



Palimpsest

By Paul Beakley

Nothing is Settled

Palimpsest

noun

1. A durable writing surface, such as a sheepskin, that could be scraped clean with a blunt tool to make room for new writing. Traces of the old writing remained.
2. In time travel, a small moment fought over by travelers attempting to force a final outcome.

Palimpsest is a game for three players, about an otherwise unremarkable moment in time being fought over by three different time traveling bodies:

- **The Time Corps**, a far-future group operating outside time itself and charged with ensuring (their) history remains unchanged. The game begins with a small event that results in substantial changes downstream. This cannot be allowed.
- **The Protocol**, a shadowy agency observing our world from a parallel reality. Operatives carry out directives from The Protocol Committee, a group of competing artificial intelligences that accurately predicts likely futures. The Protocol actively interferes in other timelines to create situations, technologies or people of use in their own reality. The Protocol has just triggered a change that will arm them with medical technology that ensures their future survival.
- **Stormwell**, an individual psychic with the ability to project back in time into other people. Stormwell can also sense when the timeline has been changed, which happened five minutes ago when their lover Cortez died unexpectedly.

Supplies

You will need:

- A block of notecards. Just unwrap a fresh pack, you might need them all.
- The first five scene sentences, one written on each of five cards.
- A d6 for each player, and one d10 (or tokens or a tally sheet) to keep track of Disruption. Set the d10 to the “1” face and put it somewhere it won’t get knocked over.
- Pens for everyone.
- Printouts of the three character sheets, and the Prologue and Context page at the end.

The Palimpsest Scene

The palimpsest scene begins as five individual notecards, each with a sentence describing a small and otherwise uninteresting moment in time. Write each sentence as they appear here on five cards:

1. Cortez arrives at the park by car, gets out, and sits on a bench under a tree.
2. Samuelson arrives at the park by car and is visibly upset.
3. Samuelson approaches Cortez. The two have a heated argument.
4. Samuelson leaves by car. Cortez tosses a small package into the nearby pond.
5. Cortez goes to their car, leaves the parking lot, and is immediately killed by oncoming traffic.

Also note on the last card “Disruption 1,” since this event is a change to the local timeline (this is why the d10 starts on “1”).

As additional cards are added before and after these five moments, the collected set of cards is called the *scene stack*.

Flow of Play

The players take turns describing their characters acting on the timeline in pursuit of their goals. They may add new cards to the scene stack and/or edit the cards already there. After choosing an ability and adding or changing the scene stack, the current player reads the entire scene stack, card by card, proposing changes to each card as they go. Some changes cause *disruption*, which represents time itself trying to fight back and stabilize the palimpsest. Larger changes result in *paradox*, where cards are flipped over entirely and left unread. Paradoxes can be reversed and disruption-causing events can be cancelled.

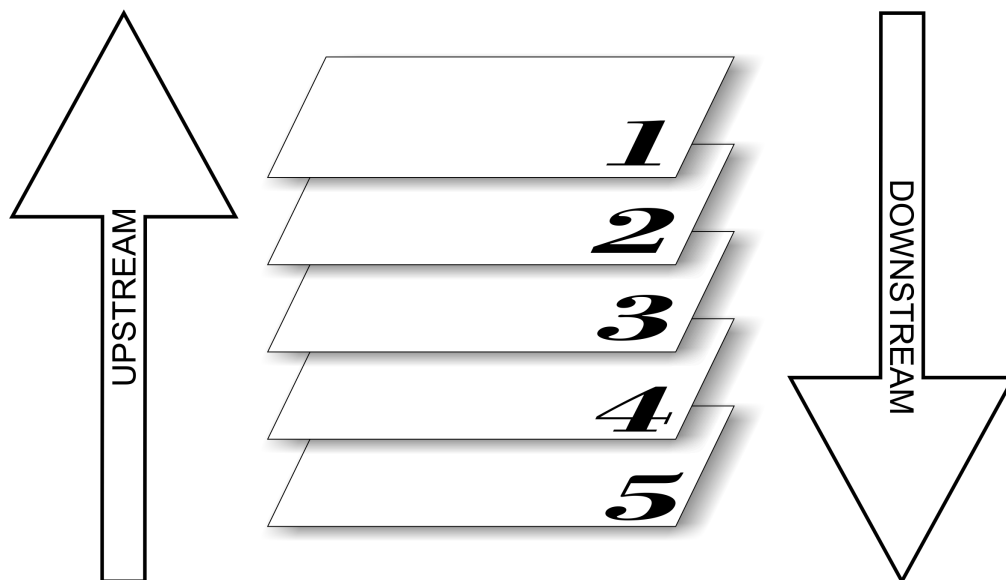
Play continues until nobody can or wants to make any more changes, and the moment in time is forever set. This may result in nobody, somebody, or everybody getting what they needed out of the scene.

The Characters

There are three characters in *Palimpsest*, each with their own approach to changing the timeline in pursuit of their goals. Players are encouraged to roleplay as much as they like, although character reactions can simply be described rather than play-acted if they prefer.

Each character has an introduction, one or more goals, and several *abilities*. There are several common concepts in the abilities:

Downstream and **Upstream**: Cards that appear chronologically later in the scene stack are *downstream*. Cards that appear chronologically earlier in the scene stack are *upstream*.



Subtle and **Obvious**: If you've acted *subtly*, then another character can't act on that information until they've *Assessed*. *Obvious* actions might provoke changes to downstream cards.

Assess: All characters have this ability. It takes time and cannot cause changes on any card, but other characters' previous *subtle* actions can be acted on downstream from that assess.

Disruption: If an ability says "add +X disruption", note this on the card that caused it and increase the d10's face value by X. This value is cumulative from every character's action and is used to determine when the game ends. Paradox and major timeline changes also add to disruption.

Communicate: Each character has one method of communicating. Agent Green can *futuresplain*, Paladin can *mislead*, and Stormwell can *convince or describe*. These are the only ways player characters can communicate!

Time Corps Agent Green

The Time Corps are a blunt force deployed to protect our timeline at any cost. Play Agent Green if you want to maintain order and repair meddling with reality itself.

Introduction

The Time Corps, observing our timeline from its headquarters outside time itself, has been alerted to this palimpsest by the premature death of subject CORTEZ. Cortez's death causes a cascade of downstream events: for reasons unknown, subject SAMUELSON researches an advanced antiviral treatment that will save millions. While some may admire this outcome, it is also a profound change to history that the Time Corps cannot abide.

Goals

Your goal is to return this moment in time to its correct outcome: specifically, that Samuelson never creates the antiviral treatment. Decide how to do this, although keeping Cortez alive is most likely to result in the desired outcome. As a further complication, Protocol operative "Paladin," tasked with defending this intrusion, is a distant relation to you. Paladin must live so you will eventually be born, Agent Green.

Abilities

On your turn, do one of the following:



Jump: Enter or exit the time stream at will. Write "Agent Green (X) Arrives/Leaves" on a card, where X = the number of times you have entered.

This indicates your iteration. Future iterations can act on anything past iterations have learned. X may not exceed 3. Entering or exiting is as obvious or subtle as you wish, but note which when you write the card.



Use force: Kill one or more people present with you. Write "Agent Green (X) kills (Y,Z, etc.)" as desired and place the card downstream of the corresponding "Agent Green (X)

Arrives." Add +1 disruption per death. The killing can be as obvious or subtle as you wish.



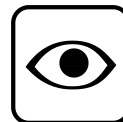
Overpower: Keep any single character from acting for the rest of the scene. Write "Agent Green (X) Overpowers (Y)" as appropriate, add a brief description of how you're

overpowering the target, and place the card after any "Agent Green (X) Arrives." If Agent Green (X) takes action after Overpower, the target may act again.



Futuresplain: Discuss the future with any other character in the scene. Write "Agent Green (X) futuresplains (Y)" and the gist of the communication and place the card downstream of any

"Agent Green (X) Arrives" card. If a later iteration of Agent Green *futuresplains* downstream events to an earlier iteration, this creates a closed loop: each card you edit because an earlier iteration acts on downstream information increases disruption by +1. You can also state facts (no lies; that's the province of the Protocol) of your choosing about the future beyond this scene.



Assess: Use your advanced technology to quickly take in previously unnoticed details about the environment. Write "Agent Green (X) Assesses" and place the card anywhere downstream of

"Agent Green (X) Arrives." This and future iterations can act downstream on any *subtle* cards upstream of this assess. Downstream *subtle* cards cannot be acted on until Agent Green assesses again downstream of them. Pay attention to closed loops: see *futuresplain* above.

Paladin, a Protocol operative

Paladin has every reason to make sure Cortez dies by the end of this palimpsest, but this puts the operative in an adversarial position with the other characters. Play Paladin if you enjoy actively meddling with time.

Introduction

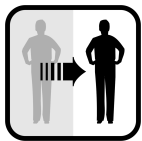
The Protocol struck a blow for our future survival by engineering the death of Cortez in a parallel timeline. The Protocol Committee has projected the resulting change in Samuelson's behavior will result in the invention of Genomic Rewrite Therapy (GWT), saving years of research and millions of lives in our timeline. If we cannot acquire this therapy, the projected losses are unimaginable. The Time Corps will try to revert our changes; you must not let them.

Goals

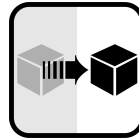
Your goal is to ensure Samuelson goes on to create GWT. The Protocol Committee projects that Cortez's death will prompt Samuelson to do so, but this is just the mostly likely of several futures. Use your discretion to ensure this outcome before the Time Corps or anyone else can stop you.

Abilities

On your turn, do one of the following:

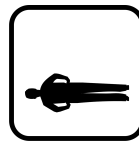


Change Lanes: Slide between their universe and ours at will. Our timelines proceed in sync but we lack the Time Corps' time travel technology, so sliding back and forth must proceed downstream. Add your first "Paladin Arrives" card at any point in the scene stack, and place all further Leave/Arrive cards downstream from each other. Leaving cannot be Delayed by Stormwell. You can arrive anywhere in the scene, as obvious or subtle as you'd like but note which on the Arrive card.



Send Our Version: The Protocol Committee arranges to send our version of Cortez, Samuelson, any bystander, or a copy of any object that can be carried in one or two hands.

Write "Copy of (X) arrives" on a card and place it anywhere in the scene stack. Our copies have been briefed on what they need to do; make changes to downstream cards as necessary to reflect the copy's actions. Add +1 disruption per card changed.



Disable: Keep a single character from acting for the rest of the scene. Write "X is Disabled" on a card and place it anywhere Paladin is active. The target is rendered unconscious or injured,

your call, but Paladin can continue to act after this.



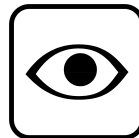
Infer: Based on what you know about our timeline, you can infer facts about their timeline. Edit any card in the scene stack with additional context or explanation, your choice, without

changing the actions of those present.



Mislead: You are a master of deception and can *communicate* to change the mind of anyone present with you (no truth-based persuasion; that's the province of the Time Corps).

Insert a card that says "Paladin Misleads (X)" and a description of how the target has been misled. Change downstream cards as necessary.



Assess: Use your operative training to take in previously unnoticed details. Write "Paladin Assesses" and place the card anywhere Paladin is active.

You can act downstream on *subtle* cards upstream from the Assess. *Subtle* cards downstream from this Assess cannot be acted on until you Assess again downstream of them.

Stormwell, a psychic

Stormwell is the most relatable and emotionally engaged character in the game. Play Stormwell if you want to explore the feels of the scene or enjoy getting things done without advanced technologies or a vast parallel-universe conspiracy to help you.

Introduction

Five minutes ago, while you were sleeping, Cortez died in a car crash just a few miles away. *That should never have happened.* Somehow, history changed and the person you loved died. You have the power to reach across time and space to stop this, or at least find out why it happened.

Goals

Your goal is to either save Cortez, or find out why Cortez died when they weren't supposed to.

Abilities

On your turn, do one of the following:



Project: You may project your consciousness into any character present in the park at any point in the scene stack. Write "Stormwell Projects into X" and add the card to the stack as appropriate. You may only project into one character at a time. Starting from the added Project card, make edits to downstream cards as necessary to reflect your acting on this character's behalf.



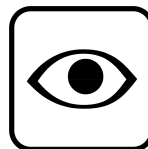
Hang Up: You may stop projecting your consciousness, freeing your power to project into someone else. Write "Stormwell Leaves Y" and add the card to the stack as appropriate.



Convince or Describe: Acting through a character you've projected into, you can *communicate* to convince another character present to do something, or describe how history has changed by directly referencing crossed-out information on upstream cards. Write "Stormwell Convinces/Describes to X" and how. They are convinced, or may act on your description: edit downstream cards to indicate how they act on this information. Add +1 Disruption per card changed.



Delay: You're not a trained soldier or agent, but can use the character you've projected into to delay someone present in the scene. Write "Stormwell Delays X," place it immediately upstream from the card you're delaying, and explain how you're delaying them. Then, move the delayed card downstream as many steps as you wish. Add +1 Disruption per card position moved. You can't delay effects that allow characters to leave the scene.



Assess: Using your psychic powers to explore the scene even if you haven't projected into anyone yet, you can sense any *subtle* card in the scene stack. You need only do this once to be constantly apprised of subtle actions. This action cannot be blocked. Write "Stormwell Assesses" on a notecard and put it after the most downstream card. You cannot act on any upstream *subtle* card until you've done this.

Nothing is Settled

The object of *Palimpsest* is to have fun with the logic of time travel and to explore the feels of intersecting and maybe-incompatible goals. Stormwell is the most emotionally engaged character because they love Cortez and want to save them, but Paladin's civilization is facing an existential threat if they can't carry out their mission. Agent Green is the most duty-driven, but perhaps can be convinced to work with the others in the scene.

Order of Play

Agent Green takes the first turn, followed by Paladin and then Stormwell. This order continues throughout the game. Any player can jump ahead of the current player before they announce their action by increasing disruption by 1, permanently altering the order of play.

Subjects and Bystanders

If the current player needs to talk to Cortez, Samuelson or any bystander introduced in the scene, ask another player to take on that role. That player may invent and embellish details about their situation as needed, but once introduced, details cannot be changed. Keep a notecard with notes about "facts" introduced to their narrative. If a card in the scene stack indicates a subject said something, that player should try to repeat what was said, or adjust to new facts.

New Shit Has Come To Light

Each card added to the scene stack can potentially alter downstream cards. On the current player's turn, they read through the entire stack and edit cards with *reasonable and likely* changes downstream of the card they just inserted. The timeline can only take so many changes, though, so if a notecard is too filled with crossed-out details to be read and understood, no more changes can be added. Players should strive to make as few changes as possible. Leave things undetailed if they don't need to be detailed, so other players have an opportunity to define them.

You cannot make changes in the behaviors of other player characters without their permission, but everyone else is fair game. If a player doesn't give you permission, ask them how their character's behavior changes and note that on the card instead.

One or more details can be changed on a card as long as at least one previous detail remains. If it is *reasonable and likely* that all details change, or if the card has become impossible to execute, it becomes a *paradox* (see below).

The timeline works hard to self-correct and will exert force to fit events so they'll continue flowing. If anyone feels an announced change is *not* reasonable and likely, say why, add +1 Disruption and keep the change anyway. Players decide for themselves their rubric for "reasonable and likely."

Players will likely make a change on one card and discover those changes cascade into *reasonable and likely* downstream changes. No going upstream to undo or change edited cards! Sometimes changes to the timeline have unexpected consequences.

Paradox

You may find the entirety of a card needs to be changed or has become impossible to execute: Samuelson can't leave a scene if they're dead, Cortez can't be in a car that's blown up, and so on. If you run into a card that cannot be recontextualized (i.e. time itself can't make this moment fit), do two things:

1. Turn the card face-down. It is now a paradox. Do not read it. Keep this in mind as you continue reading and editing downstream.
2. Add +1 Disruption to the d10.

If later events warrant it, turn paradoxes face-up again, but do not reduce the d10.

Disruption and Endgame

After the current player has read through and edited the scene stack, they roll a d6.

1. First, if the roll is less than or equal to the total number of paradox cards in the stack, the current player crosses out one of their abilities.
2. Then, add the face value of the disruption die (the d10) to the roll. If the total is 10+, the game immediately ends and the timeline is locked in place.

When nobody can influence the scene stack (because they've crossed out all of their abilities), or the modified d6 comes to 10+, or everyone agrees, the game is over. Read through the final version of the palimpsest one last time, and remember the previous versions of this story that are now lost. Each player should look at their goals and talk about how far they got.

Thank You

This came together fast for Game Chef 2018 but it would not have been possible without help from Jason Furedy, Jonathan Perrine, Jahmal Brown, and Kit La Touche. Very special thanks to Adam Day (wubbins@gmail.com) for his excellent cover and last page illustrations.

Prologue and Context

This is its own sheet or notecard. Players may write on it if the prologue changes.

Time

July 10, 201X, 1117. It's 23C, partially cloudy but not rainy.

Place

Woodland Park, a small but active community park in a midsize city (your choice, otherwise the city you're playing this in). Joggers and speed-walkers occasionally pass through the park. A small duck pond is nearby.

Other Context

There are four cars in a nearby parking lot. None are running at 1117. Subject CORTEZ is in one of them.

Subject SAMUELSON is approaching Woodland Park by car and is about one mile away at 1117.

