

FALSE WITNESS

Evidence Depth Design Document

Making Investigation Engaging Without the Cultist

Design Principles, Mechanics, and Examples

January 2026

1. The Core Problem

The lesson from Mimesis is clear: if base gameplay is 'just Lethal Company but with [gimmick],' the game fails. The Cultist mechanic must be layered on top of engaging investigation gameplay, not used as a crutch to compensate for shallow mechanics.

The Phasmophobia Trap

Phasmophobia's core loop is essentially checkbox completion: find EMF 5, find Ghost Orbs, find Freezing Temps, match to journal, leave. After 50 hours, it becomes routine. The entity type barely matters beyond 'does this one hunt early?'

The RNG Frustration

When evidence is ambiguous due to random factors, players feel cheated. 'I couldn't find the third evidence so I just guessed' feels like the game failed you, not like you made a strategic error. This was a consistent complaint in Phasmophobia's community.

The Cultist Reframe

The Cultist mechanic transforms this dynamic entirely:

Without Cultist	With Cultist
Ambiguous evidence → "RNG screwed me"	Ambiguous evidence → "Someone might be lying"
Wrong guess → "The game's fault"	Wrong guess → "We got outplayed"
Uncertainty feels unfair	Uncertainty has human explanation

Players accept being outplayed by other humans far more readily than being screwed by RNG. This is the psychological foundation of the entire evidence system.

2. The Core Design Rule

Evidence should be clear and definitive when collected honestly. Ambiguity comes from trust, not from the evidence itself.

What This Means

- EMF 5 is EMF 5. It's not 'maybe EMF 5, maybe EMF 4.8.'
- Freezing temps are freezing. The thermometer shows a number.
- Fingerprints are visible or they're not.

The uncertainty isn't 'what does this reading mean?' — it's 'did the person who reported this reading tell the truth?'

The Cultist's Cover Problem

But this creates a conflict: if evidence is truly unambiguous, the Cultist has no cover. 'I saw EMF 5' when someone else checked and saw EMF 3 makes you an obvious liar.

We need some ambiguity for the Cultist to hide in. The question is what KIND of ambiguity doesn't feel like RNG punishment.

The Revised Rule

Evidence is definitive when collected properly. Proper collection requires skill, timing, and conditions. Shortcuts produce ambiguous reads. The Cultist hides in the space between 'I messed up' and 'I lied.'

3. Good Ambiguity vs. Bad Ambiguity

Bad Ambiguity (RNG)	Good Ambiguity (Skill/Judgment)
Evidence randomly didn't spawn	I took the reading under suboptimal conditions
The number flickered too fast to read	I might have mispositioned the equipment
Ghost never showed the third evidence	I caught a partial reading, not a full one
Random chance determined outcome	Player skill/choice determined outcome

The key difference: good ambiguity has a human explanation and a path to mastery. Players can learn to get better readings. Rushing or sloppy technique produces ambiguous reads; careful play produces definitive reads.

The Honest Mistake Rate

For this system to work, honest players need to occasionally make the same 'mistakes' the Cultist makes. If only Cultists ever misread equipment, the jig is up.

Target rates:

- ~15-20% of readings are 'weak' reads due to conditions
- ~5-10% of players genuinely misinterpret what they saw
- Cultist hides in this noise

This means in any given game, someone probably got a questionable read even without a Cultist. That's the cover.

4. Concrete Mechanics

4.1 Reading Quality Based on Conditions

EMF readings exist on a quality spectrum based on how they were collected:

Reading Type	Conditions	Result
Strong Reading	During active manifestation, close proximity, stable position	Definitive
Weak Reading	From residual energy, at distance, while moving	Suggestive but not conclusive

So 'I got EMF 4' could mean: entity genuinely has EMF 4 as max (strong read), entity has EMF 5 but I caught residual energy (weak read), or Cultist lying about an EMF 5 reading.

4.2 Partial vs. Complete Evidence

Fingerprints could show:

Evidence State	Requirements	Information Value
Full Handprint	Recent touch + proper UV angle + examination	Identifies entity type by pattern
Partial Print (2-3 fingers)	Moderate conditions	Consistent with multiple entities
Smudge	Poor conditions or old evidence	Something was here, unclear what

Cultist cover: 'I only saw a partial before it faded' — this is a plausible honest mistake that doesn't immediately flag them as lying.

4.3 Overlapping Signatures

Some evidence types are shared across entities but with subtle differences:

Evidence	Entities	Distinguishing Feature
Fingerprints	Phantom, Spirit, Poltergeist	Decay rate (Phantom prints fade faster)
EMF 5	Demon, Spirit, Shade	Frequency of spikes (Demon more frequent)
Freezing Temps	Mare, Demon, Wraith	How cold (Mare goes colder)

Reporting 'fingerprints' isn't lying even for a Cultist — you're just not reporting the nuance that would distinguish entities. Honest players might also miss nuance if they're inexperienced.

5. Cooperative Equipment (Key Mechanic)

Equipment that requires two players, where one has the opportunity to lie, is the core trust-building/breaking mechanic.

5.1 Triangulation EMF

- EMF reader shows direction and intensity, not exact location
- Two players take readings from different positions
- Intersection of reported directions = entity location
- Cultist can report false direction → team searches wrong area

5.2 Spirit Box Relay

- Spirit Box responses only audible to holder (headphone jack / static interference)
- Holder must relay what they heard to the group
- 'It said DEATH' vs 'It said NEAR' — Cultist can fabricate or 'mishear'

5.3 UV Confirmation Protocol

- UV reveals fingerprints but they fade within 5-10 seconds
- Standard procedure: one player shines UV, calls out, second player verifies
- If only one player 'saw' the print before fade → single-witness evidence
- Cultist can 'miss' seeing something, or claim to see something that wasn't there

5.4 Thermal Imaging Relay

- Thermal camera shows cold spots, but display only visible to operator
- Operator calls out what they're seeing to the team
- Cultist can report phantom cold spots or ignore real ones

6. The Trust Gradient

Not everything should require cooperation. The evidence system should have layers:

Evidence Type	% of Total	Trust Level	Example
Solo-verifiable	50-60%	Anyone can independently confirm	Shared displays, visible phenomena
Cooperative	30-40%	Requires 2+ players, creates trust <small>Testimony</small>	Manifestation, relay equipment
Single-witness	10%	Only one person could have seen it	Brief manifestation, behavior glimpse

Paranoid teams CAN verify everything independently — but it takes longer and uses more resources. Trusting your teammates is efficient. That's the tradeoff.

The Strategic Tension

You CAN verify every reading definitively. It just costs time and resources:

- Want to confirm EMF 5? Wait for active manifestation, get close, take multiple readings.
- Want to confirm fingerprints? Have two players observe simultaneously before fade.
- Want to confirm behavior? Observe the entity multiple times across different conditions.

But:

- Timer is running
- Entity is hunting periodically
- Other evidence still needs collecting
- Sanity is draining

Trust is a resource optimization. Trusting teammates = faster completion. Verifying everything = safer but slower. The Cultist exploits groups that trust too readily. But they ALSO exploit groups that waste time over-verifying — running out the clock is a win condition.

7. Behavioral Evidence as Ground Truth

Behavioral evidence cannot be contaminated by the Cultist. This is the anchor that makes the system work.

When the team observes:

Observation	Conclusion	Cultist Can Fake?
Entity stepped in salt	NOT a Wraith	No
Entity hunted with lights on	NOT a Mare	No
Entity moved slow, then fast when spotted	Revenant	No
Entity only chases one specific player	Banshee	No
Entity disappeared when photographed	Phantom	No

The Cultist can't make the entity float. They can't make it ignore salt. Behavioral evidence is TRUE regardless of what the Cultist does.

The Deduction Structure

1. Equipment says X
2. Behavior suggests Y
3. Do X and Y align?

If they don't align, either:

- You misread the equipment (user error)
- Someone lied about the equipment reading (Cultist)
- You misinterpreted the behavior (user error)

The 'Gotcha' Moment

'The EMF says Demon, but we've been in this room together for five minutes at 60% sanity and it hasn't hunted. Demons hunt early. Either the EMF is wrong... or someone lied about the EMF.'

This is the satisfying moment the system creates: equipment evidence vs. behavioral evidence, with trust as the variable that resolves the conflict.

8. Positive & Negative Examples

8.1 POSITIVE: Equipment Triangulation

Scenario:

Two players take EMF readings from opposite ends of a hallway. Player A reports 'strong signal, northwest direction.' Player B reports 'moderate signal, northeast direction.' The intersection points to the second floor bathroom.

Why it works:

- Clear, definitive readings when done properly
- Requires cooperation and communication
- Cultist can lie about direction (plausible: 'I thought it was northwest')
- Team can verify by sending third player to check the indicated location
- Creates natural discussion and trust evaluation

8.2 POSITIVE: Behavioral Contradiction

Scenario:

Player A reports 'I got EMF 5 in the basement.' The team tentatively marks Demon, Spirit, or Shade as possibilities. Later, during a hunt, multiple players observe the entity moving very slowly until it spots someone, then accelerating dramatically.

Why it works:

- EMF 5 evidence is clear when reported
- Behavioral observation (speed change) is also clear and witnessed by multiple people
- These two pieces of evidence conflict — Revenant doesn't have EMF 5
- Team must now decide: was the EMF reading wrong, or is Player A lying?
- No RNG involved — all information was available; it's a trust/interpretation question

8.3 POSITIVE: Partial Evidence Under Pressure

Scenario:

Player A is checking for fingerprints with UV when a hunt begins. They glimpse something on the doorframe but have to hide immediately. They report 'I think I saw prints on the door, but I couldn't get a good look before the hunt.'

Why it works:

- The ambiguity is caused by gameplay circumstances, not RNG
- Player skill matters — better players might have checked faster
- The 'I think' qualifier is honest and appropriate
- Team can send someone to re-verify after the hunt
- Cultist has plausible cover for similar uncertain reports

8.4 NEGATIVE: Random Evidence Spawn

Scenario:

The entity is a Spirit (EMF 5, Spirit Box, Ghost Writing). The team finds EMF 5 and Spirit Box responses quickly. They spend 10 minutes looking for Ghost Writing but the entity simply never writes in the book, even when left in the ghost room. Time runs out.

Why it fails:

- Players did everything right — nothing they could do differently
- The failure is pure RNG (entity didn't trigger the evidence)
- No skill expression, no interesting decision
- 'The game cheated us' feeling
- Cannot attribute to Cultist — this is clearly mechanical failure

8.5 NEGATIVE: Indistinguishable Readings

Scenario:

The EMF reader flickers between 4 and 5 rapidly. Player reports 'I'm getting EMF 4... no wait, 5... no, 4 again. I can't tell.' Even with perfect positioning during manifestation, the reading is genuinely unclear due to game mechanics.

Why it fails:

- No amount of skill resolves the ambiguity
- The uncertainty is mechanical, not human
- Player can't learn to do better next time

- If this is common, Cultist cover becomes 'the game is just buggy'
- Undermines the trust-based system entirely

8.6 NEGATIVE: Unverifiable Single-Witness Evidence

Scenario:

The entity only manifests visually to one player at a time, ever. There's no way for two players to see it simultaneously. Player A claims 'I saw it float — it's a Wraith.' No one can ever verify this because the entity mechanics prevent multi-witness sightings.

Why it fails:

- Verification is mechanically impossible, not just difficult
- Every behavioral observation becomes he-said/she-said
- No path to building trust through verification
- Cultist can lie with impunity about behavior
- Removes the 'ground truth' that makes the system work

8.7 POSITIVE: Time-Pressured Verification Choice

Scenario:

With 5 minutes left, the team has two pieces of evidence confirmed and needs a third. Player A reports Spirit Box response from the attic. The team can either trust this and make their guess, or send someone to re-verify — but that might take 3 minutes and leave no time if it's wrong.

Why it works:

- Clear strategic decision with real tradeoffs
- Trust vs. verification is an interesting choice, not a solved problem
- Both options are viable depending on trust level
- Cultist influence is meaningful — their lie costs the team time either way
- Win or lose, players feel their choices mattered

9. Summary: The Evidence System Philosophy

The evidence system must satisfy three requirements simultaneously:

1. Engaging Without Cultist

The base investigation gameplay must be deep enough that players enjoy it in training mode. This means: skill expression in evidence collection, interesting equipment interactions, behavioral observation that rewards attention, and meaningful time/safety tradeoffs.

2. Fair Ambiguity

All ambiguity must have human explanations. 'I took a weak reading' or 'I only caught a partial' are acceptable. 'The game randomly didn't show evidence' is not. Players must always have a path to definitive information if they invest skill and time.

3. Cultist Cover

The Cultist must be able to hide in the noise of normal play. This requires ~15-20% of honest readings to be 'weak' or uncertain due to conditions. The Cultist's lies must be indistinguishable from honest mistakes — until behavioral evidence contradicts them.

The system works when trust is a resource optimization: trusting saves time but carries risk; verifying takes time but provides certainty. The Cultist exploits both over-trusting AND over-verifying groups. And behavioral evidence — observable by anyone, unfalsifiable by the Cultist — provides the anchor that lets players eventually catch liars.

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