
ABNORMAL THINGS

By Orion Canning
Based on Abnormal by Avery Alder

Abnormal Things

What This Is

This is a storytelling game written by Orion Canning, intended to tell stories similar to the show *Stranger Things* created by the Duffer Brothers. It is a hack of the game *Abnormal* by Avery Alder. You can download *Abnormal* here:

(<https://www.patreon.com/posts/abnormal-619932>)

To play you'll need about 4 hours, 3-5 people (The game can accommodate more but it will slow down the game a bit), notecards or similarly sized scraps of paper, writing implements for all players, a blank sheet of paper to draw a map on, a 4 sided die, and 10 or so counters. I also recommend familiarizing yourself with the rules of *Abnormal*, because it's great and this game borrows from it heavily.

What's The Difference?

Abnormal is a game about personal body horror, with a single main character. This is also a game about horror, but it's more about people in a small town community and their relationships, and how they pull together to help each other in the face of that horror. As such, the horror should be externalized.

The horror has a single source, some kind of creature or monster stalking the town, but the horror can have many manifestations, some of which can involve aspects of body horror. In addition manifestations can include things that arise as a result of the horror but are not the horror itself. For example, fanatical cultists, dimensional gateways, mutated livestock, or shadowy government agents could all make great manifestations, even though they aren't direct manifestations of the creature that started it all.

Avery has some great advice in *Abnormal* on boundaries which I will copy verbatim here:

On Boundaries

While body horror draws its power from discomfort, it is important to respect your boundaries and the boundaries of your fellow players. Be ready to retract anything you say if it crosses a line. Pay attention to the facial expressions of your fellow players, and if necessary check in and ask, "Is that too much?" Part of your responsibility in playing this game is creating a safe space for the players.

I strongly recommend playing the game while using the X-Card or a similar tool. To use the X-Card, draw an X on an index card. Place it in the centre of the table. Explain to everyone playing that, *"This is an X-Card. If ever someone says something that you're not okay with introducing into the game, for whatever reason, you can touch your finger to this card. We'll pause the game momentarily and figure out how to get the game back on track, so that everyone feels okay with the direction that the game is going. Usually this will mean a quick substitution of the last thing that was said for something else. Sometimes it'll mean a water break or a short conversation about expectations and boundaries. You can use the X-Card for serious triggering content, but you can also use it for smaller things, like a name you don't want to have incorporated into the story."*

The X-Card is just one option, but having a safety mechanism when you play *Abnormal* ensures that you're able to push scary and unnerving content in the game while also knowing that everyone has tools to fix the situation if you end up pressing the wrong buttons.

There is good discomfort and bad discomfort, and playing *Abnormal* involves paying attention to which of the two you feel at any given moment.

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Roles

There are three roles in Abnormal Things, which everyone will rotate playing.

Witness

One of the members of your small town community, who becomes aware of a supernatural creature or force threatening the residents.

Support

A person who one of the witnesses cares about. Also, someone the witness would go to for help after discovering the threat.

Horror

The horror begins by portraying a single manifestation of the supernatural threat, and as the game progresses develops new manifestations, and begins abducting and possibly consuming support characters. Later on the horror will decide what the supernatural creature looks like and how it behaves based on all of it's previous manifestations.

Setup

At the beginning of the game life in town is carrying on like normal. Everyone is holding their life together, with the same sorts of problems normal people have. No one suspects the supernatural horrors that will soon befall them.

Town Facets: Quiet, Rural, Friendly, Old Fashioned, Scenic, Peaceful, Stable, Religious, Historical, Industrious

The Town

First everyone makes the town together. No matter what it's a small town but it can be in any region or climate. Look at the town facets and as a group choose two from the list that apply to the town, and one that emphatically does not.

Afterwards write the facets on the corner of a sheet of blank paper, which will be used to draw a map. Then discuss together what the combination of details mean. Picking something that doesn't apply to the town is different than not picking something at all, the town is either conspicuously lacking in that facet or some opposing quality exists. For example, a town that is not historical might be brand new, or may have had all of it's historical records destroyed.

Briefly flesh out some of the town's history, and talk about the region, climate, season, and weather. As you discuss the town, if any places or land features come up, draw them on the map and give them a label or name. The map doesn't need to be to scale, so the drawings can be simple or symbolic. Make sure to leave plenty of room to add more as you go though, both in the town and its surrounding areas. Before you are done each player must add one location or feature to the map, and you must give the town a name.

Orion, Alex, and Max are creating their town, and decide that the town is Industrious, Friendly, and Not Scenic. They decide that the town's nearby river is heavily polluted from the local factory, Arvid Dye Works, and is often swirling shades of oily colors. Most locals work at the dye works, though there is some separation between corporate employees and workers. The town is also surrounded by fields where plants are grown from which the dye is extracted. Alex suggests that there should be a drive-in theater in town, and Max adds that it would be cool if the projector screen was on the side of an airplane hangar where a couple biplanes used for crop dusting are kept. Orion says there should be a bridge across the river that leads into a wooded area, which is the boundary most kids in town aren't allowed to cross, since it's where kids go to get into trouble.

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Witness Characters

Each player creates a witness character by picking two areas of the witness' life to describe, out of:
work life, romantic life, home life, social life.

If your character is still in school, swap work life with school life.

For each of the selected areas, choose two of the facets below that describe it, and tell the other players a bit about it.

The area of your life is: monotonous, unprecedented, satisfying, strained, rich, vulgar, esteemed, timid, temporary.

Name your character, give them an age, and write their information down on a note-card folded in half, so it stands up and other players can see it. When everyone is finished take turns briefly describing your witnesses.

First Victim

Everyone will create the first victim together, who will be abducted by the threat near the beginning of the game. This should be someone that all of the witnesses know and care about enough to have a reason to try to help them if they suddenly disappeared. Everyone should specify their relationship to the first victim. Together pick two descriptors from the support list below that describe the first victim, then write down their name, descriptors, and a brief one line description of them on a note card. Then talk about what the descriptors mean.

Support Characters

Each player creates a support character on their own in the same way the first victim was created, by picking two of the facets below, which describe the support character or their relationship to the player's witness. They write the character's name and descriptors on a note card and tell the other players a bit about these new characters. Support characters are people who will come to the witness's aid when truly needed (regardless of whether they are on amicable terms normally). Support characters should be kept in a pool at the center of the table near the map and Stage cards, as anyone can play them.

The support is: quiet, tired, ex-_, gorgeous, unseeing, domineering, sympathetic, needy, strong, frenetic, kind, connected

The First Manifestation

Decide who will play the horror first, which should be whoever seems most excited to do so, or chosen randomly if that's not clear. The horror player now creates an initial manifestation for the horror. They do this by choosing two of the facets below. Don't describe the manifestation just yet - that'll happen when it first emerges in the second scene of the game to abduct the first victim. For now, just choose its descriptors and begin brainstorming what the combination might mean.

The manifestation is: metallic, voiced, attuned, shadowy, psychic, liquid, religious, human, bestial, meaty, hungry, beautiful, writhing, liminal, bloody, other-dimensional, conspiratorial, spiny, electrical, atmospheric, insectile

Card Placement

Place the Stage cards face down, forming a row from Stage 1 to Stage 4. Place the two remaining cards face up.

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Game Structure

The game alternates between witness turns (in which a witness tries to keep their life together) and horror turns (in which the horror tries to extend its reach). One player takes a turn playing as the horror, showing how the witness of the player to their left encounters it. Then that witness takes a witness turn, followed by a horror turn, playing the horror for the next player to the left, and so on clockwise around the table. On a witness turn, the witness player gets to choose who will play the horror for them. If you want someone's witness in the scene, don't cast them as the horror. Most turns involve a short scene being played out.

The horror evolves over four Stages: Awaken, Spread, Abduct, Devour. As it evolves, fragments build up on each of the four Stage cards. There are 2 endgame triggers which cause the horror to win:

Town Utterly Consumed: Three fragments rest upon the Consume Stage card.

Horror Permanently Entwined: Seven fragments rest upon the cards.

The witnesses may be able to defeat The horror before it consumes their town and the people they care about. This is represented by the third possible endgame:

Town Saved: The horror has been successfully defeated.

Framing Scenes

The player whose turn it is sets up the scene. This player frames the scene at the start of their turn, describing the location it will take place at, saying which characters are there and what they are doing at the start of the scene. Each scene also has a character who the scene is centered around, called the focus. In a horror scene the horror player gets to frame, and must have the witness character of the player to their left in the scene as the focus. In a witness scene the player whose turn it is frames and they must also cast their witness character in the scene as the focus.

In either scene type the person framing can tell a player to play their witness in the scene. Alternatively they can place a support character in the scene and choose who plays it. Support characters have no player ownership and can be played by different players every time, but only the player who made a witness character can play it. The player framing or the horror player can also cast incidental characters in a scene, such as a waitress or police officer, and say who will play them. Unlike other characters, incidental characters can be killed or taken over by the horror player at any time.

If a player hasn't been cast they may request (or be asked) at any time to enter the scene as their witness or another character, but the player in charge of the scene has the final say.

Narrating Scenes

During scenes, the witness players are responsible for narrating the witness's thoughts, and the horror player is responsible for narrating the witness's sensory experiences, especially those of the focus, and any ways in which the horror manifests itself. The witness players are generally responsible for narrating the witness's actions, though the horror player is invited to narrate how the witnesses probe or investigate things going on around them (no "Do you investigate the noise?" is needed). Don't forget to make changes to the map if you introduce locations or features to the town.

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The First Round

During the first round, each player takes a turn framing or narrating a brief scene about their witness character, showing their life as normal before the horror arrives.

The First Horror Turn

The player who was chosen to play the horror first is in charge of the first horror turn. The scene should focus on the abduction of the first victim by the horror. They must also have the player to their left play their witness character in the scene, and may assign the role of the first victim to another player or play it themselves. Otherwise they frame and cast other roles in the scene as normal. The witness player might see the first abduction happen, or it might occur when they are no longer around at the end of the scene, though because the first victim is an important person to all the other characters their absence should soon become apparent regardless. After the first victim is abducted, place their note card after the fourth Stage at the end of the four Stage cards.

Preparedness

Certain actions on the witness turn (Search For Meaning, Ask For Help) lead to gaining points of preparedness when they succeed. Use a fragment on the Preparedness card to keep track of how much preparedness points the group has. Preparedness points are shared by all witness players. Any witness player may choose to spend a point of preparedness after they make a die roll to re-roll and attempt to get a better result. If successful they say how some previous preparation for this moment paid off. Multiple points can be spent on the same die roll if the rolls keep failing.

The Witness Turn

On the witness turn, the witness player chooses one of the following five options. Note that in the early turns of the game, you will often choose an option that doesn't actually have a mechanical effect (Act Like Nothing Is Wrong, Search For Meaning) since you need to roll under the amount of tokens on a card, and there may not be enough tokens yet. That's okay! But when the opportunity to remove fragments does appear, play tactically. The current witness player should have this section of the rules handy to refer to during play.

Act Like Nothing Is Wrong

Frame a scene where the witness tries to ignore the horror and continue on with their life as normal. This scene might take place at work, school, home, around town, or somewhere more exotic. The scene can involve support characters and/or other witness characters or it can be in isolation. The horror player can choose to what extent the manifestations intrude.

Mechanical effect: You may take a fragment from either of the middle Stage cards (Stage 2 or Stage 3) and place it on a different Stage card. This does not trigger a scene. This mechanical effect allows you to lump fragments together so that your next Search For Meaning or Ask For Help roll might be more effective. If there are no fragments on Stage 2 or Stage 3, no mechanical effects occur.

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Search For Meaning

Frame a scene where the witness digs deeper, exploring the nature of a manifestation or dwelling upon the potential reasons that all of this horror has beset their town. This might involve obsessively monitoring strange electrical interference, researching the secret history of the town, or chasing shadowy figures down unlit alleyways.

Mechanical effect: Choose an unlocked Stage card. Roll a four-sided die. If you roll less than the number of fragments on the card, remove one and increase the preparedness track by one.

Ask For Help

Frame a scene where one of the support characters comes to the aid of the witness, and tries to help them fight or protect them from the horror. They might drive the witness to the hospital, probe a strange orifice with trembling hands, join in an alarming ritual that just might work. They might not fully understand what's going on, but still they try to help.

Mechanical effect: Choose an unlocked Stage card and one of the support characters. Roll a four-sided die. If your roll is less than the number of fragments on the card, remove them all and increment the preparedness track by that many. If your roll is a 3 or 4, the support character becomes threatened. Place them beside the 3rd Stage card. The next time Stage 3 is activated on the horror turn, any threatened support characters must get abducted.

Attempt A Rescue

Frame a scene where you attempt to rescue someone who has been abducted. To do so you must enter the lair of the horror itself. You might follow a trail of slime into the sewers, sneak into a secret government research lab, or cross over into a nightmarish parallel dimension. You can choose to make the roll first and set up the scene to play towards the outcome, or wait for a pivotal moment and roll to find out what happens.

Mechanical effect: Roll a four-sided die. If you roll under the number of fragments on Stage 3, the support character is rescued and you subtract 1 from any future rolls to face the horror. Otherwise, the rescue attempt fails and the support character remains in the clutches of the horror.

Face The Horror

Frame a scene where you confront the horror in an attempt to destroy it. This will probably involve venturing into the horror's lair or finding some way to draw it out. It will also involve some plan of attack, possibly with multiple characters banding together. Now is the time for the horror player to come up with true nature of the horror and what they look like. They should look at all the manifestations and create something that can possibly serve as an explanation for all of them.

Mechanical effect: Roll a four-sided die. If you roll under the number of fragments on Stage 4, you defeat the horror and trigger the Town Saved endgame. If you roll over, your witness is consumed by the horror. On a tie you are forced to retreat and regroup, and lose 1 preparedness. If other witness characters are helping, they can also attempt to roll to defeat the horror if you failed, but if they fail they are also consumed. If your character is consumed, choose one of the remaining support characters to play as your new witness character. If there are none left, create a new witness character, perhaps one based on an already established minor character in town.

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The Horror Turn

On the Horror turn, the Horror player rolls a four-sided die. If the die face matches one of the already-unlocked stages, add a fragment to that card and follow the instructions on that card for framing a scene.

If the die face matches the next stage waiting to be unlocked, it is now unlocked - the player turns the stage card face up, places a fragment upon it, and follows the instructions on that card for framing a scene.

If a card already has three fragments on it, instead of placing a fourth upon it, place the new fragment upon the next stage card in the sequence (unlocking it if necessary). Follow the instructions for the card you actually place the fragment on. If the die face doesn't match or unlock a stage, then unlock the next stage card but place no fragments this turn. No scene occurs, and the Horror turn is over.

Awaken and Spread both introduce a new type of action that the Horror player may elect to do instead of rolling the die and taking a regular turn. If you do this instead of rolling, place a fragment on the card as normal.

Stages Of Horror

There are four Stages to the horror: Awaken, Spread, Abduct, and Consume.

Awaken

When you place a fragment on this card, create a new manifestation of the horror. Frame a scene where the focus encounters this manifestation for the first time. The witnesses are encountering these strange phenomena because of some supernatural being stalking their town, whose motivations may very well be beyond mortal understanding. When you create new manifestations and introduce them into the witness's life, do so with an eye to challenging and subverting the character's explanations for what's happening. Give those playing no easy and tidy causality. Keep it messy and uncertain and anxious. When creating new manifestations, pick two descriptors from the same list that you picked from previously: metallic, voiced, attuned, shadowy, psychic, liquid, religious, human, bestial, meaty, hungry, beautiful, writhing, liminal, bloody, other-dimensional, conspiratorial, spiny, electrical, atmospheric, insectile

Spread

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where one of the manifestations of horror that already exists affects a new part of the focus's life. Use these scenes to highlight how the horror affects different life facets of the witness, and to explore how the witness reacts to such occurrences. Imagine that our witness is tenderly kissing a lover, when suddenly black veins begin growing along the walls. Do they freak out and leave abruptly? Do they try to play it cool? Does their lover notice the grotesque phenomenon, or are they oblivious? What does this do to their evolving relationship?

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Abduct

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where the focus witnesses one of the support characters being abducted. You may cast witness and support characters as you like but the focus witness should somehow witness the abduction, or at least notice that the support character is gone. If a support character is the most recently threatened you must abduct that character, otherwise it's the support character of the focus witness that is taken. It's important not to reveal the true nature of the horror prematurely in these scenes. Instead use one of the current manifestations as the manner by which the support character is abducted, whether they are covered in creeping shadows, surrounded by sinister cultists, or dragged into the sewers by slimy tentacles.

Other options are to have them disappear off screen, perhaps mysteriously vanishing from a room with no obvious exits, or suddenly going missing from the back of the group while walking through dark woods. Also they can be visibly grabbed by an unseen horror, perhaps pulled into shadows, underwater, through a wall or into the ground, or through a strange portal. It's also possible to frame a scene where the support character is alone with the horror, and the focus witness doesn't notice the disappearance until later, or to begin the scene with the support character already gone, leaving behind some mysterious or terrifying evidence of their abduction.

Usually you will want to use these scenes to build up tension, working up towards the moment of the inevitable abduction. Also use these scenes to build a connection between the support character and the witness before the support character is abducted, and to show the psychological impact on the focus witness at having someone important to them taken away.

Consume

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where the focus witnesses one of the abducted support characters being consumed by the horror. They may be killed, infected, or otherwise taken over by the horror. If no support characters are currently abducted, the most recently threatened support character should be consumed, and if there are no threatened support characters any support character is fair game.

The focus of these scenes should be horror and loss, whether the witness stumbles on the decaying body of their best friend in the school basement, realizes that something else is masquerading as their mother, or slices open a giant cocoon to find a partially transformed ex-boyfriend inside. There's no need to pull punches here, something terrible has happened to the support character and they are irrevocably lost. Maybe there's a chance the support character will be returned to normal if the horror is defeated, but there is no need to hint at that now. Focus on driving home the terrible danger the horror presents and the tragedy of losing someone the witness cares about.

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Endgames

There are three potential endgames: Town Consumed, Permanently Entwined, and Town Saved. When one is triggered, finish playing out the current scene, and then move on to frame a scene based on the endgame instructions

Town Consumed

3 or more fragments rest on the consume card

Together, frame and narrate a scene where the horror utterly consumes the town and it's people, including the witnesses. Show the catastrophic end, whether it involves people being eaten alive, transformed, or possessed, down to the last child. Then show what remains, whether it's an empty ghost town, a town of possessed people with eerily fake smiles, or a smoldering blood soaked crater.

Permanently Entwined

7 fragments rest upon the cards

Together frame and narrate a scene that shows how the horror becomes a permanent fixture of the town, continuing to haunt it's residents. Show the effect on the town over time from living with something that stalks it's citizens from the shadows and periodically abducts them. Talk about the myths and urban legends that arise about the creature, the barred windows and cursed regions where no one dares go out at night.

Town Saved

Face the horror and succeed

Each player takes a turn narrating a scene about what their witness's life looks like after the horror has been defeated. Show how the experience has changed them, whether it's for better or for worse. If their supports were consumed, have they returned to normal, or does the witness mourn them or serve their memory in some way? In what ways have things returned to the way they were before and in what ways will things never be the same?

**ABNORMAL
THINGS**

Stage 1

**ABNORMAL
THINGS**

Facets

**ABNORMAL
THINGS**

Stage 2

**ABNORMAL
THINGS**

Preparedness

**ABNORMAL
THINGS**

Stage 3

**ABNORMAL
THINGS**

Stage 4

These six card-backs correspond to the six cards on the next page. If you have a double-sided printer, print these two pages double-sided with the printer set to “flip on short edge,” they should come out correctly aligned. If not, here’s a legend for assembly:

Stage 1: Awaken
Stage 2: Spread
Stage 3: Abduct
Stage 4: Consume

Consume

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where the focus witnesses one of the abducted support characters being consumed by the horror.

Abduct

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where the focus witnesses one of the support characters being abducted.

Spread

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where one of the manifestations of horror that already exists affects a new part of the focus's life.

The horror player may choose this action instead of rolling.

Awaken

When you place a fragment on this card, create a new manifestation of the horror. Frame a scene where the focus encounters this manifestation for the first time.

The horror player may choose this action instead of rolling.

Town Facets: *Quiet, Rural, Friendly, Old Fashioned, Scenic, Peaceful, Stable, Religious, Historical, Industrious*

Life Facets: *monotonous, unprecedented, satisfying, strained, rich, vulgar, esteemed, timid, temporary*

Support Facets: *quiet, tired, ex-, gorgeous, unseeing, domineering, sympathetic, needy, strong, frenetic, kind, connected*

Manifestations: *metallic, meaty, voiced, attuned, shadowy, psychic, liquid, religious, human, bestial, hungry, beautiful, writhing, liminal, bloody, other-dimensional, conspiratory, electrical, spiny, atmospheric, insectile*

Preparedness:

0 1 2 3 4

Actions: *Act Like Nothing Is Wrong, Search For Meaning, Ask For Help, Attempt A Rescue, Face The Horror*

Fonts: Crimson Text by Sebastian Kosch
Amarante by Karolina Lach

Edited by Max Hervieux

Platesters: Max Hervieux
Alex Guerrero-Randall
Marc Hobbs
Dylan Clayton