Burning4

A freeform roleplaying game by Lorenzo Trenti (www.valis.it)

Introduction: the four burners

"One burner represents your family, one is your friends, the third is your health, and the fourth is your work." The gist is that in order to be successful you have to cut off one of your burners. And in order to be really successful you have to cut off two (http://chrisguillebeau.com/3x5/the-four-burners-theory/). This story game starts with this quote from a David Sedaris article. And that's what we'll test in this game, trying to answer these questions: what are you burning for? And, was it worth it in the end? We'll have a last scene of hope - but what will happen that gets us to it?

What you need

This game has no game master / director and no preparation beforehand. It can handle 2 to 5 players and should last 1-2 hours including the setup phase.

Set up

In this phase we will create the Protagonist of our story and his/her surroundings. Choose who will play the Protagonist; write down on a big sheet of paper the labels **age**, **gender**, **family relations, friends**, **job** and **other aspects** of the Protagonist. Default play setting is "close to home", i.e. in a realistic situation and in a time and place near where you're playing. The group will begin with a collective brainstorming where everyone can, and should, contribute an answer to the characteristics of the Protagonist. The player of the Protagonist has the final say on the answers. As the last act, the Protagonist player defines the **name** of the Protagonist, writing it down.

Now the players choose together **four other characters** that will act as "avatars", or embodiments, of the four burners. The Protagonist will directly relate only with these four characters and, at least at the start of the game, they should be positive and meaningful relations. They could be, for example...

- **Family**: your wife; your fiancee; the guy you're dating; your mom; your beloved grandpa; an elder sister; a younger brother; your son; a counseling nun; the friend of a life...
- **Friends**: a friend from your childhood; another player in your football team; a very pleasant colleague; an ex lover; someone you met just recently...
- **Health**: someone from Family or Friends that hasn't been used for that burner; someone you meet in a hobby or activity that gives you emotional stability; your family doctor; the girl that serves you coffee every morning; your personal trainer; your psychological counselor; you in the mirror (as a narrative tool)...
- **Work**: your boss; a sympathetic colleague; a recurring customer; someone that works for you; your artistic mentor; your apprentice; someone that reviews or evaluates your job...

For every character decide the **name**, **basic info** (age, gender, job...) and **how this character gives good things to the Protagonist's life**. If you're stuck, rotate 4 index cards; every turn, each player adds an element to a character.

Divide the four avatars among the other players not playing the Protagonist:

- 2 players: one plays the Protagonist, the other all the avatars;
- 3 players: one plays the Protagonist, the other two avatars each;
- 4 players: one plays the Protagonist, the others one avatar each (except one that plays two avatars);
- 5 players: one plays the Protagonist, the others one avatar each.

As the last phase of the setup, the Protagonist writes four index cards with the name of the burners and randomly picks one. The first scene will be with this avatar.

Playing the game

The game is divided into scenes, where:

- **the Protagonist will be pushed to sacrifice things in order to get success, and see what happens;**
- **the avatars will tempt the Protagonist by remembering him/her the importance of their burner.**

That said, conflicts and antagonism are between characters, not players. This is a cooperative game, not a competitive one. The purpose of every player is to collectively create a meaningful insight into the Protagonist's life, in a cycle of destruction and (possible) rebirth.

Scenes

For every scene there is an active Burner, represented by its avatar. This is what will happen for every scene:

- The Protagonist declares if he/she will be **passive** or **active** in starting the scene;
  - If passive, the Burner states where and when the scene takes place.
  - If active, the Protagonist states where and when the scene takes place.
- The scene is an encounter of some kind between the Protagonist and the avatar of the Burner.
- Whoever defines the scene, that player just tells the place and, if it's important to the story, how much time has passed from the previous scene. Do not make assumptions on the content of the scene: putting the Protagonist and his boss in the office doesn't automatically mean they will talk of work deadlines.
- The player that has defined the scene has the responsibility of the **first spoken line**. By saying this line you can create every situation you need ("ain't you excited that tomorrow is your wedding, my dear?").
- Play the scene larp style, using your body and gestures and occupying a space defined as "stage" in front of the other players. If you need a prop: a pen, a sheet of paper or a plastic glass can become everything (the same can be said of thin air and an appropriate gesture).
- Apart from the first spoken line, assume that the Protagonist is the only one that can state things about his/her life, while the avatar can introduce and control elements from all over the world of its burner. However, be flexible with that.
- The scene will end with a last line that acts as a cliffhanger for the next scenes.
  - In case of a passive Protagonist, he/she will publicly choose one of these options:
    - **Confirm.** You reaffirm the importance of this burner for your life and are willing to sacrifice something for it. *Speak the last line of the scene with this intention and tell how you will permanently damage one of the other burners. "I will accept the job promotion, knowing that I'll have no time left to see my friends"; "I will marry you and follow you to Iceland, knowing that I'll drop my volunteering activity".*
    - **Sacrifice.** You're willing to sacrifice this burner on the altar of something more important. *Speak the last line of the scene by stating something that you will do that will permanently damage this burner and advance one of the other burners. "I won't accept the new job: seeing my daughter every day is more important"; "I can't stop drinking alcohol: parties with friends are my life".*
    - **Slow decay.** Something in the routine of this burner is cracking. *Speak the last line of the scene by introducing a minor element that will slightly diminish this burner in your life. "I'm not ready for a child"; "Sorry boss, next time I'll do it better".*

Please note that there is not an option that makes everything stay positively as it is. As the say, "love is like the moon: if it doesn't grow up, it falls down". The idea is, if you left things unchanged and untouched, you will experience a slow but constant decay. For every relation you have, you can't just

sit down and expect that everything will do well. You must constantly feed your relations. On a theoretical level, a Protagonist is able to *not* sacrifice a single burner and live a life of constant decay in all of its burner. That's a perfectly acceptable option of play.

- <u>In case of an active Protagonist</u>, the avatar will publicly choose one of these options for the scene ending:
  - **Ask more.** Demand a proof of love to the Protagonist. Ask a question that will put at least one other burner to stress. *"Will you marry me?"; "We're organizing a 2 months trip around the world! Are you coming?".* The Protagonist won't answer now, just leave the question floating.
  - **Step back.** The Protagonist isn't showing enough consideration to your burner. Ruin something important. *"You've missed too many trainings, you won't play the next match"; "Your blood test is very bad, you can't live this way for too long".*

The Protagonist randomly picks an index card with one of the remaining Burners and declares who will be present in the next scene. When all the four Burners have been picked, shuffle back the deck and start over.

Ending the game
The game should go through **3** cycles of shuffling (all the four Burners repeated three times).
There's a **last scene of hope** where the Protagonist meets an avatar of his/her choice, either:
- <u>the one he/she thinks has had more success with</u>. The Protagonist will confirm one more time the importance of this burner in his/her life.
- <u>the one he/she thinks has had messed more with</u>. The Protagonist will play a scene of reconciliation. This doesn't mean that everything will be restored to the starting situation, but at the last the avatar will consent to hear what the Protagonist has learnt (like the importance of love in one's life; this doesn't mean that the Protagonist will get love from this avatar).

The last scene could be a monologue (e.g. the Protagonist reading aloud a page of a diary while writing it) or a short interaction with the avatar.
A personal note on hope: my aim is to design an emotional game that doesn't feel depressing. Leaving players with unresolved anxiety is easy; creating catharsis is challenging. Also, I think that making choices in life is difficult, but rewarding in the end, and I try to daily remind myself of that. And probably that's why I felt the need to write this game.

Techniques
There are some **techniques** you can use to enhance your playing.
- **Inside/outside**. If you want to show the inner feelings of your character, stand up (or step aside), say a phrase from your inside, and then take back your position.
- **Fast forward / lucid dream**. Don't just talk to the Protagonist: show him/her your life together, your trip around the world, the benefits of a new career as part of a metaphorical scene. Every avatar can use this technique <u>once</u> per game, at the end of his/her scene, clearly stating the beginning of a "Sliding doors effect".
- **Interfere**. <u>Once</u> per game, an avatar can interrupt another avatar's scene and open a little parenthesis to disturb another burner. You can insert a phone call from the Protagonist's boss at the worst possible moment, the accidental meeting with the Protagonist's love interest in a very embarassing situation, a daughter asking the Protagonist not to miss her dance recital...

Playing suggestions
Keep the stakes high. Every avatar has just three scenes to interact with the protagonist. So **keep scenes tight and focused**: go directly to the point and introduce challenges for the Protagonist. Make him/her choose privileging your burner at the expense of another.

Try to **create meaningful bonds** (this may let you think what a good relationship is made of). Please note the four burners purposely are *not* quantified by a number. You, together, will define while playing what is meaningful to the Protagonist and what is not.

For ease of play, let's assume that **everyone knows everything** and every avatar is more or less aware of what's happening in the other burners.

If a relationship with an avatar is definitely broken, **keep playing with that character**. Don't substitute it! The avatar can continue influencing the Protagonist's life, at least as a vague shadow of guilt, or as the incarnation of bitter consequences (not only in a metaphorical way: the Protagonist can keep meeting his divorced wife for cold, legal reasons about money).

As for **time passing** between scenes, you are free to state it as you like, provided you don't block the story for other players. E.g. if a young Protagonist has a Family relation with her grandfather, it's considered not fair to state "50 years have passed from the previous scene" (unless you find a smart way to play this).

Variations

You can try some variations on the basic game:

- **Other burners**. Try changing one or more of the aspects: "Art" instead of "Family", "Faith" instead of "Health", "Fame" instead of "Friends", etc.
- **Other settings**. Try playing in a different era that's relevant for the burners: a woman in the 50's, a father in a post-apocalyptic world...

Design notes

The scene structure nowadays is common to many games, but the first I met that used it was *On Stage! Il gioco dell'attore* by Luca Giuliano.

The passive/active Protagonist with different ending of the scene is inspired by *Fiasco* by Jason Morningstar.

The actions in the ending are inspired by the moves from *Apocalypse World* by Vincent D. Baker.

The freeform techniques are taken from *Play with intent* by Matthijs Holter and Emily Care Boss.

The quote about moon and love is taken from the movie *Il ciclone* by Leonardo Pieraccioni.

The game has been designed for the Golden Cobra Challenge 2017 and incorporates themes and ingredients of **hope, meaningful non-romantic relationships**, **destruction and rebirth**.

Hope you liked the game! If you play it, I'm very happy to know how it went. Mail me at lorenzo dot trenti at gmail dot com.