



[Mars Colony] Green Corruption, Yellow Terrorism

**Ben_Robbins**

August 2009

edited August 2009

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We played the ash can of Mars Colony, and we liked it so much we played it again the next day. For anyone who isn't familiar, it's a two-player game of guiding public policy to avert the problems confronting the colony on Mars. The juicy bit: when your policies fail, you can just suck it up, or you can lie and make it look like your policies are working. The tempting part is that deceptions are just as effective as successes in saving the colony, at least until you get caught...

Green + Corruption

In the first game, a young and dogged, but perhaps under-qualified, Dr. Kelly Perkins confronts the possibility that her appointment wasn't because of her qualifications (the Earth Coalition council had Contempt of her from the start) but because of her estranged husband's position in Ares Group, the Halliburton-esque mega-contractor for the Mars Colony (the sympathy was a spouse with a major deceit, which we decided was his shady business dealings which drove them apart in the first place). Did AG pull strings to get her assigned, confident that she could be manipulated to their advantage? Was it her husband's idea, or would he have rather they stayed thousands of miles apart but didn't have the leverage to stop the plan?

Our health markers are corruption, energy and atmosphere. The Green party (read as Green party) is dominant, overshadowing the Red (Republican) and Blue (Democrat) minorities, which Kelly herself is a part of.

She launches an energy conservation campaign, steering away from a Red "drill baby drill" plan that would anger the Green majority but also highlighting that the initial estimates for solar power were hopelessly optimistic -- Mars is a lot farther from the sun. We rapidly see that AG has been getting piles of sweetheart deals via the Colony Council (corruption). After some bitter encounters with her husband, Kelly strong-arms the Council into bidding reform in exchange for not exposing past misdoings, then she undercuts AG further by finding loopholes in the patents on their new atmospheric scrubbers and sets the stage for open bidding to mass produce them.

After her resounding success against Ares Group (corruption), she spirals downward, making promise after promise that she just can't keep. The atmospheric scrubbers that looked so promising just won't work, and despite her pledges and tireless work a solution seems as far away as ever. She covers up the failures, promising great things in the future, but it's all just talk. [Moderate rolls at the start, and then some disastrous rolls in the last four scenes, nothing but zeroes and lies.] She has bitter confrontations with her estranged husband over her "betrayal" and an ultimately selfish affair with Chief of Staff Spaniel from the sympathetic (Blue) Mayor's office.

corruption 45 -- stabilized

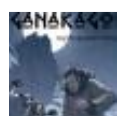
energy 37 (10 of it lies) -- significant progress

atmosphere 16 (lies, all lies!) -- no progress

In the end only the Council still Respects her (heck, she got them off the hook), and while her lies are never brought to light the News Network Corp Suspects her and she's Insecure about her failings and personal decisions. It's a haunted and defensive Dr. Kelly Perkins who takes the shuttle back to Earth.

(game two coming up)

Comments

**Bill_White**

August 2009

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Quote

Hey, I have a question. Did you play any personal scenes with Kelly and if so, why? That is, why did the Savior player call for a personal scene, and did doing so achieve that aim? For those who haven't played, personal scenes are interactions within a non-professional relationship the character is in; they have only a fictional component, without any game-mechanical consequences.

Tim C Koppang

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Ben,

It really sounds like you had a juicy story of corruption! I love how everything seemed to be going so well for Kelly at first, and that she tried to recapture some of that success later on in the game. I look forward to reading about game 2.

In addition to Bill's comments, did the mechanics of the game work for you? If you have any questions, please send them my way.

– Tim



ping

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Posted By: Bill_WhiteHey, I have a question. Did you play any personal scenes with Kelly and if so, why?

Yes we absolutely did in both games because of their interesting fictional nature and relation to the Savior. The first sympathy character was Kelly's estranged corrupt Mars contractor husband and the second game's sympathy character was Kelly's old friend who was a doctor treating her for an secret terminal condition and stabilizing her enough to work. For me, when I played Kelly, the scenes served to flesh out my take on the Savior so the narrations of the policies and the catastrophic failures and scandals (just wait until game 2 – snake eyes!) were stronger and consistent.



Ben_Robbins

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@ Bill -- Yep, what Ping said. I did feel some tension as the Governor, wanting to establish what was going on with the health markers but knowing if I did a personal scene I was giving the Savior the initiative so to speak. More on that later.

@ Tim -- I'm saving the rules observations for after the summary of the second game, coming soon. In a nutshell: the mechanics work magnificently.

Tim C Koppang

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It should probably be mentioned that personal scenes can be framed by either the Governor or the Savior. So it's not up to the Governor alone to provide the Savior a voice. Other than that, I will wait for Game 2!

– Tim



Ben_Robbins

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Yellow + Terrorism

We switched roles for game two -- I was Savior last time, now I'm Governor. We started off with a very different political climate, keeping Red (Republican) and Blue (Democrat) but adding Yellow (Nazi) and making them all equal minorities. Yep, the Nazi Party. To match that, we picked terrorism, funding and labor as our health markers.

Ping's Kelly Perkins was a former President, a powerful and influential figure on the world stage of diplomacy, an ambassador sans portfolio like Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton except in the Red party. We rolled friend/enemy and severe illness for the sympathy, but instead of a sick friend we decided that Kelly was the sick one (terminal brain tumor), and as Ping mentioned the friend was a doctor that Kelly pressured into secretly treating her while she was on Mars. This request in the first personal scene highlights President Perkins as a driven figure, determined to succeed at all costs even if it costs her old friend her medical license if the secret gets out. She's blind to her own arrogance, that only she can save Mars, something her grumpy old doctor friend bitterly points out. We definitely agree that if the secret of her condition got out it could undermine her credibility entirely -- who knows

how the brain tumor could be affecting her reasoning or judgment?

We quickly see that because funding to the colony is faltering, projects are on hold and there is mass unemployment among the frustrated workers who came here to build the city. Violence is simmering. But as the Yellow Councilman coldly puts it "what are they going to do, walk back to Earth?"

Right off the bat, the dice pressure ratchet up the drama. Kelly sweeps in and addresses the workers, calling for unity, but it's a disaster (rolled a 1 on the first roll). She meets with the Council party reps behind closed doors, but they're antagonized that she would just waltz in and put forward her own plans without even meeting with them first (Council dropped to contempt after that failure). Her Red allies are stymied and embarrassed by her failure, the Blues hate her policies to begin with, leaving the Yellow rep to act as broker and suggest that clearly that the greater security is needed. ID cards, curfew, checkpoints, all that kind of stuff. The Blues hate it, but the Reds have to ally with the Yellow after losing face to keep a majority. This is becomes a big theme of the game -- the Yellows using the terrorism threat and the labor problem to move their party into power and cement authoritarianism.

Kelly uses Progress and tries a more measured approach, putting through semi-secret legislation for wiring tapping and surveillance to catch the real troublemakers instead of just applying martial law (oh so Red). Ping gets up to 14, and probably would have liked to quit, but since she zero'd in the first scene she needs to make some headway on something. Bang, she rolls a 1. She takes the Deception, because otherwise she'd be making no progress. She describes a very public coup arresting a cell of workers before they can plant a bomb, but in truth the threat they posed is completely hype. Ouch. The Yellow party couldn't be happier, and ex-President Perkins is stuck with strange bedfellows.

Ping changes gears and focuses on the funding, convincing the member nations back on Earth that Mars is a worthy investment, but every time I get my turn I keep hammering away at the terrorism + labor issue. The Council institutes color-coded alert levels, broadcast in the corner of vid screens at all time. It's alert level Silver, then Indigo, then X-ray. Basically I'm just trying to torture her for every scene she does something other than deal with it. When she stabilizes funding and we introduce a new marker, radiation, I put in an opposition scene of the swank who's who celebration, only to have it interrupted by a bomb going off that nearly cracks the dome -- fractures cause radiation leakage that bathe the worker's quarter, displacing thousands of people. Was this an intentional attempt to destroy the dome, or a bomb-maker's workshop that went off accidentally, we don't know.

In President Perkins waterloo moment, she tries again to appeal to the people and restore unity (progress terrorism), but she gets a double-1 right out of the gate. Catastrophe. Worker marches erupt into fighting as Yellow gangs clash with protesters, and on the podium Kelly's medication and brain tumor get the better of her and she is publicly confused and incoherent, shattering her image as the strong, confident leader. Since that pops the lies of progress she made on terrorism, we narrate that once the Yellow party sees her value shot, they throw her under the bus and use their puppet bleeding heart Blue news anchor to release info about the hyped terrorist threat from the beginning, laying the blame for all the clandestine gestapo tactics at her feet. Kelly and the Red party look like the villains, with the Yellows again scheming to be the voice of security and moderation.

We've only got three progress scenes left and while funding is done, Ping has a measly 14 on terror and nothing on labor or radiation. Ping goes for broke and tries to eliminate the terrorist threat, bringing in crack investigators from Earth to sift through forensic evidence, CSI-style. To me this feels like dodging the issue, since the narrative has made it pretty apparent that the Yellows using the threat of terrorism to erode civil liberties is the real threat, but I wait to see how she narrates. She rolls and rolls and rolls, and gets up to 20 (34 total). With only two scenes left, she doesn't have time to spend another scene on terrorism, so she decides to go for broke and shoot for the 40... and rolls a 1. It's lies or failure. Arrests are made, the much hoopla is made that the "terrorists" have been found, and Kelly even lowers the alert level down to the peaceful "White", but in truth the threat is still there, and now everyone's guard is down.

Kelly finally gets around to addressing the languishing workers. In a desperate move she publicly admits her tumor to show that she has a lot in common with the irradiated and now cancer-ridden victims -- this is her swan song -- but her attempts to fix the dome and get proper medical treatment for the victims are muddled (1's on the first rolls of both remaining scenes). Those parts of the city are finally abandoned, temporarily of course.

funding 47 -- stabilized
terrorism 34 (20 of it lies) -- facade of significant progress
labor 0 -- no progress
radiation 0 -- no progress

Her condition garners sympathy, but also a certain degree of dismissive pity, encouraged by all the parties since they all want to be rid of her at this point. She leaves Mars to live her few remaining months a neutered martyr, unable to establish the crowning legacy of her career.



Ben Robbins

August 2009

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Rules Stuff

The Deceptions and Scandals are beautiful. It's the "what is your character willing to do?" part of the game. The book is wonderfully procedural and straightforward, but as I mention [elsewhere](#), revealing the deception concept as part of the opening pitch would be better than saving it until so late. The limited number of progress scenes and dice pressure seem tuned perfectly to tempt greatness.

Before play I was skeptical of everyone having a party alignment, but in play it was a great shorthand for complex relationships and motivations in supporting characters (like in the second game, where the lead anchor was a bleeding heart Blue, but the network chief was a Yellow clearly using him as a mouth piece).

The Fear cards had zero impact on our games. Choosing parties and health markers is what tapped our thoughts about government. I wonder if it would be better to do Fear cards as the last stage, so now that we've agreed we're playing a game about terrorism, etc. we can think about our government fears are that relate to those issues specifically. You can't really pick health markers based on the cards since only two of them are showing.

One thing we did that was helpful was to jot down the marker and results beneath each progress scene slot (like "14 lies labor"). It let us look back and see the continuum of events at a glance.

Questions & Issues

If a lie put you over 20 or 40, and you moved something from contempt to respect, and then a scandal moves you back down, do you also take a downshift for that?

Can the savior act against health markers before they are introduced in opposition scenes by the governor? In other words, can Kelly interpret what she thinks the markers mean and tackle them or is it up to the governor to phrase the specifics of the problem?

Going bust on the first roll -- I'm torn on this one. When we played it was narratively interesting to deal with cases where you rolled a 1 on your first roll in a progress scene, so your effort just failed no matter what you did. You couldn't even lie to make it work. But there were some times where I really, really wanted Kelly to lie and do whatever it took, particularly at the end, but I couldn't. One possible solution would be to let Kelly create a Deception if she rolls a 1 on the first roll, then roll again and take the second roll as the health of the lie. Obviously if you rolled a 1 the second time you got a lie and no benefit whatsoever, but them's the breaks. But I also kind of like the flat "too bad" result as is.



Ben Robbins

August 2009

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[Quote](#)

Posted By: Tim C KoppangIt should probably be mentioned that personal scenes can be framed by either the Governor or the Savior.

Yep, absolutely. We both framed personal scenes.

Tim C Koppang

August 2009

edited August 2009

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[Quote](#)

Ben,

Awesome! Just awesome. I have many comments, but I want to address your specific questions first. Look for a follow-up post later on.

If a lie put you over 20 or 40, and you moved something from contempt to respect, and then a scandal moves you back down, do you also take a downshift for that?

I'm not sure I entirely understand your question. Do you mean an "additional" downshift? If so, the answer is "no." Otherwise, the players would simply have to do too much bookkeeping. When a scandal occurs, the Savior only takes a hit to a number of Reputations equal to the number of Deception tokens he has accumulated. So if a Scandal occurs when the Savior has three Deception tokens, then three of his Reputations move down to Contempt (or Desperation). This happens regardless of what the Lies helped him to achieve in the past.

Can the savior act against health markers before they are introduced in opposition scenes by the governor? In other words, can Kelly interpret what she thinks the markers mean and tackle them or is it up to the governor to phrase the specifics of the problem?

The Savior can frame a Progress Scene for whatever Health Marker he chooses, regardless of whether there has been a corresponding Opposition Scene. The caveat is that the players should cooperate to decide what a certain Health Marker encompasses, both during the preparation phase and during actual play. Obviously, a Health Marker is also defined by the constraints of the fiction.

Going bust on the first roll -- I'm torn on this one. When we played it was narratively interesting to deal with cases where you rolled a 1 on your first roll in a progress scene, so your effort just failed no matter what you did. You couldn't even lie to make it work. But there were some times where I really, really wanted Kelly to lie and do whatever it took, particularly at the end, but I couldn't. One possible solution would be to let Kelly create a Deception if she rolls a 1 on the first roll, then roll again and take the second roll as the health of the lie. Obviously if you rolled a 1 the second time you got a lie and no benefit whatsoever, but that's the breaks. But I also kind of like the flat "too bad" result as is.

I appreciate the conundrum you're feeling. I had similar thoughts. Right now I like the "too bad" feel of the game, but I'm not 100% convinced. I should point out, though, that the Savior is allowed to take a Deception even if he rolls a 1 on the initial roll. He won't gain any Lie points, but he will still cover up his failure. This means that, in terms of the fiction, the people won't know that Kelly screwed up, and in terms of mechanics, the Savior doesn't have to move a Reputation down to Contempt.



Bill White

August 2009 [Flag](#)

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Posted By: ping

Posted By: Bill_WhiteHey, I have a question. Did you play any personal scenes with Kelly and if so, why?

Yes we absolutely did in both games because of their interesting fictional nature and relation to the Savior. The first sympathy character was Kelly's estranged corrupt Mars contractor husband and the second game's sympathy character was Kelly's old friend who was a doctor treating her for an secret terminal condition and stabilizing her enough to work. For me, when I played Kelly, the scenes served to flesh out my take on the Savior so the narrations of the policies and the catastrophic failures and scandals (just wait until game 2 - snake eyes!) were stronger and consistent.

Posted By: Ben Robbins@ Bill -- Yep, what Ping said. I did feel some tension as the Governor, wanting to establish what was going on with the health markers but knowing if I did a personal scene I was giving the Savior the initiative so to speak. More on that later.

Thanks, guys. The reason I asked was that Tim demonstrated the game for me at Gencon and I had a tough time wrapping my head around the non-mechanical character of the non-progress scenes. If they don't have any effect, why have them? The Governor's obstacle-framing scenes (what are they called again) I can sort of see, in that they shape the fictional context in which the Savior can frame a progress scene, but the personal scenes weren't clicking for me. But I get what Ping is saying: you get a stronger feel for the "person" you are playing. To a certain degree, I see the Perkins character as Frank Chalmers from *Red Mars*, with the same kind of public/private split. In any event, now I get it: personal scenes inform the fiction, and make Perkins' almost inevitable failure that much more poignant.

Tim C Koppang

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[Quote](#)

Ben:

The Deceptions and Scandals are beautiful. It's the "what is your character willing to do?" part of the game. The book is wonderfully procedural and straightforward, but as I mention elsewhere, revealing the deception concept as part of the opening pitch would be better than saving it until so late. The limited number of progress scenes and dice pressure seem tuned perfectly to tempt greatness.

I appreciate the kind words about Deceptions and Progress Scenes. And I agree, I sometimes have a terrible time picking out what exactly people will find most intriguing about my games. For example, the multi-generational mechanics in Hero's Banner were added just to tie the entire game together at the end. Turns out those were the mechanics that most jazzed the players. At least now with the Ashcan process I can figure out these things ahead of time before the final release.

Before play I was skeptical of everyone having a party alignment, but in play it was a great shorthand for complex relationships and motivations in supporting characters (like in the second game, where the lead anchor was a bleeding heart Blue, but the network chief was a Yellow clearly using him as a mouth piece).

I'm glad to hear the political parties worked for you guys. Did the color-coded names do anything for you? Were they confusing? In an earlier draft of the game, I simply said that the players should use the modern political party names. But I made the change to colors in order to abstract the parties a bit and avoid confusion.

I'm not surprised to hear that the Fear Cards were less useful to you. In practice, I've found that players latch onto the political parties, the Fear Cards, or the organizations as a primary point of focus. The rest tends to fade away. I'm okay with that generally, but did you at least find the Fear Cards a useful exercise during preparation? What I mean is that did the Fear Cards get you thinking about the sort of governmental problems that you might want to tell a story about?

I do appreciate the suggestion about moving Fear Card creation to the end of the preparation phase. I'll take another look at the order and see what makes most sense.

One thing we did that was helpful was to jot down the marker and results beneath each progress scene slot (like "14 lies labor"). It let us look back and see the continuum of events at a glance.

Cool! I like this idea. Although I think it works best as an optional suggestion for certain players. The character sheet is crowded enough!



Ben Robbins

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[Quote](#)

Color-coded parties is great -- it's much better to have them be abstract and not literal real world parties.

Posted By: Tim C Koppang
In practice, I've found that players latch onto the political parties, the Fear Cards, or the organizations as a primary point of focus.

Not the health markers? For me, parties + health markers were the key bits that said what the opposition was going to be about.

Since the Fear cards are secret (except the two that are revealed) I don't see how they can be useful for getting the players on the same page about the game they want to play. If they're for private reflection, thinking what you want the game to be about, then they should probably be at the very beginning, before you choose parties, etc. but again they're weaker because they're secret.

Jumping all the way back to a conceptual level, I'm visualizing two ways the game could flow:

– pick details (parties and markers) and see how those choices surface what you are think about government => emerging shape

– start with a specific complex idea (like a fear card or a big picture) and pick details (parties and markers) that address that conscious idea => intended shape

When we played I'd say we were mostly the former: by the time we had parties picked that changed the health markers I wanted, but it was an evolving dialog. Now if we had open fear cards or something and said "these are the concepts we want to get out" that would be the second case, and we would pick parties and markers to fit that. But with secret fear cards most of the shape you might intend is hidden.

I think the emerging shape also works better socially -- it's a progressive dialog, so the two players can come to an agreement through a series of small choices and compromises, rather than having to make one big decision at the start.

Another twist would be to put fear cards at the end, and have each player write one card relating to each marker (something about terrorism, something about labor, etc). Then write that on the back so you can see it, and flip the other players' card when you want inspiration on that marker.

But all in all I really don't think the game needs a lot of change: it works great, the Fear cards being the only loose end (in our games). And they had no negative effect, they just didn't do anything.

Tim C Koppang

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[Quote](#)

Posted By: Ben Robbins
Not the health markers? For me, parties + health markers were the key bits that said what the opposition was going to be about.

You're right. Health Markers are certainly number one. What I meant was that, aside from the direct problems that the Health Markers force onto Kelly, the players tend to latch onto either the political parties, the Fear Cards, or the organization structure to flesh out the story.

Your comments on Fear Cards are thought provoking. I agree that they can be tweaked to gain a bit more narrative punch. But I also like the idea of them being kept secret until used. The Fear Cards are less about direct

collaboration (at least in their creation) and more about bringing personal issues to the table. I realize private creation may work against the goal of tying them into the fiction, but I don't want to lose the more intimate feel of the Cards. A simple reordering may be what I'm looking for. Either way, it's something to think about.

Oh, and I also wanted to add that I agree with your first assessment of the conceptual structure of the game. An emerging sense of what the players feel about their own governments is definitely what I'm after. I hadn't thought about it in those terms, but I think your wording is basically correct. If it went the other way (starting with a pre-conceived concept and making a statement about that concept), I think I'd have to redo a bunch of mechanics.

Tim C Koppang

Quote

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Posted By: Bill_WhiteThanks, guys. The reason I asked was that Tim demonstrated the game for me at Gencon and I had a tough time wrapping my head around the non-mechanical character of the non-progress scenes. If they don't have any effect, why have them?

Bill, I hadn't forgotten about your comments here. And actually, you may be interested to know that you are not the only person to wonder why the Personal and Opposition Scenes aren't tied into the mechanics more directly. It's an initial criticism that has been unexpected (but not really surprising), and I was hoping to talk about it a bit more with you.

Let me start with a tangent. If you've ever played Zombie Cinema, you'll know that playing to "win" the game (by escaping) isn't the point. If you play Zombie Cinema to win, the game won't be very satisfying. I think Mars Colony is going to run into some of the same misconceptions. It's easy to think that the point of playing Mars Colony is to win (by saving the Colony). The push your luck dice mechanics sort of encourage this point of view. But playing that way would be missing the point.

In the play to win context, Personal and Opposition Scenes do, I think, become vestigial. As you put it, "what's the point?" But from a Story Now context, I think they serve a very important purpose as discussed above. I also like that they open up the game and let the players make a wider range of creative choices. I think that playtesting so far, for the most part, has borne this out quite well.

So my question is how can I best convey this to the reader? Obviously, I don't want the dice mechanics to overwhelm play, but they are important as a tool to build tension.



Joshua A.C. Newman

Quote

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HOW DO I GET



Bill_White

Quote

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Tim -- I think you've got two choices. One is keep doing what you're doing: explaining that the point of personal scenes is to flesh out the fiction, and the payoff for doing so is a fuller appreciation of the character that you and your buddy will spend two or three hours getting to know. That may be enough. The other option is to make it matter, somehow, to the game as a whole. The only thing I can think of is to make personal scenes matter to the Savior's self-perceptions: "I may have doomed millions to Martian serfdom, but at least I've reconciled with my estranged son." But that may destroy the larger (rhetorical?) point that is currently served by the structure of the game as it stands: the personal scenes may help us understand the Savior as a person, but they fundamentally do not matter in the larger context. So what if Perkins reconciles with his son? It matters exactly as much and as little as if Hitler loved puppies, or if Kennedy cheated on his wife. In other words, there's a subtle point about the role of "character" in politics the way you have it. -- Bill



ping

Quote

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Posted By: Tim C KoppangYour comments on Fear Cards are thought provoking. I agree that they can be tweaked to gain a bit more narrative punch. But I also like the idea of them being kept secret until used. The Fear Cards are less about direct collaboration (at least in their creation) and more about bringing personal issues to the table. I realize private creation may work against the goal of tying them into the fiction, but I don't want to lose the more intimate feel of the Cards. A simple reordering may be what I'm looking for. Either way, it's something to think about.

I appreciate the writing of the fear cards as an intellectual and thought-provoking exercise. However, in practice, the fear cards seem very disjointed from the rest of the game because there's no mechanical effect nor any direct

relationship to the fiction (unlike the personal scenes). In my experience, there were too many mental steps to quickly link a generic thought about my government to a health marker and then try to tie it to the fiction. To be happily honest, there were just too many juicy ideas already on the table that they weren't necessary for inspiration!

All this leads me to say that Mars Colony is a joy to play and a true stand-out. I appreciate its simple mechanics that for being so simple are very motivating and effective for exploring societal issues in the fiction. The beautiful set up that Kelly is the sole "Savior" for the Mars Colony further helps the players cut to the chase and engage the premise.

In short: the game is a gem.

Tim C Koppang

[Quote](#)


September 2009 [Flag](#)

Thanks again for the kind words and encouragement! I've found this thread very heartening and useful.

I very much agree that there is a lot of material in the game that is just waiting to be used. I'm okay with that, and okay with the reality that not all of it will get used in every game. In fact, that's sort of on purpose. I think two-player games benefit when the system provides more than you'd get in a multi-player game (where the players can be counted on to add that same level of variety). I'll be giving some more thought to the Fear Cards. I certainly want to keep them for all the reasons I've talked about so far. But I certainly don't want them to be so divorced from play that they become an abstract exercise. So thanks again for the feedback, and of course if you have any more questions, etc., I'm all ears.

- Tim

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