Contents

The Four Foxes

v1.7.1

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Four Foxes is an **tabletop roleplaying game** focused on **fast-paced investigation** with a couple of twists. The overall tone is what you would find in Cthulhu tales and movies like Indiana Jones.

What makes this game different?

Instead of focusing on the scenario, here the attention is aimed at the **characters**. They are designed to complement each other and create interesting interactions between them.

This is a **diceless RPG**, heavily inspired by Amber and Puppetland. The rules are simple and straightforward.

If you are reading this, I assume you have some experience with Tabletop RPGs (I can't imagine you finding this book out of the blue as your first experience). So I'm going to skip the usual preamble about what's a Role-Playing Game and how to run it. Instead, I'm going to focus on the differences between The Four Foxes and what you would probably find elsewhere. Explaining by contrast and relying on previous experiences seem to have worked better in my tests.

The terms you find here are the ones traditionally used in RPGS with exactly the same meaning: Game Master (GM), Player Character (PC), Non-Player Character (NPC), and so on.

Principles

Here are the principles that rule The Four Foxes:

- **The game is fast-pace**. Think of the Law & Order TV show, scenes are short and the plot moves quickly.

- **The game is cinematic**. Cool and epic trumps "realism".

- **The game is open**. The Game Master does not plan everything from the start. Both Players and Game Master will create the case during the play.

Chapter 2

The Four Foxes

. . . is a private detective agency running from 1926 through 1951.

The agency has some sort of "supernatural magnetism" that makes every case an extraordinary one.

Four siblings, of which the father was a renowned explorer, ran the agency during its whole existence.

The characters' appearance is purposely vague, feel free to add your colors and fill in the blanks.

The characters in 1926

Molly Fox - "Grumpy Molly "

Molly is in her early 50s. She was never prone to action but always felt responsible for her siblings since their father disappeared.

Motto: "Nobody punches my family, except me!"

Traits

- She cannot win a fight unless one of her siblings is in danger. If so, she cannot lose a fight as far as his opponent is human.

- She can clear fear, dizziness, or any temporary mental condition from his siblings with a slap or a punch in the face.

- She is immune to fear when smoking.

- She can sense danger or supernatural forces in a place or object. She can't say exactly what it is but knows where and how bad it is.

- She can cast a small flame on his hands, as strong as a lighter.

- If shooting or throwing, she has the same precision as a drunken raccoon.

Important note: If the **player** forgets to say Molly is smoking, then she is not, meaning she not immune to fear. Next time, try not to forget to light it before passing through that creepy door.

Laura Fox - "Bold Laura"
("Reckless Laura" according to her siblings)

Laura is in her middle 40s. She is a natural explorer as her father, and besides her age, she is the most physically capable of the family.

Motto: "Me first!"

Traits

- She can answer any question about ancient history or artifacts, or know where to find the answer given enough time.

- She can fight two or three humans with bare hands and win.

- She never misses a shot or a throw, as far she has enough time to aim.

- She can swing on ropes, jump over huge gaps, and climb over huge walls. No obstacle can block her unless it's a dead end.

- She cannot convince, coerce, or intimidate anyone.

- She cannot lie convincingly, no matter the consequences.

Samantha Fox - "Cunning Samantha"

Samantha is in her late 30s. She is the only real detective of the family.

Motto: "It's obvious, isn't it?"

Traits

- If sober and given enough time, she can find anything odd in a place or situation. It's always something relevant to the story.

- If sober and given enough time, she can tell exactly what recently happened in a place.

- When sober, she can tell if someone is lying and his or her feelings during a conversation.

- She can defeat any human opponent in close combat, as far she is drunk or if she can improvise a weapon. No matter how big or small the improvised weapon it's gonna break after the first use.

- She can jump, climb, and escape any pursuer when drunk. She can do the same when sober but usually ends badly injured.

Lisa Fox - "Smooth Lisa"

Lisa is in her middle 20s. The youngest of the siblings is as *bon-vivant* as she is good with people.

Motto: "Relax, ok? I have it under control."

Traits

- Given time, she can convince anyone to do whatever she wants, as far it's not obviously life-risking.

- She can lie as convincingly as telling the truth. Maybe even more convincingly than the thuth itself.

- She cannot win a fight, no matter how. But can talk enough to make the opponent hesitate for a moment, even if it's non-human.

- When in a life-threatening situation, she can run as faster as an Olympic champion.

- Given enough time, she can disguise as anyone she had seen closely. A more specific target requires more time while a generic one can be quite fast.

- She can sense danger if she is behind someone else, in other words, not leading and not alone.

Chapter 3

Rules

There are only two rules in The Four Foxes:

- Traits;

- Fear and damage;

It's a very lightweight system, but that means these few rules are really important.

Traits

The Four Foxes has no attributes or dice. Everything different from an average human is in the traits list, as also as character limitations.

Traits are absolute, if the characters *can* do something, then they can, period. Nothing will prevent them from doing that, not even the Game Master. The same for *can't*, if they can't do something, no matter what, they can't. The rules seem strict but that makes the game fun.

As we don't throw dice, no danger comes out of the blue and kills characters instantly. The Game Master will always picture the situation to the players, enumerate their options, and tell if they are going well or not (more ahead). So, if you are a player, please pay close attention to the clues the Game Master is telling about how difficult things are.

Narrative hat

The Game Master can describe the result of the action or, if the players feel comfortable, they can narrate the outcome themselves. Just make sure the end result is what the Game Master asked for.

Speaking of end result, a lot can be left in the hands of the players, check Molly's example below, there is a lot of room for the player to create an interesting scene there. On the other hand, if there is something important for the plot to move on the outcome should be described by the Game Master.

Example

Here is a positive trait in action.

GM – "Lisa, there's that bouncer in front of the door. What do you do?"

Lisa – "Hmmm... In my character sheet it says I can lie very convincingly, can I tell him to let me in?"

GM – "Absolutely! He's totally and completely convinced that you are a legitimate guest. What did you tell him?" (If it's a trait it will be a success, simple like this.)

Lisa – "With my best smile and my most confident look I said I'm the new British ambassador and firmly ask the gentleman to announce my presence."

GM – "Marvelous, your excellency! After being announced, you are in the main ballroom and you see a few gentlemen and ladies throwing confused looks at you in the middle of their conversation. What now?"

Example

And now a negative trait in action.

GM – "Ok Molly, what do you do?"

Molly – "I'm going to throw this grenade in the pit they are fighting, but far enough to not hurt them."

GM – "You have the aim of a drunken raccoon and that will go really wrong, are you sure?"

Molly – "Yeah, it's a large space, how bad can it be?"

GM – "Really really bad. . . So, tell us how the grenade ended up ticking at your feet."

Molly – "Oh my! Am I going to die?"

GM – "No, unless you want to. However, that should hurt you and blow the wrong stuff. So tell us how the grenade ended up there, how did you manage to escape, and what kind of damage it did to you and the whole place."

Fear and damage

You might have noticed that there is no *Hit Points* here. Think of some video games where the screen gets slightly red for a while when you get hurt and, after a short break out of the action, it gets back to normal. Damage in The Four Foxes works the same way, if you keep receiving damage you'll pass out, but take a break from it and you'll be fine.

Sometimes the Game Master will tell you that your character gets dizzy, drowsy, tired, limped, or something like that as a consequence of your actions. That means the characters will not be at the peak of their abilities and that their traits will be somewhat affected.

That snowballs quickly, the more conditions you receive, the more likely it is to get even more.

Fear in The Four Foxes is as dangerous as damage, it can affect your judgment and your abilities the same way as a bullet. So, when the Game Master says "that's scary, you're afraid", be aware that your actions can lead to even more damage or fear until you get incapacitated.

Fear works as damage to the mind.

But fear is way more interesting than physical damage. Enough fear leads to insanity. The Game Master can describe to you things that are not there, or you can be forced to fill small rituals to take action, like praying, avoiding cracks in the walkway, or like Molly's smoking. Every time you ignore them, insanity increases, imposing even more complications.

Getting rid of fear and damage

Conditions can be light as being dizzy or severe as losing your arm. What you do to get rid of them depends only on the narrative. For dizziness, just a

moment to catch your breath might be enough; for a lost arm, well... maybe you need to find a genius engineer who could replace it for a 1930 version of a cybernetic limb; or perhaps a powerful relic can regrow your arm entirely.

The important part here is that *damage is always narrative*, they are not numbers. Their consequences and healing are entirely dealt with in the game.

Death

Let's get this straight: characters in The Four Foxes **never die**, *unless* the player chooses to do so.

That might sound a bit odd, what is a horror game if you can't die? The trick is that there are worse things than death, especially in a Role-Playing Game.

Death in an RPG usually means the player stops playing (quite boring) and needs to create another character (also boring). However, if the character keeps getting deep and deep into trouble, that's interesting.

Here are some interesting alternatives for death:

- The character is put in jail, trapped, or captured.

- The character loses sanity and starts to see or hear things that are not there.

- The character loses important equipment, or limbs. Even a broken arm or leg is already a big challenge.

- Nothing really happens to the character, but they disappear and reappear with no memory of what happened.

- The traumatic experience (whatever it is) changes the character's perception of reality, so the Game Master describes things differently for different players. Like "people in the corner seem to be enjoying the party and you can hear the laughs from their jokes", versus "people in the corner look at you and start laughing for no apparent reason, what's so funny?".

Chapter 4

Diceless for Players

If you have played Tabletop RPGs before you might be wondering if your Game Master doesn't have too much control over your character. Actually, that's exactly the opposite. As you know what your character *can* do without failing and what he or she *can't* do, no matter what. The tricky part lies only between these two extremes.

So, here are only the two things you need to know, besides your character personality and traits list:

1. Ask what your character thinks, not only what they see.

2. Pay attention to fear and damage.

Ask what your character thinks

You don't have your character abilities.

If your character is an experienced brawler, no one expects you (the player) to evaluate an opponent by yourself just based on the Game Master's description. That's not only unfair but impossible. Even if you *are* an experienced fighter, the description will never be complete and detailed enough to allow you to judge by yourself.

Just ask "What is my character's evaluation?" and the Game Master will give you an accurate picture of what to expect and maybe some options. Your character is also an investigator, which very few of us are in real life, so

a common question is **"what does my character think is worth noting here?"**, to which the Game Master will always point you towards the relevant direction.

On the other hand, your character has abilities in your trait list that you don't need to ask what's the outcome. For example, Laura is a very skilled hand-to-hand fighter, so you don't say to the Game Master "I'm going to throw a punch on his face", you say "I just knock him out and throw him through the window". The Game Master will redo the scene if that guy was something you couldn't handle that easily.

If you have played other RPGs before, that might sound strange. But that helps to keep the game pace. Just try it.

Always remember to say:

- *What does my character think of it?*

- *My character just does it.*

Fear and damage

That's how the Game Master tells you that the course of action is not working.

Your character is never going to die from a sudden explosion but is more likely to die fighting a stronger opponent alone, ignoring all the increasing damage he's inflicting upon you. So, when the Game Master says "the rocks are still hitting you, and they're getting bigger", that means you need to do something different and do it fast. Some situations are really dangerous and there is no way to get out of them without some damage, it's a matter of choosing the "lesser evil" and that's a big part of a horror/investigative game.

Instead of being the result of randomness, fear and damage in The Four Foxes are tools for the Game Master to help you without breaking the game pace or the narrative.

How do I know something is difficult without numbers?

Like in real life, there are two ways to assess how hard something is:

1. You evaluate it using your experience. Meaning you ask the Game Master what your character thinks of the situation.

2. You try it by yourself. Meaning your character jumps into the situation and keeps an eye on how things are going, which usually means paying attention to *fear and damage*, more often than not.

There are no numbers on a sheet you can compare, so you need to make your character experiment within their limits as safely as possible.

The best example here is combat. You know Laura can handle 3 or 4 humans and win but what about that beast running toward her? You need to test! Say that you will engage in combat in the most defensive way you can, trying to assess how strong the beast is. The Game Master will tell you how strong or weak it is describing how much damage you're receiving. If you suspect you can get in deep trouble, try to have a clear escape route or a plan B when doing that.

Just like in real life.

Chapter 5

Diceless for Game Masters

A diceless game is not difficult, but you don't narrate it as your usual RPG. The most important thing is to let your players clearly know what are the consequences of each action *before* they act.

Let me repeat that:

Tell the consequences **before** they act.

If you don't describe possible consequences beforehand, you rob decisions from the players, and every outcome is actually the sole decision of the Game Master. Let them decide, and always remember that the players are the heroes, the very heart of the story. Let them shine.

To help you out, I have put the essentials of game mastering a diceless RPG below. Of course, following them is up to you, but I strongly advise you to start there and then adapt the guidelines to your own play style after you get a grip on how the game goes.

Game Master guidelines

Here is your agenda as a Game Master of The Four Foxes, by order of importance:

1. Tell the consequences *before* commit to the action

2. Handle the plot to the players

3. Always answer "yes, you can"

17

4. Sometimes answer "yes, you can. But..."

5. The world doesn't stop when players talk

6. Snowball fear and damage

Tell the consequences *before* commit to the action

When players tell you what they are doing, if it's risky, tell the possible consequences and ask again: "is that ok?"

The outcome of actions should never surprise the players.

This is the *most important rule*, especially if the player is playing that character for the first time.

Sometimes players want to do things their characters can't do. When that happens, ask about their intentions, that will give you more room to provide sensible options and consequences.

More about that on "Handle the plot to the players" ahead.

Example

Lisa can't fight at all. So this is how to handle the situation when the player really wants to go physical.

Lisa – "I'm going to jump, I want to grab him."

GM – "You cannot fight. Probably you're going to miss him and hurt yourself a bit. What's your intention? To prevent him from fleeing?"

Lisa – "Nah...I just want to delay him if possible. So the others can catch him up."

GM – "Even if that hurts?"

Lisa – "Yeah, as far as I can create some advantage for us, I'm ok."

GM – "That's fair. You'll slow him down enough but you'll end up hurt, maybe dizzy. How will that happen?"

Handle the plot to the players

The Four Foxes is all about the characters being the stars and keeping pace.

Encourage the players to describe the outcome of their actions when they are in their traits list.

If Lisa is trying to deceive someone, say to the player "She completely convinced! Can you describe how Lisa did it?".

More important, *let the players build the plot.*

If Samantha is investigating a body and asks what killed the person, it's ok to reply with "**you** tell me!". Then get whatever the player throws at you and run the game with it. If the player said it was a bullet, so you now have a gun somewhere. If it was poison, then someone bought or made it.

After a while, these inputs make the game run by itself. You don't need to ask yourself what to do next, because the players had that answer for you way before you need it.

Always answer "yes, you can"

The characters are the heroes and they are way above normal people, so the default answer is always "yes" and the action is always a success.

Example:

The characters are in an alley and the player asks "is there a bottle here?", the answer is *yes*.

Laura gets a rock and throws it at the guard pursuing her. She has no trait about throwing stuff, so the player asks – "Do I hit him?" – the answer is *yes*. But then, tell the player the consequences before the action is committed: "GM - You're not that strong, so the guard will probably just lose balance and get delayed a bit, also, she's going to get angry and catching you will become personal. Is that ok?"

Sometimes answer "yes, you can. But. . . "

The characters have "cant's" on their list, so if the player attempts something the character can't do, tell how that is going to fail. The consequences are never terminal, in this game characters die only if their players want to do so. Dead is always intentional. Fear and damage, on the other hand, are not.

The world doesn't stop when players talk

This is another guideline to keep the game pace.

No matter if they are talking in or out of character. Every minute or so you must interrupt them and tell them that the world is moving.

That can be their pursuers getting closer; or they hear, smell, or sense something happening; maybe someone enters the room and drops dead. The world is not going to wait for them.

In moments of tension, don't let them coordinate their actions.

After one or two phrases exchanged between them, tell the cultists are getting closer, then dangerously closer, and finally that they engage in combat. As a rule of thumb, give two warnings and then strike. If you want the players on their toes, give just one warning and then strike. The trick here is to be consistent, if you start with two warnings, keep two, if you start with one, keep that. If you are going to change the pace, be very explicit when you do so, say – "Things are way more dangerous now, I'll not warn you as frequently as I'm doing now" – and then use just one warning.

From time to time, the players will be in fierce combat or in a place you want to picture as dangerous. In those situations *any pause to debate means damage.* There is no time to talk, that's why those situations are dangerous (and exciting).

Example

The siblings are fleeing from some cultists and they got cornered on a cliff.

GM – "You are being hunted by those cultists. You can hear them shouting."

Molly – "We should jump, we are not going to die."

GM – "Probably not, but you can break a leg or an arm, and that will surely ruin what you smoke." (Here the GM is telling the consequences before they commit to action.)

Molly – "Hmmm... I don't like that. Hey, guys. I can fight if you do." (Molly can only win fights when their siblings are in danger.)

Lisa – "I'd rather run. Can I disguise as one of the cultists?" (The player is asking something Lisa would know, but the player is unsure.)

GM – "Yes, but you need time you don't have. Unless you think of something you can do to buy time. By the way, the cultists are getting too close, you have seconds before they reach you." (Here the GM uses *yes, but. . . .* Also, don't let the players forget the cultists are moving.)

Laura – "How many of them? I can handle some myself." (More questions about something Laura would surely know.)

GM – "I would say 10 or 12, it's difficult to see in the dark. You think it's a bit too much for you alone. They are almost upon you."

Laura – "Ok. Guys, let's go fight."

Molly – "I'm down to it!"

Laura – "That can create a distraction, so I can disguise myself."

GM – "Indeed."

Samantha – "I don't know, I'm out of booze. I'd rather try the cliff."

Lisa – "Hmmm, I think it's. . ."

GM – "The cultists reach you, and they start fighting. They have no weapons but they are strong. You are all defending yourselves and throwing punches. What do you do?" (Here the GM interrupted the players. A tense situation doesn't allow coordination or too much elaboration. Throwing the combat and not allowing them to coordinate keeps the tension high.)

Snowball fear and damage

Fear and damage are narratives. And they affect traits in the narrative.

That means a broken arm prevents Laura from escaping. Being dizzy makes it impossible for Lisa to run as fast as usual. More important than that, actions under fear and damage create more fear and damage.

Create a snowball, when the character is afraid, say the consequences of the actions are worse than normal. Any option should create more damage and fear unless it's something really safe to do. Fear and damage are the excuses the Game Master has to make things go from bad to worse.

That helps to increase tension.

When players keep going and the damage is too high, they end up passing out. Don't kill them, killing is extremely boring in an RPG. Capture them, let them wake up chained to the wall; attach their legs to iron balls; drug

and release them in the middle of the city. Be creative, but remember, they are still the main characters of the story. They'll come back for revenge.

Snowball fear and damage, then hurt them hard.

Combat

The main focus of the game is the investigation and pushing the plot forward, so combat is just a means to that end. Given that, they are fast and quickly resolved. Don't expect combat to last more than a couple of minutes of gameplay. A very important fight should last no more than five minutes at the table. A trivial combat should be solved in one or two.

So, what are the goals of a fight?

The first one is to **present more clues**. A defeated opponent can be interrogated and move the plot forward. Losing and being captured can reveal information about the ones causing all the trouble or even reveal where is their lair. A quick fight can reveal opponents' strong and weak points, so you can defeat them easier later.

Second, it's a way to **create pressure and speed up** players. If some nasty creature is approaching them, there is no time for a detailed analysis of the corpse, they need to fight or run. To be honest, combats might not be the best way to do that; any kind of approaching danger would probably work as well as a fight. On the other hand, if the players are a bit slow in progressing the plot, a fight is a good opportunity to give everyone more clues.

Sometimes, combat can be used to **highlight an accomplishment**. It's quite satisfactory to capture the murderer after a fight, especially if she has successfully escaped from the last one.

Finally, every combat is **an opportunity for the players to roleplay between them**. Depending on the character or the opponent, there is no way to win alone. So the characters must create solutions or play with their strengths and weaknesses.

Example

Samantha – "I'm going to fight the closest cultists with my rock."

GM – "Ok, the rock is an improvised weapon so you are going to lose it

after this but you are in control for a while. What do you want to do? Kill them? Just knock some out?"

Samantha – "Do I think we can defeat all the cultists?" (The player is asking something Samantha would know.)

GM – "You have seen a lot of brawls and you're pretty sure you can beat them, but not without a lot of fatigue and some broken bones."

Samantha – "Ouch! Lisa, can you do something?"

Lisa – "I guess I can trick them if they think I'm one of them."

GM – "That works."

Samantha – "Ok, I'm just holding my ground, but making a lot of trouble to attract their attention to me." (That's totally ok, the player is being careful.)

Laura – "I'm with Sam."

Molly – "I'm going to light my cigar to shake the fear out and join the fray."

GM – "You're in a hurry, but you got your cigar lit. Are you all buying time for Lisa?"

Laura – "Yes."

GM – "Ok, you are more interested in keeping them looking at you than really knocking them out. That works really well, however, they are slowly pushing you toward the cliff. Lisa, your move." (The Game Master clearly tells what's going to happen, similar to damage, that let the players know what they are doing is not enough to let the out of the situation.)

Lisa – "I'm going to reach the cultist who is behind the others and hit him hard." (Lisa can't win a fight but the cultist are not really fighting her. Also, as a Game Master, don't throw a monkey wrench on a good plan, let the players shine.)

GM – "What do you want to do? Kill him?"

Lisa – "Nah, I just want his robes."

GM – "No big deal. Everyone is paying attention to the others, so it's easy to sneak behind one of them. You have your robes and a guy laying on the ground."

Lisa – "I'm going to kick him over the cliff."

GM – "Done. He's passed out, nobody really noticed you. However, folks, you are dangerously close to that cliff." (The world moves, and the Game Master keeps pressing the players.)

Molly – "Kid, whatever is your plan, it's better to do it now."   - to the GM - "I'm going to press the cultists a little harder."

GM – "A little dangerous, but you got some ground at cost of some bruises."

Lisa – "I'm running away from the cliff and ..."

Molly – "I'm gonna kill you, brat!"

Lisa – "Let me finish! And I'm going to shout to the cultists - 'Brothers! Forget the intruders, the BEAST will take care of them, let's return before it reaches us too!'"

GM – "Ahhh... good call. You saw the beast in a cage before. The cultists hesitate for a moment."

Lisa – "You know the beast will kill us too if it got us here!"   - to GM - "I'm bluffing, I had no idea what that beast does."

GM – "It's a fair assumption. The cultists start to retreat, you can sense they are on the verge of panicking."

Lisa – "Nice!"

Molly – "Good job, kid!"

Lisa – "Don't call me that!"

GM – "You hear a howl at distance. Pretty sure it's not a dog. What are you doing?"

Game pace

Investigative games tend to be slow. Give time and a player will tell you the character is "searching every corner, tapping on everything, looking closely at whatever is out of place." When in combat, players tend to spend a lot of time discussing out-of-character the best strategy possible.

When running this game, try to keep pace. Don't let them stop for long. If they are discussing too much or spending too much time on a scene, creates pressure to make the world move.

Examples

- *The players are discussing which clue to follow for the past 3 minutes.* GM - "Lisa, you noticed someone in the corner. You're sure it's the same person who was observing you yesterday. You can tell that because she's quite attractive so she got your attention then. What do you do?"

- *The players are debating if there is a trap or not for the past few minutes.* GM - "Ok, as you are examining the artifact, the temple starts to shake. Rocks fall over your head, hurting a little bit. What will you do?"

- *The players are still pressing an NPC for the past 3 minutes for clues.* GM - "You're talking to the Captain when a man in a striped suit enters the room, opens his mouth, and falls forward, dead with a knife in his back."

Give everything

More often than not, the players just don't want to miss anything. Don't stall the game yourself, *give everything* and move on. Keep more scenes coming!

Example

Samantha – "I want to search the room for anything else that catches my attention."

GM – "Cool! Samantha is a very experienced investigator and never misses anything important. You search not only the room but give a good look at the whole house. Whoever attacked this man was invited to enter by the front door. There are no signs of forced entry anywhere, no signs of a fight, and that door is unlocked. You're sure the assassin is someone the victim knew well because he died late at night and no one invites a strange into the house that late."

That's it. Don't stall the game and don't let the players do the same. With every clue, there are more questions and more scenes coming. That will keep everyone on their toes and a 2-hour game will cover a complete investigation.