

SPIRALIS



# SPIRALIS

## **A Roleplaying Game of Cosmic Horror and Eldritch Mystery**

**By Aaron M. Sturgill**

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updates, and more roleplaying game resources.

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Spiralis*, a roleplaying game of supernatural mystery and dread inspired by *Cthulhu Dark* and the Powered By the Apocalypse family of games. In this game, one to five players will portray Investigators, peering into the secrets of the cosmos, which will probably shatter their lives in various ways. Additionally, one person will be the Keeper, who will prepare and present an investigative scenario: conflicts to be resolved, clues to be uncovered, and consequences for the Investigators' actions.

Although some familiarity with other roleplaying games is expected, first-time roleplayers should be able to follow these rules.

## PLAYER ACTIVITIES

Players will determine their Investigators' basic information, as well as three core Stats that will fluctuate (mostly downward) in play. This is a game of spiraling terror, and more than one Investigator is very likely to meet a grotesque fate.

Creating your Investigator should take 5 to 15 minutes at most, with substantial input from the Keeper and other players at the table. Each player should have a handful of dice: three six-sided, one eight-sided, and one ten-sided. These are represented by symbols throughout the main text: , , , etc. It helps if two  are a simple and identical (small or black), while the other three dice are completely different (large or colored), but this isn't strictly necessary.

# SCENARIOS, ETC.

*Spiralis* is intended to take a group of players through a short campaign-length story arc (two to six sessions of play). If the Keeper is not designing her own mysteries, she will most often utilize published scenarios from games such as *Call of Cthulhu*, *Trail of Cthulhu*, *Cthulhu Dark*, *The Cthulhu Hack*, or elsewhere. These adventures will often require minor or no tweaking whatsoever; you can just ignore the stat blocks for those systems, and have the players roll for the clues as they come up in each scene. (More tips for scenario design on p. 34.)

## TERMS

For clarity, I will refer to individuals playing the game (the Keeper and the players) as **she/her**. Their fictional counterparts, the Investigators, are referred to as **he/him**. Below are some unique terms used in this game that you will find throughout the book.

**Action (or Action Roll):** A dice roll (always one to three dice) used to resolve something an Investigator is attempting to accomplish or discover.

**Agenda:** A guiding principle for the players and the Keeper which will drive the fiction in a specific way.

**Critical Insight:** The best possible outcome from an Action roll, defined as complete success plus a glimpse of cosmic insight or other fictional bonus.

**Current Level (or Level):** The fluid rating of a Stat, as opposed to the die attached to it (which is static).

**Fiction, The:** The narrative created at the table during sessions of play. Interchangeable with ‘story’.

**Investigation:** A defined narrative arc, or story. Consists of a beginning, middle, and end; may comprise one or more sessions of play.

**Investigators:** The fictional characters portrayed by the players, who will follow the clues and uncover the mystery.

**Keeper:** Many games call this player the GM, or Game Master. Her role is to prepare an Investigation, perhaps pregenerated Investigators for the players, and portray the world around them in the fiction.

**Keeper Characters (KCs):** The supporting cast of allies and threats, portrayed by the Keeper. Often known as NPCs.

**Player Characters (PCs):** Used when referencing both player(s) and Investigator(s) inclusively.

**Stats:** Three traits that all Investigators share in common (though in varying measure): Sanity, Stamina, and Standing.

**Stat Check:** A die roll (always one die) that determines whether an Investigator is harmed by a particular trauma.

**Vital Clue:** A clue that must be discovered by the Investigators in order to proceed to a following scene.

# YOUR INVESTIGATOR

The *Spiralis* Investigator sheet (and condensed rules) can be found at [trailofdice.weebly.com/spiralis](http://trailofdice.weebly.com/spiralis).

## PLAYER AGENDA

These are the things that you, as a player, should aim to do at all times, both during Investigator creation and throughout play.

### 1. Play the Mood

### 2. Seek the Mystery

### 3. Share the Fiction

## 1. PLAY THE MOOD

*Spiralis* is suited to a serious exploration of tension, uncertainty, and cosmic terror. That being said, your play group will have a unique tolerance for out-of-character jocularity. Some players (or Keepers) will feel that this sort of meta-humor always detracts from the horrific tone of the game, while others find it easier to flip between humorous digression and grave fiction-making. Do your best to read the situation; if jokes are met with blank stares, consider substituting a complementary fictional element, such as a sight, smell, or sound that fits with another player's narration.

## 2. SEEK THE MYSTERY

Why, exactly, is your Investigator putting himself in harm's way for the dubious reward of horrifying revelation? He must pursue the mystery at any cost, and it's your job as the player to make that doomed single-mindedness believable and compelling. This starts when you create your Investigator: what event triggered your character's hell-bent curiosity, and what about his Profession makes him well-suited to it? This agenda should continue during play, as you strive to make decisions for your Investigator that propel the Investigation, even when running for your life or just calling the authorities might make better sense to a rational mind.

## 3. SHARE THE FICTION

It can be tempting to create a 'loner' Investigator, but this isn't just your story. First and foremost, create your Investigators simultaneously, together at the table (it doesn't take long). Build relationships with the other Investigators, either into your backstory or at the outset of the game, and look for opportunities to support their goals or share the spotlight in a scene. If you notice that a quieter player hasn't gotten to narrate as much as others recently, ask her directly: "What do you think about what's going on?" Don't wait for someone else, even the Keeper, to engage less vocal players.

In addition to casting the spotlight on other PCs, there are times when your own input can support the narrative, even if your Investigator is otherwise engaged or not present in the scene. As long as you're not talking over anyone else, feel free to add colorful fiction to any scene, especially if it's directly supporting the actions of another player (or the Keeper).



# FIRST STEPS

## NAME

First, choose a **Name**. Your human identity always gives you one die (6) to use for Actions.

These are, of course, tied to the time and place in which the Investigation is set. Players and Keepers may want to consult online collections of names from various eras and locales.

## PROFESSION

Then, choose a **Profession**. Your expertise gives you another 6 to use for Actions in which it is applicable. Consider this to be a broad skill-set: you are capable in any area generally found within your Profession.

The setting of your Investigation dictates what sorts of Professions are available or appropriate. Below are a few examples, from common Lovecraftian historical settings, and from more obscure eras and locales.

Traditional United States and Great Britain, 1920s-1930s	Obscure Further historical, science fiction, etc.
Professor	Benedictine Monk
Artist	Roman Legionnaire
Dishwasher	Starbase Physician
Police Detective	Terraforming Administrator
Private Investigator	Asteroid Mining Technician
Antiquarian	Xenobiologist
Dilettante	Psychohistorian
Hobo	Temporal Special Agent

When working with the other players to select your Profession, consider the various social strata of your game's setting. Are social classes at all relevant? Fantasy fiction tends to eschew issues of class and privilege, allowing paupers and princesses to act and react similarly, for the most part. However, the Lovecraftian genre is situated much closer to our own world, and is therefore liable to touch on more subtle and troubling aspects of social stratification. Will your vagabond be able to conduct an effective investigation with another player's wealthy socialite? How will the impoverished residents of Red Hook respond to your middle class white detectives coming in and trying to solve their problems for them? I won't presume to give any sort of correct answer for these delicate topics, only suggest that it be discussed openly at the outset of your game.



Lastly, choosing different Professions can be tricky in scenarios where the Investigators all share the same occupation (soldiers, miners, monks, deep space colonists, etc.). In these cases, simply redefine Profession as Specialization: for instance, a military platoon can variously specialize in firearms, intelligence, communications, command, etc.

# STATS

All Investigators are rated in three identical **Stats**:

- ▶ **Sanity** (mental and emotional resilience)
- ▶ **Stamina** (physical hardiness)
- ▶ **Standing** (social status)

Circle a die for each Stat (6, 8, or 10); each must be different, so you'll have one of each. Don't worry if your Stats are the same as those of another PC—Investigators are differentiated in the fiction more than the mechanics.

Stats will fluctuate (mostly drop) in levels, but you start at the highest face for each die you chose (e.g., if you circled a 6 for Sanity, write 6 in the Current Level box).



Note that, mechanically, your Stats are strictly reactive: basically, you make a Stat Check in response to experiencing trauma. In terms of the fiction, you the player may determine what Stat levels might indicate about your Investigator's abilities. For instance, a 45-year-old steelworker with Stamina 10 might have vastly different levels of agility, dexterity, or brute strength than a world-class gymnast with the same Stamina rating. There are no mechanical guidelines for this minutia—work it out in the fiction.

Example: Flora is creating her first Investigator. She chooses a name: Robert Briggs, and then a Profession: Police Detective.

Next she selects Robert's Stat dice, which will help her flesh out his background and capabilities. She takes 10 in Sanity, 8 in Stamina, and 6 in Standing.

While these dice are not prescriptive of Robert's innate abilities, Flora has a general idea that: (a) his high Sanity indicates a strong will or commitment to faith; (b) his above-average Stamina suggests that he's at least in decent shape; and (c) his mediocre Standing could mean he's not on the short list for a promotion.



# THE GAME

There are two types of die rolls in *Spiralis*: **Stat Checks** and **Actions**.

## STAT CHECKS


When you experience a trauma related to one of your Stats, the Keeper will ask you to make a Check: roll the die associated with the Stat in question. If the result is less than your current level, you lose a level. (If the result is equal to or greater than your current level, you're okay.) You also make a Stat Check when a risked Stat die rolls highest in an Action roll.

Here are a few examples of what might prompt these Checks.

Sanity	Stamina	Standing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Glimpsing a severed limb.</li><li>▶ Realizing a terrible truth about your ancestry.</li><li>▶ Confronting a horrible, eldritch creature.</li><li>▶ Becoming lost and isolated from familiar surroundings for an extended period.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Being pushed down a flight of stairs.</li><li>▶ Being punched or kicked repeatedly.</li><li>▶ Running at a high exertion for an extended period.</li><li>▶ Suffering extended hunger, dehydration, or other critical deprivation.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Getting caught telling a lie.</li><li>▶ Turning your back on a trusted friend (or vice versa).</li><li>▶ Being publicly humiliated as a result of your investigations.</li><li>▶ Burning bridges by calling in favors one too many times.</li></ul>

Note the varying severity in the above examples. The Keeper will let you know when a trauma is severe enough to warrant a Check.

Players, remember to Play the Mood (p. 06) by narrating your Investigator's response to various trauma. You don't go chasing a suspect if your leg is broken, and you might not be in a place to comfort a witness if you yourself are emotionally struggling with what you've seen.

*Example: Robert has a  in Sanity, with a current level of 8. After seeing a mutilated corpse, the Keeper calls for a Sanity Check. Flora rolls the green ten-sider, and the result is 6, a failure, causing Robert's Sanity level to drop to 7. Flora describes Robert fleeing the scene and vomiting.*

## REGAINING STATS

When a Stat level reaches 3 or lower, your Keeper may allow you to regain lost Stat levels in the following ways:

- ▶ **Sanity:** Destroying Mythos-related artifacts, tomes, locations, etc. One level for each rare item destroyed.
- ▶ **Stamina:** Medical care or rest.
- ▶ **Standing:** Regaining lost credibility is extremely difficult; Keeper's discretion.

*Example: Robert has been brutally beaten, and is sitting at 2 Stamina. Flora narrates how he drags himself to the nearest emergency room, where he spends a couple of days recuperating from his injuries. The Keeper awards one level of Stamina (bringing Robert to 3) for the immediate care, and tells Flora that if Robert takes another three days off from the investigation under medical supervision, he can regain an additional level.*

## WHEN THEY'RE ALL GONE

When any of your Stats is reduced to 1, your Investigator will change permanently. See **Leaving the Game** on p. 21 for more on this.

## ACTIONS

When you need to know how well you do:

- ▶ State what it is your Investigator is trying to accomplish or discover.
- ▶ Take one **6** if the Action is *within human capabilities* (that's your "Name" die).
- ▶ Take another **6** if the Action falls within your *occupational expertise* (that's your Profession).
- ▶ You may add **one** Stat die (**6**, **8**, or **10**) if you *will risk it to succeed*, and it makes sense to do so.

So, an Action roll will always consist of one to three dice. The **highest die** is your result:

Mixed Success	Success	Critical Insight
1, 2, or 3	4 or higher	6, 8, or 10*
You barely succeed and at a cost, or you get the barest amount of information necessary for the investigation to proceed (possibly nothing).	You succeed thoroughly, or discover everything that a competent detective would.	You succeed completely and impressively, and glimpse hidden secrets of the cosmos (or gain some other kind of bonus).

\* A Critical Insight occurs when any die rolls on its highest face.

If you risked a Stat die and it comes up the highest, immediately make a Check for that Stat (see Stat Checks, p. 12).

When rolling Stat dice in an Action, use different sizes or colors to distinguish them from the Name and Profession dice (which should be neutral and identical, if at all possible). Perhaps: green for Sanity, red for Stamina, and blue for Standing.

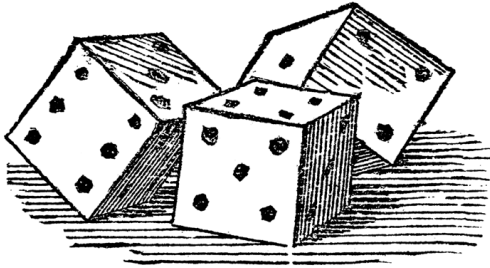
Any color or size differential will work, as long as each player can distinguish the Stat dice in an Action roll. Here’s an example:





*Example: Flora is questioning a suspect about the disappearances in Twin Falls. She takes a 6 for Robert's human capabilities, and a 6 for his quite relevant Profession of Police Detective. She decides Robert is willing to rough up the suspect a little bit, even if it costs him professionally: she risks his Standing and takes a blue 6 to distinguish it from the other two dice in case it rolls high and incurs a Standing Check.*

*After rolling, Flora's highest result is a 3; the Keeper gives her a vital clue that will connect to a following scene, but no more.*



# FAILURE

If any player or the Keeper thinks it would be interesting for an Investigator to fail an Action, they describe how that Investigator might fail, and roll a failure die:

		
Simple, straightforward	Complex, challenging	Extremely difficult

If the failure die rolls higher than any of the acting Investigator's dice, the Investigator fails in the way that the contester described. If not, the Investigator succeeds according to the highest die she rolled. In the case of a tie, the acting Investigator succeeds, but just barely and at a cost.

## RESTRICTIONS

Failure is not always interesting or fun. Here are two situations in which you should not use a failure die.

- ▶ No one may suggest failure if the Action involves discovering a **vital clue** (Keeper's discretion; see p. 39 for more on vital clues).
- ▶ If the acting player feels that their fictional input is being obstructed (i.e., if the suggestion of failure is not considered constructive by all parties), do not roll.

## FAILING FORWARD

Players and Keeper alike are responsible for suggesting a threat, bargain, or other consequence when failure is on the table. Failure is never interesting when the only result is that the fiction grinds to a halt.

*Example: Robert is trying to escape a group of cultists in an abandoned building. Flora picks up her Action dice, but Jamie, another player, thinks it would be interesting if Robert gets caught by the cult. Flora agrees; this could be an interesting turn for the story. The Keeper confirms that a vital clue is not at stake, so failure is totally an option. Flora's highest die is a 4, but Jamie rolls a ⑧ (a complex Action) and lands a 5, causing Robert to get caught. Jamie and the Keeper narrate how the cult apprehends Robert, which complicates the story significantly.*

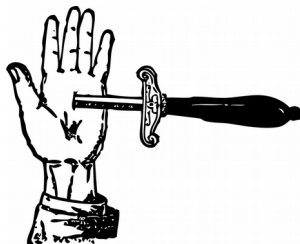
## AID OR INTERFERE

If you wish to aid another Investigator in their Action, simply narrate how your Investigator is assisting, roll your own Action pool, and take the highest result rolled by either player.



# MAGICK

Magick in Lovecraftian stories is a costly and highly involved process. The first step in performing a magical ritual is threefold, and purely narrative: you must procure the **tomes**, **tools**, and **time** necessary to complete the spell. Your Keeper will tell you what is required; this step may take entire sessions of play to complete.



When you have the three Ts completed, the spell comes at a cost, depending on how powerful it is:

- ▶ *Make a Sanity Check* to power a **weak** or commonplace spell (e.g. contact a minor creature, scrye a short distance, read minds, short-term invisibility, etc.).
- ▶ *Lose a Stat level* (Keeper's choice) to power a **moderate** spell (e.g. contact a major entity, summon/bind a minor creature, dominate mind, teleport a great distance). If you burn your last die in a Stat, your Investigator must leave play (p. 16).
- ▶ *Burn your Name or Profession die (permanently)* to fuel an extremely **powerful** spell; you may no longer take that die to roll Actions.

*Example: Having learned that the cult activity is centered around an eldritch deity called Iq'ik, Robert has decided to risk his mind and soul to perform a banishing ritual he found in the Ars Notoria manuscript (that's the **tome**).*

*The Keeper informs Flora that the only notable **tool** required is a blade that Robert himself must fashion from a freshly-killed ox. In the process of performing this gruesome task, Robert is reduced to level 2 in Standing. Desperate times...*

*After all this, Robert must spend about twelve hours cleansing a ritual space and performing the ritual, which involves ceremonial bloodletting and lots of chanting (**time**). Once this is complete, the Keeper mercifully deems this a Moderate spell, so Robert only loses a Stat level of the Keeper's choice: she decides on Stamina, which drops to 3.*

More details on Magick can be found in the Keeper's section on p. 31.



# LEAVING THE GAME

Your luck has run out and your tale is complete when one of your Stats drops to 1. However, the results for each Stat are a bit different.

When **Sanity** reaches 1, you may choose to:

- ▶ *Retire* the Investigator as quickly as possible, placing him out-of-play, perhaps due to death, incarceration, etc.
- ▶ *Relinquish* control of the Investigator to the Keeper, who can play him as a deranged KC.
- ▶ *Retain* the Investigator under the player's control. Do as much damage as possible before someone puts you down.

When **Stamina** reaches 1, your Investigator is irrevocably dead, or imminently so.

When **Standing** hits 1, two things happen:

- ▶ The Investigator is **shunned**: he can no longer interact with sane, mundane NPCs in an intelligible way. They barely register your existence and intentionally ignore you. This includes family and friends.
- ▶ You become **indigent**: your resources are gone, or soon will be: you lose your job, the authorities will repossess your house for nonpayment, your car falls into disrepair, etc. This can be a gradual process, but it must begin immediately.



# INSANITY

When you lose a level of Sanity, roleplay your fear, trauma, etc... but try to avoid referencing real-world disorders (paranoia, schizophrenia, psychosis, etc.).



This is a cornerstone of Lovecraftian fiction, but not one to be taken lightly. Psychological trauma is poorly understood even today, yet many people suffer from it—some who might play at your table. For this reason, I advise you to keep the insanity alien and strange: focus on the Investigator's inability to comprehend the situation, not on any particular condition that could result from it.

I highly recommend [\*Lovecraftesque\*](#) by Becky Annison and Joshua Fox for in-depth advice on how to ensure that your portrayals of psychological trauma are sensitive to those who might actually suffer from something similar.

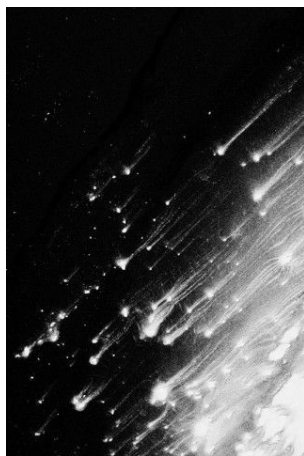
*Bad Example: Robert loses a Sanity level as a result of seeing Iq'ik in the flesh. Flora narrates him acquiring a new personality in order to deal with the trauma, which she says will be diagnosed as schizophrenia. Unfortunately, Jamie (another player at the table) has a family member that suffers from schizophrenia, and does not appreciate this glib and cartoonish depiction of the condition.*

*Good Example: Robert loses a Sanity level from seeing Iq'ik. Flora narrates that Robert's perception of reality is forever altered, they he will perceive monsters in the shadows from now on, whether real or imagined. (This is a basic hallucinatory condition, which is probably vague enough to be acceptable.*

# TO THE KEEPER

## PURPOSE

My favorite Lovecraftian stories are the “pure” ones, where investigators are sure to uncover the mysteries behind reality, but are largely powerless to confront the horror in any meaningful sense. *Spiralis* was written with this in mind: the story of each Investigator is destined to be a downward spiral of horrific discovery. The interest, then, lies in the journey: what will a player risk or sacrifice (both mechanically and fictionally) to uncover the secrets of the cosmos?



## KEEPER'S AGENDA

Like the players, the Keeper has her own Agenda, or guiding principles to help her direct the fiction:

- 1. Keep the mood**
- 2. Support the players**
- 3. Challenge the Investigators**
- 4. Move the spotlight**
- 5. Reflect their ideas**



## 1. KEEP THE MOOD

Making jokes around the table is a longstanding tradition in roleplaying; however, for a horror game that's not focused on comedy, too many jokes can quickly kill the mood for everyone. Fun is paramount, but part of the fun of *Spiralis* is the dark, brooding mood—so support that. Monitor players that are prone to crack jokes, and suggest that they try to incorporate other types of genre-appropriate narration.

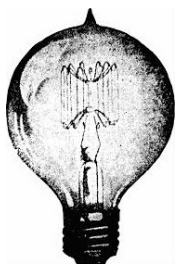
On a different note, your own narration as Keeper will set the tone for the game. Feel free to indulge in some wordy set-building, and engage all the Investigators' senses. On the other hand, you may be most comfortable with a terse, minimal narrative style, like that of Cormac McCarthy. The best inspiration for you is to read great horror (and other) literature, and apply the techniques you enjoy at the table (in other words, steal liberally).

## 2. SUPPORT THE PLAYERS

Be a fan of the players, and give them what they need to succeed, from game components (dice, pencils, Investigator sheets) to information. Don't ever let your KCs or prepared story take precedence over what the PCs do at the table; although you hold the secrets, this is their story. In the fiction, provide them with plenty of important details, but if they get confused or bogged down, help them sift through the chaff to focus on what's important.

## 3. CHALLENGE THE INVESTIGATORS

While your role is not to antagonize the players (this is a fairly cooperative game), you must provide plausible challenges and threats for them to overcome. Some of your KCs will have defined goals that are at odds with those of the Investigators; play these out, and don't hold back. Also, while vital clues are necessary to progress the Investigation, make the players work for them.



## 4. MOVE THE SPOTLIGHT

Some players are more talkative, charismatic, or commanding than others, and therefore tend to gain the majority of the spotlight. Even if their motives are unselfish, it is vital to shift attention to another PC when the more vocal individual has had plenty of chances to provide input.

While we're here, I will say that this is also how I handle initiative when turn order is important to the fiction. The instigating character goes first (whether PC or KC), gets one general action, then I (the Keeper) either respond, or ask another player, "What are you doing?" Make sure to mix up the order so you're not always going clockwise around the table.

## 5. REFLECT THEIR IDEAS

Find out what matters to each PC, and incorporate it into the fiction. During Investigator creation, pay attention to their Name, Profession, and Stat choices. Just as important, when they introduce their characters, listen to the details they offer: where they come from, what they look like, who in their family they love or loathe, etc. What do these details say about their priorities? It's your job as Keeper to incorporate these details into the fiction, sometimes just by using them ("You receive a letter from your brother"), but often by threatening them ("Your brother has been kidnapped").

Likewise, during the game, listen to what they're doing. Are they more interested in library research than in questioning the locals? You may have to move some clues around to ensure their discovery.

The final component of this agenda is also the most important: **do not plan the endings.** (More on this on p. 34.)

# QUESTIONABLE CONTENT

It is quite possible that in the course of play, individuals may find fictional content objectionable or offensive. As Keeper, you should strive to make your game an inclusive place where people don't need to feel threatened. To this end, I suggest two techniques that are totally not mine: **Lines and Veils** (from Ron Edwards), and the **X-Card** (from John Stavropoulos).

## LINES AND VEILS

This is a conversation that should be had before play begins, either before or after creating Investigators.

Start by asking the players, as a group, if there is any specific fictional content that they would find objectionable. Common responses include depictions of sexual violence, depictions of sexuality whatsoever, harm to children (or even the threat thereof), harm to animals, etc.

Keep in mind that your role is to facilitate this conversation, not to make a list of things you can't talk about. As these items come up, ask one further question: "Should we draw a Line around this, or a Veil?"

- ▶ **Lines:** These are themes, topics, and descriptions that are completely verboten. As a common example, rape of any kind cannot be used or even referenced.
- ▶ **Veils:** This content can be included in the fiction, but cannot be described in any detail. Violence and sexuality are often brought under this heading, as they are common elements of a whole lot of media, but discussing it in detail with your friends (or worse, strangers) can be troubling.

## THE X-CARD

*This mechanic courtesy of John Stavropoulos. You can find the X-Card document here: [tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg](http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg).*

Despite your best-laid plans and conversations prior to play, objectionable content may arise during play. This tool gives players (and the Keeper) a solution in the moment. From the X-Card document, linked above:

**To use, at the start of your game, simply say:**

*"I'd like your help. Your help to make this game fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way...*

**[Draw X on an index card.]**



*...Just lift this card up, or simply tap it.*

**[Place card at the center of the table.]**

*You don't have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded. And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I'm the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you! Please help make this game fun for everyone. Thank you!"*

While some players have balked at using this in their regular gaming groups, I consider it essential for convention gaming or other situations where strangers are playing together.

# STATS

When the players circle their dice for Sanity, Stamina, and Standing, they're telling you, the Keeper, what's important to them. More specifically, their highest Stat(s) represent their greatest fears: the player who circles a  for Sanity is stating that they want to maintain their mental faculties as long as possible, while circling a  for Standing suggests that the player doesn't really see social status as much of an issue. I hope you see the gold mine of challenge and conflict this uncovers for you!



That being said, not all Lovecraftian scenarios are written to make use of all three Stats equally. Generally, you can assume that all scenarios will use Sanity (it's the cornerstone of the genre), while only some will make significant use of Stamina or Standing. While most scenarios suggest Sanity checks quite clearly, it can be harder to see where to engage with the other two Stats. Some tips:

- ▶ **Stamina** can be used to test an Investigator's strength, constitution, endurance, agility, or even specific skills like acrobatics or hand-to-hand combat.
- ▶ **Standing** is begging to be used whenever an Investigator interacts with anyone outside of their immediate social strata, or when they abuse their resources. Caucasian federal agents asking questions around an impoverished minority-dominant neighborhood? A dilettante burning through his trust fund and family's good favor in pursuit of the unknowable?

# ACTIONS & FAILURE

The possibility of failure is necessary for dramatic tension. However, it is placed in the hands of everyone but the acting player so that everyone has a stake in the conflict. In other words: encourage everyone to use failure dice most of the time.

## VITAL CLUES

In the case of investigative Actions intended to uncover clues that are crucial to the progress of the Investigation, you can do one of two things:

- ▶ *Rule* that failure dice cannot be rolled against Actions which will uncover vital clues.
- ▶ *Grant* the acting Investigator the vital clue(s) in question, even if the Action fails in every other respect.

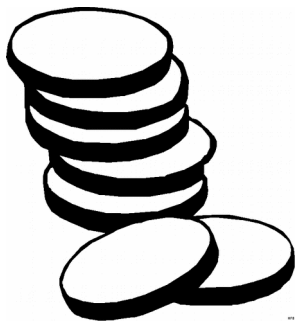
Feel free to rule on a case-by-case basis.

## FAILING FORWARD

Failure is bad enough; failure without consequence is just boring. When failure is a factor, the person who rolls the Failure Die must come up with interesting and, ideally, relevant results of that failure. As long as *something* happens as a result of failure rather than *nothing*, then the fiction continues to flow.

This is simple enough in an outright physical conflict: you fail to get the drop on an enemy, and they get to attack you while you flounder. However, it can be trickier to come up with relevant consequences from investigative Actions: you fail to turn up anything at the library, and...? In this latter case, you have two options:

- ▶ Have one of your KCs accomplish something menacing “off-screen.” Perhaps they could attack another KC who is allied with the Investigators, or somehow make strides in their ultimate goals.
- ▶ You may benefit from adding the optional mechanic of **Failure Tokens**. When an Investigator fails and no one can come up with an interesting or relevant consequence, the Keeper takes a black token. This token can be used at any time in the future to disrupt what the Investigators are doing, whether through attack, distraction, etc.



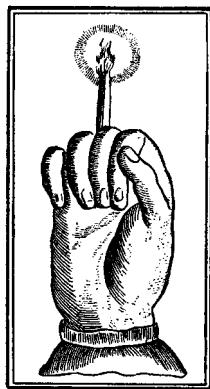
*Example: While interrogating a suspect, Robert fails to gain any useful information. Having nothing in the scene at hand that could plausibly go wrong, the Keeper decides that as a result of this interrogation, the Cult of Iq'ik will deem Robert too great of a threat, and will attack him at their next opportunity. (Example of both an off-screen and imminent consequence.)*

# MAGICK

Occult power is not an everyday occurrence, nor is it something with which to trifle. Investigators who choose to wade into these dark waters can quickly find themselves... well, I won't let this river analogy get away from me.

Although Mythos entities (and even certain humanoid avatars, or “sorcerers”) can wield magickal power off-the-cuff, the average Investigator cannot simply pull off a spell without some serious preparation. Hence, the “**Three Ts**” from p. 19:

- ▶ **Tomes:** An Investigator has to learn about a spell from some eldritch source, usually a tome with a dense Latin title such as *Cultes de Goules* or *Malleus Malificarum*. Gaining access to these texts is a story unto itself, so don't make it easy on them. Then, there's the matter of understanding the text. If they can somehow do that, then they will need to collect the...
- ▶ **Tools:** Sometimes just a circle of salt and a dagger, sometimes much more elaborate. The Western magickal tradition often calls for the magickian to construct elaborate objects out of very specific metals, or procure rare substances such as the tears of a fawn shed by the light of a full moon, etc. Again, this is an arduous process.





- **Time:** After all of this, the ritual itself is not like it is on TV; spells in the Western Hermetic tradition require hours (days, really) of ritual cleansing and banishing before the work itself begins. Setting up the ritual space with its tools and appropriate sigils; intoning the ritual phrases until the correct frame of mind is established, carrying out the various patterns and reading from the tome(s) in question; etc.

Once the Three Ts are fulfilled, the player must pay the cost required by the power of the spell (from p. 19):

- **Weak spell:** make a Sanity check.
- **Powerful spell:** lose one Stat level (Keeper's choice).
- **Epic spell:** burn your Name or Profession die, permanently.

I won't provide you with a list of spells; you can consult any of the **Other Resources** on p. 40 (or any RPG with "Cthulhu" in the title) for magical inspiration.

In closing: let magick be powerful. It can make you invisible, control the mind of another, transport you astronomical distances, or summon the Great Old Ones. However, make the cost one that no sane person would pay; it should be the last resort of the mad and the damned.

## COMBAT

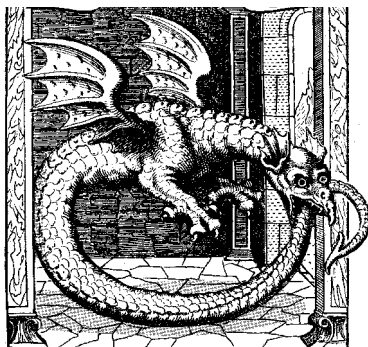
Fighting is no different from any other Action, but the consequences can be deadly. When Investigators achieve a mixed success or a failure in combat, Stamina Checks are inevitable, and grievous harm can come quickly. Don't hold back.



# HORROR

Many words have been written on the peculiarities of running and playing in a roleplaying game of horror and mystery. I have only two pieces of advice:

- ▶ *Get buy-in:* First and foremost, do your best to ensure that each and every player is excited about the type of game you're running. The Players' Agenda covers this, but some players give it lip-service and then fall into the habit of cracking jokes at every opportunity (making people laugh is fun!). As the Keeper, be prepared to have a conversation about conversational expectations at the table. This can be awkward, but it can make or break a horrific game.
- ▶ *Never speak its name:* The monsters of the Mythos go by many names. My preference is to use new or unpopular creatures whenever possible, to maximize the sense of discovery and minimize the potential for that moment when the players turn to each other and say, "Oh, it's a [byakhee/star spawn/manifestation of Nyarlathotep/etc.]." When I do use a common Mythos creature (I love me a good Colour), I rely solely on description, and try to make it distinct from the known canon.



# SCENARIO DESIGN

Mysteries in roleplaying games are a peculiar conceit. On one hand, players should be allowed complete freedom to take the story wherever they want, right? We all know that railroading is bad. On the other hand, the existence of a mystery implies that the Keeper is expected to hold some information back, and dole it out as the game progresses. How do we resolve these seemingly contradictory goals?

Due credit to *Trail of Cthulhu*, *Cthulhu Dark: Dark Depths*, and *Silent Legions* for insights on structuring an Investigation in as free-form a manner as possible. Much of what I have to say is simply spinning off from those texts.

## CREATING A SITUATION

As a general goal, you should create a situation that is both (a) spiraling towards tragedy (worse than what has occurred already), and (b) that cannot be ignored by the PCs. The latter part is most important; if you're making pregenerated Investigators, you can write their connections to the mystery into their background. If the players are generating these, either incorporate what they've written to compel them to action, or ask them to write their Investigators into the situation you've created. This mostly comes down to Professions: if you've written an Investigation that relies on law enforcement contacts, then the Investigators will have to be in a position to access those.

Although I will outline some suggestions for crafting various scenes in which the Investigators will find themselves, you should concern yourself not with leading them from scene to scene, but with connecting them with the situation in whatever manner makes sense. This may seem like a vague distinction, but it will help you improvise around the framework of the scenes you've created.

No matter what happens during the Investigation, there is one rule the Keeper must follow at all times: **do not plan the endings**, of individual scenes, much less the Investigation as a whole.

## A NOTE ON SCOPE

*Spiralis* is best suited for tight, personal games, with a limited number of KCs and geographic locations. While a group could certainly run a years-long globetrotting campaign, the downward spiral of the Investigators' Stats would probably make that awkward. For me, two to five sessions is the sweet spot, with plenty of interpersonal drama between the PCs and KCs.

## A QUESTIONNAIRE

When collecting your ideas for an Investigation, a guided questionnaire can be helpful. Here is a sample, though you may want to create your own questions, depending on your style of writing/game prep.

### 1. What is the primary monster or seminal threat?

You may have a compelling set piece, supporting character, or other story element in mind. However, start with a Mythos creature—either previously established, or from your own imaginings—to tie the Investigation together. This monster will almost certainly be confronted in some fashion at the climax of the game.

After selecting a core threat, the following questions can be tackled in any order.

## **2. What is the setting?**

The when and where of your game should (a) be interesting to you and the players, and (b) flow organically from any compelling images you have in mind for the story. For instance, if you envision the Investigators as colonists on a far-flung Earth-like planet, you're probably dealing with a futuristic and potentially quite alien setting. Many Lovecraftian mysteries take place on Earth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but this is arguably a matter of tradition more than strict adherence to a perceived genre.

## **3. Who are the Investigators?**

What types of protagonists will naturally fit into the fabric of the mystery? If your hook involves a missing child, then parents, neighbors, and law enforcement are likely archetypes.

This is not about generating specific protagonists ahead of time, but having some pregenerated Investigators available can provide players with an immediate “in” to the mystery.

## **4. What is the monster doing, and how does it come to the attention of the Investigators?**

Think of this as the inciting event. In question #3, it's probably connected to the missing child—an easy, if oft-utilized device for drawing the PCs into the narrative. From question #2 (the off-world colony), perhaps an inciting event could be a character suffering from terrifying nightmares, which you know are transmitted by an ancient god dwelling deep beneath the surface of the planet.

## **5. What minions or tertiary threats are serving the interests of the primary monster?**

The usual suspects here are hooded cultists armed with sigil-laden daggers and minds warped by alien knowledge. Try to be more subtle than this—it could be a single mysterious stranger following the Investigators, or it could be a weaker servitor monster (such as a byakhee).

The most important thing is defining the servitor's connection to the primary monster: is the servitor possessed, enslaved, or is their servitude bought at a price?

Lastly, determine their *modus operandi*: coercion, theft, abduction, murder, etc.

## **6. How might the Investigators come into contact with: (a) the mystery in general, (b) the minions or servitors, and (c) the primary monster itself?**

At this stage, you are starting to formulate a path that the Investigation might follow (what in *Trail of Cthulhu* is called the Spine). The three elements of this question (A, B, and C, above) are essentially layers of an onion:

- A) **The outer layer:** This consists of the initial mystery or inciting incident, as the Investigators are pulled in.
- B) **The inner layers:** This is where most of the research and investigation takes place, as well as any conflicts with mundane antagonists (servitors, etc.). Note that this layer composes the majority of play, and can be broken up into as many distinct layers as you wish to envision.
- C) **The central horror:** The inevitable confrontation with the primary monster.

Start envisioning various scenes, in whatever order makes sense to you. You may wish to work backwards, putting the Investigators at the doorstep of the final horror, then imagining how they could get there. Other Keepers prefer to keep the final horror as a vaguely-defined goal while writing the preceding scenes, either chronologically, or haphazardly. Try any method you like, and see what works for you.

Eventually, you should have a number of scenes connecting the inciting incident (A) to the final horror (C). The exact number of “B” scenes you construct will vary from story to story. You may find you need fewer than you think, as players are apt to overanalyze any information presented to them. Thus, you may find yourself having to inspire them to action more often than scrambling to come up with new details in play. In short, simple is better.



The most important thing to remember when composing the Spine of your Investigation is to avoid becoming attached to any specific progression of events. That is to say, the Scenes you construct are merely a guide, and should be written so that they can occur in any order or combination the players choose to pursue. This is why the antagonists' activities and motivations are detailed in the first few questions: if you create a chaotic, dangerous situation that demands the Investigators' attention, and maintain an awareness of the antagonists' machinations throughout the course of the Investigation, then you can portray the story as a living thing, unfurling before the players naturally, as opposed to a strict narrative progression from which they cannot deviate.

**7. [Ask this for each scene.] What clues are present? Does this clue connect to another scene, or is it simply for flavor?**

Vital clues are those that lead the Investigators to crucial places, characters, or events in the mystery. Remember: Investigators cannot fail to uncover these clues. As long as an investigative roll is made during the scene in question, you are obligated to provide the barest amount of information that could lead them further, even if the highest die comes up a 1.

Other clues can and should exist, which simply provide context or flavor: additional setting information or details about the various threats or victims which will increase the sense of tension or feelings of horror.

**8. Are there any break points in your Investigation?**

Your goal as Keeper is to help the PCs find the most satisfying path from inciting incident to final horror. Part of this process is ensuring that the clue trail does not rely upon highly obscure or difficult information-gathering. You should make the players work for the information, of course, but read through your vital clues and see if they make sense.

**9. Set the opposition: who, where, when, and how might the various threats take action against the Investigators?**

You may have already written some overt conflicts into your scenes under questions 6 and 7, but make sure you have at least a couple of points where the shadowy menace(s) makes itself known by threatening the Investigators. This will almost always be the minions or secondary adversaries, such as cultists and weak monsters, but may include fleeting appearances by the final horror.



## OTHER RESOURCES & AFTERWORD

My greatest inspiration for scenarios comes from Pelgrane Press' *Trail of Cthulhu* line. In this system, Investigations are presented as Spines: a chain of scenes, clues, and events that can be experienced by the Investigators in whatever order they choose. Even better, *ToC* scenarios are compellingly written, and are mostly free from cumbersome blocks of stats and mechanical details that abound in older, more well-known systems.

Additionally, the Lovecraftian game *Silent Legions* by Kevin Crawford's Sine Nomine Publishing contains a plethora of evocative and colorful tables that will inspire every aspect of your horror games for years to come.

In place of a bibliography, I will suggest the Lovecraft eZine (**lovecraftzine.com**) for expansive coverage of the world of Lovecraftian media, from novels and short stories to comics, films, and more.

Lastly, abundant thanks for reading! I relish any feedback you might have, from typos to core concepts, especially if you end up playing the game. Feel free to drop me a line or six if you feel compelled.

Email: **ephemere.66@gmail.com**

Website: **trailofdice.weebly.com/spiralis**

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