A Short Guide to Demo-ing Polaris

By Ben Lehman

This assumes that you already know how to play the game, and are very comfortable with key phrases and the like.

Get two or three people to sit down at a table with you. How to do this we'll cover in the pitching section, but for right now let's just assume things.

Shake everyone's hand and introduce yourself. Talk a little bit about your relationship to the game. This should take 30 second maximum. Make sure that your demo target (the person you think will most enjoy the game -- I target girls and sensitive looking folks) is sitting across from you.

Give a brief rundown of the game. "Long ago, there was this perfect civilization. They had a great society, beautiful art, beautiful music, no one was every hungry or tired, there was never any war." Look a little bored ... such a society is boring, so this shouldn't be hard. "Then, they made a Mistake, and it utterly destroyed them. There was no history about them, no stories about them, no ruins left, no colony elsewhere that survived. Nothing was left by bare ice. It was as if they were never there at all." Pause. "The characters we're going to play are positioned in time after the Mistake, but before the end. Further, the characters we're going to play are Knights of the Stars, sworn to undo the Mistake, to defeat the demons that it has brought into the world and the sun that it has brought into the sky, and to make the world perfect again. Now, we know that they fail, completely and utterly. As we play the game, the characters will also realize this. The question is not 'can you save the world' but 'knowing that you will fail to save the world, what do you do?'"

Now start character creation. Introduce the sheet as you fill out each step.

"In an ordinary game of Polaris, we'd each have a character, but for the demo we're going to make one character together. Now, here's a character sheet." Put the sheet on the center of the table. "The first thing we need to do is choose a name for the character. Fortunately, everyone in the Polaris setting has the names of stars, so it's easy to pick a name. You" point to someone "choose a name from this list," show a star names list "and write it into this box in the center of the sheet."

"Great! (pronounce the name) Now we're going to fill out the rest of the sheet. See these parts around the edge? Those are the Themes, and we're going to fill them out now."

Point the Offices. "The offices theme describes the roles that you fill in society. These can be formal roles -- 'I am king' 'I'm a senator' -- or informal roles 'I'm reviled. I'm a hero.' All starting characters are knights of the order of the stars, so you (point to someone) write down 'knight of the stars' there under offices. Great!"

Point to Blessings. "The blessings theme describes your tools. This is usually your stuff -- your sword, any other weapons, any magical devices -- but it can also be people or animals or even demons, as long as they are largely available as tools for your use rather than individuals in their own right. All characters star with a starlight sword, which is like a lightsaber but cooler." (this usually gets a laugh "So, you, write down 'starlight sword' under Blessings."

Point to Abilities. "Abilities is a broad category -- it's any traits of the character, or anything that they're especially good at, or any special abilities. 'I'm big,' is an ability, and so is 'I'm cowardly.' But also 'I know the lore of the stars,' or 'I can fly.' All knights have special training in dealing with demons, so they start with 'Lore of Demons' as an ability. You, write that down under 'ability' there."

Point to Fate. "Fate is a bit of a catch-all category -- it's people, demons, events or ideas that are going to be important to the story, but we don't yet know how. If we were playing a full game, we'd each be making a character, and our starting fate would be a person or demon that we shared, together, as a fate. Since we're not doing that, just pick a name from this list and write it down. We'll figure it all out later." ***don't*** have them pick extra aspects.

Point to the cosmos. "Okay, this big circle in the center of the sheet is called the cosmos. You know how, in a lot of games, you end up writing down a lot of character names and places and in the margin of your sheet, so you can remember them? Well, the cosmos is kind of like a big margin of the sheet, just put in the center. There's four parts."

Point to the Heart section. "This is the Heart section, and it's for the main character only. We've already filled it out."

Point to the New Moon section. "This is the New Moon section. It's for people with whom you have a close personal relationship: Friends, lovers, family members if you're close with them. Now, I want you to pick a name from the sheet and write it in the new moon box. Cool!"

Point to the Full Moon section. "This is the Full Moon section. It's for people with whom you have a more formal relationship. Like, you know how you have friends from work and you might like each other and hang out sometimes but if you didn't work together you wouldn't be friends? That would be in the full moon section. Also, your servants, your superiors in the knights, your parents if you see them once a year and they nod harshly at you while you bow at them. You, pick a name from the list and write it in the full moon section. Cool!"

Point the Mistaken section. "This is the Mistaken section. It's for all demons -- even if you have a close trusted friendship with a demon, it still goes here -- and all people who actively seek to do you harm. Now, I want you to pick a name from the sheet and write it in the mistaken box. Some demons don't have the names of stars, but those that do often used to be people."

"Now, see how these is divided into three parts? That's central to the game. Let's say that this is (person across from you's) character. So she's the heart, and controls everything which is in the heart box -- as in, her character. Now, you, sitting to her left, would be new moon, and you'd control all the characters in the new moon box -- all her friends and lovers and such. You, sitting to the right, would be the full moon, and you would control all the characters in the full moon box. Me, sitting across from her, would be the mistaken, and I get to control all the characters in the mistaken box, plus the environment." I point to the boxes the emphasize the relationship between physical space and the sheet.
"But, if this were your character," and here I rotated the sheet 90=B0, "then you would be the heart," and go into the different arrangements.

(If there are only three people at the table, I use a bag or water bottle as a sample "fourth player" for this part.)

Point the values section. "This part is for the on-going plot structure of the game, and we're not going to use it for the demo since we only play one scene."

Pull out the key phrases sheet, folded so that you can only see the four general key phrases. Say "Polaris as a game is structured around use of key phrases. In a lot of games, when you would roll a die, instead, in Polaris, you say a phrase. And there is a phrase to start out the game. So I want you to read this first phrase here" point to the first phrase. "Good! Now we've started the game.

Say "Okay, and now I'm going to explain a couple of things real quick. First, as we play the game, we're all going to be controlling these characters and saying what they do. In a lot of role-playing games, you state what you're trying to do and wait for confirmation. 'I swing at him. Do I hit?' In Polaris, you can't do that. You have to say what you do and what the consequences of that are. So, for instance 'I swing at him and I cut his head off' or 'I swing at him and I miss wildly and my sword goes flying out of my hand.' You can do this with non-combat things, too. 'I look at her and she falls in love with me instantly.'"

"Now, at some point someone is going to say something that makes you go 'huh, I don't think so,' or maybe 'wow, I think that should be more complicated.' At that point, we're going to start conflict. I'm not going to introduce the rules for that right now, but as Mistaken it's my job to drive for conflict, so when something comes up, just say 'I'd like to have a conflict' and we'll go from there."

"Okay, the game is structured by key phrases, and there is a key phrase to start or end scenes. Either the heart or the mistaken can use it, but in this case, I'm going to start the scene, because it's my demo. But you" talking to the person sitting across from you "can use it to end the scene whenever you like. The phrase is 'and so it was,' and it's used like this.'"

At this point, I frame a scene and play it out. My standard scene is this

"And so it was that Sir HeartCharacter (and his friend sir FullMoonCharacter, if there is a four player) returned home after years at the war to find Sir HeartCharacter's estate in ruins, the servants all slaughtered, the halls running with blood. Terrified, he made his way to the inner chambers, where he saw MistakenCharacter standing over the nearly dying body of his (beloved or child) NewMoonCharacter."

Variations and bangs for this scene:
1) The demon has taken the knight's place, and no one remembers him.
2) The demon is the lover of the knight's lover or child, and she cares more for the demon.
3) The demon offers to save the child's life at a price.
4) The demon has an unspoken history with the knight.
I just toss these in if I can.

There's alternate versions, of course. I used this one a little at GenCon: "And so it was that Sir HeartCharacters son, NewMoonCharacter, came to his father to ask his permission to marry his beloved, MistakenCharacter, a demon." It went well.

Always escalate the scene if the players are hesitant, de-escalate the scene if they are violent. The goal is to throw in catches and nasty bits. Make sure to draw in the moons -- ask them what their characters are doing and saying.

Once conflict comes up, I give a brief introduction to the key phrases, with an emphasis on But Only If. I ignore the cost-phrases (And Furthermore and You Ask Far Too Much) for the purposes of the demo. "Just as everything else in Polaris is focused on key phrases, we use them for conflict. The basic phrase is 'But only if' which means that you're okay with that thing happening if this other thing will also happen."

The best thing to do is to start conflict yourself, based on some statement of the player, but that's not always possible.

I run through the "phrases that deal with the moons," if they come up, as quickly as possible -- just saying "we shall see what comes of it" or encouraging my opposite to do so. The goal is to showcase the conflict.

When the scene is closed (remember the key phrases!), take some time to talk about the game, and give thoughts about what the next scene could be, and where the game might go from here. Shake everyone's hand again, talk about how much fun you had, put a copy of the book into their hands, and tell them the price.

General Key Phrases:

LONG AGO, THE PEOPLE WERE DYING AT THE END OF THE WORLD.	Start the game.
BUT HOPE WAS NOT YET LOST, FOR N_ STILL HEARD THE SONG OF THE STARS.	Introduce a Protagonist.
AND SO IT WAS…	begin or end a scene.
BUT THAT ALL HAPPENED LONG AGO, AND NOW THERE ARE NONE WHO REMEMBER IT.	End the game.

Key Conflict Phrases:

BUT ONLY IF…	Suggest some additional event or compensation. Your opponent may respond with any phrase.
IT SHALL NOT COME TO PASS.	Roll to decide the conflict. Conflict ends. May be used at any time.
IT WAS NOT MEANT TO BE.	Follows "BUT ONLY IF." Your opponent does not get the last thing that he asked for. You do not get the last thing you asked for. Conflict ends. May not be used at the start of a conflict.
AND THAT WAS HOW IT HAPPENED.	Accept all statements and end conflict.
BUT IT WAS NO MATTER…	Negate or oppose a Moon's statement.
WE SHALL SEE WHAT COMES OF IT.	Take up a Moon's statement as your own.