

Birds of a feather

-GM Guide-

You have the most difficult job at this table: guiding your party of fractious pigeons through their adventure. This booklet is intended to be a guide for you, providing you with a framework to build and run your adventure.

This is a work in progress. If you run a game of this, please get in touch! Let me know what worked and what didn't, and I can make this game better.

Writing an adventure

Birds of a feather is not designed to be run as a high-prep, on-rails game. Instead, you're encouraged to run your session with a light touch: prep what you might need, and bring it in where it fits.

Come up with an assignment

What is the flock's objective this session? This could be a high-stakes paranormal task, or something more mundane. Either way, the assignment should be straightforward enough that the flock has an idea of what they need to do, but with enough twists and complications to keep your players guessing.

- Your pigeons serve the Grey Lady, which means there's always souls need escorting to a body of water. A simple escort mission is always a good way to introduce people to your world. *Complications: the soul doesn't want to go, someone else wants the soul, the soul must do one last thing before it departs, you're escorting the soul through difficult terrain, you're escorting the soul through a raging storm/a bustling carnival/a mass protest.*
- Usually, Bag People help pigeons. Sometimes, pigeons get a chance to help a Bag Person. Perhaps they need to make rent, perhaps they need to be busted out of jail, or perhaps they just need someone to organise a birthday party for them. This works best once you've established the Person as a regular contact for your flock. *Complications: you have to do this alongside another mission, another posse is competing for their attention/favour, someone is working against the Bag Person.*
- Sometimes we don't deliver a soul in time. In that case, they may become a *wraith*, an mostly-incorporeal manifestation of negative emotion. It's possible to deal with a wraith, as long as you have the right protection and preparation: even a flock of well-prepared pigeons could manage it. *Complications: there's more than one wraith, you have to find or fashion your own tools, first you must find out why the wraith wants to stick around, someone is using the wraith.*

- The Grey Lady's agents sometimes need to negotiate with other factions, for passage through contested land, for the return of souls, or for much-needed resources like bread crusts and bottle-caps. Perhaps this time it's your turn at the negotiating table. *Complications: it's a trap, it's a cover for something deeper and more complex, a third party arrives to negotiate, someone makes it personal, someone wants to defect.*
- Some days pigeons just need to do pigeon things. Perhaps it's time to get a better nest, or scout out that new fountain that's been opened recently. Maybe you need to show a newly-arrived gang of wood pigeons who's boss. Perhaps you just *really* want a bagel, or maybe it's time for the annual competition to see who has the shiniest neck-feathers. *Complications: an old flame shows up, someone brings work home with them, a potential recruit, a sudden death.*

Devise some obstacles

What stands in the way of the flock's success? What requirements might they need to fulfil before they can hit that final goal? Don't feel like you need to work out *how* the party will achieve their goal: just give them an indication of what they need to do and let them work it out on their own.

Think up a few locations

Where might the party end up? The bell-tower of the local church? A crowded plaza? A bustling dockyard? A private-access library? For each location, you may want to consider what sights, sounds, and smells characterise it, or a few obstacles or hazards that it may throw up if rolls go bad.

Sketch out some notable characters

Who will the pigeons interact with in this mission? Will there be an antagonist who bugs them throughout the session? Someone they have to outwit, or otherwise defeat? Allies or potential friends? Write down a name, a drive, a mannerism.

Running the game

With a good idea of the session structure, including scenes, obstacles, and characters, it's time to run the game. Gather your players, create some characters, and crack into it.

Starting the game

You may choose to start the game with a briefing (who gives the flock their assignment?), or you may decide to start *in media res* with the first obstacle the flock faces. Either way: set the scene, describe the surroundings, tell the flock what they have to do, and then ask: “what do you do?”.

Keeping up the pace

Hopefully the flock's response will prompt you to further description, until you find yourself faces with a case where **success is uncertain** and **the stakes are high**. At these points, you can call for a roll and see how everything goes.

When the players look to you for answers – or when they fail a roll – look to your GM moves (below) for ways to complicate their lives. When you're not sure what move to use, look to your GM principles to guide you. Between these two, you should hopefully keep their lives exciting.

When you feel a scene has done its dash, feel free to close it up and advance to the next scene. Keep doing this until the players achieve their objective, and you'll have completed your session.

GM principles

Fill the world with the mundane and the supernatural. The characters are the servants of Death Herself, but they are still pigeons. They must deal with both the ghosts of the newly-dead, and getting stuck in mailboxes. I hope you'll be able to experience both of these in your game – maybe, if you're lucky, at the same time.

Mostly, aim small. Even if pigeons' goals and aspirations are large, their size and means are tiny. The stakes of a roll may be as small as: *do you retrieve the chip from the bin?* Make the consequences match the stakes. This means when things get serious, the stakes will feel refreshingly large.

Play to find out. Don't plan your session too much in advance. Let the players try out solutions, and see where the game takes you. Don't be afraid to spend an entire session focussed on a seemingly innocuous side-quest you threw in, or skipping your planned action so you can get to the bit everyone cares about.

GM moves

When someone fails a move, or the players look to you to see what happens next, pull one of the moves from the list below.

Show them what will happen. "Hubcap, you see a cat in the alleyway, stalking the ghost. If you don't intervene, it's going to try to gobble it up." The players are agents of change in this world. Give them a chance to intervene, even if it will cost them. By showing them what happens if they fail, you telegraph the stakes to them, letting them know what happens if they fail.

Offer them an opportunity, at a cost. "Chip, the security guard is headed your way. If you cause a distraction, the rest of the flock could escape right now." This move is a great way of helping get the flock out of a jam: you're communicating to the players *here is a way of moving forward, and this is how it might go wrong*. If you can't think what opportunities exist, look at their character sheets: each fact and memory is a flag to the GM that the player would like to do more of that, thanks.

Reveal the nature of the world. "Acorn, you can see the rats performing some kind of ritual in the room below." This might be useful to the plot, or you may just use this to do some incidental world-building. Either way, it will make the players feel like they inhabit a living world.

Inflict a consequence, as established. “The dog lunges and catches you in the wing. Its teeth go right in! You’re *injured*.” If you’ve telegraphed the consequences of an action, and the players have gone along with it, you’re within your rights to play hardball here. A consequence could be fictional or mechanical.

Make a move as a faction. “Iris, when you fall asleep that night, your dreams are full of images of plants growing through buildings. You can feel the moss-god’s work around you, and know in your bones that want you to help them.” This is another move that makes the world feel lived-in. If the flock has pissed a faction off, this is your chance to move against them in revenge; if, in turn, a faction has been quiet and you want to re-introduce them, this is a great way to go about it.

Make them work together. “Whitewing, you can’t open this door yourself. You’re smart enough to open the latch, but someone else needs to push on it.” *Together* here might mean with other members of the flock, or enlisting external aid – which in turn may mean convincing another faction, or owing them a favour.

Show them success, but with complications. “Beamer, you totally succeed in bargaining with those cats. In fact, you succeed so well that they tell your friends. The next morning, you have a full pride of alley cats lining up outside your hangout trying to sell you acorns.” It’s no fun when a failed roll lands you right back where you started. Instead, keep the action going forward, giving your players new issues to deal with.

Factions

The world is full of people working at cross-purposes. You will probably invent your own as you play.

The Grey Lady and her siblings

The Grey Lady is the Final Lifter of Burdens, the Shepherdess of the Last Veil. She has infinite compassion, and time for all her flock. She rarely makes herself manifest, relying on the Bag People to spread her message and do her bidding. When she appears, she may take the form of a lost-looking girl in a grey dress, a large swan, or a ray of sunlight.

The Grey Lady's siblings are found all around the city. They have their own domains, some proper concepts like The Grey Lady, some tied to notable landmarks or the remains of natural features which have since been paved over. Some are almost human like the Grey Lady, some less so.

Moves: Inspire their followers to action; Appear mysteriously to the flock; Demand obedience; Promise riches; Whisper truths.

The Bag People

The Bag People vary from competent, driven folk who wish to forward the Grey Lady's agenda, to folks on the edge of society who do Her work as a way to make ends meet. Make them human: give them goals and aspirations, let them struggle with the city as well.

Moves: Ask a favour; Get in trouble; Draw the flock into the human world; Help the flock out of a tight spot; Provide information.

Pigeons

Pigeons are vain, self-obsessed, violent, and small-minded. Still, they're pigeons like you, and can generally be cajoled into doing what you need with a bit of feather-puffing and the occasional motivational peck.

Moves: Challenge authority; Interfere at the wrong moment; Act on their base instincts; Act as a flock; Be swayed or distracted.

Humans

People are mainly interested in their own affairs, but may view pigeons as pests, mortal enemies, merely background, or an easy target. Most people outside of the Bag People don't look on pigeons as friends – although most won't go out of their way to torment pigeons either.

Moves: Unknowingly foil the flock's plans; Get in the way; Open/Bar the way; Introduce a new faction; Act with great force.

Cats

Cats are self-interested and atheistic: not that they don't *believe* in the Grey Lady and Her siblings, merely that they refuse to pay them lip service. They spend their lives either seeking out all kinds of pleasure they can, or training themselves in the art of the hunt so they can outwit the very forces of death when their time comes.

Many cats are very proud of how much humans trust them. Some, however, view this dependency as a great weakness, and rail against it.

Moves: Make a show of dominance; Demand payment; Act on their own interest; Claim a territory; Seize an opportunity.

Dogs

Dogs have about as much going on upstairs as you'd expect. Most will go after a pigeon given the chance, though. Watch out.

Moves: Act with savagery; Bring a human running; Sniff something out; Do the bidding of another.

Rats

Rats rule the underground from their subway cities, worshipping their kings and prophesying how they will one day unseat humanity. Their ways are strange, but at least you can negotiate with them.

Moves: Demand a concession; Act in the interests of a god; Spread illness or rumours; Act cohesively; Build power; Seize something with force.