

Hester Prynne: PI

An Examination of Space, Place, and Identity in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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It's important to note, before going any further, that what I did with my game is reflective of the book moreso than actual Puritan culture, because Hawthorne's representation of Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* were not entirely period-accurate, instead reflecting a more Victorian set of values.

Introduction

In *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne is implied to be able to see the sins of others in her community. This reminded me of the investigation in the game Clue, which then inspired me to create a game as a way to investigate the story while providing the players with something new each time.

Objective

The goal of the game is to match the sin committed with a member of the Puritan community and the location that they committed the sin, recognizing the intersection of space, place, and identity in each moment.

Methodology

Why a board game?

I thought that a board game would be the most interactive way to engage with the concepts of space, place, and identity, because they can be adopted quickly and then removed and shuffled around without the time and effort that either a close reading or playing something involved like a cooperative storytelling game would require.

How did Reid, Ruetenik, and Tomc influence my board game?

These sources gave me a perspective into redemption narratives and love, and thus formed the basis for the choice of characters I did and did not use for suspects.

Suspects (Playable Characters):

- Roger Chillingworth:
 - Clear motivations and sense of identity in the novel
 - An understandable character in his motivation
 - Easy to play
- Mistress Hibbins:
 - One of the few named female characters
 - I wanted diversity in player options, but was limited by the source material
- Arthur Dimmesdale:
 - An easy character to play
 - Much to lose by being outed as committing a crime, even though the society wants to absolve him
 - "The Salem community...has only ambiguous public words and actions upon which to determine the true intent of the minister's swan song. It is thus reasonable for some people to choose not to convict the minister" (Ruetenik 70)
- Governor Bellingham:
 - A character with so much importance also has so much to lose
 - Yet nothing about the book can change, even with this interlude of the game set in a nebulous point sometime between Hester becoming less of a pariah and the identity of Pearl's father being exposed
 - His identity would not be changed at all by any sins he committed, which becomes a fascinating look at Hawthorne's Puritans in this remix

How did Donoghue, Budick, and Colacurcio influence my board game?

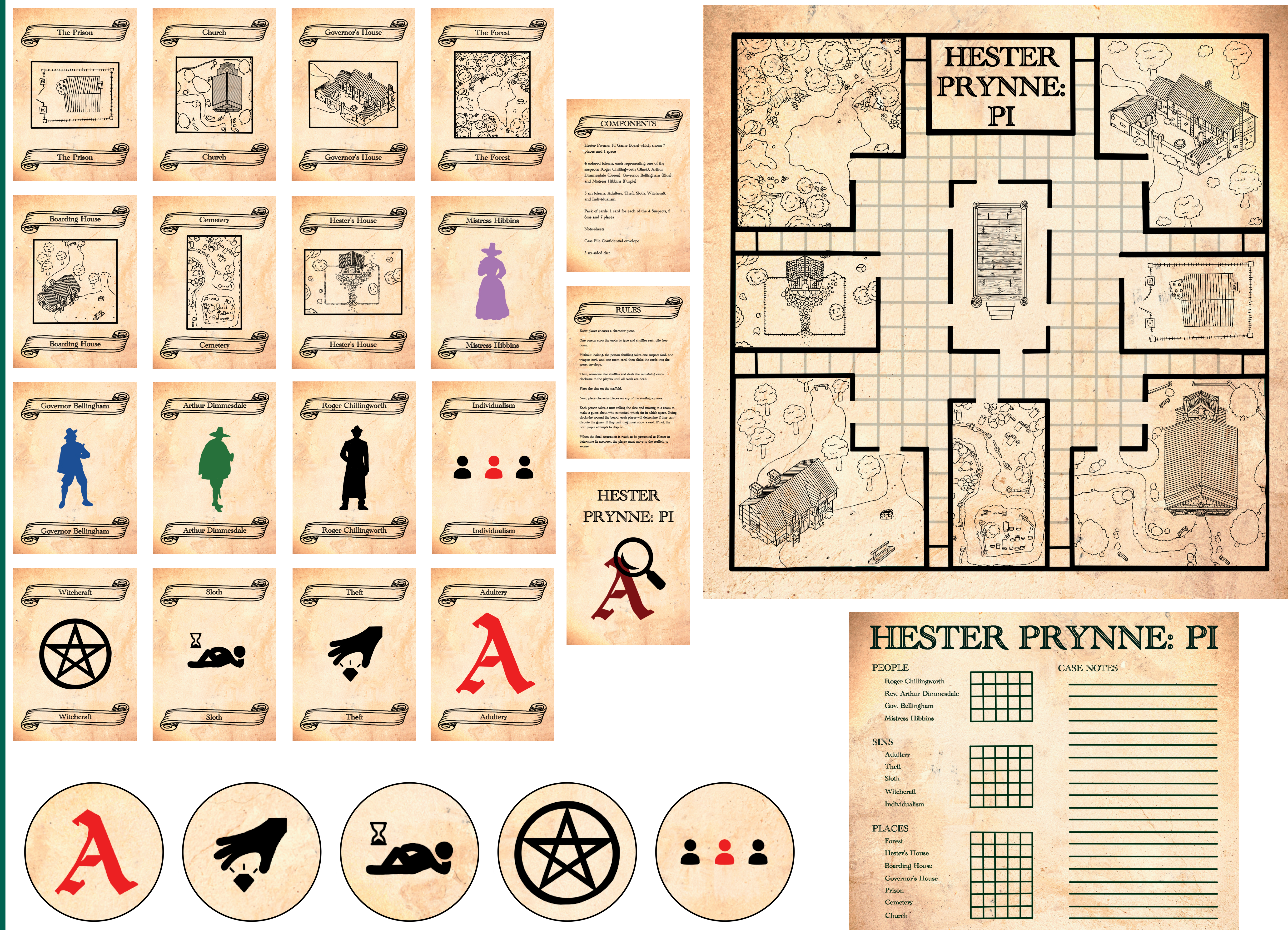
"[Hawthorne] conceives of a sin as a social transgression only, an act by which I isolate myself from the community to which I belong" (Donoghue 218). This is why I chose sins that would matter in this sense of the novel, and not mortal or horrendous sins.

Budick speaks about the familiarity of the novel, and the pervasive way that it influences our culture and cultural symbols. This is why I chose to draw it the way I did, with these symbols on the back of every card.

Colacurcio talks about the ways in which Hawthorne was cognizant of our culture's identity, with western identity, depending on the "allied experiences of sin and sorrow" (23). I took this and used it to influence my choice of gameplay, making it individual, but based on cooperative play.

Non-suspects (Non-Playable Characters):

- Pearl:
 - As a child, the potential for the sin of adultery in the game was problematic
 - I also had to consider identity. "Pearl's lack of a father lies at the heart of *The Scarlet Letter*" (Reid 247).
 - She has too much at stake as a character
 - As a child, she has too much potential
 - She is too complex to subject our wills onto and step into as a sort of person suit or temporary cosplay
- Hester:
 - Hester had to be the arbitrator of this game because it is as much about the identity of the characters as it is about the identity of the players, much in the same way as the novel's introduction, The Custom House, is about Hawthorne himself, and Hawthorne as a character
 - "As many readers of *The Scarlet Letter* have noted, Hester Prynne -- ruined, abandoned, and forced to live out her life on the negligible edges of her society -- is manifestly offered as an analog to the Hawthorne of the preface, his illegitimacy as an artist commensurate with hers as a fallen woman" (Tomc 471)



Conclusions

My goal in making this game was to encourage interaction with *The Scarlet Letter* from those who might not otherwise give the book a second look. Modern storytelling, especially movies and television, inspire fanworks and engagement easily. Older literature doesn't. In creating this remix of *The Scarlet Letter* I hope to inspire engagement with this story and the important themes and narratives within. This game might be useful in a classroom setting with high school upperclassmen, or with incoming college students as a way to connect with classic American literature on a different level.

Sources

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