



by Steve Hatherley

Roleplaying the strange world of the Illuminati is a bizarre experience where the characters are players in global conspiracies.

"Roleplaying *INWO*" was largely inspired by *Everway*. I found that I loved *Everway's* character generation but wasn't inspired by its setting. *INWO*, on the other hand, doesn't even *have* characters, but has everything I could ever want from a background! The thought of what players would make of, say, George Bush, Goldfish Fanciers, South American Nazis, Clipper Chip and a Terrorist Nuke was enough to set my pulse racing. I'm sorry, but *Everway* just doesn't compare!

Note: *GURPS Illuminati* details everything you could possibly want to know about running a sensible conspiracy theory game. Unfortunately, *INWO* is too wild a beast.

## Characters

Character creation uses the *INWO* cards to define characters and their conspiracies. As there are more than 500 *INWO* cards in print, it is best to give the players a small selection to choose from. Most cards will be groups, with a few interesting plots. These cards dictate the kind of game you will end up running. If you want to concentrate on criminal plots and government conspiracies, leave out the Cattle Mutilators, the Orbital Mind Control Lasers and Girlie Magazines.

Players choose five cards for their characters. Because an Illuminated game is a large step sideways from most roleplaying games, deal three cards to each player first. Hopefully those cards will start synapses firing and the players will start thinking about characters. If they don't like the cards they were dealt, let them choose others.

It helps if you explain what sort of characters you are expecting. For example, if they choose Vatican City and Sniper, tell them that you're not interested in a Catholic soldier, you want the Pope's personal hit man instead!

Asking the players to include difficulties and complexities for their character in their card selection provides hooks to tie into the plot at a later date. This sort of complexity might be someone you've made an enemy of, a group opposing your goals or whatever. A problem might be the Church of Elvis as an opposing

organization or a Double-Cross as some kind of personal treachery. Or both.

Finally, character sheets and system statistics. Use whatever you are most comfortable with - - *GURPS*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Bunnies and Burrows*. Whatever. I have not concentrated on numbers - - this is an article about style rather than mechanics.

## A Sample Character: Doctor Bill Windsor

Dr. Windsor, an honest-to-god player character, was based on the following cards: Center for Disease Control, Clone Arrangers, Head in a Jar, Margaret Thatcher and Moonbase. (Thanks Greg.)

Dr. Windsor works for the Center for Disease Control (CDC), in their Biohazard Level 6 department on the moon. His current mission is tracking an insidious genetic disease, a by-product of a cosmetic surgery virus.

This isn't strictly true, of course. The moonbase is actually a cover for the CDC's cloning organization set up by Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister. Her clones are keeping her in power. Windsor's real job is clone-hunter and troubleshooter. He hunts rogue clones and shuts down rival cloning operations. He receives his missions from Control, a disembodied head floating in a tank of water.

His current mission concerns one of the other players who is a clone herself (and this fit just perfectly into her background). That player is investigating another clone, but not one of the CDC's. So who else is manufacturing clones? Windsor's mission is to find out and shut them down.

## Plot

You have your characters. What are you going to do with them?

You can find your plot two ways. The first is to prepare something in advance, and put the characters through that. This may mean that the characters will need to focus on certain cards. An *X-Files* game requires that the characters work for the FBI.

Unfortunately, the biggest danger inherent with card-based backgrounds is that the characters are inevitably more interesting than any pre-defined plot. (Try fitting Dr. Windsor into a Bond-movie plot. Doesn't really work, does it?) As the players have been given the opportunity to create interesting characters, why not work with that and base the plot on the characters' backgrounds. This sounds intimidating, with assorted plots and groups all pulling in different directions, but it is surprising how plots often just fall into place.



Inspiration also comes from randomly drawing cards. For example, suppose you draw Princess Di and Rogue Boomer. Now, Princess Di is the head of the Voudonistas (one of the characters has her in his background) and it seems clear that she will be launching a brand new nuclear submarine and that her enemies want to steal it. That's a start, and when you look at the other characters' backgrounds, other pieces just fall into place. For example, tying Dr Windsor to the Diana/submarine plot suggests that a rogue cloning operation has been used to replace officers on board. And there lies the seed of a plot . . .

## Starting the Game

Start the game any way you feel is appropriate, but I usually start the game in an all-night diner in Los Angeles at 3 a.m. That way, if all else fails and I cannot think of a plot, I can always throw the *Miracle Mile* situation at them. (*Miracle Mile* is a B-movie that puts Anthony Edwards into a glorious situation just perfect for the game. If you've not seen the film, I won't spoil it.)

Finding reasons for everyone to be in this diner may be contrived. Luckily, because this is a game of conspiracy, coincidences and contrivances happen everyday. Usually their backgrounds will suggest something: A meeting? Surveillance? Following a suspect? An intercepted message? Luck? Or, most likely, all of them.

All that is then required is the catalyst, the trigger for the game to start. Something to bring all the characters (who, most likely, do not know each other) together so they can introduce themselves and start the game rolling. A W.I.T.C.H. pulling a .45 and plugging away at one of the characters, the diner's windows erupting in a hail of bullets, an earthquake, the start of *Pulp Fiction*, that sort of thing.

Apart from bringing the characters together, the start also needs enough clues to start the investigation rolling. A dead body to dissect, a briefcase to steal, a number to phone. Whatever it takes to get the players working in the direction you want them to go.

## Running a Conspiracy

*INWO* is a strange experience. The players hold their own meetings and much of the time the gamemaster has less idea of what's going on than the players do! This is normal. *INWO* is about secret conspiracies and until the players trust each other, they form small, limited alliances. Initially at least, the carefully detailed plot takes second place to finding out what the others players are up to.

This does create a couple of headaches. One is pacing: when I start running *INWO* I have no idea how long the game will take. That is entirely in the hands of the players. Another is that I often don't know what the players have been telling each other - - so debriefings are often necessary.

## Back to Saving the World

After a while all this player stuff becomes a little tiring. The plot is ticking along, and the players may need to be dragged back to it.

Scatter clues between the players. In order to get anywhere they will have to cooperate and share information. Clues can be anything - - cryptic e-mail messages, mysterious phone numbers, license plates, bullets. The players

themselves may determine what clues are available by seeking them out.

Most characters will be controlled by someone who briefs them for their mission. This secret master can also hand out information and may tell their minion that a particular symbol is often used by, say, cattle mutilators. In other words, just enough information to keep the players moving.

Secret masters can also unite the players. For instance, they might say that another character is a Templar and it would be useful to learn more about their organization. The secret master may also direct characters away from sub-plots if they are in danger of being distracted. ("No. You may not investigate these stolen satellites. We have a team already working on that.")

However, players can develop a dependency on their master. Two methods discourage this. The first is that secret masters grow rather cross when pestered for information. It doesn't look good on their report, tell them. Players usually take the hint.

Second, secret masters are remarkably inefficient at handing out information that is easily available to another player. For example, fingerprint analysis is the sort of thing that secret masters ought to be able to arrange, but I always refuse if a character works for the FBI or has Local Police Department contacts. Fingerprints are their department.

## **More Plot! Need More Plot!**

As the game progresses, you may discover that you need more information than you started with. As players lead you into alleys and along avenues you never even knew existed (let alone prepared) you need to develop more detail, more conspiracies, more plots.

There are two options. The first is that something sensible immediately springs to mind. The second is to turn to the cards. Each method has its advantages, although I personally prefer drawing cards - - so often the plot spins off in new directions.

Here's a typical situation of how I use the cards: the players are concentrating on a W.I.T.C.H. assassin more than I expected them to. I told them that she was merely a hired gun, but they look for clues anyway. So I draw some cards - - and discover that W.I.T.C.H. are linked to Lenin's Body, Black Helicopters, and the Multinational Oil Companies. (I also drew State Lotteries and AMA, but they didn't seem appropriate so I ignored them.)

Well, that tells me that W.I.T.C.H. is after Lenin's Body. The Flat Earthers, an enemy pawn in the overall plot, have arranged for W.I.T.C.H. to steal some Apache helicopter gunships being transported by supertanker. (In return W.I.T.C.H. sent an assassin to kill one of the players, an enemy of the Flat Earthers.) The gunships will eventually be used to make an assault on Lenin's body!

Because I want to tie that to the characters, I decide that the helicopters are being delivered to the Klu Klux Klan. No, I don't know what the KKK have planned for them, nor do I know what the oil companies are doing with them in the first place. But I do know that one character belongs to the KKK, and if it is important I can always draw more cards.

The next task is to incorporate that into the story. Because one character is actively seeking the W.I.T.C.H., I let him intercept a cryptic message: "The Brent Spar Link delivers the KKK's black gifts at 5 a.m. Thursday." What he does with that is entirely up to him.

## The Grand Finale

The climax of the campaign needs to be spectacular, dangerous and must wrap up the storyline. It may involve a cast of thousands and military precision, or it may be a lonely confrontation with an arch-villain in a secret polar base. (The Bond films make good starting points.)

Here's an example of how a finale might be worked up, calling in the strange and loose plot threads I've mentioned above. What we have so far is a nuclear submarine launched by Princess Di, a rogue cloning operation, some stolen helicopter gunships and Lenin's body. Among the enemy groups are the Flat Earthers (directly opposed to Di's Voudonistas) and W.I.T.C.H., although all W.I.T.C.H. really want is Lenin's body.

The Flat Earthers have replaced the submarine's command crew with clones. Stealing the boomer during the launching ceremony not only gives them a submarine bristling with nuclear missiles but is also a personal insult to Princess Di, their enemy. That much we've known from the start, when the characters were created. That's where the game has been directed, along the clone route.

Lenin's Body is just a side plot, but as it was never satisfactorily resolved during the game it needs mentioning during the climax. So it seems pretty obvious (ahem) that the body is currently on tour. The Princess will pay her respects to Lenin first, before the launch.

So, how do the Flat Earthers make it obvious that they have stolen the submarine, and what about the helicopter gunships? Returning to the cards for inspiration, Hallucinations and Lab Explosion start me thinking. (Before I chanced across them I was seriously looking for a use for the Albino Alligators!)

I decided that Lenin's Body was already aboard the submarine and that the corpse that Princess Di was to visit was a fake, a hallucination. Then, as the sub slips below the waves shortly after launch (definitely not part of the program) the gunships would perform a flyby (actually covering the theft). An explosion would wreck the Lenin's Body Tour Display to destroy the evidence and create a cloud in the shape of a ship sailing over the edge of the world - the Flat Earther's symbol, and another hallucination - type effect.

And what about the player characters? Perhaps they will smuggle themselves aboard the submarine and we can have a Crimson Tide type ending, or perhaps they'll find a use for that Robot Sea Monster they captured, or . . . who knows? They'll be looking to mess it up somehow, but let them worry about that. That's what they're there for, after all!

## Wrapping Up

Once you've had your climax you can relax, debrief your players (who will be clamoring to find out what was going on and who did what to whom, and why, and how) and take a break. You've probably earned it.

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