

Hearts in Antarctica





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Hearts in Antarctica

A game of icy horrors and human desperation

Foreword

This game has been inspired by a whole lot of different things. First off, the title has been inspired by Stephen King's "Hearts in Atlantis." The game title came up in my mind during my second research travel in that continent, and I liked it so much that I wanted to try and write something about it.

Then, the game "Polaris" by Ben Lehman. At first, I wanted a game structured as a series of love letters written during a research expedition in the early 20th century, but I needed a structure of some kind to regulate turns and the like. "Polaris" immediately came to my mind because it had so many interesting traits I could hack to develop my own game. I suggest you to give this wonderful game a chance – and possibly a lot more after the first one.

Then I remembered that H.P. Lovecraft, as well as a smorgasbord of later authors in several different media, set horror stories in that continent, which indeed can really serve as a perfect setting for this kind of stories: it is remote, isolated and harsh, communicating from the mainland with other territories is difficult when not outright impossible even with

the most recent technology, its climate is so terribly hostile to life that even Bacteria (who are renown for being able to live under conditions that would very quickly kill all other life forms) have a hard time surviving it and traveling is possible under very strict terms and conditions. People usually spend at best one year in Antarctica, and those who do are usually completed isolated from the rest of the world during its hellish winter. So I tried to incorporate elements from Lovecraft's "At the mountains of madness," although I didn't want it to become a main element of narration.

Lastly, when I read of Scott and Amundsen's rush to the South Pole and their vastly different outcomes, I came across a map that gave me the very final ideas for the game: the map and the symbols.

Finally, this game is also a tribute to human resilience, curiosity and ambition, to the early explorers who gave their lives to reach one of the most ambitious goals of their time.

On the afternoon of that day we had brilliant weather... The sledges were going very well. The day passed without any occurrence worth mentioning, and at three o' clock in the afternoon we halted, as according to our reckoning we had reached our goal.

Roald Amundsen

It's 1930. Twenty years ago, members of an exploration expedition set sail from New Zealand to Antarctica, aiming to reach the South Pole. None of them came back. Now, as six diaries from members of the expedition have been found, more details are emerging about their fate.

Players and their roles

This is a game for four, five or six people. Each player will take the role of a character from the following list:

- **The Expedition Leader:** the one who collected the money, personnel and equipment necessary to carry out this perilous journey. He needs to reach the South Pole at any cost, and be the first one to do it. His traits are ambitious, keen, dedicated, selfish.

His equipment is composed by a compass, a notebook, a star map, a gift from his lover. His card seed is Hearts.

- **The Field Guide:** an expert man, wary of the dangers posed by the icy environment, member of past expeditions on the mainland and at sea. His traits are resourceful, keen, expert, rough. His equipment is composed by a compass, a star map, notes from his other expeditions, a backpack full of necessary equipment. His card seed is Clubs.
- **The Weapon Master:** a man or a woman whose expertise in the field of weapons is unsurpassed. He/she can master whatever fits the needs and can make a weapon out of anything. His/her traits are rough, expert, quiet, aware. His/her equipment is composed by a gun with lots of gunpowder and bullets, an axe, a hunting trophy hung at his/her neck, a backpack full of necessary equipment. His/her card seed is Spades.
- **The Journalist:** a man or a woman who's in charge of writing down any step of this wondrous expedition to the unknown for a well-known journal. He/she needs this article to save his/her working life. His/her traits are ambitious, dedicated, resourceful, silver-

tongue. His/her equipment is composed by a notebook, a gift from a family member, a satchel full of money, a gun. His/her card seed is Spades.

- **The Master Scientist:** a well-known member of the most important scientific society on Earth, a man or a woman of high moral and research standing who's looking for expanding humanity's knowledge as well as his/her own personal power. His/her traits are expert, quiet, resourceful, selfish. His/her equipment is composed by a book with notes from past expeditions, a compass, an unfinished love letter, a poetry book in Latin. His/her card seed is Diamonds.
- **The Young Man:** a young man from a powerful and wealthy family who wishes to find his own way in the world. He seeks guidance and a new way of life at sea. His traits are unexperienced, trustworthy, ambitious, selfless. His/her equipment is composed by a letter of recommendation from his father, a compass, a backpack full of necessary equipment, a knife. His/her card seed is Hearts.

Steps and turns

The voyage of the expedition is marked on the map. Along the journey, you will see some steps marked with symbols. The first one is at the very beginning of the voyage, along the coasts of New Zealand, where the ship has set sail after embarking all the members of the expedition. At each step, two members of the expedition will read an excerpt from their own diary.

The first member to speak is the Expedition Leader, then the player sitting right in front of him. At the following turn, the player sitting at the right of the Expedition Leader will be the one speaking first, followed by the player sitting in front of him/her. Players must keep following this pattern for the rest of the game.

Roles at the table

Each member of the expedition must tell his/her own story, but he/she's not fully in charge of what he/she's telling. In fact, he/she'll face issues during the storytelling, represented in the game by the other players.

The player sitting at the storyteller's right plays the role of the Skua (an opportunistic scavenger and rather stubborn migratory bird). The Skua must stop the storytelling by putting his/her hand on the card deck whenever he/she sees an option for building a conflict, a struggle between different interests and goals. When the Skua does this, the storyteller must stop narrating and let the other player in the same turn start speaking. The player sitting in front of the storyteller is the Katabatic (the powerful and foul winds that blow from the continent to the sea, strong enough to move the ice and cold enough to freeze the ocean). The Katabatic is a character who strongly opposes the other's views in some ways: he/she would have done something (or everything) differently or for completely different reasons. He/she doesn't oppose to the expedition, though: just the current storyteller. The Katabatic will tell the same story as the storyteller after the Skua has interrupted him/her, but from the opposite point of view, starting from where the current storyteller was stopped by the Skua.

The player sitting at the storyteller's left is

the Seal (lazy and kind creatures dwelling on the ice, as well as majestic and graceful swimmers when at sea). The Seal, just like the Skua, will stop the Katabatic by putting his/her hand on the card deck at the centre whenever he/she sees the possibility for the storyteller to clarify his/her position despite the Katabatic's narration.

Those roles shift during play from player to player, as the role of the storyteller moves counter-clockwise across players at each step of the voyage.

Storytelling

When the storyteller speaks, he/she must look at the symbols surrounding the step of the voyage the characters are currently undertaking. The available symbols are:

- **The ship:** when The ship is shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to the ship, be it in physical or metaphorical terms.
- **The abomination:** when The abomination is shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to some mysterious or terrible event, be it ground in the real world or in the

supernatural one.

- **The iceberg:** when The iceberg is shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to some accident tied to the environment.
- **The magnifying lens:** when The magnifying lens is shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to some great discovery made by one of the expedition members.
- **The waves:** when The waves are shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to the ever-moving sea and to problems related to the route to follow, be it at sea or on the mainland.
- **The mouse:** when The mouse is shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to problems with the food and other equipment being spoiled or broken during the voyage.
- **The albatross:** when The albatross is shown, the story and/or the Issue are always related to a natural event which turns out to be useful to the expedition, but also might pose a risk if not handled correctly.
The storyteller and his/her Katabatic must choose one of the symbols on the current step and start narrating from his/her own

perspective something that happened regarding the theme of the symbol. When the Skua sees fit, he/she must stop the storyteller by putting his/her hand on the deck. The Katabatic then will start narrating the same event, but from an opposing point of view, before being stopped by the Seal. The Skua always opposes the storyteller, the Seal always opposes the Katabatic, but this doesn't mean that the Seal must defend the storyteller.

When both narrating characters have been stopped, the Skua and the Seal draw the first two cards in the deck and turn them face up.

If the seed of the Skua card matches the seed of the storyteller, he/she caused an Issue related to the symbol chosen on the step. If the storyteller wants to solve it, he/she must choose both a piece from his/her equipment and one of his/her traits and incorporate them in the way he/she wants to solve it. If the storyteller cannot solve, or doesn't want to solve the Issue, he/she must keep the card in front of him/her and accept that an Issue negatively marked the expedition. Conversely, if the Seal card seed matches

the storyteller card seed, he/she has a chance to gain Power in the expedition by doing something. Again, the storyteller must choose both a piece from his/her equipment and one of his/her traits and tell how he/she wants to use them for his/her own personal gain. Then, the storyteller marks +1 Power. If the Katabatic agrees with the storyteller with the narrative related to either the Seal or the Skua card, he/she must say "This is the Gospel truth." This sentence will be used by the player to accept what is being narrated, and it won't be challenged in any way. If the Katabatic doesn't agree with the storyteller, he/she must say "The ice tells another story." This sentence will be used by the player to refuse that is being narrated, which can be thus challenged.

When the storytelling is challenged, the storyteller has two options:

- *Retell the narrative:* when the storyteller retells the narrative, he/she must say "In truth, that is what happened." By retelling the narrative, the storyteller accepts that the Katabatic gains control over what is being told, and the two actually collaborate to tell a single version of the story. This ends the

challenge.

- *Further the narrative:* when the storyteller furthers the narrative, he/she must say “I dare you.” By furthering the narrative, the storyteller tries to regain control of what he/she’s telling. This starts the challenge.

Once the challenge is started, both players (the storyteller and the Katabatic) draw one card from the deck and put it face down in front of them, without looking at it. The card drawn by the Skua or the Seal is the target: both can use their Power and Drag in this phase, before turning their cards. After that, they both turn their cards face up: the card which value is closer to that of the target, plus Power or Drag, is the winning card – and consequently, the player with the winning card wins the narrative. The other player is the loser, and gains +1 Drag towards the winning player. If the card drawn by either player matches the seed of the Skua or Seal card, it counts as if having +1 value. If both cards have a higher value than the target, the winning one is that with the highest value. If only one has a higher value than the target, players need to look at the difference between the values: the card with the

lowest difference in value, with respect to the target, is the winning one.

In the end, the loser must accept the narrative and the winner must certify it by declaring “This is the Gospel truth.”

Power and Drag

Players can gain Power and Drag during challenges.

Power is a measure of how the character can influence other characters by gaining some sort of higher moral stature or renown or trust. Power can be spent by the storyteller to either:

- Forbid any challenge during a storytelling: if 1 Power is spent in this way, his/her narrative cannot be challenged and must always be accepted by the Katabatic.
- Help to further the narrative: during the challenge, the storyteller can spend 1 Power to give his card +1 value before turning it upside-down. Only 1 Power can be spent for each challenge.
- Buy equipment: during the challenge, the Katabatic can destroy a piece of equipment (see below). By spending 1 Power

when starting the storytelling, the storyteller can add a new piece of equipment to his list.

Drag is a sense of resentment carried by a character towards another one. Drag can be spent by the Katabatic to either:

- Negate Power: if 1 Drag is spent in this way, the storyteller's Power spent on the narrative is removed, and thus the narrative can be challenged.
- Help negating the narrative: during the challenge, the Katabatic can spend 1 Drag to give his card +1 value before turning it upside-down. Only 1 Drag can be spent for each challenge.
- Backslash an Issue: during the challenge, the Katabatic can spend 1 Drag to compel the storyteller to use his/her Issue card kept instead of using the one drawn from the deck.

A constant flow

Traits and equipment are not static elements. Indeed, during play, players must use them differently and can change them in particular situations.

During storytelling, players can't use the same traits and/or equipment twice in a row. If the expert trait is used by the Master Scientist to solve an Issue, it cannot be used during the following turn of the same character; rather, his/her player must use another trait. The same is true for the equipment. Whenever Power is used by a character during his/her storytelling turn and subsequently negated by Drag used by his/her Katabatic, any trait used during that storytelling turn must be erased. In place of such traits, new ones must be created by the Katabatic, which must be related to what happened during the storytelling turn. This happens when the storytelling ends.

Equipment put in play during storytelling (for instance to solve an Issue) can be targeted by the Katabatic, who can propose that such piece of equipment is either lost, stolen or broken as a result of the narrative. Should his/her narrative win, that piece of equipment is lost, stolen or broken and must be erased from the character list.

Stories untold: what can be included in the narrative

The storyteller in charge can tell any kind of narrative, as he/she pleases. However, some kinds of events cannot be narrated unless specific symbols show up. In particular:

- ...when **The ship** is shown, the storyteller should narrate about the ship, the equipment, the crew, the expedition, war but cannot tell about murder, blood, death, science, nature, the ice.
- ...when **The abomination** is shown, the storyteller should narrate about nature, murder, blood, death, nightmares, mystery, horrors, supernatural, madness, the ice, war but cannot tell about science, thought.
- ...when **The iceberg** is shown, the storyteller should narrate about the ice, the equipment, the sea, the ship, the crew, blood, death, science, nature but cannot tell about mystery, horrors, supernatural, madness, war.
- ...when **The magnifying lens** is shown, the storyteller should narrate about nature, science, thought, the expedition, the ice, the sea, the crew, enmity but cannot tell

about supernatural, blood, death, war.

- ...when **The waves** are shown, the storyteller should narrate about the ice, the sea, nature, the expedition but cannot tell about supernatural, mystery, horror, death, war, science, murder.
 - ...when **The mouse** is shown, the storyteller should narrate about the expedition, the crew, science, enmity but cannot tell about the expedition, the ice, the sea.
 - ...when **The albatross** is shown, the storyteller should narrate about the expedition, nature, supernatural, mystery, thought, science, murder but cannot tell about war, enmity, horrors.
- Whatever is not included in either list can be narrated.

Life and death

It is obvious that, at any step, some characters might die. It is also implied that most of them, if not all of them, will die by the end of the expedition – thus you already know you're telling a tragedy. As such, characters might die in many situations, from starvation to being thrown overboard. Yet, not all cha-

racters are created equal, when facing death.

The storyteller can tell about the death of any non-playing character – that is, any character falling outside the six ones listed previously. Also, only the storyteller can tell about his own death freely. Death of a playing character – that is, one of the characters appearing on the list above – is something that must come out of a challenge, and only the Katabatic can propose it after stating that “the ice tells another story.” In addition, this only can happen if the step the characters are currently at shows a symbol allowing to tell about death.

Natural and supernatural

Although it is clear that one of the source of inspiration for this game is H.P. Lovecraft “At the mountains of madness,” also set in Antarctica, horror, mystery and supernatural are not mandatorily linked in the game. The worst horrors and monsters lie skin deep in human beings: as a species, we are both capable of the greatest endeavours, such as founding small colonies on probably the

most dreadful and hostile environment of this planet (Antarctica) or visiting the Moon and other planets, and of the vilest acts of hatred and destruction, such as the Second World War or mass deportations and genocides such as during the Balkans War. We are perfectly able to turn the most beautiful and heart-consoling tales and truths of religion and science into seeds of mutual destruction, as in crusades and religious wars, racial discrimination and sex- and gender-based harassment of people. Monsters can be humane, and humans can be monstrous.

If you want to describe acts of unnatural horrors carried out by outlandish creatures, you are free to do so. I encourage you to do so: challenge what has been already done, or pay your homages to whom first imagined unspeakable mysteries. If you want to describe acts of unnatural horrors carried out by people of flesh and bones, you are free to do so, too. I encourage you to do so: show off human beings most dreadful sides, or try to show how such vile nature of us can be put off.

Afterword

The history of Antarctic exploration is long and riddled with failures, often dramatic. In particular, the game focuses on what has been termed “The Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration,” a period ranging from the beginnings of the 19th century to 1922, an age of explorations chiefly driven by curiosity and nationalism. During these brave expeditions, the South Pole represented an ideal, an abstract target as mystic as the Gates of the Heavens could be, but the rewards were indeed very tangible.

Yet, quite a number of expeditions during this “Heroic Age” have been plagued by death, pain or sorrow: as those explorers approached the continent, in fact, they had to face the hurdles and issues that arose in the extreme conditions. Problems such as the otherworldly low temperatures (down to -80°C during winter in the mainland), incomplete or vaguely-defined maps, equipment failure, the ice extent and endlessly changing structure led to overwhelming problems such as starvation and frostbite.

Among the most notable failures, that of the Scott's last expedition (1910-1912), in which

one of the most notable adventurer and explorer of his time died, together with all the members of his own expedition, during a “quest” for the South Pole, a race carried out against Roald Amundsen, who also was running after the geographic South Pole - and who, ultimately, won.

Four were the main hurdles that such expeditions had to overcome in order to succeed:

- the raging seas: the “Roaring Forties,” the “Furious Fifties” and the “Screaming Sixties” refer to the strong and chilly winds that generate below 40°S, 50°S and 60°S (close to the Antarctic continent). Here, the lack of continents allows winds blowing on the sea to reach unsurpassed strengths, which are often responsible for the destruction and sinking of ships by both generating huge waves and tearing down ships components.
- the ice extent at sea: as the 60°S approaches, the ice sheet can be seen covering the sea. It starts by showing small floating blocks of ice, which then coalesce into the thick pack covering everything in sight. This ice is driven by the raging winds

that blow from the continent and the currents blowing on and beneath sea surface, and its force is great enough to crush ships - even those built to endure such kind of stress, as Shackleton experienced on the *Endurance*.

- the extremely low temperatures: due to the geographic setting, winds blowing on land and sea and morphology of the continent, Antarctica rarely experiences temperatures higher than 0°C. During Antarctic winter, they might even go below -80°C, with wind chill adding to the effect. These temperatures can not only kill an unprotected human being, but also cause notable issues to the equipment freezing most liquid components and making metallic objects and textiles fragile, brittle and prone to breaking down. Also, frostbite becomes a serious issue, as many explorers experienced on their own health.
- the raging katabatic: the katabatic is a special wind that only blows in Antarctica and a few other chilly locations all over the world. Basically, it's a fluid mass of icy air that flows from the upper atmosphere down to the central portion of the con-

tinent. From there, partly due to the fact that mainland Antarctica is covered in an ice sheet that can be very thick (up to about 3-4 km), it starts literally sliding down towards the coastline, building up speed and increasing in temperature but gathering ice crystals. As a result, when it reaches the coastline, it can result in heavy snowstorms with windspeeds even reaching more than 300 km/h.

These and other “lesser” issues plagued most expeditions, although many of them managed, in a way or another, to minimize or overcome them, resulting in a success.





