

## THE KING IN YELLOW

*Give the Gift of Decay. Make a story to live in. Walk the path of Carcosa.*

The King in Yellow is a multi-week, long term collaborative experience for groups of any size, though it should be an even number. In this game, a group of creators (the **Stewards**) will design a three-week experiential story for a same-numbered group of audience members (the **Participants**). This design process starts well before the three-week period, and will continue through to the very end, involving the Participants all the way through. This story is a gift for the Participants, and everything that happens in this process should be treated as such.

The rules below will outline a general process for the design and execution of your version of *The King in Yellow*. No two games will be the same! Much of the work that will come here is specific to *your* participants— there is no participant rulebook. Anything they need to do, they will learn immersively as they move through the story. Crucially, this is because they will enter the story as themselves! They will have character histories and ways to influence the story, but none that necessitate being anyone other than themselves. As a Steward, your job is to make this story *for them*.

*The King in Yellow* utilizes a base set of lore— this can be adapted as much as you'd like, to better fit your players. For all examples that this ruleset will use, we'll consider a group of Five Participants, as that is what the first execution of this game utilized.

### LORE:

*Before Time, there was only Carcosa, a place inhabited by the trees. In Carcosa, time did not spin out into a line, but rather stood in a single moment, growing straight up like the trunk of a great tree. As the ever-present singular moment of the world grew, it put more and more weight on, time stacking atop itself until the present was a heavy thing. As the present grew heavier, things began to grow slower and slower, held down by the weight of timeless being.*

*One of the trees— Maple— grew sick. It could not grow anymore, pinned down into itself by the stillness. Eventually, it lost its voice, too, suffocating endlessly. But in Carcosa, there is no death. Maple would suffer eternally, breathless and dying with no relief, forever.*

*Until the other trees noticed. Together, they formed a council, and freed Maple from their curse the only way they could— by letting time begin. The first night arrived. The days, slowly, began to grow cold. And before the trees realized what they had done,*

*all of their lives were under threat, the bounty of their beauty no longer tenable in the coming winter.*

*Soon enough, they realized they must give in to the change around them, and they started to make an unthinkable choice—redefine themselves, not as the beautiful and powerful gods that they knew themselves to be, but as beings beholden to change. They let their leaves, the core of their identity, crumple and fall, leaving the world emptied out, and the ground yellow and brown and slowly rotting as the days grew short and the nights long.*

*So total was the dissolution of their being that the change took on a personality of its own. Out of the death of Carcosa, a new glory rose: The trees call it THE KING IN YELLOW.*

*That was a long time ago. Time, now, is as natural to us as Carcosa was to them. But there are moments in history where we come close to the tragedy of Carcosan stillness again, moments where without us realising, we, too, must shed what we know and embrace coming change. In moments like this, the King steps through time and returns to the world, bringing with him the decay of all we know.*

*And the King remembers. He remembers the players of the game in Old Carcosa, and to arrive again, the story must be told once more. This time, with You at the center. You will decay, so that he may return.*

Each participant in the game will be told the story through the voice of one of the tale's progenitors—different species of tree. In our original, we had five participants, who for the duration of the game were referred to as: Pine, Beech, Birch, Maple, and Oak. These trees were chosen for their participants for their local presence, as well as for the textures of their stories:

- Our **Maple** felt that they were unheard, quiet, more a listener than listened to.
- Our **Pine** felt that he could not accept the fraying of things— he wished to stay in something perfect and clean.
- Our **Oak** was rooted firmly in the past, but wished to become more present, a warm host for those around him.
- Our **Beech** felt the scars of things she could not changed, etched into her life permanently and painfully.
- Our **Birch** was a writer, a helper, and one who was not afraid to set out on a path all by himself.

Your game may happen in a different place, with different trees and a different number of people. Use what is around you. But a few things must remain the same:

1. The game takes place over three weeks, in the fall. Time matters, and the story should follow the world. Let the players collapse along with the literal world around them.
2. The King always comes back, at the end, and things cannot be the same again once he has returned.
3. The trees matter— not just the ideas, but the living beings around you. Remember to see them as people, and allow the participants to do the same.
4. The Participants should be invested, and at a moment of change in their lives (That part is easy— we nearly always are, when you pay attention)

The process for creating and executing the game can be explained in a few stages. These stages can (and should) be moved through slowly and with care. This whole game is about doing things slowly, and with care, and with truth. Do not be afraid to go too deep, or to spend too much of yourself on this. This is not, at times, a safe game for the Stewards. Let yourself Decay. Let yourself Collapse. Above all— **BELIEVE IN THE KING**. He cannot be a game piece for you. He must be a God. You Must believe in him. You must believe in the value of collapse. And you *Must* believe that he has returned, when the piece ends. Step into this as a game, step out of this believing in something new and powerful. Please.

The Stages:

**Stage One**: Gather your Stewards. Make sure they know what they're stepping into. However many Stewards you have, that's how many Participants you'll have. Each of you is responsible for holding the experience of this piece for one Participant. That is a responsibility that should be taken very seriously.

**Stage Two**: As a group, begin to design your story. How many of you are there? When will the three weeks take place? What trees are in the area? Design the myth of your First Fall, starting from the Lore section above.

Then:

What are the stories of these trees? What are their attributes? What was their role in the First Fall (A story you'll want to flesh out for yourselves) and what is their opinion of the King now?

Then:

Who are your Participants? How will you find them? Ideally, They Do not know each other. This piece, over the three weeks, will invite them to meet each other for the first time. They should not know who the other participants are, or how many there are.

**Stage Three** begins once you have chosen your Participants. It involves getting to know them as well as you can, so that you can design a story and experience that will meet them in the moment of their lives.

**Interview One** is the most important. Each steward will meet with their participant. Make sure you have an hour or two, and nowhere to rush off to afterwards. Consider the space this conversation happens in— it shouldn't be in a busy space, but somewhere that feels right for reflection and connection.

Ask your participant six questions. The exact questions should be designed by you, but here's a general guide.

**Roots--** Thinking about their past, and how they got to the present. Contextualize this person in front of you.

Examples-- Where are you from? What brought you to where you are?

**Trunk--** What is alive for these people right now? What journeys are they on?

Examples-- What's a way you've grown in the past year? If something keeps you up at night, what would it be?

**Branches--** Where are the pieces of these people, the ephemera of them

Examples-- How would someone you love describe you? What would they wish for you? If you had one day to do anything, how would you spend it? What literal thing (as in, a class or hobby, rather than a value or idea) feels most important to you right now?

**Canopy--** How do these people understand the world around them

Examples-- Why do you think we're on this earth? What does it mean to live a good life?

**Seeds--** Where are they going, that they might not know yet? What is hidden?

Examples-- What will the you ten years from now say to the you now? What values/lessons/truths would you hope to nurture in your child?

**Forest--** Who else could we talk to, to get to know you in someone else's voice?

Examples-- Who knows you the best?

–Remember, this interview is also a method of gaining consent and gauging interest in different ways of interaction. Discuss with your audience member how they would and would not like to engage with the

piece, and make sure they know that they have a simple way to say no to any offer that the piece gives them. This is an interview, but it shouldn't feel like a series of questions. Asking just these six questions took me into a conversation that lasted hours, and went a lot of places that weren't planned— let the participant lead the conversation just as much as the steward

**Interview Two** changes the focus from internal reflection to logistical concerns. This piece was originally conceived for college students as participants, so adapt this however makes sense to you. The goal of this interview is to *know their schedule*, as specifically as possible. Have them walk through their day, each day of the week, and when and where they're going to be, to the best of their knowledge

Consider the following:

*Where are you, when?*

*What are the pathways you take, to get where you are going? When do you leave? When do you arrive?*

*Don't just include scheduled events— when do you wake up? When and where do you eat? When do you sleep? When are you with people, or alone?*

*How consistent is this schedule? Can we rely on you being in these places at these times? How much so?*

If you haven't already, make sure you can easily contact this person.

**Interview Three** is with someone other than the participant. It should be the person (or people) mentioned in the final question from interview one. Ask whatever feels relevant from Interview One

Consider asking:

What do you wish for this person?

How do you see this person changing?

What would you want to say to this person, which you never have?

What are you afraid of for this person?

Once you've carried out these interviews, choose which trees best fit your participants. Adjust your First Fall Myth to fit the people you've selected.

**Stage Four.** Design the arc of your three weeks, using all the information you've gathered. Week One is the most important here— Throughout the project, you'll need to adapt, both emotionally and logistically, to the needs of your participants. So don't worry about the specifics of weeks two and three. You Should, though, understand where you're headed, and how week one helps you get there. Identify where the most important moment of the story is for each participant— they should each have a moment where their moment of change is most directly met, where the piece can be the most resonant for them.

As you design the course of your weeks, start from this template, creating something for each participant on each day throughout the experience:

**Week One:** The participants are alone. They do not know anything about each other. This week introduces them to the piece. Use aspects of mystery to guide them. Introduce them to their trees, and to different spaces that they will return to later.

A common design for a day, that should be iterated upon and changed, and escaped, but also used:

1. Give them a clue to go to a certain place, perhaps at a certain time— OR— Meet them at a place you know they'll be, such as on their way home from class.
2. When they arrive, show them some piece of the story. Sometimes, this can utilize a live performance by one or more stewards. It can also take the form of a mysterious note or object

Example: On day one, two stewards created a moment for Pine. One met him outside of class as he was leaving, and indicated at the second, viewed across the street from a window. Pine was instructed to follow this second steward, and not to be seen. The second steward then walked a path, weaving through different trees on campus, until eventually descending into an old and decrepit basement. There, Pine was left alone in the dark to find a note left a long time ago from Pine (the tree), explaining that this space was one that decay had taken hold of— that this is the mark of the king (In our story, Pine (the tree) was antagonistic towards the king, and we led our participant to distrust the other participants until the end of the second week)

**The End of week one:** in some way, invite each participant to commit more fully to the experience of decay— (we baptized them in fallen leaves) – Tell them that week two will ask more of them. Make it known that decay is something they will need to embrace. (Note— feel free to change this! In our story, Pine, rather than being led to embrace decay, was led to reject it, and attempt to stop the king's return. Of course, it didn't work)

**Week Two** focuses on the assembly of the participants. Where they were alone throughout the first week, this second week's story allows them to find each other. They should

begin to find each other throughout the week, but not all be in the same room until the End of week two.

Consider:

The meeting at the end of week two should feel *important*, both the the participants and for the story. Both the emotional arc of real people discovering each other, as well as the story arc of the information they can provide each other with, should be central.

**Example:** At the end of our second week, we staged a dinner for our participants. It was the first time they'd all been in the same room.

From the beginning of our story, Our participant, Maple, had not been allowed to speak, either to the stewards or to other participants. Throughout the first and second week, each of our five participants received a stone. Leading up to the dinner, we taught them that there would be a chance to free Maple's voice, if they could gather all five stones.

However, we'd been tricking them all. Pine, as described above, was an antagonist. In our First Fall, Pine (the tree) had *NOT* participated in the ritual to free Maple's voice. Rather, it had been another tree– Chestnut. As we told our participants the story over the course of the first two weeks, they each believed that when they eventually did gather all the participants, there would be Six, rather than Five. Each participant believed this, except for Maple, who was told the truth– Chestnut had died of a [blight](#), a hundred years ago.

Our participant Pine believed that gathering all *Six* trees would allow for an alternative ritual, where he could stop the king's return. When All five of our participants arrived at the dinner and realized that Chestnut wasn't coming, it was up to Pine to fill in as the fifth participant in the ritual to free Maple– a process he was not inclined to join, since it would further the return of the King. With Maple's voice free, they could tell Pine the truth– the king is *Good*, Chestnut is *Dead*.

Emotionally, the dinner resonated with **Maple**, who was able to talk for the first time, and for **Pine**, who realized that he had been deceived

For the Story, the gathering of all the participants allowed them to fill in the gaps that we had left for each of them, and instead of the Stewards leading the story, the Participants could now lead each other.

The end of Week Two brings with it the start of **Week Three**. Earlier, we'd also given Pine a key, but he didn't know where the lock was. Birch, from the start, had a locked box, but no key. Together, they could now follow the story on their own pace, without the involvement of the stewards

Week three, roughly, takes the format of an escape room puzzle. This will need to be planned well ahead of time, because ideally, the materials that the participants have received over the course of the first two weeks now all have additional relevance— everything is now a piece of the puzzle.

The goal of week three, emotionally, is that now the participants must cooperate to move through the story— Make people interact! Get them to know each other!

In the Story— The new knowledge afforded by gathering all the participants reveals a great secret, hidden until now: The king's arrival will not come soon. Rather, he will use the slow decay of the participants as a stepping stone to return, consuming them in order to do so. If the participants are to escape with their lives, they must trigger the king's return some other way— By bringing together pieces of wood from the First Fall, original pieces of Carcosa. (Again, this can change however you want. Create a victory condition that feels satisfying to your story— but it always ends with the King's arrival.)

For our Week three, we had the puzzle structure eventually lead each audience member to possess a piece of petrified wood from Carcosa. By gathering these pieces in the right place, at the right time, they could bring the king back, ending the story and saving themselves.

You should build your puzzle structure to fit the group that you've assembled— have them return to places they've been. Have them meet each other's trees. Create puzzles that rely on knowledge from their participant interviews.

The game ends when the king arrives. This moment, more than anything, has to come from You. For the Stewards— and for the participants, as much as possible, it must be real. Discover for yourselves where the King meets the reality of your life— what must decay? What must collapse?

Let it.

Create a moment that asks you to fall apart, to fray.

Share that moment, all together.

Don't be afraid to break.

And stay safe.

Example: We locked ourselves in a theater for Twenty Seven Hours. Music played through the night. On cracking, dry leaves, we wrote things we wanted to leave behind. Things we wanted to grow into. People we loved, or things we'd forgotten. We built a yellow stage for the King's return, under the soft glow of a single lamp.



Then, we danced, until everything we'd written, both the hopes and the forgotten things and the things we wished to forget— all of it— crushed to mulch beneath our feet, the words lost to movement.

At the end, thrumming music played so loud that it hurt our ears. We made a circle as lights rose all around us, blinding. We pulled on each other until our muscles strained, until eventually, the music cut out. The lights went black. We found each other in the dark. Then, we left, alone, out into the night, and each spent a moment alone with a tree in the cold. The king was back. We shivered in the night, a little different than we were before.