

## Playing the Game

**The City Burns At Midnight** takes an entire day to play. You and at least two of your friends take the roles of sleeper cell agents who have fallen in love with the city they are going to firebomb. You should agree on a day you all have free: a weekend, or a day you're all traveling somewhere together. At the beginning of the day, you will split up into singles or pairs (a pair will still produce one story between them) and go out into the city to make your memories. Then, at midnight, you will reconvene on a moonlit seaside beach for the long boat ride home, and share your stories of the city's final day before it was burned to ashes

## Players Will Need

- 1) a **camera** (digital, cellphone or Polaroid, unless you really want to spend one of the city's final hours waiting for film to develop)
- 2) a **bag** for carrying any artifacts and keepsakes you choose to take with you before the city burns

## The Goal of the Game

Your goal is to immerse yourself in the city and have an awesome day that gives you an incredible story: one that literally strains credibility.

The story you tell should:

- 1) Be fun to listen to, and
- 2) Be a worthy memory of a dead city, but
- 3) Seem plausible to somebody who wasn't there

After each of the agents has told a story, players will decide who told the best one. "Best" is loosely defined, but probably some cross between "most entertaining," "most outrageous," and "best captures the city": the most Parisian experience in Paris, etc.

## Asking Questions

While an agent is relaying her memory, she has the floor. The other agents can ask for clarifications, or question portions of evidence that seem counterfactual, but should generally hold back and listen to the story. After the agent is finished talking, any final questions can be asked. The agent is perfectly free to swear that something is true, regardless of whether or not she has any proof, but no one is required to believe her.

## Lying

You can lie. Lies help you transform a mundane experience into a moving narrative. A well-placed lie can take a story that is merely factual and make it True. However, an implausible lie cannot be the best memory of your beloved city's last day on earth. So you should bring proof.

## Proof

**Photographs:** a great way to show where you went and who you met, or even to capture yourself doing something. Of course photos can be doctored, but use your best judgement.

**Artifacts:** the empty wine bottle you shared with a kind stranger, a sari from a flea market, the smeared lipstick kiss from the burlesque dancer who seduced you. Of course, not all artifacts are what we claim, but again, use your best judgement.

## You Cannot Read

Agents can speak and understand the local language well enough to get by, but none of them have learned how to read fluently. This means that any written documents used as proof, or words that show up in any photographic evidence can mean anything at all. If you claim they mean something (perhaps you asked a local to read it to you, or you were able to pick out some of the words), nobody can prove you wrong, but they don't have to believe you either. Obviously, if an unreadable document also has pictures on it that support your interpretation, or you have corroborating photos or artifacts, so much the better.

This rule applies to labels or any other text appearing on artifacts or photographs.

## A Final Note About Proof

Proof can only be introduced by the person telling the story. If you took 30 photos and only want to use 3, nobody can use the other 27 photos to question your story.

## Strategy

From the moment you wake up on the day you play this game, your goal is to have an awesome day. Be conscious of this goal. If you get distracted from your goal, slow down, collect yourself, and refocus on having an awesome day. That's your baseline. Sometimes you just won't find a story, so just have your awesome day and look forward to listening to some cool stories tonight in the glow of a burning city.

Stay close to the facts. Intentionally go out and do things you think people would like to hear about. Seek adventure! Be brave! Do things that frighten you! Take lots of pictures. If you want an artifact, take a picture of it in context to add extra credibility if you need it.

Seriously, if it's the first time you're playing this, try sticking to the truth.

Sometimes you'll find a story that's just not quite punchy enough. You have two choices: let it ride, keep having your awesome day, and hope that things just come together naturally, or grab the narrative and fake some evidence. In the latter case, approach the game like a scavenger hunt. Next thing you know, you're running around town trying to get a picture of yourself shaking hands with a circus clown. It happens. This can be a lot of fun, but if you start stressing over a key piece of missing proof, slow down, take a breather, and go back to having an awesome day.

You may want to practice telling your story before you tell it to the group. If you have time for that, great. Don't practice with another player, unless you were exploring the city as a pair.

Introduce your pieces of proof at dramatic moments. Just when people think your story is too incredible to be true, stun them by pulling an artifact out of your bag, or show them the photo of you standing next to Jean-Claude Van Damme.

If one of your artifacts can be shared and consumed, it will make your storytelling that much better. Even if it has nothing to do with your story.

Don't be contrarian. Don't play the devil's advocate. If somebody else's story seems plausible, don't nit-pick it to death. You "win" this game by telling the best plausible story, not by tearing other people down. Don't be a dick.

## Congratulations, Agent!

The word has come down from High Command: "The city burns at midnight."

You and your fellow sleeper cell agents have successfully infiltrated a city. Secret documents have exchanged hands. There were more than a few close calls. Things nearly fell through. But you have persevered, and tonight all your plans come to fruition. Tonight at midnight, the targets you and your fellow agents have identified will be designated grounds-zero for a devastating firebombing.

The city you have infiltrated, that has become your home, that you have fallen in love with, will be burned to ashes at midnight. This is its last day on earth.

How will you remember it?

## Variations

### The City Burns at Seven Thirty-ish

Not as dramatic, but if you and your friends get sleepy, the agents can agree to meet over dinner at a reasonable hour. On the other hand, if you want to go clubbing, perhaps High Command will agree to burn the city at 11:30 the next morning over Bloody Marys?

### For Reals

In this variation, you and your friends really are traveling together in a city where you cannot read the language. Have the most awesome day possible, then get back together and tell everyone about it. You can, of course, still lie, but that's your business. Even though the city will still be there tomorrow, live like it won't! For extra fun, play this variation with strangers you meet in your hostel. If you play this game in a developing city that is rapidly Westernizing, you get 10 bonus indie points.

### The Most Parisian Day In L.A.

In this variation, players go out and explore a city as if it was a different one. The "You Cannot Read" rule takes on a huge importance. This variation emphasizes artful photography and artifact collection to create a plausible fictional narrative. Best for experienced agents.

### Fantastic

A more extreme variation of the above. Now you're exploring Atlantis, or the capitol of Mars, or Lovecraft's Innsmouth or some other fictional place. Expand the "You Cannot Read" rule to photographs. Players can elaborate on details in photographs ("That's not the sky, it's the sea."). Artifacts are still artifacts, though. You might be able to claim that a rock is from the moon, but you can't tell me it's actually a laser pistol without some good corroboration. This variation can get weird quickly, and is best suited for experienced storytellers.

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## The City Burns At Midnight

a storytelling game

&

guidebook for all cities everywhere

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