

Cheesed Off

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INTRODUCTION

This is a scenario for a|state (Craig 2004a) that uses the ‘four-point scenario construction’ method of Hutton (2005b). Originally published in IRM (Hutton 2005a) for this online version I have removed the pre-amble now covered in Hutton (2005b).

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE POISONINGS?

The link is that all the victims eat cheese. The cheese, made with dog’s milk and artificial additives, is particularly popular, tasty and cheap. With some investigation the PCs can find the cheese maker, but his products seem to be clear of any poison. The actual culprit is the papermaker who supplies the wrapping for the cheese. He has seen things in the stars and is now trying to kill as many people as possible to bring about some cataclysmic event (that may be real or imagined). As a twist it is also possible he has recently passed on some of his poisoned paper to one of the macrocorps at a very low price. They intend using it for headed notepaper and debt-collecting letters.

OPENING

The premise is that there are poisonings in Mire End. The beginnings can be as subtle or as abrupt as you desire. In a long campaign you can foreshadow this scenario by having NPCs taking sick days off work, with increasing frequency. First it is the old man at the bar, then Mrs Mullally at the bookmakers, then you noticed Old Figgins is looking like death. In this manner the characters may decide to investigate the events of their own volition.

More directly you can have an NPC closely related to the characters fall gravely ill, or—if you are feeling particularly cruel—choose the character with the lowest health and have them fall ill overnight after a particularly tasty fish and cheese pie. (The red herring, literally, being the fish in the pie.)

So the scenario opens with a poisoning and the characters should be compelled to do something about it. If the characters ignore the early signs then strike at their, or their most loved ones’, health directly.

SUMMARY

People in Mire End (or another poor area such as Bankside, Fogwarren or Folly Hills if you so desire, but Mire End is ideal) start to become poisoned. The first victims are the weak and the infirm, but soon even healthy sorts start falling ill. This will continue with growing severity and loss of life until the source of the poison is identified and stopped.

CHOICES

The choices presented to the characters are many. They may want to investigate where the victims lived, what they did, where they worked, what they ate and drank, and with whom they associated.

Some example victims are:

- **The mysterious man at the bar.** Initially no one knows who he is, or why he died. His body gives no clue to why he is in Mire End or where he came from. While not the healthiest sort, close inspection and tests (which may take a day or two) reveal that he was poisoned. Perhaps he was an investigator from Longshore looking for Volkoff (see ‘Ten Ha’Penny Tales of Mire End’ in ‘The Lostfinders Guide To Mire End’, Craig 2004b, for more on this), who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? Maybe he was working for one of the macrocrops? Or perhaps he was one of the many drifters in The City, whose time had come?

- **Mrs Mullally.** Turns a ghastly pale shade of canal green over several days. She lapses into a coma, preventing any questioning, by the time the characters arrive and without medical aid or assistance she will die from what appears to the trained eye as chronic poisoning. She worked at the bookies, was undoubtedly on the take, drank too much, and lived in a slum along with her extended family. In the grim and distant past she also worked as a prozzie on the Walk and was a favourite of influential members of the Hohler Gang.

- **Old Figgins.** A cheerful and stout fellow with a debilitating illness and a fondness for cheese pastries and cheap women. Has some guilty secret that no one seems to know and can be as earth-shattering or mundane as you desire (though don’t allow it to derail the main thrust of the scenario). He starts to look gravely ill over several days. First he stops drinking alcohol, then he tries to stop smoking, the last vice to go is eating his favourite cheese...

You can extend the length of the scenario by giving the characters many avenues of exploration. Many of the common factors in the victims include:

- Poor housing and quality of living
- Chronic work conditions
- Dangerously high levels of alcohol consumption
- Potential enemies in, and large debts to, the Hohler Gang and the Dog Track in Folly Hills
- A diet consisting of finger pies, bloated fish and dog's milk cheese

Ultimately you should allow evidence to appear that disallows all of the above, except the cheese, as common factors.

Investigating the cheese will lead to an angry confrontation with Innocent Barclay, who owns the small factory making the food. He is very defensive of any accusations of poisoning. His livelihood would be ruined were people to lose faith in his product. Thorough (and possibly clandestine) investigation of Barclay's operation reveals:

- Use of child labour, but none that don't want to be there. Child labour, while not illegal or pleasant, is a harsh reality of small businesses in Mire End.
- A surprisingly well-run operation that produces a huge amount of cheese every week.
- Links to thieves who steal dogs to order. Barclay uses the mutts to breed better milk-producing animals.
- Shady connections with the Hohler Gang, who seem to launder money through the factory, and Father Guy Herbert, who supplies children for 'work experience' in return for donations to the Third Church Home for Unwanted Children (see 'The Lostfinders Guide To Mire End,' Craig 2004b, for more information on Father Herbert and the Home.)
- A high proportion of staff (mostly children) 'liberating' cheese from the production line to feed their families. Barclay seems to turn a blind eye to this, if pressed on the point he will say it gives him good quality control of his cheese. None of the staff stealing cheese are ill in any way.
- Ultimately no evidence of poisoning at the cheese manufacturing factory.

However, once these points have been investigated the characters will notice that the cheese made at Barclay's factory is building up at the packing plant. They are struggling to cope with the job at the moment since a lot of their staff have taken ill.

This is where the characters should find the rolls of poisoned paper that the cheese is wrapped in. Prolonged exposure to the paper requires a Health check (roll once per day). Failure results in a character sustaining 1 Shock Point of poisoning damage (-10% to all subsequent tests). The illness will go away if successfully treated by a doctor. Finding the source of the paper is relatively easy. He is called Hieronymus Glosch and has taken no actions to conceal his supply of the paper.

END GAME

The resolution will probably be a confrontation with Glosch. He is an eccentric and now-mad paper maker in the southern part of Mire End. Perhaps his brain has been addled by the toxic fumes drifting down from the Old Bleach Factory? Or perhaps he genuinely has seen strange and disturbing things through his (now-broken) telescope?

How the characters tackle Glosch is up to them. He is likely no match for anyone in a straight fight (he is, after all, just a paper maker) but he has some tricks up his sleeve such as:

- Vats of toxic water poised to pour over people breaking into his home. Treat this as a test of Health, causing 2 SP damage to the victim.
- Large rolls of paper balanced near the tops of stairwells in his house.
- Automated paper cutting machines with large swinging blades. Treat these as scythes or axes. Glosch will set them with tripwires to catch unwanted intruders.
- A loaded sparklock that he keeps in his room at the very top of the paper factory. He will retreat to this room and hold out for as long as he can. Faced with overwhelming odds he will jump to his death from the window.

Other endings could be:

- The characters fail to identify the cause and the poisoning just abruptly stops. In this case Barclay discovers the poisoned paper and hushes up any connections between the illness/deaths and the cheese factory. The strange beginning and end to this episode (and lack of explanation) may cause unease amongst Mire Enders for some time to come.
- An angry Barclay and some of his workers have a confrontation with the characters (and possibly an angry mob of locals!). In the ensuing melee a fire starts that destroys the cheese factory and packing plant. This has the (inadvertent) effect of stopping the poisoning.
- A cause is blamed, such as the fish or alcohol, that is not the genuine cause of the poisoning. Regardless how this is resolved, the poisoning will stop as a result of Barclay's own investigations. It may appear that burning barrels of fish or pouring vats of alcohol into canals has the desired effect of stopping the illness. Still, stories will be told of how the 'great burning' or 'vast pouring' solved this particular problem.

AFTERMATH

What ripples does this scenario leave in your *a|state* game? If it is a convention scenario and the characters go their separate ways at the end then it need not have any long-lasting consequences.

However, possible outcomes of this scenario may be:

- **Friends.** Any of the victims that the characters were able to save will be grateful, as will any of their close friends or relatives. Friends are always good to have in a place as rough as Mire End.
- **Enemies.** NPCs who the characters falsely accuse are likely to take a note of them and start to plot bloody revenge. Also victims who feel the characters were in some way responsible for the poisoning will hold a grudge for the foreseeable future.
- **Further Adventures.** What if more places have taken delivery of the paper? For example, a macrocorp. Do the characters use this to their advantage? Do they feel responsible for preventing more poisoning? Are there benefits to selling this information to the macrocorp? Will the macrocorp think the characters are trying to extort money, services and favours from them?

- **Bigger Questions.** What did Glosch see in the stars? Who broke his telescope? Is there something bigger here that is being missed? Why were Fulgurators seen in the vicinity of his paper factory in the weeks leading up to his bout of madness?
- **Things Best Left Alone.** What do the characters do if they find out about the practices at the cheese factory? How does this change the way they see Father Herbert? Are such things best left unsaid?

In any case, even a poisoning outbreak like this can lead to a whole new series of adventures in The City.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Craig, M., 2004a. *a|state*, 256 pp, Contested Ground Studios.

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Hutton, G., 2005a. Cheesed Off, *Independent Roleplaying Magazine*, StealthBrothers, **2 (Feb. 2005)**, 7–9.

Hutton, G., 2005b. *Four-Point Scenario Construction*, A Short Essay on Roleplaying Games, available online at <http://gregorhutton.com/roleplaying/essay/>.



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