

Owlbear: Fragile Duality

Long ago, the world was in balance, and Owlbears lived together happily. Then humans came, scattered the Owlbears and destroyed the balance.

In Owlbear: Fragile Duality, you play Owlbears who roam the Borderlands, searching for other Owlbears and restoring balance to the world.

What you'll need

Owlbear: Fragile Duality is a game for three to five players and one Game Master.

You will also need:

- One orangey-brown twelve-sided die for each player and one for the GM: the "Nature Dice".
- Five transparent twelve sided dice: the "Balance Dice".

The Balance Circle

Draw a circle, on a piece of paper, and place it in the middle of the table.

This is the Balance Circle. The more Balance Dice are inside this circle, the more Balance the Owlbears have created.

At the start of the game, place all Balance Dice outside this circle, indicating maximum unbalance. Each die should show the value "7" .

Nature

The Nature of an Owlbear is measured from 1 to 12.

A high Nature indicates an Owlbear dominated by his Bear side: feral, angry and emotional. An Owlbear whose Nature reaches 12 becomes uncontrollably feral and the player must make a new character.

A low Nature indicates an Owlbear dominated by his Owl side: thoughtful, calculating and withdrawn. An Owlbear whose Nature reaches 1 becomes totally withdrawn and, again, the player must make a new character.

Each player must choose a value for his Nature which is different from that of the other players. Each player should indicate his Nature value by turning his Nature die so that value is uppermost.

Marks

Each Owlbear has been Marked, twice, by the ravages of an unbalanced world.

Going round the table, each player should describe two distressing events which have permanently marked the Owlbear. At least one must involve humans: although it will help to specify a type of human, such as thieves or drunkards. For example:

“I once had Owlbear cubs, but they were destroyed by an adventuring party.”
“My treasure was stolen by human thieves raiding a dungeon.”

The GM's Nature

The GM also has a value for his Nature, indicated by his Nature die: although the GM doesn't play an Owlbear, the Owlbears understand his actions in their terms.

At the start of the game, the GM chooses his Nature, providing it is different from that of the players. A low value indicates that the Owlbears will face cunning, calculating creatures; a high value that the Owlbears will face a physical, brutal danger.

The GM's Nature does not change throughout the game.

Starting the game

To start the game, the GM describes the Owlbears entering a region where something is out of balance. For example:

“You enter a forest. In the distance, you can see humans constructing a castle. You hear them sawing down trees to make room for the castle.”

He also describes other Owlbears nearby, but presently out of reach:

“Sometimes, you hear an Owlbear cub scream, as they kill it to make the castle safe.”

The Owlbears must react: taking whatever steps are necessary to restore the region to balance and reunite with their fellow Owlbears.

“We creep up and observe the humans, making an attack formation.”

And the GM should attempt to provoke the players by using their Marks:

“You see a group of humans, talking and relaxing after a morning's work. One is wearing a jacket which is, unmistakably, made of Owlbear cub fur.”

Conflicts launched by players

A conflict occurs when an Owlbear attempts something to restore balance.

First, the player describes what his Owlbear is doing:

“My Owlbear scales a tree. He jumps up and down on the branch, attempting to make it fall on the humans.”

The other players and GM agree whether the Owlbear is using his Owl nature (cunning, thoughtful) or Bear nature (feral, physical) in the conflict.

They also agree whether the conflict involves a Mark of the Owlbear. For example, if the Owlbear in the above example had the Mark “I once had Owlbear cubs, but they were destroyed by an adventuring party”, and he was attacking a human wearing Owlbear cub fur, the Mark would clearly be involved in the conflict.

Conflicts involving Marks

If the conflict involves a Mark of the Owlbear, the player rolls one of the Balance dice that is outside the circle.

If the Owlbear was using his Bear nature, the conflict succeeds if the roll is less than or equal to the Owlbear’s Nature.

If the Owlbear was using his Owl nature, the conflict succeeds if the roll is greater than or equal to the Owlbear’s Nature.

Then look at the Balance Dice inside the circle and at the GM’s Nature Dice. If the number rolled is shared by any of these dice, the die rolled stays outside the circle. If not, the die moves inside the circle. Either way, the die retains the value rolled.

Conflicts not involving Marks

If the conflict does not involve a Mark of the Owlbear, the player must resolve the conflict by rolling his Nature die.

If the Owlbear was using his Bear nature, the conflict succeeds if the roll is less than or equal to the previous value.

If the Owlbear was using his Owl nature, the conflict succeeds if the roll is greater than or equal to the previous value.

Rolling the Nature die means that, whether the Conflict succeeded or not, the Owlbear’s Nature will change, as follows:

- If the Owlbear was using his Bear nature, the Owlbear’s Nature increases, from the previous value, to the next highest number not shared by any of the Balance Dice inside the circle or any of the Nature Dice.
- If the Owlbear was using his Owl nature, the Owlbear’s Nature decreases, from the previous value, to the next lowest number not shared by any of the Balance Dice inside the circle or any of the Nature Dice.

For example, let’s say the Owlbear was using his Bear nature, and his previous Nature was 8. The other players have Natures of 4, 7 and 9, the GM has a Nature of 6 and there is one Balance Die inside the circle, with a value of 10. The Owlbear’s Nature cannot increase to 9, because that value is held by one of the other Owlbears; and it cannot increase to 10, because that value is held by the Balance Die. So it increases to 11.

If the Nature increases to 12 or more, or decreases to 1 or lower, the character is retired from play, as above.

Conflicts launched by the GM

A conflict may also occur when the GM attempts something to disrupt the balance.

First, the GM describes what is happening to disrupt the balance:

“One of the humans sees you in the forest. Shouting “To arms! To arms!”, he rises to his feet, readies his bow and fires.”

The players agree whether the GM is using an Owl or Bear nature in the conflict. The GM then rolls any of the Balance Dice that are inside the circle.

If the GM was using a Bear nature, the conflict succeeds if the roll is less than or equal to the GM’s Nature.

If the GM was using an Owl nature, the conflict succeeds if the roll is greater than or equal to the GM’s Nature.

Then look at the Balance Dice outside the circle and at all the players’ Nature Dice. If the number rolled is shared by any of these dice, the die rolled stays inside the circle. If not, the die moves outside the circle.

The end of the game

When all the Balance Dice are inside the circle, the balance of the region is restored, and the game ends.

A note on the other Owlbears

The players should attempt to reunite with other Owlbears. However, these Owlbears do not play a major part in the story: they simply sit, quietly, in the background.

A note on turn order

It’s expected conflicts will arise naturally, following the story. It’s also expected that the GM and players will, roughly, alternate in conflicts: the GM will launch one conflict, a player will launch the next, and so on.

If players launch more conflicts, the game will finish more quickly; if the GM launches more, the game will be longer.

What is balance?

Note that the idea of “balance” is intentionally unclear. Generally, it’s assumed that anything bad for the Owlbears is “unbalancing” and anything good is “balancing”.

Hence, the Owlbears must decide for themselves what will restore the balance. Will there be balance if the humans are frightened away? Or must they be killed? It's up to the Owlbears.

Competition

This is an entry for the Bully Pulpit Games' Owlbear Challenge. It uses the ingredients Owlbears (the player characters); Owlbears (the Owlbears with whom the characters want to unite); and Mark Twain (using the archaic meaning "mark twice" or "two marks": each Owlbear is marked twice).

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