

## **Casting Off Tyranny**

### **Overview:**

*Casting off Tyranny* is a play-by-mail keepsake game where players are citizens of a country while it is being invaded by an occupying force. In order to fight back and defend their homeland, players will collect information from newspapers, knit secret codes into garments to communicate that information, and mail it to another player who needs to know. Players will then use the information they decode from sending secret messages to take actions to liberate their home country. The game ends when either the occupying army takes the whole country, or when the resistance has driven the occupying army entirely from their lands.

### **Game Themes and Sensitivity Warnings:**

This game centers itself on the act of resistance against an occupying army in the middle of an unjust war. Themes of violence, war, death, injury, loss, and grief are major to the game. Aspects of these things can be dulled down or omitted depending on the comfort level of your players, and before play begins there should absolutely be a conversation where players can opt in or opt out of certain subject matter game-wide. Sensitivity surveys, X-cards, and other tools for safe and sane play are highly encouraged.

### **Skills Necessary to be a Player:**

- Basic skills as a knitter: knit, purl, yarn over, casting on, casting off, and ability to read chart-based knitting patterns
- Some creative writing skills for writing letters to other players.

### **Skills Necessary to be a Moderator:**

- The moderator is the only person in the game who has **no knitting** associated with their roll. The moderator DOES NOT NEED TO KNOW HOW TO KNIT.
- The ability to creatively write and print game materials such as newspapers and flyers.
- Improvisational storytelling skills
- Organizational and planning skills

### **Modifications for Online Play and Accessibility:**

If your playgroup lives too far apart to meet in person, the first session can be held over the internet. You will simply need a drawing app to make sure everyone can contribute to the same image.

## **How It Works - An Overview:**

The moderator and 1-4 players will gather to create their Homeland. The Homeland is generated by drawing a map together, then rolling dice to come up with various towns, geography, histories, traditions, and cultures that exist in the Homeland. During this phase, players place themselves on the map in towns a considerable distance apart. After this session ends, the moderator privately decides how much of the Homeland has been conquered by the occupying army, and all the damage that's been done.

All subsequent play is done in the players' own home. They receive an initial newspaper detailing all the ways that the occupying army has taken over or attacked their homeland. Players are sent out one newspaper each round describing how the war is progressing in each of the cities that contain players. Players only see newspapers local to their city, chocked with information unique to their location. Players must decipher what information is important to their associate in another city and knit them a garment containing this information in secret code.

Players then write an accompanying letter that can give small hints to how to decipher the code. But don't be too obvious - the moderator may ask for a random mail inspection, and if they can find the answer too easily, then you will be found out, and your mail won't be sent.

Once a player receives a knit garment and deciphers a message, they communicate to the DM what actions they would like to take in response: For example, prepare an ambush, send reinforcements, shore up defenses. They communicate these actions to the moderator, who will show the consequences of these actions in the next newspaper.

When the next newspaper is sent out, it will include reactions from the previous round of information, and the new information for the next round, and the process will start all over. The rounds continue until the game ends, where either the country is liberated or completely taken over by the oppressor.

Once the ending occurs, players meet one last time (in person or online) to discuss the experience, share stories, celebrate victories, and mourn their losses.

## **Receiving Newspapers**

The DM will write custom pamphlets, flyers, or newspapers to mail out to players. Each newspaper is unique to each player's location, so nobody has the same information. Newspapers will contain information that players will want to communicate to other players. For example, if one player lives in the north and another in the south, and the south player receives a newspaper that reports 'Troops gathering for a northward invasion', this is something they can tell the other player that will make a difference in their strategy.

## Knitting In Code and Deciphering Knit Code

This section will demonstrate one of several ways in which codes can be incorporated into knitted garments. Let's consider a small 2 x 6 grid:

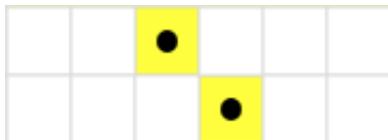
0	1	2	3	4	5
0	1	2	3	4	5

By using unique combinations of of digits, we can encode each letter of the alphabet, like so:

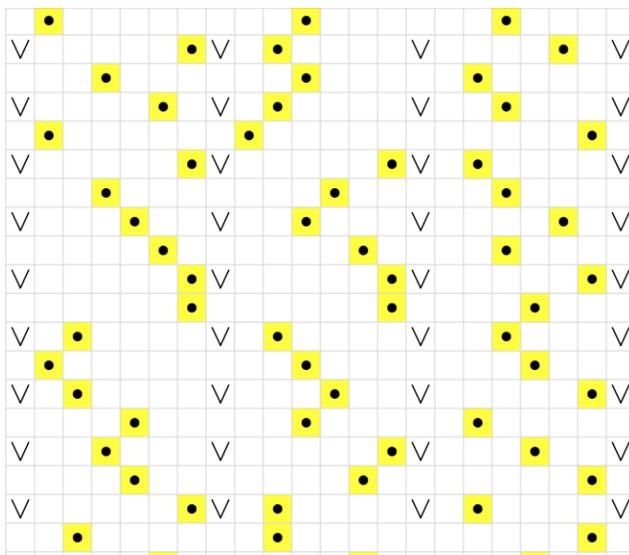
a	01	f	10	k	20	p	30	u	40	z	50
b	02	g	12	l	21	q	31	v	41	space	51
c	03	h	13	m	23	r	32	w	42	cont	52
d	04	i	14	n	24	s	34	x	43	end	53
e	05	j	15	o	25	t	35	y	45		

For example, the letter "m" could be encoded like this:

0	1	2	3	4	5
0	1	2	3	4	5



For knitting, the highlighted boxes can be purls, to stand out over knit stitches. In pattern, each letter would be a grid similar to this.



By creating a grid of these 2 x 6 letters, we can write messages in our knitting. For example, if you wanted to write "enemy artillery moving north", your pattern could look something like this:

The columns are read like a newspaper - top to bottom and then left to right.

## Knitting Sample



## Writing The Letter

Players will leave hints to where the code is hidden in the garment inside the letter they send alongside the garment. For example, if sending a pair of gloves, the sender could write “I knit the cuff extra long” to indicate the code is hidden inside the cuff of the glove.

## Taking an Action

After players receive a piece of knit code in the mail and use their code breaking skills to decipher it, they may message the moderator (digitally or by mail, depending on the playgroup) with their area’s Resistance Action for the turn. This could be “Ambush invading forces coming from the south” or “Send supplies to the western front”. As long as your action only takes one simple sentence to communicate, anything is fine. From there, the moderator interprets the consequences of all the player actions on the war effort, and writes the results of those actions into the following newspaper. The following newspaper will also contain the information they need for the next round of play, and the whole process is repeated.

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## Casting Off Tyranny - Session Zero

### Guide:

**Part 1 - Choose Your Map**

**Part 2 - Define the Homeland**

**Part 3 - Define Your Character**

### Introduction

In the first session of *Casting Off Tyranny*, players will meet (in person if possible) to create their homeland and define who they are at conflict with and why. Additionally, they will set up their characters and relationships with other players, and set up the map for Round 1 of play.

### Materials Needed:

- A print out of our map outlines (if playing digitally, a scan of it that can be screenshared)
- Pens and pencils (If playing digitally, a means to draw on a shared screen)
- A D20 (If playing digitally, there are free online places that can roll digital dice)
- A screen to block the moderator's station from view of the rest of the table
- 2-3 hours of dedicated time. Plan for a break halfway through.
- A pen and paper for taking notes.(If online, a shared google doc)

### Before Beginning: Player Boundary Communication

*Casting Off Tyranny* is a mature game with mature themes. Players are ultimately going to be defending their country from an invading force. This means themes of war, conflict, grief, loss, and more are unavoidable in the game. Player discretion is advised.

How additional themes are handled, like gore, violence, etc, should be discussed with the group. Whether playing with strangers or long time friends, setting up play boundaries before beginning is essential. Have an open honest conversation at the table. The Moderator should list all the themes expected to take place in the game, including any additions they wish to make to the game that might make players uncomfortable.

*Exercise:* If players are uncomfortable discussing which themes cause them discomfort at the table, here's a way to get around that. Everyone but the moderator closes their eyes. When the moderator names a theme or element of the game, players uncomfortable with it may raise a

hand. The Moderator marks down every theme that's vetoed this way. When the group opens their eyes, the moderator lets them know what was vetoed, and makes sure everyone promises to respect the boundaries.

*Digital Exercise:* If session zero is conducted digitally, the moderator can create a google doc with anonymous link sharing. Then people can anonymously write down what makes them uncomfortable, without anyone knowing who the source was.

Lastly, make sure that you set up protocol for if someone becomes uncomfortable and needs play to be halted, whether in session zero or during play. Standard practices usually include pausing play until a solution has been approved, retconning the lines that caused distress, and agreeing upon rules for handling that subject in the future.

### 1) Choosing a Map

The guidebook provides template maps to start playing with. The group should select a map outline of their Homeland. Place the map in the middle of the table.

### 2) Fleshing out the Homeland

**It is highly recommended that players take notes. If possible, take turns recording notes or assign a note taking person.** Players collectively answer the following Essential Questions about the Homeland. When the table decides something about your Homeland that fits, you draw something to visually represent what you decided on the map. It doesn't need to be "good" drawing - it just needs to convey the idea.

When unsure how to answer a question, try to use your imagination or ask for help from the group. Don't be afraid to get a little creative.

- 1) What's the Geography of your Homeland? What major features stand out? Mountains, fields, lakes, rivers, deserts, marshland - what's present on this map?
- 2) What's the weather like in your Homeland? Does it have seasons? How does this shape the behavior of the people who live here?
- 3) Define 2 abundances and 2 scarcities in your homeland. Mark these abundances and scarcities as they would exist on the map. How do these abundances and scarcities impact your society's culture?
  - a) Once you have answered the above question, deliberate on how these abundances and scarcities impact knitting. What fibers are the hardest to come by, and which ones are the easiest? What colors are rare and expensive, used only for special occasions, versus what colors are the most common?
- 4) Mark the major cities on your map. What are some benefits and detriments to living there?
- 5) Define your social structure. Who gets to be in charge? Is this a monarchy, a democracy? Are there rules about who is allowed to have power?

- 6) What does the military in this nation look like? How advanced is it? How much of our society's budget and resources go to maintaining it?
- 7) How are people connected to one another? How do they communicate with each other across long distances?
- 8) How technologically advanced is this society? What's the most modern piece of technology invented? Why are you using knitting as your means for passing secret codes, above other forms of communication?
- 9) What's the role of knitting in this society? Is it seen as respected work? Who knits?

Once these essential questions have been answered, each player rolls a d20 and answers one of the following optional questions to give the world a little more life. Do this until you answer at least 5 questions. If players want to answer more, they can go until they are satisfied. When possible, visually represent as much as you can on the map.

1	How was your Homeland founded? What's the story passed down through the generations about why your people exist as one?
2	Describe the fashion for people in your Homeland. What do people wear? What's unique to your culture that you can't find anywhere else?
3	What is the national symbol for your homeland? A crest, a flower, a flag?
4	Your Homeland still feels the effects of a natural disaster that took place. Where did it happen and what is the effect?
5	What is food like in your homeland? What are the main staples of the diet, and what are delicacies?
6	Your Homeland has a longstanding ally. What is your ally called and how did a friendship form between your countries?
7	What is the most popular form of entertainment in your Homeland? How did it start? How long has it been popular?
8	What religion do people in the Homeland believe in? What is the philosophy of your worship and how does it impact everyday life?
9	What is music like in your Homeland? What instruments are most common? When is music played?
10	Who are some famous people from your homeland? What did they do?
11	What's the state of education in your Homeland? Are there formal schools? What are they like?
12	What natural wonders exist in your homeland? What stories are told about how they were born into the world?

13	What sports are the most popular in your homeland? How respected are sports in culture?
14	A civil war is a part of your homeland's history. What factions were in the civil war? What was the war about? How long ago was it? What effect does that have on the Homeland?
15	What forms of high art (painting, sculpting, etc) are most popular in your homeland? How do people learn high art and practice it? How valued is it by society?
16	What defines literature that comes from your homeland? What sorts of stories and themes are most popular? What is the defining trait of literature from your homeland that sets it apart from other literary cultures?
17	Something common in your culture is severely off putting to other nations. What is it? Why is it practiced on a regular basis here?
18	Your Homeland is famous for a particular festival. What is the festival? When does it take place?
19	What civil rights issue is a hot button topic in your Homeland? What are the two sides of it? Why has this problem continued on for so long?
20	How is medicine practiced in the Homeland? How advanced is it, compared to other nations? What are some medical practices unique to your Homeland's teachings

At the end of this, come up with a name for your Homeland, and write it at the top of the map. This is your country. This is where you're from.

### 3) Defining your Characters

The point of *Casting Off Tyranny* is not that you need an elaborate backstory or a ton of intense character work - you will only be communicating with your fellow players via letters. Instead, it's important to define your character through your relationship to other players.

Figure out how many pairs you can make with your playgroup. A group of 3 people should be able to make 3 pairs with the different combination of players in pairs. A group of 4 people should be able to make 6 pairs. Write down the list of all the pairs.

Next, going pair by pair, roll a d20 die twice, taking note of the table below and which two options are available to you:

1	You are the very best of friends.
2	You are complete strangers.
3	You are siblings.

4	You are Parent/Child.
5	You are distantly related. (second cousins, cousins once removed, etc)
6	One of you was the best man/maid of honor at the other person's wedding.
7	You have just started dating.
8	You're engaged.
9	You're married.
10	Your divorced.
11	You are exes with a complicated history.
12	You work together.
13	You used to work together.
14	One of you is the mentor and one of you is the apprentice.
15	One of you depends on the other for regular help.
16	You are rivals with a dark past.
17	You know each other through acquaintances.
18	You are pen pals.
19	You share a hobby or interest.
20	Wildcard - player choice.

Once you have rolled your d20 twice, look at the two options from the table you rolled and choose which relationship type you'd like to build with that character. Once you have selected a relationship type, take a minute or two to flesh out any pertinent details - if you're in a parent/child relationship, decide who is the parent and who is the child, and how close you are. **As much as possible, use the map to help define relationships.**

For example, a parent might point to a spot on the map and say "this is the city in which my child was born, and therefore I think of it fondly". Then, they mark it down so that it exists on the map permanently. A pair of romantically involved people might choose another spot and say "this is where my lover proposed to me and I said no." Keep in mind that everyone is spread out to different locations, and take that distance into account when talking about your relationships.

Once all the pairs work has been done, each player writes down three specific things about their characters, taking into account the Homeland that has just been collaboratively built. An example might look like:

- I am the town gossip
- I host all the neighborhood parties
- I am estranged from the rest of my family.

Give yourself a name and age. You've now made your character.

The DM will ask everyone to place themselves on the map. Everyone spreads out to different locations, to represent the physical distance that will be created in play.

The preparatory session is over. Players should say their farewells. It might be a while before they see each other again.

## **Session Zero Moderation Guide**

Before reading this, make sure you've reviewed the player guide of session zero thoroughly.

When your players are in session zero, they will be in a place of joy. They will be coming up with a homeland together that they love. They'll likely add humorous touches on the map, they'll come up with running themes that bring the whole place together.

Your job is to ruin all of that.

Toward the end of session zero, you are going to stomp on everything that the players have created. You have to act as the invading force, taking over their land, occupying their cities, and destroying what they love.

This is a hard job. Be sure you're up for it, and be aware of your player's emotional state as you're doing it.

As your players go through the below steps, think like a military strategist. Analyze how to cut off their abundances, or press hard on their scarcities. Think of the geography of the land, and how that will impact what is easiest to occupy, and what will take effort.

**It is highly recommended that you take notes while your players are playing session zero.** These notes should be about the military strategy necessary for the occupying force to succeed. To help you, there are step by step questions for you below to consider when your players reach each stage of the session. Where possible, think of **differences** to create between the invading force's homeland, and the homeland being created by the players. While they build one nation, you are responsible for building another one.

### **1) Choosing a Map**

When players choose a map, this is the basis on which every other decision will get made. Currently, there are only two map options available: A landlocked map, and an archipelago map. War strategies and occupation strategies vary greatly between these two types of lands. Be sure to factor that in.

## 2) Fleshing out the Homeland

When your players answer essential questions about the homeland, you will have your own essential questions to consider.

- 1) *What's the Geography of your Homeland? What major features stand out? Mountains, fields, lakes, rivers, deserts, marshland - what's present on this map?*

During this question, it's important to consider how the geography will impact an invading force. If there's a giant mountain range with no passes to the other side, getting to the other side will be difficult. If there's a lot of marshland, that's going to slow down troop movements significantly without the proper gear.

- 2) *What's the weather like in your Homeland? Does it have seasons? How does this shape the behavior of the people who live here?*

Think about how the weather will impact when and how the occupying force will invade. Napoleon famously tried to invade Russia during the winter, and that went very badly for him. Take their weather patterns into account, and think about how the weather patterns might be different for the invading force's home country.

- 3) *Define 2 abundances and 2 scarcities in your homeland. Mark these abundances and scarcities as they would exist on the map. How do these abundances and scarcities impact your society's culture?*

- a) *Once you have answered the above question, deliberate on how these abundances and scarcities impact knitting. What fibers are the hardest to come by, and which ones are the easiest? What colors are rare and expensive, used only for special occasions, versus what colors are the most common?*

During this question, consider how this creates pressure on the invading force, or how it aids it. For example, if water is a scarcity, then the occupying force is going to want to get control of water supplies immediately, because that gives them privileged access to a necessary resource, and it ensures they can control the populace.

- 4) *Mark the major cities on your map. What are some benefits and detriments to living there?*

Listen to the benefits and detriments closely for how that will impact military strategy.

Walled in, fortified cities are going to be harder to capture, for example, than more unprotected cities.

- 5) *Define your social structure. Who gets to be in charge? Is this a monarchy, a democracy? Are there rules about who is allowed to have power?*

This defines who will be targeted by the invading military and what lengths they will go to in order to capture them.

- 6) *How technologically advanced is this society? What's the most modern piece of technology invented? Why are you using knitting as your means for passing secret codes, above other forms of communication?*

This determines how far technologically you're able to go with the invading force. If the most advanced technology invented in the homeland society is gunpowder, for example, you can't show up with tanks and machine guns.

### **Optional Questions**

Most of the optional questions are not going to have concrete military strategy consequences, but pay attention to the sorts of things that an invading army would narratively do.

For example, if they land on the optional question that has them define literature in the homeland, perhaps the invading army conducts a book burning as a means of depriving the citizens from their culture and inserting their culture as the dominant force. Perhaps an annual festival is shut down unless it includes patriotic devotions to the occupiers.

This is going to feel cruel. That is the point. Steel yourself to prepare for it.

### **3) Defining your Characters**

Once again, this section is less about military strategy and planning and narratively planning to destroy what is beloved to the players.

For example, if during the relationship defining process, they place a hill on the map where one character proposed to another, perhaps that hill is razed and mined for resources, taking that cherished spot away from the players it belonged to.

This is the end of Session Zero planning.