose threads. If everyone is interconnected, with relationships overlapping all over the place, the web is strong and dense. That's important for three reasons. The first is that it means you have fewer characters to keep track of, which makes your job easier. The second is that when a relationship changes or ends, you don't want characters to just disappear. Like, if Lu dumps Aseem, the worst thing to happen next would be for Aseem to just sort of fade out of the story. You want Aseem to stick around and make things complicated for Lu. The third reason is that if characters are involved in messy triangles of relationships, then any interaction between two characters inevitably creates ripples. Aseem is best friends with Lu's best friend. Aseem is on a basketball team with Lu's lab partner. If Aseem falls into a depressed slump after the breakup, it's going to affect a lot of people, and that's going to bring new stress into Lu's other relationships. Nothing's tidy.

When you want to put a new character into a scene, look down at the seating chart to see if you've already got someone who would fit the bill. Use the seating chart to help build a dense web.



The First Scene

Chapter 2 outlines how to prepare for your first session, including creating characters and teaching the game to others. At this point, you've got a table of eager players and a finished seating chart. Eyes fall upon you expectantly.

There can be pressure and high expectations surrounding that first scene. As a group, you've invested 30-60 minutes into getting ready for this moment. Breathe. The first scene is usually slow to start, and that's perfectly okay. Relationships reveal themselves, emotions start piling up, and soon enough there will be drama and action.

If you've got a perfect first scene in mind, trust your intuition and start there. But in most cases, the best place to frame the first scene is in homeroom. It serves to introduce a lot of characters all at once, and show how they are interrelated at the start of the story. It establishes a sense of normalcy that you can later tilt and dismantle. My first question as MC is often, "Okay, who shows up to class early?" I go from there, with more people filtering in to the scene as it unfolds.

One of your jobs in that first scene (and, to some extent, throughout the whole first session) is to test the waters and see which stories people are actually interested in exploring. When the angry, quiet kid named Butch shoulders his way between two main characters, do they snap at him? If the other characters mostly ignore Butch, then drop it. If one of them chimes in, "Watch where you're going, dumb fuck" then you have a tense relationship to explore more throughout play.

Framing the first scene in the homeroom means you can test out a lot of different relationships in quick succession, since people need to slide between each other's desks and borrow each other's pencils. Look for





clues about what the characters desire, what they fear, and where they're not in control of their own life. Jot down a couple notes.

If the scene starts to drag, skip ahead and frame another. Ask provocative questions and build on the answers. Take advantage of everything written down on the seating chart. Use your notes.

If you're antsy to get the story rolling, here are three reliable options:

- ✦ Stage a disappearance.
- ✦ Plan a party.
- ✦ Demand a fight.

Stage a disappearance

You've framed that first scene in the homeroom, with people filtering in between bells. One by one, you get all the characters in the door. Except that someone's missing. Class starts, and still Jesse is absent. Then the police arrive - two of them, pulling the teacher aside to talk in hushed tones. There's a ripple of apprehension through the classroom. One of the kids starts eyeing up the window, like she's trying to assess whether it'd be safe to jump out. What do people do next?

You can alternately set this one up before the first scene, during the seating chart process. Write down a name and then immediately cross it out, putting a big X through the desk. "When did Jesse go missing?" And then to the next player, "What do you think happened?"



Plan a party

Once class has started and the teacher has their back turned, have a popular side character start passing notes to other kids about a big party at their house later. If there's a main character who has already been established as a queen bee in their own right, seize on any competitive tension that you notice. Ask provocative questions like, "Jacqueline, how does this invite sit with you? Were you already making big plans for tonight?" If party-planning drama erupts, excellent. If not, you've still set up an excellent scene for later in the session.

Demand a fight

You've probably got a least one rowdy, loose-cannon character in your repertoire. Have them attempt to pick a fight with someone. To keep it messy and complicated, narrate some details about how their bravado is clearly muddled up with something else. Maybe their eyes are red from crying, or they've got their arm in a sling already. Make this character not just a fist-shaking bruiser, but also a scared or wounded kid. Push for a fight, either then and there or later by the flagpole. See what happens.





Convention Play

If you're playing Monsterhearts as a convention game, I strongly advocate taking a short intermission in the middle of the session. Encourage people to stretch and get some water - whatever it is that they need to do.

When people sit back down to the table, take a few minutes to check in with everyone. Ask whether they're happy with the direction that the game is going, and if there's anything on the horizon of the story that they're dreading. Now is a great time to clarify expectations, make changes, and even rewind the story a little bit if necessary. Convention games are often the first point of exposure that players have with a game, and so it's invaluable to take a moment to check in about how the session is going.

106

Experience and advancement are an exciting part of the game, but don't always get to shine in a single session. So if you're playing a one-shot game at a convention, use the intermission as an opportunity to say, "Everyone should select a free advancement for their character before we dive back into the story! When you've picked yours, tell us all what it is." It gives players an opportunity to watch their characters grow and change in tangible ways, even if they weren't soaking up the experience points during scenes. It's a neat bonus for players and an opportunity to see more of the system in action.



The Big Climax

Throughout the session, scenes will generate loose threads and compelling hooks. The MC's job is often curatorial, deciding what to follow up on and explore. Some MCs like to follow the action wherever it goes, and get a lot of input from the other players about where each scene should take place. Others like to be more ruthless and directive, skipping ahead to moments of explosive drama in quick succession. I prefer a balance, but this ultimately comes down to personal style. If you need additional guidance on framing scenes, re-read the section on page 13.

Usually, the story will organically build toward a climactic set of overlapping conflicts. As the MC, you just need to nudge here or there to ensure that everything falls into place at the right time. The Mortal has finally welled up the courage to confess her love to the Queen, but the Queen has other things to worry about: her cult just kidnapped the Werewolf and they're planning a human sacrifice bonfire in the woods. Something like that.

Since you control scene framing, you have some ability to accelerate or slow down the tempo of the story. Groups often have an agreed-upon end time for their sessions, either vague ("We usually finish up by ten, but definitely by eleven") or strict ("This convention slot ends at four"). If your session seems to be gearing up for a grand finale scene, it's ideal for that scene to start with 40-45 minutes left on the clock. I'm often caught by surprise at how sprawling that last scene can get, and how long it can take. 40-45 minutes ensures that you'll get through it and reach a brief denouement, and that people won't be anxiously glancing at the clock throughout the most exciting moments of the game.

Don't try to tie up every loose thread. Leave some chaos and unanswered questions scattered about the story. Leave people wanting just a little bit more.





Maps and Materials

Towns come to life when you draw them. It only takes a few rectangles and squiggly lines on a piece of scrap paper, and your scene locations start to feel more interconnected and real. Positioning things on a map adds both constraints and possibilities to your scenes. In addition to your seating chart, a town map serves as an excellent visual aid. Keep the map simple and impressionistic, adding just enough detail to bring context to your scene framing.

While I advocate for drawing a town map, it's been my experience that adding additional maps of homes or high school tends to clutter up the table.

Some groups like to create additional setting materials. If you've got an artist in the group, they might start sketching the characters mid-session. Between sessions, a player might want to type up a detailed account of everything that happened. Celebrate these efforts when you notice them, because they can be a huge part of how some players engage with the game.

If you're all keen to do something creative between sessions, in order to channel your teen monster energies, here are two options to consider:

- ✦ Casting your characters.
- ✦ Creating playlists.





Casting your characters

If your game of Monsterhearts was a television show or movie, who would each of the players cast in the role of their main character? Invite your fellow players to dwell on the question and chat about it throughout your week. As the MC, feel free to cast any prominent side characters that catch your enthusiasm. When you show up to the next session, bring a print-out of the actors everybody chose. Use it as a visual aid throughout play if the group wants to, or just take a moment to soak in one another's choices before putting them away.

Creating playlists

What songs does your character hum on the bus? What dark ballads soothe their tormented soul? Is there an anthem that captures everything you love about them? Nudge your players to each create a playlist for their character. It could be made in-character, or serve as a soundtrack to their story. As the MC, challenge yourself to create a playlist for the town itself.

Of course, none of this is at all required. Most players won't engage with the game between sessions. That's fine, too.





Future Sessions

Monsterhearts can be played as a one-shot, single session game. But it's also designed to serve as a game for short campaigns, lasting around 2-5 sessions.

When you return to the table for that second or subsequent session, part of your job as MC is deciding where to pick up the story. The other players might default to the expectation of resuming at the exact moment and situation where the last session left off, but you're allowed to challenge that expectation. Maybe you frame the opening scene in homeroom the next morning, or skip ahead two days to Lu and Rocko's third date. Think about pacing and tempo. If the first session had an arc of rising action that led to a thundering grand finale, it may be prudent to slow down the action and have some re-establishing scenes before the momentum rebuilds. Trust your intuition.

110

Some plot threads will carry over between sessions. Others will get tied up neatly. Whenever the momentum of the story starts to slow, consider reincorporating or revisiting those loose threads from past sessions. Since one of your Principles is to give everyone a messy life, it's fine to have situations change dramatically or become dangerously volatile while the main characters aren't looking. As you play, jot down enough notes so that you'll remember what the loose threads are between sessions.

Campaigns of Monsterhearts have a built-in timer, known as Seasons. For a refresher on how Seasons work, see pages 51-52.



Villains



The player characters are monsters, but they're also just teenagers. There's a difference between monsters and, you know, monsters. Real monsters kill people. Real monsters are hardened to the ways that their actions hurt people. Real monsters get what they want. Are the main characters ready to cross that line? Do they even realize that the line exists?

Sometimes, as MC you'll want to introduce a villainous character to provoke the main characters and learn more about their mettle. Maybe you name-drop Lydia, the vampire queen. Maybe you have a motorcycle gang of werewolves roll into town. Maybe the Fae messes up one too many times, and the Faery King comes to pay a visit.

Introduce villains sparingly. Don't spoil it by showing off how edgy they are – instead, use it as an opportunity to hold a dark mirror up to the main characters, tempting them and beckoning them to look closer at themselves. Here's the thing: when you introduce a villain, you're making a bid for the players' attention. If they try to brush it off, take a hint and shuffle that villain back out of the story. If they engage excitedly, a whole story arc might emerge.

If you introduce a villain and the players eagerly engage, react accordingly. Give that villain resources and motivations. Have them dangle lucrative promises in front of these vulnerable teenage protagonists. Have them make demands, each one just slightly more insidious than the last. Take your cues from the other players about whether this villain will be part of a fleeting side-story or come to be a driving force in the plot.





If a villain becomes meaningfully involved in the story, you can do the following two things to give yourself a bit of extra structure and inspiration for playing them:

- ✦ Write a custom Principle for playing them.
- ✦ Write a custom Reaction for them.

*At first, Vic was just a class bully. But as the main characters interacted with her, her role grew. When Gerard chose to **Gaze Into the Abyss** about her, the MC made up details about her being involved in some kind of satanic ritual. Slowly, Vic emerged as a villain in the story.*

*Josh decides that Vic deserves some special attention. Thinking back on all the nasty choices Vic has made so far, and looking ahead to where the plot might head next, Josh gives her the Principle “**Always go after the weakest link**” and the Reaction “**Break somebody’s nose without warning.**”*



Chapter 5:
The Skins





The Fae

At the edges of this world, just beyond the veil, there are colours that few mortals even dream of. Beauty enough to shatter any heart. The Fae live and breathe at the edges of this world. They keep a dusting of that magic tucked behind their ears, just in case.

And the Fae are willing to share. They're nothing if not generous, asking for only one thing in return. A promise. Keep it, and the true beauty of the world will be revealed. Break it, and feel the wrath of faery vengeance.

Playing the Fae

Alluring, otherworldly, fickle, and vengeful. The Fae entices people into making promises, and wields faerie vengeance when those promises are broken. They also have the ability to commune with ethereal forces, just beyond the veil.

The two stat choices for the Fae allow you to slant toward being either beautiful and mysterious (Hot 2 & Dark 1) or audacious and alien (Volatile 2 & Hot 1). With a consistently-low Cold stat, they aren't prone to being very chill, cynical, or wry. From their forward sensuality to their unwavering sense of justice, sincerity is a big theme for the Fae.

When you play the Fae, promises matter. Use the Fae's allure and wit to tease those promises out of other characters. You can add mechanical incentive for others to make promises to you by spending Strings to *tempt them to do what you want*, or through the move *Lure*. Keep track of the promises that others make to you, in the margins of your character sheet or on scrap paper.

Beyond the Veil, *Guide*, the option to join a **Jury of Fae**, and talk of faery justice all invite you to collaboratively imagine the world of faery. To do so, ask questions of the MC, anticipate questions being asked of you in return, and brace yourself for surprise.

Identity

Name: Anders, Aurora, Crow, Gail, Harmony, Iris, Lilith, Ping, Selene, Sienna, Walthus

Look: dainty, girlish, gaunt, mysterious, dishevelled

Eyes: quick eyes, lyrical eyes, mesmerizing eyes, laughing eyes, piercing eyes

Origin: fae born, fae blooded, swapped at birth, stole the gift, touched with the gift

Your Backstory

You wear your heart on your sleeve. Give everyone one String.

You've captured someone's fancy. Gain 2 Strings on them.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot 2, Cold -1, Volatile -1, Dark 1
- ✦ Hot 1, Cold -1, Volatile 2, Dark -1

Darkest Self

Everything you say seems a promise. Everything you hear seems a promise. If a promise is broken, justice must be wrought in trickery or blood. You aren't subject to the human rules of mercy. To escape your Darkest Self, you must in some way re-balance the scales of justice.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Fae move.
- Take another Fae move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You belong to a **Jury of Fae**.

Sex Move

When you lie naked with another, you can ask them for a promise. If they refuse, take 2 Strings on them.

Fae Moves

You get Faery Contract, and choose one more:

● **Faery Contract**

If someone breaks a promise or contract made to you, take a String on them. When spending a String to even out the score and get justice on a broken promise, add these options to *Pulling Strings*:

- ✦ they fuck up something simple at a crucial moment, suffering 1 Harm if appropriate,
- ✦ add 2 to your roll on an act of vengeance.

○ **Unashamed**

You can give someone a String on you to add 3 to your attempt to *Turn Them On*.

○ **The Wild Hunt**

When you draw upon your most feral manner, echoing the lithe movements of a cat or the voracity of a wolf, add 1 to your roll to *Turn Someone On*.

○ **Lure**

Whenever someone makes a promise to you, they mark experience. Whenever someone breaks a promise to you, you mark experience.

○ **Guide**

If you spend a String on someone willing, you can bring them across the veil, into the faery realm. The spell lasts for a scene or two, before you're both returned to the mundane world.

○ **Beyond The Veil**

To seek audience with the Faery King, *Gaze Into the Abyss*.

On a 10 up, in addition to other results, the Faery King reveals to you a hidden String on someone. Gain it. • On a 7 to 9, in addition to other results, the Faery King demands a favour of you.



The Ghost

You used to have a future. Growing up was a painful tumult at times, but at least you were growing. Now you only have a past - unfinished business to take care of before you can leave this world behind.

Life is precious. You understand that, now that you've lost yours. You just want to help. You just want to be seen. But sometimes even the simplest desires feel so difficult to grasp.

Ghosty ghost, you're dead.

Playing the Ghost

Lonely, wounded, caring, and creepy. The Ghost has experienced intense trauma, and now seeks validation and intimacy. They have the potential to provide care and healing for others, but also tend to ignore personal and physical boundaries.

The two stat choices for the Ghost let you steer toward being either icy and distant (Cold 2 & Dark 1), or scary and moody (Dark 2 & Volatile 1). Your ghost might end up crying out for help, pushing away the very people they care about, or burning themselves out trying to take care of others.

At the start of the game, the Ghost's low Hot stat means that they aren't good at *Turning Someone On*. This plays into their core dilemma – without social power, how does the Ghost get the attention and emotional support that they need? Maybe they're endlessly giving, hoping for reciprocation. *Helpful Spirit* and *Transference* both point in that direction. Maybe they're mean and spiteful, assuming from the outset that they aren't worthy of affection. *Unresolved Trauma* and *Projected Blame* provide a different dynamic, suggesting a mean and spiteful Ghost who lashes out at those who remind them of what they've lost. Creep and Limitless add a voyeuristic element, encouraging the Ghost to ignore others' boundaries. Lots of other possibilities exist in the interactions between these moves, too.

Identity

Name: Alastor, Avira, Catherine, Daniel, Kara, Lenora, Orville, Rufus, Spencer, Tien

Look: forlorn, scared, stuffy, out of place, brooding

Eyes: hollow eyes, pained eyes, dull eyes, unnerving eyes, piercing eyes

Origin: left to die, murdered in cold blood, murdered in hot passion, a tragic accident, a confused death

Your Backstory

Someone knows that you're dead and how you died. They gain 2 Strings on you.

You've been inside someone's bedroom while they were sleeping. Take a String on them.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot -1, Cold 2, Volatile -1, Dark 1
- ✦ Hot -1, Cold -1, Volatile 1, Dark 2

Darkest Self

You become invisible, unnoticeable. No one can see you, feel you, or hear your voice. You can still affect inanimate objects, but this is your only avenue of communication. You escape your Darkest Self when someone acknowledges your presence, and demonstrates how much they want you around.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Ghost move.
- Take another Ghost move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You reside in a **Haunted House**.

Sex Move

When you have sex with someone, you both get to ask a question of one another. This can be asked in character or player-to-player. They must answer honestly and directly.

Ghost Moves

You get Unresolved Trauma, and choose two more:

● **Unresolved Trauma**

Whenever something brings to mind your death, you choke up and gain the Condition **traumatized** if you don't have it already. Whenever someone helps you resolve this Condition, you both mark experience.

○ **Helpful Spirit**

When you help someone resolve a Condition, gain a String on them.

○ **Transference**

Whenever you spend time truly listening to someone else's struggles, they heal 1 Harm, and then transfer their remaining harm to you.

○ **Projected Blame**

While you've got the Condition **traumatized**, you may act as though others had the Condition **at fault for my death**.

○ **Creep**

When you silently witness someone in one of their most private moments, perhaps sleeping or putting on makeup, gain a String on them.

○ **Limitless**

You can walk through walls and fly.



The Ghoul

Death changed you. It took away your contemplative joy, it dulled your senses, and it left you impossibly hungry. That hunger is always with you, like a hum in your ears that swells and crescendos until you can't hear anything else. Unattended, it will come to dominate you - but feeding it may be just as bad.

There is a certain beauty to what you've become. Your gaunt body, its unnatural form - it draws people in. Your stark disinterest is beguiling. But underneath that disaffected presentation - the hunger, the hunger.

Playing the Ghoul

Obsessive, dangerous, morbid, and quiet. The Ghoul is constantly contending with voracious Hunger, and the emotional distance brought on by death makes it easier to do bad things in pursuit of feeding. They might be a flesh-eating zombie, or something a little more subtle and strange.

The two stat choices for the Ghoul paint a portrait of the character as either cruel and erratic (Volatile 2 & Cold 1) or disaffected and portentous (Cold 2 & Dark 1). Since *The Hunger* forces you to *Keep Your Cool* to avoid a feeding opportunity, your Cold stat plays a pivotal role in maintaining self-control.

Watchful Golem and *Esprit de Corpse* both present the ability to steer the Ghoul in a couple different directions. Are you watching over others out of a deep-rooted but unexpressed sense of care? Or are you skulking around serving them because death took away your sense of independence?

Short Rest For the Wicked is a recipe for pandemonium. It's also an invitation to the MC to frame you into a new, dramatic situation. A lot can happen in a few hours.

Your Sex Move prompts you to create a new Hunger. It can be anything you like, and it's added to your character alongside their existing Hungers. If you have sex often, you'll find your appetite growing wider and weirder all the time.

Identity

Name: Akuji, Cage, Cole, Georgia, Horace, Iggy, Mara, Morrigan, Silas, Sharona, Victor, Zed

Look: gaunt, stiff, disfigured, detached, wrecked

Eyes: hollow eyes, quiet eyes, calculating eyes, harsh eyes, hungry eyes

Origin: resurrected, constructed, disturbed, rejected, sent

Your Backstory

Someone reminded you what love was, when you thought that death had stolen it away from you forever. Give them a String.

Did anyone watch you die? If so, you gain 2 Strings on each other.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot -1, Cold 1, Volatile 2, Dark -1
- ✦ Hot -1, Cold 2, Volatile -1, Dark 1

Darkest Self

Your dull hunger sharpens. You can't focus on anything else but feeding. And in addition to your peculiar cravings, you recognize something else. That primordial hunger which connects all hungers. Flesh, blood, meat. You escape your Darkest Self once you've overindulged, or you've been locked out for long enough to regain composure.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Ghoul move.
- Take another Ghoul move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You're part of a **Reckless Crew**.

Sex Move

When you have sex with someone, create a new Hunger.

Ghoul Moves

You get The Hunger, and choose two more:

● ***The Hunger***

You have a Hunger for (circle 1): fear, power, plunder, thrills.

When you heedlessly pursue a Hunger, add 1 to rolls. When you ignore a promising feeding opportunity, roll to *Keep Your Cool*.

○ ***What the Right Hand Wants***

Your body contains many histories, and it desires many things. Create another Hunger.

○ ***Satiety***

When you satiate a Hunger, choose one:

- ✦ heal 1 Harm;
- ✦ mark experience;
- ✦ take 1 Forward.

○ ***Short Rest for the Wicked***

When you die, wait it out. A few hours later, you wake up fully healed.

○ ***Watchful Golem***

When you defend someone without them ever knowing about it, mark experience.

○ ***Ending***

You remember every detail of your death. When you tell someone about it, give them the Condition **morbid** and roll to *Turn Them On* with Cold.

○ ***Esprit de Corpse***

When you *Gaze Into the Abyss*, the abyss will share with you its Hunger. Treat that Hunger as one of your own until you satiate it, and mark experience when you do so.



The Hollow

They set out to make something from nothing. It's not clear whether they succeeded or not. See, it turns out there's a lot of grey area between something and nothing.

You're alive, but you're not real. You don't have a soul. You don't have childhood memories, because you don't have a childhood. You don't have parents; you have makers. And those makers forgot to give you a place in the world.

Playing the Hollow

Uncertain, unstable, impressionable, and lost. The Hollow doesn't have a past, and is struggling to imagine their future. They're in the midst of an existential crisis, and being not-quite-real they can only look to those around them for the answers.

The Hollow's two stat options slant toward being either beautiful enigma (Hot 1 & Dark 2) or an erratic misfit (Volatile 2 & Dark 1). Their Cold stat is low, making it hard for them to confront their fears or stand up to others.

The Hollow is yearning for a sense of self, and clinging to any labels which seem like they might help cobble together an identity, which is why so many of their moves revolve around Conditions.

When you use *Strange Impressions*, you can gain any of the Skin Moves on the relevant sheet. You aren't limited only to the ones which have been selected for that character. When you temporarily gain a move in this way, it doesn't affect the other character's access to it.

If the Hollow has sex with more than one person at once, everyone does the writing and revealing simultaneously. If the Hollow shared an answer with one or more characters, that's the set of characters who mark experience.

Identity

Name: Adam, Baby, Bryce, Dorothy, Eva, Franklin, January, Max, Nix, Raymond, Summer

Look: immaculate, disheveled, haunted, inexperienced, earnest

Eyes: shifty eyes, soulless eyes, wide eyes, vacant eyes, desperate eyes

Origin: born of a wish, a failed experiment, once a toy, amnesiac, machine

Your Backstory

You've been taking your social cues from someone, and doing so has taught you a lot about them. Gain 2 Strings on them.

Someone's seen through your invented past, and realized it's all lies. They gain 2 Strings on you.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot 1, Cold -1, Volatile -1, Dark 2
- ✦ Hot -1, Cold -1, Volatile 2, Dark 1

Darkest Self

Your body is a prison. You don't belong inside of it. You need to put it in harm's way, and make it suffer, just like it's made you suffer. There's got to be a way to cut yourself out of it. You need to meet your makers, and hold them accountable for what they've done to you. To escape your Darkest Self, you must come to see how someone else feels more trapped than you do.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Hollow move.
- Take another Hollow move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You've found **Hollow Siblings**.

Sex Move

When you have sex with someone, both players secretly write down whether the sex was confusing or soothing for their character. If you reveal the same answer, both characters mark experience.

Hollow Moves

Choose two:

○ **Better Than Nothing**

When you gain a Condition, mark experience.

○ **A Blank Canvas**

When you take an action that embodies one of your Conditions, allowing that Condition to alter your sense of self, cross it off and add 1 to your roll.

○ **Try Harder Next Time**

When you screw up, give yourself an appropriate Condition and take 1 Forward.

○ **Fake**

Add 1 to any rolls you make while lying.

○ **Metamorphosis**

When you *Gaze Into the Abyss*, on a 7 or higher the abyss will also show you what you must become, and you can permanently swap two of your stats.

○ **Strange Impressions**

When a main character either harms you or helps you heal, you can respond by studying them with wide eyes. If you do, temporarily gain one of their Skin Moves and add it to your character sheet. It disappears once you use it.



The Infernal

At first, it seemed innocent. It gave you things, made you feel good about yourself. You came to it with your problems, and it fixed them. When you asked how you could return the favour, it told you to be patient - that all debts would be settled in due time. That was the first time you heard it mention debts.

You've got Satan as your cornerman, or a demon in your brain. Or maybe the stars glow just for you. Regardless, you owe a debt to something much bigger and scarier than you'll ever be.

Playing the Infernal

Tempted, impulsive, and in over their head. The Infernal has a demonic patron – someone who gets them things they want, at an unspecified price. The Infernal plays with themes of temptation, addiction, and dependency.

The Infernal is extremely powerful while sinking into debt with their Dark Power, though that pushes them toward an inevitable crash. The crash isn't a punishment to be avoided, but rather a dramatic height in the character arc. When you play the Infernal, don't stop just shy of that fifth String of debt or try to play it safe. The Infernal is most interesting when they are swinging chaotically between power and powerlessness.

With Dark Recruiter, the specifics of what it means to bring someone to the Dark Power is left up to interpretation and context. It might involve ritual sacrifice, or a simple introduction at the cafe.

The *Strings Attached* Bargain plays with the “be careful what you wish for” trope from stories of witches and genies. Taking this Bargain communicates to the MC that you want to be punched in the gut by tragic irony every now and again.

Identity

Name: Baron, Cain, Chloe, Damien, Logan, Mark, Mika, Omar, Ophelia, Poe, Yoanna

Look: quiet, frantic, venomous, spoiled, spooked

Eyes: empty eyes, calculating eyes, burning eyes, flickering eyes, piercing eyes

Origin: bartered soul, emissary, last-chancer, legion, lackey, chosen

Your Backstory

You owe debts. Give away 3 Strings, divided any way you like between the Dark Power and the other characters.

Someone thinks they can save you. Gain a String on them.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot -1, Cold -1, Volatile 2, Dark 1
- ✦ Hot 1, Cold -1, Volatile -1, Dark 2

Darkest Self

You find yourself shivering, needy, and alone. The Dark Power will make some daunting, open-ended demands. Every demand fulfilled brings you closer to feeling whole again, and removes one of the Dark Power's Strings on you. You escape your Darkest Self when the Dark Power is out of Strings, or you make a bargain with an even more dangerous entity.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Infernal move.
- Take the remaining Bargains.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You supply for **Needy Fiends**.

Sex Move

When you have sex, the Dark Power loses a String on you and gains a String on whoever you had sex with.

Infernal Moves

You get Soul Debt, and choose one more:

● **Soul Debt**

You owe a debt to a Dark Power. Name it, and choose two Bargains it has made with you.

The Dark Power can gain Strings. If ever it has 5 Strings on you, trigger your Darkest Self.

○ **Dark Recruiter**

When you bring an innocent soul to the Dark Power, mark experience.

○ **Under Pressure**

If someone has 3 or more Strings on you, add 1 to your rolls to carry out their bidding.

○ **Can't Save Myself**

When somebody saves you from forces too powerful for you to reckon with, they mark experience, and you gain a String on them.

Bargains

Choose two Bargains that the Dark Power has made with you:

○ **The Power Flows Through You**

You can give the Dark Power a String in order to add 2 to your next roll.

○ **Numbing It Out**

You can give the Dark Power a String in order to remove a Condition or up to two harm.

○ **Elsewise Power**

You can give the Dark Power a String to use a move you don't have, just this once. This move can come from any Skin.

○ **Uncanny Voices**

You can give the Dark Power a String in order to realize a secret about someone you're talking to. The owner of that character will reveal one of their secret fears, secret desires, or secret strengths (they choose which.)

○ **Strings Attached**

You can ask the Dark Power for something that you really, really want. The MC will attach a price to the thing you want, and hint at an undesired twist in its nature. If you pay the price, you'll get what you're after.



The Mortal

None of them would understand. What you have here, in this dark and secret place, it's beautiful. They'd warn you that this sort of beauty is dangerous, like a raging fire. Well some things are worth getting burned for.

Love has eclipsed all hope, and the dark has left you feeling beautiful.

Playing the Mortal

Vulnerable, magnetic, and beautiful. For anybody else, giving away a String would represent a loss of control. For you, it's more symbiotic - you get power by giving it away. The Mortal explores co-dependency, power imbalances, and wide-eyed eagerness.

The two stat choices for the Mortal both have Hot 2, because the Mortal is desirable and special. They differ depending on whether the Mortal is more impulsive and panicky (Volatile 1) or brooding and lonely (Dark 1).

True Love is about who you've currently placed at the center of your universe. You don't necessarily need to be in a relationship with someone to declare them your Lover.

Your Sex Move might seem like a major drawback, but remember that the Mortal can gain a lot of leverage from victimhood. Having lovers suddenly get weird, scary, or hostile after a moment of intimacy gives you a perfect opportunity to take advantage of moves like *Sympathy Is My Weapon*, *Excuses Are My Armour*, and *Down the Rabbit Hole*.

Identity

Name: Anne, Carla, Deirdre, James, Jonathan, Laeli, Patrick, Robin, Shen, Timothy, Wendy

Look: quiet, desperate, awkward, beautiful, displaced

Eyes: doe eyes, sad eyes, darting eyes, nervous eyes, human eyes

Origin: new kid in town, kid next door, your barista, someone's girlfriend, someone's boyfriend, nobody

Your Backstory

Declare your backstory last.

Choose one person to be your Lover. Give them three Strings on you. Take one String on them.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot 2, Cold -1, Volatile -1, Dark 1
- ✦ Hot 2, Cold -1, Volatile 1, Dark -1

Darkest Self

Nobody understands you. Nobody even tries. You do so much for the people you love, and they walk all over you. Enough is enough! Betray them. Show them what its like to be uncared for. Reveal their monstrosity and yours. Only seeing the pain that you're causing your Lover will let you escape your Darkest Self.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Mortal move.
- Take another Mortal move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.

Sex Move

When you have sex with someone, it awakens something sinister within. The next time you take your eyes off them, they become their Darkest Self.

Mortal Moves

You gain True Love, and choose two more:

● **True Love**

You always have exactly one Lover. The first is chosen during Your Backstory. If you ever fall in love with someone else instead, give them a String and they become your new Lover. You always carry 1 forward to earning your Lover's heart or fancy.

○ **Mess With Me, Mess With Him**

When using your Lover's name as a threat, add 2 to your roll to *Shut Someone Down* or *Keep Your Cool*. Your Lover gains a String on you.

○ **Entrenched**

If you and another character have a combined total of 5 or more Strings on one another, gain 1 to all rolls against them.

○ **Sympathy is My Weapon**

Every time you forgive someone for hurting you, and excuse their base nature, gain a String on them.

○ **Excuses Are My Armour**

When you ignore some blatant problem with your Lover or how they treat you, mark experience.

○ **Downward Spiral**

When you *Gaze Into the Abyss*, you may cause yourself 1 Harm. If you do, add 2 to your roll.

○ **Down the Rabbit Hole**

When you go poking your nose in affairs not meant for your kind, someone involved in the situation gains a String on you, and you mark experience.



The Queen

You're one of the special ones. A sovereign beauty. You deserve more than the rest of this wretched world does. You deserve the will and worship of those around you.

And it's not only because you're better than them. It's because you make them better. Stronger, more beautiful, complete. They'd be nothing without you.

Playing the Queen

Popular, dangerous, bitchy, and commanding. The Queen has a powerful clique who serves as their gang. Loyalty and control are crucial if the Queen is to retain their power, but everyone in the clique has their own set of needs and desires to contend with.

The two stat choices for the Queen allow you to slant toward being either desirable and commanding (Hot 2 & Cold 1) or cutthroat and secretive (Cold 2 & Dark 1). Either way, you're not very good at getting your own hands dirty – with a low Volatile stat, you depend on others to fight your battles and keep you safe.

Depending on the origin you pick and your moves, the Queen can range from being a mundane human teen all the way to weird cosmic horror. More than any other Skin, you're in control of just how supernatural to make them. Are you a bossy cheerleading captain, or a brooding alien swarm queen here to repopulate the earth?

Identity

Name: Burton, Brittany, Cordelia, Drake, Jacqueline, Kimball, Raymond, Reyes, Varun, Veronica

Look: stunning, domineering, icy, neurotic, talkative

Eyes: calculating eyes, captivating eyes, murky eyes, vacant eyes, pretty eyes

Origin: most popular, most dangerous, cult leader, source of the infection, firstborn of the hive mind

Your Backstory

Name three side characters who are members of your gang.
Gain a String on each.

You find someone threatening. Give them a String on you, and take a String on them.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot 2, Cold 1, Volatile -1, Dark -1
- ✦ Hot -1, Cold 2, Volatile -1, Dark 1

Darkest Self

They've failed you. Again. This whole mess is their fault, and why should you have to suffer the consequences of their idiocy? You need to make an example out of each of them -- a cruel and unwavering example. You escape your Darkest Self when you relinquish part of your power to someone more deserving, or when you destroy an innocent person in order to prove your might.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Queen move.
- Take another Queen move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take *The Clique* again and detail another gang.

Sex Move

When you have sex with someone, they gain the Condition **one of them**. While the Condition remains, they count as part of your gang.

Queen Moves

You get *The Clique*, and choose one more:

● ***The Clique***

You're at the head of the toughest, coolest, most powerful clique around. They count as a gang. Choose one of the following strengths for your gang:

- ✦ they're armed (with guns and real dangerous stuff),
- ✦ they're connected (with money and designer drugs),
- ✦ they're talented (in a band or sports team),
- ✦ they're cultists (with dark oaths and willingness to die).

○ ***The Shield***

When you're surrounded by your gang, subtract 1 from any rolls against you.

○ ***Bought Loyalty***

You can give a side character a String on you to tempt them to do your bidding. The MC will tell you what sort of bribe, threat, or coaxing it'll take to get that character to do what you want right now.

○ ***And Your Enemies Closer***

When someone betrays you, gain a String on them.

○ ***Many Bodies***

When you promise one of your gang members to someone, add 2 to your roll to *Turn Them On*. When one of your gang members has sex with someone, it triggers your Sex Move.

○ ***Streaming***

You have a telepathic connection with your gang members. You can always hear their emotions and fears. If you try to hear specific thoughts, *Gaze Into the Abyss* about it and add 1 to your roll.



The Vampire

You are beauty eternal. You are the darkness that everyone wants to taste, but no one dares understand. It's there in your eyes, your carefully chosen words, and your every gesture: you no longer have a soul.

Some vampires revel in that fact, their afterlife a tapestry of hedonism and exsanguination. Others hate the evil in their skin, solemnly vowing to a chaste and lonely existence. Either way, someone suffers. The choice is yours.

Playing the Vampire

Icy, manipulative, hypnotic, and cruel. The Vampire thrives on emotional entrenchment and control. The Vampire knows how to undermine the will of others, and often possesses an unsettling attitude toward consent.

Both stat options showcase the Vampire's Hot and Cold nature, passionately romantic one minute and downright mean the next. Your choice is about which way the scale tends to lean: sexy or disdainful.

The Vampire has some moves that are downright scary, not because of anything supernatural, but because they are calculatingly and intimately violent. Playing a Vampire means contending with being a person who wilfully causes harm. Do you work toward redemption? Do you give in to dark temptation? Remember that you're a main character in this story, and that means having a character arc beyond simply hurting others. Or, if not, be prepared to have your role change from protagonist to villain, as the other characters start sharpening up their stakes.

Identity

Name: Amanda, Cassius, Clayton, Helene, Isaiah, Jessamine, Jong, Lucian, Marcell, Morana, Serina

Look: intense, aloof, predatory, smoldering, old-fashioned

Eyes: dead eyes, lusty eyes, pained eyes, hungry eyes, thirsty eyes

Origin: newly reborn, taken this century, many ages old, lord, cursed blood

Your Backstory

You're beautiful. Gain a String on everyone.

Someone once saved your unlife. They gain 2 Strings on you.

Stats

Either:

Hot 2, Cold 1, Volatile -1, Dark -1

Hot 1, Cold 2, Volatile -1, Dark -1

Darkest Self

Everyone is your pawn, your plaything. You hurt them and make them vulnerable, for sport -- like a cat does with a mouse. Maybe you'll even drain them dry, though you'll certainly take your time first. You escape your Darkest Self when you're put in your rightful place, by someone more powerful than you.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Vampire move.
- Take another Vampire move.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You're in a **Vampiric Coterie**.

Sex Move

When you deny someone sexually, gain a String on them. When you have sex with someone, lose all Strings on them.

Vampire Moves

Choose two:

○ ***Invited***

You cannot enter a home without being invited. Whenever someone invites you in, gain a String on them.

○ ***Hypnotic***

You can hypnotize people who have no Strings on you. Roll with Hot. On a 10 up, they do exactly what you wish and have no idea that anything is wrong. • On a 7-9, the hypnosis works, but choose one:

- ✦ they realize exactly what you've done to them,
- ✦ they fuck up your commands,
- ✦ their sanity is unhinged.

○ ***Cold as Ice***

When you *Shut Someone Down* and roll a 7 or higher, you may choose an extra option from the list.

○ ***The Feeding***

You feed on hot blood, direct from the source. If this is the first time they've ever been fed upon, you both mark experience. When you feed, choose two:

- ✦ you heal 1 Harm,
- ✦ you take 1 Forward,
- ✦ they definitely don't die.

○ ***Marked for the Hunt***

Feeding on someone establishes a preternatural bond. From that point forward, whenever you *Gaze Into the Abyss* concerning their whereabouts or well-being, roll as if you had Dark 3.

○ ***Inescapable***

You may spend a String on someone to demand that they remain in your presence. If they still walk out on you, gain 2 Strings on them.



The Werewolf

Everyone around you seems so willing to play the roles they are handed, to quietly colour within the lines. They've been tamed, domesticated. You're of a different stock: you've broken down the fence built to contain you. You've howled at the moon, and heard it howl back.

Now, the transformation is complete. This is what you were always meant to be. Wild. Unwavering. Alive.

Playing the Werewolf

Aggressive, domineering, primal, and amorous. The Werewolf is primed for violence, and knows that physical dominance is the root of social power. They are territorial and dangerous, but they draw people in with their rough, lusty gorgeousness. Rounding out the Werewolf is a mystical, animal side: they are strongest when basked in moonlight and guided by primal instincts.

Both stat options highlight the Werewolf's sexy, dangerous nature. Your choice is about whether they lean more toward a heart-breaker with a mean streak (Hot 2 & Volatile 1), or an unpredictable loose-cannon who it's dangerous to get too close to (Hot 1 & Volatile 2).

The question of whether you can transform into the form of a wolf when not your Darkest Self is left up to individual groups to decide. You have the same stats and moves regardless of your current form.

Identity

Name: Cassidy, Candika, Flinch, Levi, Margot, Lorrie, Luna, Peter, Tucker, Zachary

Look: primal, unkempt, wiry, rugged, feisty

Eyes: cunning eyes, predatory eyes, fierce eyes, savage eyes, wolf eyes

Origin: born a wolf, bitten, raised by wolves, ancestral power, awoken, favoured by the moon

Your Backstory

You lack subtlety. Give a String to everyone.

You've spent weeks watching someone from a distance. Their scent and mannerisms are unmistakable to you now. Gain two Strings on them.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot 1, Cold -1, Volatile 2, Dark -1
- ✦ Hot 2, Cold -1, Volatile 1, Dark -1

Darkest Self

You transform into a terrifying wolf-creature. You crave power and dominance, and those are earned through bloodshed. If anyone attempts to stand in your way, they must be brought down and made to bleed. You escape your Darkest Self when you wound someone you really care about or the sun rises, whichever happens first.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Werewolf move. (*option appears twice*)
- Take a move from any Skin. (*option appears twice*)
- You belong to a **Wolf Pack**.

Sex Move

When you have sex with someone, you establish a deep spiritual connection with them. Until either of you breaks that spirit connection (by having sex with someone else) add 1 to all rolls made to defend them. You can tell when that connection has been broken.

Werewolf Moves

Choose two:

○ **Primal Dominance**

When you harm someone, take a String on them.

○ **Scent of Blood**

Add 1 to all rolls against those who have been harmed in this scene already.

○ **Howl at the Moon**

When basked in moonlight, you may act as if you had Dark 3.

○ **Spirit Armour**

When basked in moonlight, any harm that you suffer is reduced by 1, and you add 2 to all rolls to *Keep Your Cool*.

○ **Heightened Senses**

When you rely on your animal instincts to make sense of a charged situation, roll with Dark. On a 10 up, ask the MC three questions from below and take 1 Forward. • On a 7-9, ask one question from below and take 1 Forward:

- ✦ Where's my best escape route or way in?
- ✦ Which enemy is the most vulnerable to me?
- ✦ What's their secret weakness?
- ✦ What poses the biggest threat to me?
- ✦ Who's in control here?

○ **Unstable**

When you become your Darkest Self, mark experience.



The Witch

In every lock of hair, every furtive glance, every secret note that transfers hands during history class – there is an invitation. An invitation to be fucked with. Not that witchcraft is about fucking with others, exactly, but it's hard not to notice how utterly malleable the world is, once you know a thing or two about magic.

Of course, a good witch like you knows restraint. A good witch turns a blind eye to all those invitations, and doesn't think about how sweet vengeance and control might be. A good witch is above that sort of thing. At least, most of the time.

Playing the Witch

Brooding, vengeful, secretive, and occult. The Witch bides their time, silently judging others until an opportunity for magical retribution and mischief presents itself.

The two stat options for the Witch slant toward being either calculating and venomous (Cold 2 & Dark 1) or seductive and spooky (Hot 1 & Dark 2). Either way, the Witch relies on patience to be at the height of their power. Unless they're willing to chant in tongues, eyes swirling a cloudy crimson, their low Volatile stat means they're not very good at reacting to unexpected threats.

The best way to keep track of both Strings and Sympathetic Tokens is to use a different symbol for each. Since circles are already suggested for Strings, little stars or triangles would work well for the tokens. You can keep track of what the physical objects are on a scrap piece of paper or in the margins of the sheet.

If a character of another Skin takes the **Hex-Casting** move without also taking *Sympathetic Tokens*, the only way they can cast a Hex is by meeting their target's gaze and chanting in tongues – not exactly a subtle approach.

Identity

Name: Abrielle, Annalee, Cordelia, Darius, Evelyn, Gerard, Lucca, Merrill, Sabrina, Vanessa

Look: lithe, guarded, coy, edgy, meticulous

Eyes: calculating eyes, smirking eyes, playful eyes, wicked eyes, deep eyes

Origin: taught by grandma, awoken, pagan initiate, tumblr, avid reader

Your Backstory

You start the game with two Sympathetic Tokens. Decide whose and what they are.

One of the others caught you rummaging through their friend's stuff, but hasn't said anything. They get a String on you.

Stats

Either:

- ✦ Hot -1, Cold 2, Volatile -1, Dark 1
- ✦ Hot 1, Cold -1, Volatile -1, Dark 2

Darkest Self

The time for subtlety and patience is over. You're too powerful to put up with their garbage any longer. You hex anyone who slights you. All of your hexes have unexpected side effects, and are more effective than you are comfortable with. To escape your Darkest Self, you must offer peace to the one you have hurt the most.

Advancement

- Add +1 to one of your stats.
- Take another Witch move.
- Take all the remaining Hexes.
- Create a new Hex.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- Take a move from any Skin.
- You belong to a **Coven**.

Sex Move

After sex, you can take a Sympathetic Token from them. They know about it, and it's cool.

Witch Moves

You start with Sympathetic Tokens and Hex-Casting:

● **Sympathetic Tokens**

You gain power from Sympathetic Tokens - items of personal significance taken from others. Sympathetic Tokens count as Strings.

● **Hex-Casting**

You can cast Hexes. Choose two that you know. To cast them, either expend a Sympathetic Token during a secret ritual, or meet the target's gaze and chant at them in tongues. Then roll with Dark. On a 10 up, the Hex works, and can easily be reversed. On a 7-9, it works but choose one:

- ✦ the casting does you 1 Harm;
- ✦ the Hex has weird side effects;
- ✦ trigger your Darkest Self.

○ **Transgressive Magic**

If your ritual transgresses the community's moral or sexual standards, add 1 to your *Hex-Casting* roll.

○ **Sanctuary**

You have a secret place for practicing witchcraft. Add 1 to all rolls you make within this space.

Hexes

Choose two:

○ **Wither**

The hexed loses all of their hair, or their teeth start falling out, or their period arrives unexpected and heavy, or their skin gets all sickly yellow and spotty. Whatever the specifics, it's bad.

○ **Binding**

The person cannot physically harm others.

○ **Ring of Lies**

Whenever the person attempts to lie, they hear a piercing ringing noise. Big lies will often make their knees buckle and disorient them. Severe lies can cause harm or even brain damage.

○ **Watching**

You enter a deep sleep, and begin to see the world through the eyes of the hexed. You can feel their reactions to and impressions of what they are seeing.

○ **Illusions**

Pick one: snakes and bugs, demonic visages, false prophecies, non-existent subtext. The hexed sees that thing everywhere. You have no control over the exact images or manifestations.



Additional Skins

You can find additional Skins at
www.buriedwithoutceremony.com/monsterhearts

The Chosen is a warrior, sworn to vanquish darkness and evil in the world. But with such a heavy burden to bear, and surrounded by a monstrous lot, will they be able to hold to their noble and powerful sense of self?

The Serpentine is caught between the human and serpent worlds, between a manipulative family and everyone else. How will they adapt, and who will they trust?

While both Skins are fun, they aren't included here in the main book because they come with some special handling instructions and won't be a fit for every game. The Chosen dramatically changes the tone of play, pushing toward a story about tense allegiances and moral turmoil. The Serpentine brings with it a host of side characters who remain mostly private throughout the game. Check them out online if you're interested! Additional Skins will likely be added over time.

You can also check out Jackson Tegu's project *Monsterhearts Second Skins*, a collection of six additional Skins available for purchase: the Sasquatch, the Wyrn, the Cuckoo, the Unicorn, the Firstborn, and the Neighbour. It's available at
www.photographsoflightning.com

Follow that link and you'll also find the Selkie, a beautifully designed and freely available Skin.



Chapter 6:

Making It Your Own





Mad Science

The structure of Monsterhearts leaves a lot of room for tinkering. The setup of a high school homeroom is not sacrosanct. Basic Moves, Skins, Principles, and Reactions are all modular lists that can be tampered with. At the same time, each of those lists has been tuned and balanced to deliver a certain play experience. Your tinkering will be most successful if you have a solid understanding of what each of those components is contributing to the game.

If you've got a mad scientist streak in you, this chapter examines how best to conduct your experiments. It suggests where you might start your tinkering, and unveils some of the design intentions underlying the game as it currently stands.



After Graduation



While *Monsterhearts* is built on the assumption that the main characters are teenagers who go to high school together, other possibilities exist. You might choose to depart from the high school milieu by focusing on teenagers at a summer camp, members of a local sports team, or twenty-somethings who work together at a fast food place.

While the immediate social context can shift, it still needs to echo the emotional realities of high school. The main characters need to be in the midst of an uncomfortable life transition, experiencing alienation both within their skin and from the world at large. They need to get sucked into petty social politics, and have it be difficult to simply walk away from dysfunctional relationships. They need to be talked down to by most of the adults in their lives, despite the fact that they are capable and powerful in their own right.

157

If the main characters are all employees at a fast food place together, maybe their manager is a stodgy, bitter man who relishes the opportunity to flex his paltry authority over others. Maybe irregular, unpredictable shift schedules thwart their ability to form meaningful, healthy relationships outside of work.

As mentioned on page 71, if your characters don't share a homeroom then you should create a substitute to the seating chart. In the example of the fast food place, it might be the current day's shift schedule, or seats at a quarterly staff meeting. The important things that a seating chart contributes to the game are ready-to-use side characters, juicy information about them and their community, and a smattering of implied relationships to explore through play.





Surveying the Environment

The basic moves are more than just a set of actions that matter to the teen monster sex horror genre. They're an ecosystem, a responsive environment that shapes the story. Removing one of those moves changes the significance of the others. As an example, *Turning Someone On* is one of the main ways that characters gain Strings on others, positioning sexuality as a powerful, burgeoning force in these characters' lives. Changing the ecosystem by adding more ways to gain Strings will have an impact on how sexuality and sexual identity are woven into the story.

The basic moves tie together all the economies of the game - Strings, Conditions, Harm, and Experience. Modifying or replacing a move tends to change how a number of those economies work. As an example, if you cut out the rules for *Skirting Death*, suddenly Harm is a lot more lethal and scary. Characters with a high Volatile stat have more social leverage, because crossing them has more dire consequences. While spending a String to *tempt them to do what you want* remains an option for controlling others, threatening them with physical violence and holding that String in reserve to *add 1 to the harm you deal them* becomes a relatively stronger choice. Since gangs increase the amount of harm you deal, spending your advancement on a gang becomes more alluring, which steers the game toward stories of rivalry and blood. When taking a move from another Skin, players might be more likely to eye up the Werewolf. The Ghoul's *Short Rest For The Wicked* move also gains a lot of significance and power. Not every group of players will necessarily react the same way, but it's important to appreciate how changing a single mechanic can create ripples throughout the rest of the design.



Before tinkering with how the game works, it's important to play. Play to find out what happens when you push the game in different directions. Play to reveal the hidden connections between moves. Play to develop an appreciation of the environment. That way, when you start mucking about, whether it's tweaking the basic moves or writing a new Skin, you'll have an intuitive appreciation of how your changes will ripple through the rest of the design. And when you take your ideas into playtesting, you'll have a better baseline for detecting wonky side-effects.





Writing Moves

Moves follow a common formula:

When you [specific trigger], [effect].

The wording can vary from move to move. *Skirting Death* is triggered with the phrase “to avoid death” rather than “when you want to avoid death”. What’s important is that the move clearly states how it is triggered and what the effect is.

Many moves involve a die roll, expanding the formula:

When you [specific trigger], roll with [stat]. On a 10 up, [a good result]. • On a 7-9, [a result where you mostly get what you want, but there’s a drawback or difficult choice].

A lot of moves involve choosing an option off a short list. Moves work best when they are compact and easy to digest, and for this reason its best not to have multiple lists embedded in one move. The basic moves demonstrate several different ways to accomplish this. *Turn Someone On* has a 10 up result that grants a benefit and makes your opponent choose from a list, while the 7-9 result makes it one or the other. *Shut Someone Down* lets you pick off the same list either way, but attaches a drawback to the 7-9 result. *Lash Out Physically* and *Run Away* only give options to choose from on the 7-9 result.



You can revise, replace, cut, or add basic moves. As mentioned, doing so tends to create ripples throughout the rest of the design.

For example, if you and your friends want to play a game of Monsterhearts that involves walking between dimensions and realities, you could create a basic move to capture the strangeness of stepping through portals. If you decide that you want an element of risk and uncertainty, a move where you roll dice is the obvious fit. A finished move might look like this:

When you step into a dimensional portal, roll with dark. On a 10 up, you arrive where you expected, safe and sound. • On a 7-9, choose one:

- ✦ You arrive in the midst of a dangerous situation;
- ✦ You arrive somewhere else altogether;
- ✦ You arrive disoriented, spooked, and thirsty.





Dissecting Skins

Skins aren't just types of monsters. They also represent different teenage perspectives, dysfunctions, and relationship dynamics. The Werewolf is a shape-shifting wolf-person, of course it is, but it's also a metaphor for fiercely domineering and territorial partners. The Vampire is a lens for understanding consent issues and emotional entrapment.

Every Skin takes advantage of the environment of play differently, and leverages different economies in particular. Some of those economies are shared (Strings, Conditions, Harm, and Experience), while others emerge from the design of the Skin (Sympathetic Tokens, Promises, and Hungers). The Ghost centers on gaining and resolving Conditions, and helping others heal. The Mortal gains experience and bonuses by putting their Lover in a position of unsettling power over them. The Werewolf excels at dealing harm, and leverages that harm to gain their social power. Skins are not just distinguished by their literal monstrosity and metaphorical significance, but also their moves and economies.



Every Skin is composed of the same elements:

- ✦ An evocative bit of flavour text to read aloud at the start of the game,
- ✦ An Identity section (10 name options, 5 looks, 5 eyes, 5 origins),
- ✦ Two stat lines to choose from (typically arrayed as +2, +1, -1, -1)
- ✦ Your Backstory
- ✦ A Darkest Self, with a clear escape clause built into it
- ✦ 5-7 Skin Moves, with directions on how many to pick initially
- ✦ A Sex Move, which reflects something of their outlook and powers

Many Skins have a special thing to keep track of beyond what's listed above, whether it's a special relationship or unique economy. The Fae needs to keep track of promises, the Mortal needs to keep track of their Lover, the Ghoul needs to keep track of their Hungers, and the Witch needs to keep track of Sympathetic Tokens, to name a few.





Writing Skins

There are a lot of monster archetypes left untouched by Monsterhearts. There is no Succubi, Psychic, or Catgirl. Skins are also metaphors for understanding teenage experience, and you might find yourself lamenting an absence of that sort - where is the doggedly loyal best friend who'd do anything to prove himself, or the shy nerd kid who finds her only solace in books and computer screens? You might find yourself wanting to create a new Skin.

It can be helpful to start by asking yourself these questions, ideally writing down the answers so that you can refer back to them throughout the design process:

- + What is the monster archetype this is based on?
- + What is the teenage experience this speaks to?
- + What are this Skin's two best stats?
- + What moves and economies does this Skin center on?
- + What is the most exciting thing about this Skin for me?

As the answers to those questions emerge, think about whether there are any existing Skins that you like, that you could simply tweak to bring your vision to life.



Maybe you want to design a Skin that's a dog-person who is just such a loyal and loving friend, who'd be willing to make bad choices if it made their best friend happy. You tentatively title it the Good Boy, or maybe the Labrador, and start jotting down notes about it. Soon enough, you realize that the moves and economies that you're dreaming up are strikingly similar to *The Mortal*. That sort of realization is great! Maybe you decide that the Good Boy is an alternate version of the Mortal, one where Lover is replaced by **best friend**, and the moves are all re-titled to reflect the over-committed, try-hard nature of a dog-person. Some of the moves might need to get replaced entirely, and the Darkest Self might need to be rewritten.

Sometimes you'll want to create a new Skin from scratch. That's great. Remember to keep those five questions listed above in your head as you move through the design. Write Skin Moves that are complementary but allow a player to make meaningful choices and distinguish their character. Write a Darkest Self that reveals and embellishes the sinister depths of the character, but be careful not to get needlessly edgy in a way that makes the game less fun in play. Finally, write some dripping, melodramatic flavour text for the front page.

You can access an inDesign template file for laying out your Skin by emailing me at alder.avery@gmail.com





The MC Toolkit

The player-facing mechanics aren't the only thing that you can tamper with - Principles and Reactions are both open-ended lists that you can modify or expand. Principles convey the spirit of the game, and how the MC should generally steer the story. Changing them means making a decision to have the game *feel* different. Reactions, on the other hand, are archetypal plot devices. Changing them means that the story will go in different directions, moment to moment.

For example, if you wanted a version of Monsterhearts that involved intricate mysteries and sleuthing action, you might create a new Principle like "Be generous and conspicuous when introducing a clue". You might add "Kidnap someone" and "Introduce a red herring" to the list of Reactions.



Chapter 7:

Taking Inspiration





The Long Example

Gabriella thinks of her character as an impulsive, self-centered sort. She decides that Gerard doesn't spend much time reflecting on his decisions, instead leaping forward with a shaky plan that he revises as he goes. And so when Vic tells him that he needs to recruit Laeli for the dark rituals of a diabolical group, Gerard doesn't hesitate. He heads directly to her.

When he gets to Laeli's house, he's still rehearsing all the things he might say to her. He walks in uninvited, too preoccupied to knock, and sees her texting on the couch. "Laeli, I -" Laeli startles, instinctively hiding her cell phone between couch cushions. "Gerard! Hey, I didn't realize you were coming over."

*One of the MC's Principles is to **find the catch**, and so he's already looking for ways to sow discord between the two lovers about Laeli's recent indiscretion. He's pretty sure he already knows the answer, but just to be sure he turns to Lorraine and asks, "Laeli, who were you just texting?" He **addresses himself to the characters, not the players**. Lorraine answers: "It's Cassidy. I'm trying to play it cool, but I've realized I'm really into her."*

Gerard starts talking too quickly. "Listen, Laeli, I've been thinking a lot about our relationship. About how we're good, yeah, but we don't really spend a lot of time supporting one another. Like, how you've got your writing, and that's a real passion for you. And for me? It's magic, being a real practitioner, right?"

"Yeah?" Laeli shifts in her seat, a little bit uncertain where this is going.

"Well, I was thinking that what we should really be doing is supporting one another. Like, embedded journalism. Working on our crafts alongside each other."



Laeli blinks twice, clearly not following. She knits her brow, trying to fill in the blanks. Gerard plunges ahead: "What I'm trying to say is, there's this group. It's local, it's kids from our school. And they want me in their circle. And I want to do it, Laeli, I really want to be there. But I want to be there with you. It's dark ritual, and I know you don't believe in that stuff. But I was hoping you'd do it for me, for our relationship. And it'd give you a chance to do more serious writing, like real investigative stuff."

Gabriela watches Lorraine's face intently, and then adds, "Gerard is going to spend a String to **tempt her to do what I want**. So it's an experience point if you say yes." She scribbles in one of the Strings next to Laeli's name on Gerard's character sheet, having just used it up.

Laeli shakes her head, slowly and nervously. She chooses her next words carefully. "Listen, Gerard, I think we need to talk." She's resisting Gerard's temptation, and so no experience point is earned. Gerard looks crestfallen. Laeli glances toward the other side of the couch, implying Gerard should sit. "It's just that, I did something. I want to be direct about it, talking to you. I think you deserve that."

There's a tense silence. Silence can be a perfect opportunity for the MC to react (by selecting a Reaction and working it into the conversation), but the scene is already barreling toward melodrama and wounded hearts. And so the MC just leans in eagerly, waiting to see what happens next.

Gerard sits, but refuses to meet Laeli's eye contact. He stares at his feet, studying the scuff patterns on his combat boots. "It was Cassidy, wasn't it?" Laeli nods and mumbles yes. Gerard doesn't need any more information – hindsight fills in the rest.

Now it seems like the two teens are sinking into sullen quietude, and so the MC decides it's time to react. He **puts them together** by turning to Cody and saying, "Hey Cassidy, it's been a few minutes since Laeli sent her last flirty text your way. Have you figured out your response yet?" Cody nods, grinning at the invitation to meddle.



Laeli's phone dings, and then dings again, and then dings a third time. She can't resist glancing at the lock screen. The moment she does, Gerard gets up in a huff and moves toward the door.

Laeli jumps up and follows behind him, begging him to stay and talk it through. When she continues to follow him out the door and onto the walkway, he whirls and accosts her. "You don't get to have it both ways, Lae. You don't get to run around sleeping with any girl who flashes you a crooked smile, and still keep me on retainer. You don't even, you – I'm done. I'm fucking done, Laeli."

Gerard is **Shutting Someone Down**, and so Gabriela rolls. The dice are 2 and 2, and Gerard's Cold stat adds another 1. The total of 5 means that Gerard is generally unsuccessful. The MC jumps in to narrate how neighbors are watching, and his voice cracks midway through his temper tantrum. Since the roll was unsuccessful, it also hands the MC a golden opportunity to react. Josh looks at the list of Reactions and chooses to **trigger their Darkest Self**.

Gerard feels the dark thrum of magic in his veins, coursing through his heart. The Witch's Darkest Self involves hexing anyone who slights you, and Gerard certainly feels slighted in this moment.

Gabriela describes how Gerard's eyes flood with inky blackness, and he starts chanting in a language Laeli doesn't recognize. She picks up the dice and rolls for **Hex-Casting**, one of the Witch's Skin Moves. Gerard is going to cast **Ring of Lies** on Laeli. The end result is a 9, which involves choosing an option from the list. Gabriela decides that the Hex works, but there are weird side effects. The MC chimes in to suggest, "So, this Hex makes Laeli's head ring whenever she tells a lie. What if the side effect was that there was a psychic link, so that it actually hurts you both." That sounds like a perfect side effect. What could go wrong?

Laeli's scared and confused by what she sees, but all she really wants is for Gerard to calm down so they can work it all out. "Please, babe, just come back inside?"



Gerard sneers, and starts to walk away. Laeli follows him, now standing on the sidewalk in her socks. "Please, babe, I still love you!"

The MC reacts by **asking provocative questions and building on the answers**, saying, "But do you, really? You couldn't stop checking your phone even as you were confessing about hooking up with someone else." Lorraine ponders for a moment, and then responds, "I guess not. She just doesn't want to be abandoned."

Both Laeli and Gerard feel an explosive pain in their heads. She's lying to herself. The MC reacts by **inflicting harm**, saying, "That's a big lie, I think you both suffer 1 Harm." Gerard reels but continues to stumble away. Laeli stands there, feeling numb for a moment as blood trickles down from her nose.

One of the Mortal's most pivotal Skin Moves is **True Love**, which declares that you always have exactly one Lover. The move states that if ever you fall in love with someone else instead, you give them a String and they become your new Lover. Lorraine erases Gerard's name and pencils in Cassidy. Cody writes down a new String on Cassidy's character sheet.

The MC asks, "Gerard, where are you headed?"

Gabriella smiles. She's a fan of the Witch's Darkest Self, and is enjoying the invitation to lean into the arrogant, destructive side of Gerard's personality. "I'm looking for Cassidy. When I find her, I'm going to kill her."





Media Homework

If you've got an appetite for stories in the same genre and vein as *Monsterhearts*, this curated list is a perfect introduction. Keep going down the list until your hunger is satisfied.

Start with these three songs:

"Violet" by Hole,

"Cannibal" by Kesha,

"Y I Do" by Zebra Katz.

Watch *Ginger Snaps*.

Read "the seam of skin and scales" on the Taking Steps blog. Think about all the ways that monstrosity can serve as a metaphor.

Watch "The Zeppo" (*Buffy: the Vampire Slayer*, season 3, episode 13). Think about what it means for a character to have power, to have agency, and to be vulnerable.

Watch *The Craft* and *The Lost Boys*. Think about gender, belonging, and violence.

Watch a season of *The Vampire Diaries*. Notice how the breakneck pacing helps keep the story feral, and how none of the characters are that complicated. Everyone's given simple, divisive motivations that they telegraph in obvious ways.

Browse *Scarleteen* and *Rookie Mag*. Think about what it means to be a teenager.

Read *Apocalypse World*.



∞ Gratitude ∞

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Index

A

Advancement 34

Gangs 35

Agenda 9–12

B

Backstory 69

Basic Moves. *See* Moves

C

Conditions 31–33

Conventions 106

D

Darkest Self 45–46

Death 30

E

Examples of Play 7, 17, 19, 29, 32, 33, 79, 98, 112, 168–171

Experience 34

F

Forward 31

Future Sessions 110

G

Gangs 35

H

Hacking 156–166

Harm 27

Healing 28–29

High School 7, 38, 44, 70–71, 157

I

Identity 62

M

Materials 58, 60, 154

MC Role 59, 84

Media Homework 172

Modifying the Game 156–166

Moves 14–15, 66–67, 160–161

Gaze Into The Abyss 24

Growing Up Moves 54–56

Healing 28–29



Keep Your Cool 21
Lash Out Physically 22
Pulling Strings 26–27
Run Away 23
Shut Someone Down 20
Skirting Death 30
Turn Someone On 18–19

O

One-Shots 106

P

Principles 85–90

Q

Queerness. *See* Sexuality

R

Race 40–43

Reactions 92–98

Roleplaying 8, 65

Rolling Dice. *See* Moves

S

Safety 60, 74–82

Scene Framing 13, 103–105, 107

Seasons 51–52, 110

Season Advances 53–56

Seating Charts 70–71, 102

Setting 60, 63–64, 108–109

Sexuality 18–19, 36–37, 48, 49

Side Characters 99–101

Skins 61, 162–165

Identity 62

Small Towns 60

Strings 16–17, 26–27, 66, 100–101

T

Teaching 59–71

Texting 50

V

Villains 111–112

Violence 22, 27, 47

X

X-Card 60, 78

