

Under a Dark Star

This is a game of investigation and adventure. Like so many adventures, it begins in San Francisco. The year is 1924, and San Francisco draws people of every kind and manner, you among them. The city seems out of time: Victorian elegance and grand skyscrapers, gold ornaments and neon lights. Politically, all power in the city is divided between the reign of day and night. By day, mayor “Sunny Jim” Rolph runs city hall and the New Palace Hotel. By night, “Legitimate” Frank Lanza runs every game in town. High living, great art, and world class universities can all be found in San Francisco, but also conspiracy at the docks, opium in the underground, and across the water, America’s loneliest prison, hidden in rumor and fog. In the course of your travels, you will see both sides of San Francisco: Pacific Heights and the Bohemian Grove, *and* Chinatown and Hassler Farm. It’s a city on a hill, and you will explore its highs and lows.

Game Play

This guide will cover a few important issues. First, it will show you how to make a character. Second, it will discuss general gameplay, especially investigation. Finally, it will explain combat.

Creating a Character

When no one knows your name, you can be anyone you want. You decide your story, your skills, and your faults. But be sure to develop your character before the first session.

1) **Profession:**

Everybody has a profession, and it’s your profession that defines your skills, special knowledge, social connections, and goals. As you play, you can use any skills or resources which would plausibly be available to a person such as yourself. Choose creatively.

Examples of professions or backgrounds include:

Disillusioned Beat Cop	Cutpurse	Cardsharp
Epidemiologist	Heiress	Muckraker
Professor of Religion	Costumer	Disgruntled Politician
Egyptologist	Pinkerton Agent	Radio Evangelist
Prison Psychologist	Club Fighter	Botanist
Clairvoyant	Treasure Hunter	Wiseguy
Traveling Salesman	Spiritual "Teacher"	Jesuit

Of course these are just a few of the many professions you might develop. Please be creative! Once you decide on a profession, inform your narrator, so your skills can be built into the story itself. Remember, it's your profession that determines what you can do in the game. Choose a profession that has fun skills.

2) Special Skills:

Your profession provides you with all your basic skills and knowledge. Beyond these, you have **two further skills**, talents, or knowledge for which you have *unusual*/attunement. These can be related to your profession, or separate from it. And just like your professional skills, you can invoke these special skills (when appropriate) for further bonuses. A few notes: first, there are **no magical skills**, because you are a normal person; second, **the more specific the skill description, the higher the bonus** ("knowledge of plants" will provide a bonus, but "knowledge of mushrooms" will provide a narrower but larger bonus); finally, **you can choose skills unrelated to your chosen profession**, but they might not provide as much bonus, as you would be an amateur.

Examples of professions and two additional special skills:

Cat Burglar with a knack for **picking locks** and **second story work**

Disgraced Journalist who specializes in knowledge of **city government** and can **forge documents**

Archivist who studies **medieval Asian history** and especially **ancient cults**

Machinist who can **repair broken equipment** and is an **amateur radio enthusiast**

Former Magician who specializes in **prestidigitation** and is a **master escape artist**

Psychic Reader with a third eye in **Seance** and a hidden talent for **Ventriloquy**

To use any professional or further skill, wait for a moment in the story when that skill might be plausibly and appropriately employed, and then announce your intention and plan. If the narrator and your fellow players agree, you can attempt to employ your skill by spending a **star card**. Depending on the difficulty or plausibility of your plan, you may also need to roll a twenty-sided die to succeed. In either case, you lose the star card. You can earn more star cards at the beginning of each session, or be awarded one due to excellent role play, or earn one through quests, or as a result of facing dangers that test your mettle as an adventurer.

3) **Physical Attributes (choose one as a bonus and another as a penalty):**

When you take an action, you might be asked to roll a dice to succeed. If you are especially gifted in an area, you will roll two and take the higher. If you are especially bad, you will roll two and take the lower. Every character has one special attribute and one special weakness. Please choose one of each.

Brawny/scrawny: Throw a punch; lift a body; pry a door. You are a he-man and can carry more.

Tough/girly: Take a punch; resist a poison; survive a fall. You get extra health and stamina.

Nimble/klutzy: Balance on a roof; hop a train; work a lock. You react more quickly and avoid falling into traps.

Special Note: There are no attributes for intelligence, wisdom, charisma, memory, or so forth. Your character is as smart as you play them, and wisdom doesn't boil down to a number. Fear and nerves, on the other hand, are facts beyond your control. Let alone insanity...

4) **Additional Features of your Character**

Hit points: You have six hit points, unless you are tough or girly, and have eight or four. You will gain no further hit points throughout the game, though you can "heal" one hit point a day up to your maximum.

Equipment: You are expected to keep a detailed inventory of your gear. If a piece of equipment isn't listed in your "supplies" you don't have it. You can carry up to 40 pounds, unless you are brawny or scrawny, and carry twenty extra or fewer. In a life or death emergency, a person can lift four times what they carry.

Sanity: Your starting sanity is determined by a secret roll between 1 and 20. Tell this number to no one (except the narrator). Whenever you encounter a particularly shocking experience, you may be asked to make a sanity check. To do so, roll a d20 and add your sanity. If you fail, you will suffer consequences and may even lose further sanity. To note: Insanity need not manifest in your roll play in any particular or obvious way. A low sanity person isn't necessarily a stuttering idiot, and madness might only slowly emerge in your thought patterns, speech, or something more sinister still.

Using Skills and Making Checks

Once you have a character (with a profession, skills, and attributes, and with hitpoints, equipment, and a sanity score) you are ready to play. Because most of the game takes place outside of combat, we will focus on the mundane: the work of deciding what your characters do when they aren't fighting.

Mundane Tasks: Much of the game consists of you walking around, talking to people, opening doors, and the like. For these mundane tasks, success is a given, and no checks of any kind are required. You are a normal person, and you can do anything a normal person can do in real life, barring specific and definable obstacles. Unless drugged you will not fail to talk, unless drunk you will not fail to walk, etc.

Difficult Tasks: Occasionally, you will perform a difficult or challenging action which a normal person *could* attempt, but might fail at. This could mean climbing a rope, kicking down a door, balancing on the hood of a car, or catching yourself before a fall. **If you attempt to perform an unusually challenging action, you will be asked to make a check.** Checks are performed by rolling a twenty-sided die, possibly with advantage or disadvantage (rolling two die and taking the higher or lower number). When you are asked to make a check on these "hard for a normal person" abilities, you do *not* need to spend a star card.

Professional and Special Skills: A final kind of skilled action comes from your professional competencies and special skills or knowledge. This can include anything a person of your profession would know to do because of their profession, or because you specifically listed it as a special talent of yours. **In order to invoke these professional competencies and special skills, explain why you believe they are relevant to the situation at hand, and if the**

Narrator agrees, you can spend a “star card” to perform the action. This may or may not require further checks, depending on the difficulty of your plan.

Star cards are given out for excellent role play. You can also earn star cards for facing special trials or difficulties. As discussed previously, these star cards are quite valuable, as they allow you to employ your professional and highly skilled abilities.

Investigating

Your characters rely on their wits. This means discovering clues, following leads, interviewing relevant witnesses and subject experts, and generally showing some get-go. Investigating is an active skill. Generally, you should announce your intention to search rooms, examine old books, or perform impromptu autopsies. For questions of general competence, we will assume success. For plans which require special competence or skill, you will need checks.

Presumably your character’s backstory gives them some idea of how to solve a crime, whether through their background knowledge or the people they rely on for clues (a cop would be familiar with prominent street gangs, and a professor might have colleagues who specialize in ancient languages or exotic plant biology). You can spend star cards to roll for these connections and clues. With luck and gumption, you might even foil some plots.

Combat and other Time-Sensitive Situations

Traps and Surprises

Sometimes you are caught flat footed, and other times you have a split second to react.. If the Narrator gives you an opportunity to avoid a trap or bad fall, your nimbleness might be enough to save you.

The Beginning of Combat

Combat usually begins with a trap, a stray word, or a wild punch. Once that lands, combat begins, and everyone is “equal” in their reaction from there on out.

Combat

Combat is based on range and adversarial die-rolling. To attack, you must be near or beside an opponent, and then you and your opponent roll competing six sided die. The higher side wins and deals the difference as damage. Combat takes place “all at once.” That is, each person in the group announces what they are going to do, then the bad guys decide what they are going to do, then everyone rolls together and announces their results. Once the results are calculated (including damage, checks, special equipment resolutions, and sanity loss), we take a second round of combat. This continues until one side is incapacitated or retreats.

What to do in a Round of Combat

1) Move

You can move in “ranges.” You can be “very far”, “far”, “near” and “beside” other players and objects. You can move one range per turn and take other actions, or “run” and move two ranges. So you can move from “near” to “next to” someone and give them first aid, or you can spend your whole turn running from “near” to “far away” from someone pursuing you.

2) Attack

To successfully attack, you must be “**in range**,” with the attacking ranges being “**near**” and “**beside**.”

All **melee attacks** (sucker punching, slapping, pulling hair, brandishing a knife, reckless sword play, nunchucks, etc.) are launched from “beside” and follow similar rules. **To melee attack from beside, roll a six sided die against the person you are attacking, and they will do the same. The higher side wins and deals the difference as damage to the loser.**

All **ranged attacks** must be made from **near or beside**. When you make a ranged attack, **you have a ½ chance of immediate failure**, because you panic, miss wildly, or accidentally shoot yourself. If you succeed, **you then roll a six sided die against the person you are attacking, and they will do the same. If you win, you deal damage equal to the difference.**

Besides physical strikes, there are all manner of holds, grapples, or ranged attacks. All grapples are a contest between your strength and the strength of your opponent.

3) Other things

You can also ask the narrator to do other things. These include hiding in a closet, climbing up a ladder, praying to God, setting off a smoke grenade, triggering a trap, providing first aid, insincerely calling for peace, removing a mask to reveal your true self, or snorting your “courage powder.” The list is endless. Please be flavorful.

Special Abilities and Secrets

If you would like to make your character more flavorful and unique, please consider designing some special abilities or features you would like to add to their kit. I am open to discussing limited but interesting ideas. Likewise, please consider what phobias, secrets, or plans your character has and may be hiding from others.

Wrapping Up

Overall, this game is about role play, not rules. I hope you come up with great characters! I plan to kill them!