

Duels in the Tower of Eternity: An Epistolary Game of Sacrifice and Revolution

By Abigail and Mark Stone

Duels in the Tower of Eternity is a game for two players. Each one plays a student or teacher at a different elite boarding school, participating in a series of duels to determine the fate of the world. They don't know it yet, but they're fated to face one another in the final duel. This game combines epistolary, solo and digital LARP formats. Players use story prompts to write and mail letters to one another in character as their duelists. Before writing each letter, players participate in a brief solo LARP related to the prompt, created to simulate the character's experience at this stage of the story. As the final scene, the two players "duel" each other in a scene played out in real time over video chat.

Step One: Define the Play Space

Discuss how much you want to define the setting, relationships and characters ahead of time and how much you want it to be improvised on a letter by letter basis. Duels in the Tower of Eternity uses safety mechanics to ensure a positive game experience for everyone - discuss these as well and make sure both players know how to use them.

Story

The players portray characters at elite boarding schools. Along with their rivals, they ascend to a liminal space called the Tower of Eternity to participate in duels to possess a Prize. The Tower of Eternity itself is an unearthly floating structure that is connected to the earth by mysterious staircases. No one knows for sure what the tower is, how it came to be there, or why it is only visible to those few chosen to duel in its courtyard arenas. The players' characters are friends who teach or study at different schools, communicating via letters.

- The tone of the story can be dark, deadly serious, absurd, mournful, and surreal in various combinations. **Players should discuss which moods they want their game to skew towards.**
- The schools, and the arena, should feel like vivid, real places in your letters. **Both players should create some sensory impressions of their schools. Consider the uniforms, the school colors, the architecture, etc.**
- The duels are fought by students, teachers or both. **Players should decide whether they want their characters to be adolescents or adults.**
- Each school has its own Prize. The Prize can take many forms, including a weapon that you can use to defend your ownership of it, something symbolic like a chalice or an orb, or even a person. **What form does the Prize take at each of the player characters' schools?**
- In the end, whoever holds the Prize for their school must fight a final duel against another champion from another place. If they win, they will have earned the power to reshape the world.

A Note on Inspiration

Players familiar with the anime Revolutionary Girl Utena will notice that this game draws strong inspiration from the show. To avoid confusion, you should choose what to do with this inspiration. This game can accommodate a version of the world that closely imitates Ohtori Academy and characters very similar to its student council members. If you want to play that story (or another set there) as a character, go for it! If you prefer to go in a very different direction, the game allows for and encourages that as well. If you are unfamiliar with Utena, this game is for you too.

Safety

Duels in the Tower of Eternity uses Lines and Veils and suggests that players let one another know out of character when material needs to be removed or altered. To support safety for participants, answer these questions together:

- **Lines:** What elements or events are not allowed at all? Common examples include sexual assault or torture.
- **Veils:** What are you ok with having happen, so long as it is off-screen and not explicitly described?
- **Something to Consider:** How will you communicate that you need to pause the game and talk about something that has made you uncomfortable? Consider a faster method than writing it in a letter.

Step Two: Create Characters

Each player picks a different archetype, reads the description, and uses it to guide their answers to the character questions. The archetypes will also come in handy for defining the rival duelists and other characters.

Archetypes

The Champion

If it were just a matter of fighting skill, you would never lose. You want something that the sword can't get you, except maybe by winning the duels. In the meantime, possessing the Prize is almost as good as satisfying this desire.

The Ingenue

Your world used to be such a simple place, filled with innocent romance and simple pleasures. Now that you know just how dark the world can be, you are determined to win so you can recreate your lost innocence.

The Prize

You belong to whoever has most recently won a duel; what that means is up to them. You don't fully understand this game, but you are inescapably at its center. Most days, you're just a person at the school like everyone else but when the Arena calls you must answer. Note: playing the Prize introduces troubling themes.

The Spoiler

You are an eccentric, devoted to ideas of nobility and honor. When you stumbled upon the Arena, you saw how wrong all of this is and realized that you had to put a stop to it. If the Prize is a person, you are fiercely protective of them.

Now, some questions...

Your Character

Use the description of the archetype you chose to guide your answers to these questions.

- What are your important relationships at school? Who are the other duelists at your school? Define your relationships, positive and negative, with your rivals. Use the archetypes to quickly define non-player characters.
- What sensory impressions are associated with your character? What is their color palette? Their clothing style? Their smell?
- What do you plan to do when you win the duels and have the power to reshape the world?
- What are your theories about what is really going on here? How confident are you in them?
- If the Prize is a person, what is your relationship like? How does it change when you are technically their "owner"?

Your Relationship

The relationship between the players' characters is a key factor in the story this game tells. Answer these questions together:

- How do you feel about each other? Your feelings need not be completely mutual.
- What is your friendship like? Is it warm or adversarial? Comfortable or fraught? Do you hold each other back or urge each other forward?
- What do you disagree about? Agree?

The Redeemer

Someone you love has been lost to you. Perhaps they have an incurable illness, or have gone down a dark path in life - or maybe they just grew in a way that you refuse to understand. If you possess the Prize when the time comes, you will bring the one you love back to you.

The Schemer

Your most powerful weapon is your cunning and ruthlessness. You duel for the experience of conquest and domination. Once, someone hurt you so profoundly that you lost most of your empathy for your fellow humans, enabling you to become the master manipulator you are now.

The Scion

You are not the first of your family to become involved with the Arena. Winning duels and ultimately possessing the Prize is a matter of family honor. You think you know what's going on here, what the Tower really is, and what the duels are really about; you don't.

Step Three: Determine Prompts

Depending on the length of your game, players will use 3, 5 or 7 prompts (the same number for both). Agree on the number before you begin, and choose appropriate prompts as you go, based on the content of the letters you write and receive. Each prompt represents the events of about a month, during which the character fights between one and several duels, experiences life at an elite boarding school, and writes their friend a letter. Each prompt also includes a solo LARP, which the player should play on their own before writing. The purpose of a solo LARP is to be physically and emotionally in character, for a visceral experience of what your character is feeling. All games must end with The Final Duel.

Prompts

Prompt	Themes	Narrative	Solo LARP
First Blood	violence, loss of innocence	Your first duel is intense, likely the first time you have fought in a physical battle. How does it change you?. Note: you don't need to use this prompt - characters can have been involved with the duel for some time before the game begins.	To the extent that you are able: run (or walk) until you are a little out of breath, hit something solid with a stick or wooden dowel until it breaks, then get to someplace where you have a nice view.
Victory!	violence	Your first win. You defeat the previous holder of the Prize. Do you do it by trickery, or are you simply the superior fighter? What do you do now that the Prize is yours?	Treat yourself to a little luxury: perhaps a delicious snack, a comfortable chair, a cocktail. Write or narrate to yourself the story of the duel you just won. Embellish the story until you feel completely full of yourself.
Defeat!	violence, failure	You held the Prize, but someone beat you in the arena. This is your first major loss. How does it happen, and how do you behave afterward?	Gather stackable objects - jenga blocks would be ideal - and build a tower. With each piece you place, verbally narrate one decision your character made which led to their loss. When your character surrenders, knock the tower over.
I'm Done	surrender, abandonment, entrapment	You are done trying to win the Prize, done with duels and secrets. You want to live a normal life now. Surely you don't need the Prize to be happy. But something calls you back.	Write a list of all the reasons why your character wants to leave on a piece of paper. Burn the piece of paper and, while it smolders, consider that you can't escape.
Petty Politics	bullying	Your time between duels has been taken up with social machinations, whether it's students harassing each other in the halls and during clubs or professors snubbing each other at staff teas. How does this impact the duels?	Draw a relationship map, including every other character you have invented, with your character in the center. Continue to add complications until it is completely absurd and you can feel your character's confusion.
"True" Love	sexuality, romance, betrayal	You have fallen in love with one of your fellow duelists, and it looks like they might reciprocate. How does this change the dynamic of the fights at your school? Can you hang onto your love when only one of you may win the Prize?	Write a note or record an in-character video or audio message to your love. Pour out your heart. Are you asking to continue the relationship, or ending it? Have you been used, or is this the real thing?
The Tea Party	passive aggression, cuteness	You are invited to a tea party in your dorm (or the dorm where you work). Detail some of your friends outside the arena, your relationships with your rivals, or both.	Drink a cup of your favorite tea with as much ritual into this as you want. With each sip, imagine a momentary confrontation with each of your characters' main rivals, from a meaningful glare to a short exchange over tea.
The Initiation	brainwashing, secrets, baptism	You are initiated into a secret society and learn secrets of the Arena. The initiation includes being dunked in water and emerging changed.	Submerge yourself; while you are underwater, consider what your character is washing off, and who they are becoming when they emerge.
The Feast of the Damned	loss, survivor's guilt, death	A duelist was killed. Now a table hovers upside down over the arena; sitting at it are the ghosts from the duelists' past. They comment on the duel, while the fighters clash below.	Have a flashback to your character attending the funeral of someone they loved. Spend time in a graveyard or other monument to the dead. How did your character react when faced with grief?

The Dark Place	negativity, flaws and failings	The stairs to the arena have been replaced by an unlit elevator. While you are there, you hear voices telling you about your failings. When you fight, the Tower looms above you.	Find a dark, quiet place and close the door. Imagine the accusations of everyone your character has failed. Is your character humbled or do they reaffirm their self-confidence?
The Final Duel	betrayal, inevitability	Over the course of the last month, various signs and portents make it clear that the duels are coming to a close. It is time, at last, to face your friend in combat.	Reread the letters you have exchanged so far. Walk uphill (mobility abilities allowing) and imagine yourself climbing the stairs to face your friend. Only one of you can reshape the world.

Step Four: Playing the Game

Each player uses the prompts and mini solo LARPs to immerse themselves in their character's story. The letters exchanged after each prompt define the ongoing narrative. Alternate writing letters in a way that seems natural to you until both players have responded to all of their prompts.

A strong letter achieves some or all of the following goals:

1. Advance the story towards the final duel. Are your rivals eliminated, do they drop out, or are they maimed, physically or emotionally?
2. Touch on, but don't answer, questions about the nature of the duels, the nature of the schools, and the reason all this is happening.
3. Explicate elements of the character's past, gradually revealing how they came to be who they are. This can include experiences the characters shared as friends.
4. Show how the duels test and temper the character, gradually forging them into someone new.

This LARP is played over a long period of time, and while it will of course affect the players' lives, it's important to differentiate LARP time from non-LARP time. In order to do this, begin each session of play (usually one solo LARP and one letter), with the ritual phrase **"Now we duel to possess the Prize and the power to change the world."** and the kindling of some kind of light (a candle, a flashlight, or just turn on the light switch). End with the phrase **"The one who holds the Prize holds the power"** and extinguish the light.

The Final Duel

At last, the players should meet over video chat to discuss the outcome of the final duel. Both players should find a dark, quiet place to connect and kindle a light, as before. One character begins by saying the first of the two ritual phrases above, and the other character responds with the second.

It may be clear to both players which character should win. If you can't agree, flip a coin. Once the duel is done, roleplay the final exchange between the characters as they reckon with what has happened and what it means to their relationship. As wrap-up, each player should answer these three questions:

1. How has the character changed as a result of their experiences in the Arena?
2. Does their character remain at the school, or do they leave?
3. Does this constitute a good or bad end to the character's story?

Do not attempt to answer any of the larger questions about the Tower, the Arena, the Prize, and how the world has been reshaped. Players and characters might have credible theories, but these questions should never be answered to anyone's satisfaction.

To indicate that the game is over, both players should extinguish their candles in as close to the same moment as possible. The players should sit in darkness for a minute or two until both are ready to return to the real world. Finally, turn on the lights, get something to drink, and talk about how awesome and intense your run of Duels in the Tower of Eternity was, as well as any additional derolling both players would find meaningful.

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A Note on Aesthetics

It's fine to play Duels in the Tower of Eternity via email, or mailing typed letters on plain paper, but it's more fun if you really lean into the format. Consider special stationery and pens, altering your handwriting, even using wax seals or stickers. The more you make writing and receiving letters part of the LARP experience, the more immersive it will be. The more you engage all of your senses in the mini solo LARPs, the more engaging they will be and the better story you and your partner will be able to tell.