



THE ESOTERRORISTS

BY ROBIN D. LAWS

Introduction

The Esoterrorists is Pelgrane Press's first new roleplaying game since the Dying Earth. This game includes the new GUMSHOE system, a modular rule set designed to combine bullet-proof investigative rules for playing and just as importantly devising adventures, with a solid set of general abilities. Next we will be releasing a GUMSHOE version of the Book of Unremitting Horror, and then a new version of Call of Cthulhu by Kenneth Hite. These new releases will build on the GUMSHOE foundations here, and add new genre-appropriate features to GUMSHOE for each type of game.

Game Dogma

Over the last few years, there have been many developments in the roleplaying game design field, and we've been watching them with interest. A year ago we devised a simple new set of rules for new games we are producing, our game dogma.

Our new games will be:

- Fun to play
- Easy to learn
- Easy to teach
- Easy to play
- Innovative
- Approachable
- Sustainable

A GM should be able to learn each game in half an hour, nuances in a hour or so. It should be easy to teach the basics of the game to a novice in fifteen minutes. The design should take account of developments in gaming over the last ten years and offer something genuinely original. GMs will want to run the game time and time again, and players will want to play it.

The Esoterrorists is the embodiment of these aims, and we hope you enjoy it.



CREDITS

The Esoterrorists roleplaying game

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THE BASICS

YOU ARE REALITY'S LAST DEFENDERS, ELITE INVESTIGATORS COMBATING THE PLOTS OF THE ESOTERRORISTS, A LOOSE AFFILIATION OF OCCULT TERRORISTS INTENT ON TEARING THE FABRIC OF THE WORLD AND LETTING THE MONSTERS IN.

UNLIKE OTHER INVESTIGATIVE ROLEPLAYING GAMES, THE ESOTERRORIST'S GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM ENSURES THAT THE PLOT NEVER GRINDS TO A HALT DUE TO A FAILED DIE ROLL. AS THE TOP PARANORMAL DETECTIVES, YOU NEVER FAIL IN YOUR AREAS OF EXPERTISE. WHEN NECESSARY, YOU CAN EXPEND EXTRA EFFORT TO GLEAN MORE FROM THE EVIDENCE THAN ANY PLODDING JOURNEYMAN COULD HOPE TO FIND.

Who Are You ?

You and your teammates are elite investigators drawn from various walks of life, all with a background in investigation. You may be a world-weary homicide detective, a lab-coated forensic scientist, a grizzled old-school reporter, a tweed-jacketed scholar, or even a hanger-on in the criminal underworld. You lead a double life. Most of the time, you're an ordinary civilian, paying the rent and leading a normal existence. However, you belong to a cell of a secret, worldwide organization called the Ordo Veritatis. This benevolent conspiracy, which operates with the tacit approval of the world's major powers, fights the machinations of the Esoterrorists, who seek personal power by evoking malign paranormal phenomena.

What Is Roleplaying?

This book is intended for experienced roleplayers. If you don't know what roleplaying is, how the heck did you get a copy of this book?

If you think this is a book about genuine, real-life supernatural phenomena, or teaches you to use spells or be a real vampire, you are badly confused. If you think roleplaying might be a cool form of entertainment but don't quite grasp the basic concept, look it up on the Internet or get a geeky friend to explain it to you.

Other Antagonists

Although you often tussle with Esoterrorists, you never know at the beginning of a case just who's behind the occult events you're investigating. You may face independent cultists, lone-wolf ritualists, or free-ranging creatures spontaneously generated the collective unease of people around them.

How Does the World Work ?

Magic doesn't come into the world easily; it has a basic set-point of sanity that's hard to tamper with. That's why ghosts and other occult manifestations are typically only encountered in certain haunted locations by highly sensitive individuals. But when people begin to doubt the sanity of their everyday world, these breaks in the fabric of reality become easier to create. Your enemies stage hauntings, create Fortean phenomena, and insert false evidence of nonexistent conspiracies into the historical record. These begin as hoaxes, but, as they create mass hysteria, become real. As they peak, they spawn the so-called Creatures of Unremitting Horror, bizarre modernist monsters who must be destroyed before they become as much a part of consensus reality as lions or convenience stores.

Who Are Your Enemies ?

The Esoterrorists are a worldwide network of misfits and rejects from various occult traditions who've banded together to enhance their power at the expense of others. When these plots succeed, the personal power of the involved Esoterrorists increases. Many use the power they glean for personal gratification, whether their tastes run toward money, drugs, or sex. Most enjoy power for its own sake, sadistically inflicting horror on an unsuspecting populace.



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YOUR CHARACTER

THIS SECTION IS ADDRESSED TO PLAYERS AND SHOWS THEM HOW TO CREATE THEIR CHARACTERS. GMS SHOULD READ IT, TOO. THE GUMSHOE RULES DEFINE YOUR CHARACTER BY WHAT HE OR SHE CAN ACCOMPLISH IN AN INVESTIGATIVE SCENARIO. THE COMPONENT ELEMENTS OF EACH ABILITY DON'T MATTER IN RULES TERMS. THE RULES DON'T CARE IF YOUR FORENSIC ACCOUNTING ABILITY IS ONE PART NATIVE MENTAL ACUITY TO TWO PARTS TRAINING OR VICE VERSA, ALTHOUGH YOU CAN MENTION THEM WHEN DESCRIBING YOUR CHARACTER TO OTHERS. ALL THAT MATTERS IS HOW YOU SOLVE CASES, AND OVERCOME OTHER OBSTACLES ARISING FROM THEM.

Concept and Contacts

Before you start, decide why your character attracted the interest of the Ordo Veritatis in the first place. What qualifies you to conduct dangerous investigations into the supernatural? You might be an accomplished academic, a decorated cop, a retired military officer, or even a shady character with extensive underworld contacts. The ordinary life you set out for yourself may allow you, in tandem with some of the abilities listed below, to gather information you would not otherwise be entitled to. You do this by drawing on the contacts and resources that come with your day job. Naturally you must be careful not to alert your blissfully unaware colleagues to the true reason for your inquiries.

Buying Abilities

You create characters by spending build points on your character's abilities. Each ability has a numerical rating. Every rating point costs 1 build point to purchase.



THE
ESOTERICS
OF
ORDO VERITATIS

YOUR CHARACTER

YOUR CHARACTER

The number of points each player spends on investigative abilities varies according to the number of regularly attending players, according to the following table.

# of players	Investigative Build Points
2	32
3	24
4	22
5+	20

Players who can only attend every now and then get the same number of investigative build points as everyone else, but are not counted toward the total when deciding how many points to allocate.

When choosing investigative abilities it is better to get a large number of abilities with fairly low ratings. Even a 1-point rating is worth having. You'll rarely want to spend more than 3 or 4 points on any one investigative ability.

Each player gets 60 points to spend on general abilities, regardless of group size.

General abilities use different rules than investigative ones, which allow for possible failure. When choosing general abilities, you'll want to concentrate your points among a few abilities, giving your comparatively higher ratings than you want in the investigative category. You'll find that you'll want ratings of around 8 in core abilities, like Health, Stability and Shooting or Scuffling.

Although there is no set cap on abilities, the second highest rating must be at least half that of the highest rating.

Justin wants to have a Health rating of 30. This requires him to take at least one other ability at 15. This would leave him only 15 points to spend on all of the other general abilities. Justin reconsiders, opting for a lower Health rating, so he can spend his other points more freely.

If you want, you can save build points from character creation to spend later. If your GM is running an ongoing series of Esoterrorists games, you will accumulate additional build points during play.

When creating characters, it is essential that you coordinate with your fellow players to make sure that at least one member of the group possesses each of the investigative abilities. Successful groups also ensure that the various general abilities are all accounted for. When in doubt, perform a roll-call of abilities to make sure you've covered all the abilities.

You must have an ability to get useful information from it, or to perform tests and contests. You might be able to perform unremarkable tasks without having the related ability.

You can still drive a car without the Driving ability; you just can't do anything difficult behind the wheel. You don't need Preparedness to own a bag full of stuff, but that stuff will never come in handy during an investigation.

Free ABILITIES

A basic grounding in the history and methodology of occult practice is an essential tool in combating Esoterrorists. Every member of the Ordo Veritatis is given at least a basic grounding in it, gaining Occult Studies 1 for free. Additional rating points carry the standard cost. In GUMSHOE-based games not based on the Esoterrorist default setting, this free bonus does not apply. You also start the game with 1 point each in Health and Stability.

What Good Are Ratings ?

Players used to the bumbling half-competence of their characters in other investigative game systems may be surprised to learn how effective even a single rating point is.

Any rating in an investigative ability indicates a high degree of professional accomplishment or impressive natural talent. If you have an ability relevant to the task at hand, you automatically succeed in discovering any information or overcoming any obstacles necessary to propel you from the current scene further into the story.

Each rating gives you a pool of points to spend in situations related to its base ability. You may ask to spend points to gain **special benefits**. Sometimes the GM will offer you the chance to spend points. In other circumstances she may accept your suggestions of ways to gain special benefits. Use them wisely; spent points do not return until the next investigation begins.

General abilities use a different set of rules and are measured on a different scale than investigative abilities. The two ability sets are handled in different way because they fulfill distinct narrative functions. The rules governing general abilities introduce the possibility of failure into the game, creating suspense and uncertainty. Uncertain outcomes make scenes of physical action more exciting, but can stop a mystery story dead if applied to the collection of information. This division may seem aesthetically weird when you first encounter it, but as you grow used to the GUMSHOE system you'll see that it works.

An average person off the street has no investigative abilities at all, and Health and Stability ratings of 4 or so. This is all they need to get through life. You need to be much better

than average, because you're going up against the Esoterrorists. Naturally, when they confront you directly, they'll send similarly adept agents to do you harm.

GUMSHOE focuses not on your character's innate traits, but on what they can actually do in the course of a storyline. Why they can do it is up to each player. Your characters are as strong, fast, and good-looking as you want them to be.





Investigative Abilities

The following abilities are the bread and butter of GUMSHOE characters.

Ability descriptions consist of a brief general description, followed by examples of their use in an investigation. Creative players should be able to propose additional uses for their abilities as unexpected situations confront their characters.

Certain specific actions may overlap between a couple of abilities. For example, you can enhance image resolution with either Data Retrieval or Photography.

Some abilities, like Research, are broadly useful, and will crop up constantly. Others may be called for many times in the course of one scenario, and not at all in others. When building your character, strike a balance between the reliable workhouse abilities and their exotic, specialized counterparts.

Investigative abilities are divided into the following sub-groups: Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical. The purpose of the sub-groups is to allow you to quickly find the best ability for the task during play, by scanning the most likely portion of the overall list.

ANTHROPOLOGY (ACADEMIC)

You are an expert in the study of human cultures, from the stone age to the Internet age.

You can :

- identify artifacts and rituals of living cultures
- describe the customs of a foreign group or local subculture
- extrapolate the practices of an unknown culture from similar examples

ARCHAEOLOGY (ACADEMIC)

You excavate and study the structures and artifacts of historical cultures and civilizations. You can:

- tell how long something has been buried
- identify artifacts by culture and usage
- distinguish real artifacts from fakes
- navigate inside ruins and catacombs
- describe the customs of ancient or historical cultures
- spot well-disguised graves and underground hiding places

ARCHITECTURE (ACADEMIC)

You know how buildings are planned and constructed. You can:

- guess what lies around the corner while exploring an unknown structure
- judge the relative strength of building materials
- identify a building's age, architectural style, original use, and history of modifications
- construct stable makeshift structures
- identify elements vital to a building's structural integrity

ART HISTORY (ACADEMIC)

You're an expert on works of art from an aesthetic and technical point of view. You can:



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Why No Lying Ability?

Unlike many other RPG rules sets, GUMSHOE does not treat lying as an ability unto itself. Instead characters employ it as a tactic while using any of the various interpersonal abilities. With Bureaucracy, you tell functionaries what they want to hear. Using Cop Talk, you convince police officials that you're their kind of guy, and so on. There's a little bit of deception in nearly every successful interpersonal interaction—at least when you're on the job for the Ordo Veritatis.

- distinguish real works from fakes
- tell when something has been retouched or altered
- identify the age of an object by style and materials
- call to mind historical details on artists and those around them

ASTRONOMY (TECHNICAL)

You study celestial objects, including the stars, planets. You can:

- decipher astrological texts
- plot the movement of constellations
- study and debunk UFO reports

BALLISTICS (TECHNICAL)

You process evidence relating to the use of firearms. You can:

- identify the caliber and type of a bullet or casing found at a crime scene
- determine if a particular gun fired a given bullet

BULLSHIT DETECTOR (INTERPERSONAL)

You can tell when people are lying. You must usually be interacting with them or observing them from a close distance, but sometimes you can spot liars on television, too. Unfortunately, nearly everyone lies, especially when facing possible trouble from the authorities. Sometimes you can infer why they're lying, but it's hard to reliably discern motive or get at the facts they're working to obscure.

Not all lies are verbal. You can tell when a person is attempting to project a false impression through body language.

Certain individuals may be so adept at lying that they never set off your bullshit detector. Some people believe their own falsehoods. Psychopathic personality types lie reflexively and without shame, depriving you of the telltale tics and gestures you use to sense when a person is deceiving you.

BUREAUCRACY (INTERPERSONAL)

You know how to navigate a bureaucratic organization, whether it's a governmental office or a large business concern. You know how to get what you want from it in an expeditious manner, and with a minimum of ruffled feathers. You can:

- convince officials to provide sensitive information
- gain credentials on false pretences
- find the person who really knows what's going on
- locate offices and files
- borrow equipment or supplies

Bureaucracy is not a catch-all information gathering ability. Bureaucrats wish to convey the impression that they are busy and harried, whether or not they actually are. Most take a profound, secret joy in directing inquiries elsewhere. When players attempt to use Bureaucracy to gain information more easily accessible via other abilities (such as Research), their contacts snidely advise them to do their own damn legwork.

CHEMISTRY (TECHNICAL)

You're trained in the analysis of chemical substances. You can:

- among a wide variety of other materials, identify drugs, pharmaceuticals, toxins, and viruses
- match samples of dirt or vegetation from a piece of evidence to a scene

COP TALK (INTERPERSONAL)

You know how to speak the lingo of police officers, and to make them feel confident and relaxed in your presence. You may be a current or former cop, or simply the kind of person they immediately identify as a solid, trustworthy citizen. You can:

- coolly ply cops for confidential information
- get excused for minor infractions
- imply that you are a colleague, authorized to participate in their cases

CRYPTOGRAPHY (TECHNICAL)

You're an expert in the making and breaking of codes, from the simple ciphers of old-school espionage tradecraft to the supercomputer algorithms of the present day.

DATA RETRIEVAL (TECHNICAL)

You use computer and electronic technology to retrieve and enhance information on hard drives and other media. You can:

- recover hidden, erased or corrupted computer files
- increase the clarity of audio recordings, zeroing in on desired elements
- miraculously find detailed, high-resolution images within a blurry video image or blurry JPEG



DOCUMENT ANALYSIS (TECHNICAL)

You're an expert in the study of physical documents. You can:

- determine a document's approximate age
- identify the manufacturer of paper used in a document
- tell forged documents from the real thing
- identify distinctive handwriting
- match typed documents to the typewriters that produced them
- find fingerprints on paper

ELECTRONIC SURVEILLANCE (TECHNICAL)

You're adept at the use of sound recording equipment to gather evidence. You can:

- trace phone calls
- plant secret listening devices
- locate secret listening devices planted by others
- make high-quality audio recordings
- enhance the quality of audio recordings, isolating chosen sounds

EVIDENCE COLLECTION (TECHNICAL)

You're adept at finding, bagging and tagging important clues. You can:

- spot objects of interest at a crime scene or other investigation site
- note relationships between objects at a crime scene, reconstructing sequences of events
- store objects for forensic analysis without contaminating your samples

EXPLOSIVE DEVICES (TECHNICAL)

You're an expert in bombs and booby-traps. You can:

- defuse bombs and traps
- reconstruct exploded bombs, determining their materials, manufacture, and the sophistication of the bomb-maker
- safely construct and detonate explosive devices of your own

FINGERPRINTING (TECHNICAL)

You're an expert in finding, transferring and matching fingerprints. This includes expertise in the computer software used to compare sample fingerprints against large databases of criminal defendants and government personnel.

FLATTERY (INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at getting people to help you by complimenting them, as subtly or blatantly as they prefer. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- perform minor favors
- regard you as trustworthy.

FLIRTING (INTERPERSONAL)

You're adept at winning cooperation from people who find you sexually attractive. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- help you in small ways
- date you

It's up to you whether a high rating in Flirting means that you are physically alluring, or simply exude a sexual magnetism unrelated to your looks.

FORENSIC ACCOUNTING (ACADEMIC)

You comb through financial data looking for irregularities. In the words made famous during Woodward and Bernstein's investigation of the Watergate scandal, you know how to "follow the money." You can:

- tell legitimate businesses from criminal enterprises
- spot the telltale signs of embezzlement
- track payments to their source

FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY (TECHNICAL)

You perform autopsies on deceased subjects to determine their cause of death. In the case of death by foul play, your examination can identify:

- the nature of the weapon or weapons used
- the presence of intoxicants or other foreign substances in the bloodstream
- the contents of the victim's last meal

In many cases, you can reconstruct the sequence of events leading to the victim's death from the arrangement of wounds on the body.

You also perform DNA analysis on samples found at crime scenes, matching them to samples provided by suspects.

FORENSIC ENTOMOLOGY (TECHNICAL)

You specialize in the relationship between corpses and the legions of insects who dine on them. By studying eggs and larvae in a decomposing corpse you can:

- determine approximate time of death
- identify a crime scene, in the case of a dumped body

FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY (ACADEMIC)

You apply psychological insight to the solving of criminal cases. From the details of a crime scene, you can, based on past case studies of similar offenses, assemble a profile detailing the perpetrator's likely personal history, age, habits and attitudes.

You can also glean useful information from simple observation of certain individual, especially as they react to pressure.

HISTORY (ACADEMIC)

You're an expert in recorded human history, with an emphasis on its political, military, and economic and technological developments. You can:

- recognize obscure historical allusions
- recall capsule biographies of famous historical figures
- tell where and when an object made during historical times was fashioned
- identify the period of an article of dress or costume

IMPERSONATE (INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at posing as another person, whether briefly misrepresenting yourself during a phone call or spending long periods undercover in a fictional identity. Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult. Brief voice-only mimicry pits you against a Difficulty Number of 4. Face-to-face impersonation requires successful roll against a Difficulty Number of 7 every five minutes of sustained contact between you and the object of your impersonation. (Difficulty Numbers are explained on p. 32.)

INTERROGATION (INTERPERSONAL)

You're trained in extracting information from suspects and witnesses in the context of a formal police-style interview. This must take place in an official setting, where the subject is confined or feels under threat of confinement, and recognizes your authority (whether real or feigned.)

INTIMIDATION (INTERPERSONAL)

You elicit cooperation from suspects by seeming physically imposing, invading their personal space, and adopting a psychologically commanding manner. Intimidation may involve implied or direct threats of physical violence but is just as often an act of mental dominance. You can:

- gain information
- inspire the subject to leave the area
- quell a subject's desire to attempt violence against you or others

LANGUAGES (ACADEMIC)

For each rating point in Languages, you are verbally fluent and literate in one language other than your native tongue. You may specify these when you create your character, or choose opportunistically in the course of play, revealing that you just happen to speak Japanese when circumstances require it. You are not learning the language spontaneously but revealing a hitherto unmentioned fact about

Ordo Veritatis and the Law

You and your teammates operate in a hazy world of extra-legal authority. You may be authorities of various sorts in your day-to-day professional lives, from cops to district attorneys. Sometimes you can quietly use the resources of these jobs in your capacity as fighters against the Esoterrorists. On other occasions you'll work purely as civilians. Individuals with police powers, of arrest for example, may only exercise them in their jurisdictions, and only in a way that can be explained away to the mundane authorities.

Patrons and accomplices of the Ordo Veritatis exist throughout the world's power structures, particularly in the industrialized world. Although you can't flout the law with impunity or obviously be seen to commit major crimes, you can expect some behind-the-scenes leeway to be granted when circumstances force you to bend procedure to keep a lid on your occult enemies.

In general, the rules concerning illegal activity are:

1. Don't break the law unless you absolutely have to.
2. Break rule one only when the safety or sanity of the public is at stake, and only if the cost of inaction is significantly greater than that of action.
3. Don't tell anyone about the Ordo Veritatis. If they already know, they'll understand.
4. If you are imprisoned or detained by the rightful authorities of a major nation, sit tight and we'll get you out.
5. If you are imprisoned or detained elsewhere, or by illegitimate or corrupt authorities, do your best to escape. Knowingly or not, they're probably working at the behest of the Esoterrorists.
6. Don't get caught.

your character. You may elect to be literate in an ancient language which is no longer spoken.

LAW (ACADEMIC)

You are familiar with the criminal and civil laws of your home jurisdiction, and broadly acquainted with foreign legal systems. At a rating of 2 or more, you are a bar-certified attorney. You can:

- assess the legal risks attendant on any course of action
- understand lawyerly jargon
- argue with police and prosecutors

LINGUISTICS (ACADEMIC)

You are an expert in the principles and structures underlying languages. You can probably speak other Languages, but that is a separate ability that must be purchased separately. You can:

- given a large enough sample of text, decipher the basic meaning of an unknown language
- identify the languages most similar to an unknown language
- identify artificial, alien and made-up languages

NATURAL HISTORY (ACADEMIC)

You study the evolution, behavior, and biology of plants and animals. You can:

- tell when an animal is behaving strangely
- tell whether an animal or plant is natural to a given area
- identify an animal from samples of its hair, blood, bones or other tissue
- identify a plant from a small sample

NEGOTIATION (INTERPERSONAL)

You are an expert in making deals with others, convincing them that the best arrangement for you is also the best for them. You can:

- haggle for goods and services
- mediate hostage situations
- swap favors or information with others

OCCULT STUDIES (ACADEMIC)

You're an expert in the historical study of magic, superstition, and hermetic practice from the stone age to the present. From Satanists to the Golden Dawn, you know the dates, the places, the controversies, and the telling anecdotes. You can:

- identify the cultural traditions informing a ritual from examining its physical aftermath
- supply historical facts concerning various occult traditions
- guess the intended effect of a ritual from its physical aftermath
- identify occult activities as the work of informed practitioners, teenage posers, or bona fide Esoterrorists

Your knowledge of the occult is that of a detached, even disapproving, outsider. This ability does not allow you to work magic or summon supernatural entities. Doing either

of these things is bad, the work of Esoterrorists. It weakens the fabric of reality and warps the practitioner's psyche. You can, at best, fake your way through a ritual while attempting to pass yourself off as a believer. Even in this situation, your actions do not evoke supernatural effects. Your covertly hostile presence may, in fact, be enough to prevent an Esoterror ritual from achieving efficacy.

As mentioned earlier, all characters built for the Esoterrorist setting get Occult Studies 1 for free.

PHOTOGRAPHY (TECHNICAL)

You're proficient in the use of cameras, including still and video photography. You can:

- take useful visual records of crime scenes
- spot manual retouching or digital manipulation in a photographic or video image
- realistically retouch and manipulate images

REASSURANCE (INTERPERSONAL)

You get people to do what you want by putting them at ease. You can:

- elicit information and minor favors
- allay fear or panic in others
- instill a sense of calm during a crisis

RESEARCH (ACADEMIC)

You know how to find factual information from books, records, and official sources.

You're as comfortable with a card catalogue and fiche reader as with an Internet search engine. The contacts file on your personal digital assistant brims with phone numbers of exotic and useful contacts.

STREETWISE (INTERPERSONAL)

You know how to behave among crooks, gang-bangers, druggies, hookers and other habitués of the criminal underworld. You can:

- deploy criminal etiquette to avoid fights and conflicts
- identify unsafe locations and dangerous people
- gather underworld rumors

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS (ACADEMIC)

By studying the content of texts (as opposed to their physical characteristics of documents) you can draw reliable inferences about their authorship. You can:

- determine if an anonymous text is the work of a known author, based on samples of his work
- determine the era in which a text was written
- identify the writer's region, and level of education
- tell a real work by an author from a false one



TRIVIA (ACADEMIC)

You're a font of apparently useless information that would stand you in good stead as a contestant on a quiz show. You're especially good in the following spheres of interest:

- celebrities and entertainment
- sports records and statistics
- geography
- arts and letters
- names in the news

This catch-all ability also allows you to know any obscure fact not covered by another GUMSHOE ability. (In moments of improvisatory desperation, your GM may allow you to overlap with abilities which none of the players at the current session possess, or which no one is thinking to use.)

General Abilities

ATHLETICS

Athletics allows you to perform general acts of physical derring-do, from running to jumping to dodging falling or oncoming objects. Any physical action not covered by another ability, probably falls under the rubric of Athletics.

If your Athletics rating is 8 or more, your Hit Threshold, the Target Number your opponents use when attempting to hit you in combat, is 4. Otherwise, your Hit Threshold is 3.

DRIVING

You're a skilled defensive driver, capable of wringing high performance from even the most recalcitrant automobile, pick-up truck, or van. You can:

- evade or conduct pursuit
- avoid collisions, or minimize damage from collisions
- spot tampering with a vehicle
- conduct emergency repairs

For every additional rating point in Driving, you may add an additional vehicle type to your repertoire. These include: motorcycle, transport truck, helicopter, or airplane. You may choose exotic types, like hovercrafts and tanks, although these are unlikely to see regular use in an investigation-based game.

FILCH

Your nimble fingers allow you to unobtrusively manipulate small objects. You can:

- pilfer clues from a crime scene under the very noses of unsuspecting authorities
- pick pockets
- plant objects on unsuspecting subjects

HEALTH

Health measures your ability to sustain injuries, resist infection, and survive the effects of toxins. When you get hit in the course of a fight, your Health pool is diminished. A higher Health pool allows you to stay in a fight longer before succumbing to your injuries.

When your Health pool is depleted, you may be dazed, wounded, or pushing up the daisies. For more on this, see "Exhaustion, Injury and Gruesome Death," p. 37.

INFILTRATION

You're good at placing yourself inside places you have no right to be. You can:

- pick locks
- deactivate or evade security systems
- move silently
- find suitable places for forced entry, and use them

Despite its name, Infiltration is as useful for getting out of places undetected as if its for getting into them.

MECHANICS

You're good at building, repairing, and disabling devices, from classic pit-and-pendulum traps to DVD players. Given the right components, you can create jury-rigged devices from odd bits of scrap. Mechanics doubles as an investigative ability when used to:

- evaluate the quality of workmanship used to create an item
- determine the identity of a handmade item's maker by comparing to known work by that individual

MEDIC

You can perform first aid on sick or injured individuals. For more on the use of this ability, see p. 37.

PREPAREDNESS

You expertly anticipate the needs of any mission by packing a kit efficiently arranged with necessary gear. Assuming you have immediate access to your kit, you can produce whatever object the team needs to overcome an obstacle. You make a simple test (p. 32); if you succeed, you have the item you want. You needn't do this in advance of the adventure, but can dig into your kit bag (provided you're able to get to it) as the need arises.

Items of obvious utility to a paranormal investigation do not require a test. These include but are not limited to: note paper, writing implements, laptop computer, a PDA with wireless Internet access, mini USB drive, cell phone, various types of tape, common tools and hardware, light weapons, flashlights of various sizes, chem lights, batteries, magnifying glasses, thermometer, and a no-frills audio recording device.

The utility of traditional anti-supernatural accoutrements such as crucifixes, holy water, and silver bullets is a matter of great debate within the Ordo Veritatis. Whether you choose to include them in your basic kit reveals your attitude toward the supernatural.

Is it purely the work of the Esoterrorists, or are there other unnatural forces out there? Decide for yourself, and pack wisely.

Other abilities imply the possession of basic gear suitable to their core tasks. Characters with Medic have their own first aid kits; Photographers come with cameras and accessories. If you have Shooting, you have a gun, and so on. Preparedness does not intrude into their territory. It covers general-purpose investigative equipment, plus oddball items that suddenly come in handy in the course of the story.

The sorts of items you can produce at a moment's notice depend not on your rating or pool, but on narrative credibility. If the GM determines that your possession of an item would seem ludicrous or and/or out of genre, you don't get to roll for it. You simply don't have it. Any item which elicits a laugh from the group when suggested is probably out of bounds.

Inappropriate use of the Preparedness ability is like pornography. Your GM will know it when she sees it.

SCUFFLING

You can hold your own in a hand-to-hand fight, whether you wish to kill, knock out, restrain, or evade your opponent.

SHRINK

You can provide comfort, perspective and solace to the mentally troubled. You may be a therapist or counselor, a priest or pastor, or just a empathetic and intuitive individual. You can restore panicked characters to a state of calm, and treat any long-term mental illnesses they accrue in the course of their investigations.

SHOOTING

You are adept with firearms.

STABILITY

Jarring or stressful events can exert a damaging long- psychological toll. Confrontation with supernatural Esoterrorist manifestations can provoke outright madness. Your Stability rating indicates your resistance to mental trauma.

You get Stability 1 for free.

SURVEILLANCE

You're good at following suspects without revealing your presence. You can:

- guide a team to follow a suspect for short periods, handing off to the next in sequence, so the subject doesn't realize he's being trailed
- use telescopic viewing equipment to keep watch on a target from a distance
- find undetectable vantage points
- hide in plain sight

8 or more points in Surveillance grants you 1 free point of the investigative ability Electronic Surveillance.

List of Abilities By Family

ACADEMIC

Anthropology
Archaeology
Architecture
Art History
Forensic Accounting
Forensic Psychology
History
Languages
Law
Linguistics
Natural History
Occult Studies
Research
Textual Analysis
Trivia

INTERPERSONAL

Bullshit Detector
Bureaucracy
Cop Talk
Flattery
Flirting
Impersonate
Interrogation
Intimidation
Negotiation
Reassurance
Streetwise

TECHNICAL

Astronomy
Ballistics
Chemistry
Cryptography
Data Retrieval
Electronic Surveillance
Entomology
Evidence Collection
Explosive Devices
Forensic Anthropology
Document Analysis
Fingerprinting
Photography

STANDALONE

[GENERAL]

Athletics
Driving
Filch
Health
Infiltration
Mechanics
Medic
Preparedness
Scuffling
Shooting
Shrink
Stability
Surveillance

GUMSHOE

rules system



THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

THIS CHAPTER DESCRIBES THE BASIC GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM AND IS ADDRESSED TO PLAYERS AND GM ALIKE. BUT FIRST BEAR WITH US FOR A LITTLE EXPLANATORY THEORY.

Why This Game Exists

Investigative scenarios have been done wrong since the early days of roleplaying games. As a consequence, they're hard to run and prone to grind to a halt. GUMSHOE is here to fix all that.

What's wrong about the traditional way of doing investigative games? They're based on a faulty premise. Story-based roleplaying, of which investigative games were an early if not the earliest example, evolved from dungeon-bashing campaigns. They treat clues the same way that dungeon games treat treasure. You have to search for the clue that takes you on to the next scene. If you roll well, you get the clue. If not, you don't—and the story grinds to a halt.

However, treasure gathering isn't the main event in a dungeon game. There, the central activity is killing the monsters and enemies who live in the dungeon. The treasure-finding phase comes afterwards, as a mere reward. If you don't get all the treasure in a room, you lose out a bit, but the story keeps going, as you tromp down the hallway to the next monster-filled chamber.

Imagine a dungeon game where you always had to roll well to find another room to plunder, or sit around feeling frustrated and bored.

In a fictional procedural, whether it's a mystery novel or an episode of a cop show, the emphasis isn't on finding the clues in the first place. When it really matters, you may get a paragraph telling you how difficult the search was, or a montage of a CSI team tossing an apartment. But the action really starts after the clues are gathered.

INVESTIGATIVE SCENARIOS ARE NOT ABOUT FINDING CLUES,
THEY'RE ABOUT INTERPRETING THE CLUES YOU DO FIND.

GUMSHOE, therefore, makes the finding of clues all but automatic, as long as you get to the right place in the story and have the right ability. That's when the fun part begins, when the players try to put the components of the puzzle together.

That's hard enough for a group of armchair detectives, without withholding half the pieces from them.

Mystery Structure

Every investigative scenario begins with a crime or conspiracy committed by a group of antagonists. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities.

If you use the GUMSHOE rules for straight-up crime drama, the team investigates a crime, finds out who did it, and puts the culprits under arrest.

In the Esoterrorist setting, the team investigates an occult conspiracy, finds out who did it and why, and takes action to end the occult manifestations. They may detain or kill the Esoterrorists behind it. They may destroy any supernatural creatures or effects generated by the conspiracy. Or they might turn over the information gained in their investigation to a specialized Ordo Veritatis clean-up team, who ruthlessly and efficiently dispose of the guilty parties and their workings.

Your GM designs each scenario by creating an investigation trigger, a sinister conspiracy, and a trail of clues.

THE INVESTIGATION TRIGGER

This is the event, often a gruesome crime, that attracts the attention of the Ordo Veritatis, resulting in the initiation of an investigation. Examples:

- The discovery of a murder victim, obviously slain during a ritualistic killing.
- The discovery of a corpse slain by supernatural means, perhaps by a creature.
- Sightings of supernatural creatures or phenomena.
- The apparently mundane death of an Ordo Veritatis member or ally.

THE SINISTER CONSPIRACY

This sets out who the bad guys are, what they've done so far, what they're trying to do, and how the investigation trigger fits into the overall scheme. The GM also determines what has to happen to prevent the plot from going forward. This, unknown to the players, is their victory condition — what they have to do to thwart the bad guys and bring the story to a positive conclusion.

Once the GM has the logic of the story worked out from the villain's point of view, she then thinks in reverse, designing a **trail of clues** leading from the investigation trigger to an understanding of the sinister plot and its players, sufficient to get to work destroying it.

Optionally, the GM may also plan a series of **antagonist reactions**. These lay out what the bad guys do when they find out that they're being investigated. The GM determines what conditions trigger them, and what the antagonists attempt to do. These may include further crimes, giving the team more to investigate. They may try to destroy evidence, hinder the investigation by planting false leads, or to intimidate or dispose of potential witnesses, including accomplices they no longer trust. They may attack the investigators. Foolish, overconfident or risk-taking antagonists may take them on directly. Clever antagonists will strike from a distance, taking great pains to cover their tracks.

From Structure To Story

The GM's structure notes are not a story. The story occurs as you, the team of players, brings the structure to life through the actions of your characters. The story proceeds from scene to scene, where you determine the pace, discovering clues and putting them together. Your characters interact with locations, gathering physical evidence, and supporting characters run by the GM, gathering expert and eyewitness testimony.

The first scene presents the mystery you have to solve. You then perform legwork, collecting information that tells you more about the case. Each scene contains information pointing to a new scene. Certain scenes may put a new twist on the investigation, as the initial mystery turns out to be just one aspect of a much bigger story. As clues accumulate, a picture of the case emerges, until your characters arrive at a climactic scene, where all is revealed and the bad guys confronted. A wrap-up scene accounts for loose ends and shows the consequences of your success — or, in rare instances, failure. (Why is failure possible at all? Its possibility creates urgency and suspense.)

To move from scene to scene, and to solve the overall mystery, you must gather clues. They fuel your forward momentum.

Gathering Clues

Gathering clues is simple. All you have to do is: 1) get yourself into a scene where relevant information can be gathered and 2) have the right ability to discover the clue and 3) tell the GM that you're using it. As long as you do these three things, you will

Mundane MYSTERIES

The scenario structure given in the main text assumes you're using the Esoterror background, or a similar setting of occult investigation.

Ordinary crime dramas may call for a simpler structure. The bad guys could still be furthering a sinister plot, or they may be doing nothing after committing the triggering crime other than hoping that the investigators don't catch up with them. In this case there is no ongoing conspiracy to disrupt. To achieve victory and bring the scenario to a successful conclusion, the investigators need merely prove their case against the criminals. The climactic scene might involve wringing a confession from the wrongdoer, or provoking him into revealing the crucial bit of evidence which will ensure his conviction.

Tip For Players: Containing Speculation

Investigative scenarios often bog down into speculative debate between players about what could be happening. Many things can be happening, but only one thing is. If more than one possible explanation ties together the clues you have so far, you need more clues. Whenever you get stuck, get out and gather more information.



never fail to gain a piece of necessary information. It is never dependent on a die roll. If you ask for it, you will get it.

You can specify exactly what you intend to achieve: "I use Textual Analysis to determine if the memo was really written by Danziger."

Or you can engage in a more general informational fishing expedition: "I use Evidence Collection to search the crime scene."

If your suggested action corresponds to a clue in the scenario notes, the GM provides you the information arising from the clue.

Intrepid investigator Stig Thompson is on the trail of a roving tribe of high-tech cannibals. He searches a section of forested land off the highway for evidence of their presence. His player, Justin, says, "I put my video camera in infrared mode and scan the area for heat traces." This is all he needs to do to get the information he needs to proceed to the next scene, a confrontation with the cannibals in their encampment. "Blobs of heat energy pop up to your right, about a hundred yards away. It looks like there's four or five people, appearing and disappearing behind a barrier."

For each scene, the GM designates a **core clue**. This is the clue you absolutely need to move to the next scene, and thus to complete the entire investigation. GMs will avoid making core clues available only with the use of obscure investigative abilities. (For that matter, the character creation system is set up so that the group as a whole will have access to all, or nearly all, of these abilities.)

Certain clues allow you to gain special benefits by spending points from the relevant investigative ability pool. During your first few scenarios, your GM will offer you the opportunity to spend additional points as you uncover these clues. After that it's up to you to ask if there's anything to be gained by spending extra time or effort on a given clue. You can even propose specific ways to improve your already good result; if your suggestion is persuasive or entertaining, the GM may award you a special benefit not mentioned in her scenario notes.

Each benefit costs either 1 or 2 points from the relevant pool, depending on the difficulty of the additional action and the scope of the reward. When asking you if you want to purchase the benefit, the GM always tells you how much it will cost. Additional information gained provides flavor, but is never required to solve the case or move on to a new scene. Often it makes the character seem clever, powerful, or heroic. It may grant you benefits useful later in the scenario, frequently by making a favorable impression on supporting characters. The benefit may be helpful in arranging the veil-out, the all-important Ordo Veritatis cover-up undertaken at the conclusion of an investigation into the supernatural. It may allow you to leap forward into the story by gaining a clue that would otherwise only become apparent in a later scene. On occasion, the additional information adds an emotional dimension to the story or ties into the character's past history or civilian life. If you think of your GUMSHOE game as a TV series, an extra benefit gives the actor playing your character a juicy spotlight scene.

"Can I tell what kind of barrier they're behind?" asks Justin. The GM knows that it's the cannibals' tricked-out recreational vehicle. This information isn't necessary to move forward, and in fact Stig will stumble across it in a moment if he keeps going toward the cannibal camp. But it would be mighty impressive, in a Sherlock Holmes kind of way, if he could answer that question now.

"Do you want to spend a Photography point?" asks the GM. Justin agrees, and reduces his pool from its maximum of 3, down to 2. Justin has already established that in Stig's civilian life, he's an electronics freak and rabid early adopter who pays for his gear with a variety of oddball freelance gigs. This gives the GM an opening to justify Stig's impressive insight, while also giving him a distinctive character moment.

The GM explains as follows: "The contours are unmistakably familiar to you from the time when you were hired to shoot footage at the New Mexico RV Show. It's a luxury motor home, a 2006 Patriot from Beaver Motor Coaches. You remember the price tag on one of those puppies. Over three hundred grand."

Stig whistles through his teeth. "These aren't your father's hillbilly cannibal cultists," he says.

Spending points on benefits gives you an edge at the end of the scenario, when you are awarded points to improve your character. Thus it is to your advantage to propose cool benefits to the GM, even when they aren't specified in the scenario.

The act of spending points for benefits is called a **spend**. The GM's scenario notes may specify that you get Benefit X for a 1-point spend, or Benefit Y for a 2-point spend. GMs of great mental agility who feel comfortable granting their players influence over the details of the narrative may allow them to specify the details of a special benefit. If you wish to make a spend in a situation where the GM has no special benefit to offer you, and cannot think of one that pertains at all to the investigation, you do not lose the points you wish to spend.

Inconspicuous Clues

Sometimes the characters instinctively notice something without actively looking for it. Often this situation occurs in places they're moving through casually and don't regard as scenes in need of intensive searching. The team might pass by a concealed door, spot a droplet of blood on the marble of an immaculate hotel lobby, or approach a vehicle with a bomb planted beneath it. Interpersonal abilities can also be used to find inconspicuous clues. The classic example is of a character whose demeanor or behavioral tics establish them as suspicious.

It's unreasonable to expect players to ask to use their various abilities in what appears to be an innocuous transitional scene. Otherwise they'd have to spend minutes of game time with every change of scene, running down their abilities in obsessive checklist fashion. That way madness lies.

Instead the GM asks which character has the highest current pool in the ability in question. (When in doubt for what ability to use for a basic search, the GM defaults to Evidence Collection.)

If two or more pools are equal, it goes to the one with the highest rating. If ratings are also equal, their characters find the clue at the same time.

Stig visits the hospital to get his lip stitched up after a scuffle with a young cannibal. His pal Mitchell Blunt waits with him. The doctor in the ER is a cannibal, too, and intends to drug Stig and have him hauled off to his favorite butcher's shop. The GM decides that the Forensic Psychology ability will alert them to a sense of predatory anticipation underlying the doctor's wearily professional demeanor. Both characters have the skill; Stig has 2 points in his pool, while Mitchell has 3.

"Mitchell," says the GM, "you can't put your finger on it, but there's something hinky about the doctor. He's got what Shakespeare would call a lean and hungry look."

TESTS

A test occurs when the outcome of an ability use is in doubt. Tests apply to general skills only. Unlike information gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

Die Rolls

All die rolls in GUMSHOE use a single ordinary (six-sided) die.

Even in the case of general skills, the GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most general ability uses should allow automatic successes, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like investigative abilities.

There are two types of test: simple tests and contests.

Simple Tests

A simple test occurs when the character attempts an action without active resistance from another person or entity. Examples include driving a treacherous road, jumping a gorge, sneaking into an unguarded building, binding a wound, shooting a target, disconnecting a security system, or remaining sane in the face of creeping supernatural horror.

The GM determines how hard any given action is by assigning it a Difficulty Number ranging from 2 to 8, where 2 offers only a slim chance of failure and 8 verges on the impossible. The player rolls a single die; if the result is equal to or higher than the Difficulty Number, the character succeeds. Before rolling the die, the player may choose to spend any number of points from the relevant ability pool, adding these to the final die result. Players who forget to specify the number of points they want to spend before rolling are stuck with the unmodified result.

In the game world, expenditure of pool points in this way represents special effort and concentration by the character, the kind you can muster only so many times during the course of an investigation.

Stig wants to climb a high wall to see if Unremitting Horrors lurk on the other side. The GM needs the group to get to the other side of the wall and therefore assigns the relatively low Difficulty Number of 3 to the task. Stig's player, Justin, has a full 8 points in his Athletics pool. He decides that he really needs a win on this one and decides to spend half of them on the attempt. He rolls a 5. With the 4 points from his pool, this gets a final result of 9. Displaying impressive aerobic grace, Stig hauls himself over the wall.



The Esoterrorists setting is meant to be straight-up and brutal horror game. Losing points is meant to hurt. To truly evoke that spirit, the GM never reveals Difficulty Numbers.

GMs running GUMSHOE in non-horror environments, or who wish to water down the setting's intentional level of oppressive nastiness, may choose to reveal Difficulties.

The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

Mitchell has just failed his Mechanics test to repair a broken pump in the sinking ship he and the other investigators are trapped in. He spent 2 points from his Mechanics pool on this attempt. The GM decides he'll have one more shot at it before the ship capsizes. Now he must spend at least 3 Mechanics points. Fortunately he has 4 points left in his pool. The Difficulty Number of the repair attempt is 5. Mitchell rolls a 6, adding 3 points to get a final result of 9. The pump kicks back in, just in time to reverse the ship's sinking.

Difficulty Numbers and Story Pacing

Just as the GUMSHOE system keeps the story moving by making all crucial clues accessible to the characters, GMs must ensure that tests and contests essential to forward narrative momentum can be easily overcome. Assign relatively low Difficulty Numbers of 4 or less to these crucial plot points. Reserve especially hard Difficulty Numbers for obstacles which provide interesting but nonessential benefits.

For example, if the characters have to sneak into the cannibal campground in order to stage the final confrontation, assign the relatively low Difficulty Number of 4 to the task. If it seems to the characters that they ought to have a tougher time of it, insert a detail justifying their ease of success. The cannibal assigned to patrol duty might be found passed out at his post, say.

PIGGYBACKING

When a group of characters act in concert to perform a task together, they designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

Stig, Mitchell, Lauren and Yoriko attempt to sneak into the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to perform tests on the famous Botticelli painting Primavera. Lauren, with an Infiltration of 8, takes the lead. Stig, Mitchell and Yoriko have 2, 0, and 4 points in their Infiltration pools, respectively. Stig and Yoriko pay 1 point apiece; their pools go down to 1 and 3. Because Mitchell has no points to spend, the Difficulty Number of the Infiltration increases from 4 to 6. (If the group left him behind, it would be easier to sneak in, but he's the one with the Art History degree.) Lauren spends 3 points on the attempt and rolls a 1. This would have overcome the Difficulty if it wasn't for Mitchell's presence. Clearly, he's stumbled on his way into the gallery, setting off the infrared sensors.

In most instances a group cannot logically act in concert. Only one character can drive a car at one time. Two characters with Preparedness check their individual kits in sequence, rather than checking a single kit at the same time.

COOPERATION

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll.

Stig and Mitchell are trying to repair a badly damaged old motorcycle so they can escape on it before the members of a Baghdad militia show up to kill them. Stig has 3 points left in his Mechanics pool. Mitchell has 2 points. They decide that Stig is the main mechanic, and Mitchell his assistant. Both choose to spend all of their remaining points on the attempt. Stig adds 3 points to the die roll. Mitchell spends 2 points, but adds only 1 to the die roll. Stig's player rolls a 3, for a result of 7. This beats the Difficulty Number of 6, allowing them to zoom away on the back of the bike as semi-automatic rounds ping all around them.

Contests

Contests occur when two characters, often a player character and a supporting character controlled by the GM, actively attempt to thwart one another. Although contests can resolve various physical match-ups, in a horror game the most common contest is the chase, in which the investigators run away from slavering entities intent on ripping them limb from limb.

In a contest, each character acts in turn. The first to fail a roll of the contested ability loses. The GM decides who acts first. In a chase, the character who bolts from the scene acts first. Where the characters seem to be acting at the same time, the one with the lowest rating in the relevant ability acts first. In the event of a tie, supporting characters act before player characters. In the event of a tie between player characters, the player who arrived last for the current session goes first in the contest.

The first character to act makes a test of the ability in question. If he fails, he loses the contest. If he succeeds, the second character then makes a test. This continues until one character loses, at which point the other one wins.

Typically each character attempts to beat a Difficulty Number of 4.

Stig flees through an abandoned mall from a chainsaw-wielding cultist. His Athletics pool is 6; the cultist's is 7. As the fleeing character initiating the chase sequence, he's the first character to act. He rolls against a Difficulty of 4, spending 1 point. He rolls a 4, and manages to scramble toward the food court. The cultist spends 1 point as well, rolling a 3. He slides along the polished floor, revving his chainsaw.

Stig spends another point, taking his Athletics to 4. He rolls a 2. That's not enough to get away. Stig has backed himself into a corner, caught between garbage bins emblazoned with the logo of a popular fast food corporation. The cultist advances on him. Now he has no choice but to stand and fight.

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap faces a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant.

An investigator running through a swamp finds it harder to move quickly than the marsh creature pursuing him. In this case he might face a Difficulty Number of 4, while the marsh beast gets the lower Difficulty of 3.

Throughout the contest, GM and players should collaborate to add flavor to each result, explaining what the characters did to remain in the contest. That way, instead of dropping out of the narration to engage in an arithmetical recitation, you keep the fictional world verbally alive.



Exhaustion, Injury and Gruesome Death

Unlike most abilities, your **Health pool can drop below 0**.

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness Roll. Roll a die with the absolute value¹ of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness roll is based on your Health pool before you make this reduction.

Elam Stokes is being chased by condo cultists through the lobby of a swank apartment building. They hit him with a harpoon, dropping his Health pool to -2. He really wants to get away from them, lest they sacrifice him on their altar to conspicuous consumerism. Thus he must remain conscious. The absolute value of -2 is 2, so this is the Difficulty of his Consciousness roll. He chooses to expend another 2 Health points he doesn't have, pushing himself onward toward the revolving doors. That gives him a bonus of 2 to his roll. He rolls a 6, for a final result of 8. Elam gets away, but now his Health pool is down to -4.

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to -5, you are **hurt**, but have suffered no permanent injury, beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. However the pain of your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on Investigative abilities, and increases the Difficulty Numbers of all tests and contests, including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1. A character with the Medic ability can improve your condition by spending Medic points. For every Medic point spent, you regain 2 Health points—unless you are the Medic, in which case you gain only 1 Health point for every Medic point spent. The Medic can only refill your pool to where you were before the incident in which you received this latest injury. He must be in a position to devote all of his attention to directly tending to your wounds.

If your pool is between -6 and -11, you have been seriously **wounded**. You must make a Consciousness roll. Whether or not you maintain consciousness, you are no longer able to fight. Until you receive first aid, you will lose an additional Health point every half hour. A character with the Medic ability can stabilize your condition by spending 2 Medic points. However, he can't restore your Health points. Even after you receive first aid, you must convalesce in a hospital or similar setting for a period of days. Your period of forced inactivity is a number of days equal to the positive value of your lowest Health pool score. (So if you were reduced to -8 Health, you are hospitalized for 8 days.) On the day of your discharge, your Health pool increases to half its maximum value. On the next day, it refreshes fully.

When your pool dips to -12 or below, you are dead. Time to create a replacement character.

¹ In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.



Fighting

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving any of the following abilities:

- Scuffling vs. Scuffling: the characters are fighting in close quarters.
- Shooting vs. Shooting: the characters are apart from one another and trying to hit each other with guns or other missile weapons

The aggressor is the first character to move against the other. When the status of aggressor and defender are unclear, the combatants compare their current pool numbers in the abilities they're using in the fight. The character with the highest number chooses whether to act as aggressor or defender. (Unlike an ordinary contest, in a fight it is often advantageous to strike first.)

A contest proceeds between the two abilities. When combatants using the Scuffling or Shooting abilities roll well, they get the opportunity to deal damage to their opponents.

HIT THRESHOLDS

Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more.) The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to harm him. Less competent supporting characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.

DEALING DAMAGE

When you roll on or over your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage to him. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die which is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

WEAPON TYPE	DAMAGE MODIFIER
FIST, KICK	-2
SMALL IMPROVISED WEAPON, POLICE BATON, KNIFE	-1
MACHETE, HEAVY CLUB, LIGHT FIREARM	0
SWORD, HEAVY FIREARM	+1

For firearms, add an additional +2 when fired at point blank range. Supernatural creatures often exhibit alarmingly high damage modifiers. Characters may never spend points from their combat pools to increase their damage rolls.

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less (see sidebar), that combatant collapses from exhaustion and is unable to continue fighting. Any combatants currently engaged with him in a close quarters fight can then deal another instance of damage to him. Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead, they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become seriously wounded — see sidebar.

Stig is attacked in his own motel room by a slime-dripping creature made of hair, claws, and his own sexual guilt. It leaps on him, making this a close quarters fight, for which the Scuffle ability is required. The GM declares that the creature is the aggressor, since it's come out of nowhere to attack the sleeping Stig. The creature has a Scuffle rating and pool of 12, a Health rating and pool of 10, a Hit Threshold of 4, and a Damage Modifier of 2. Stig's Scuffle rating is 10 but his pool is down to 6. His Health pool is down to 8 from a rating of 12. His Hit Threshold is 4. With no weapons at hand, his Damage Modifier is -2. The GM spends 2 points from the creature's Scuffling pool, dropping it from 12 to 10. The GM rolls, getting a 2. Modified by the point spend, that comes out to a 4, which beats Stig's Hit Threshold. The creature may then make a damage roll. The GM rolls a 4; with his Damage Modifier of 2, that equals 6 points of damage. The creature's rancid claws dig deep into Stig's naked torso, reducing his Health pool from 8 to 2. Stig screams in terror, hoping to summon his teammates, slumbering in the adjoining rooms.

He flails at its shifting visage with white-knuckled fists. His player, Justin, spends 3 points, taking his pool from 6 to 3. He rolls a 3, for a result of 6, which more than meets the creature's Hit Threshold. He therefore deals damage to it. Justin rolls a 5. Combined with his -2 modifier, this comes out to 3 points of damage. The creature's Health pool drops from 10 to 7.

The creature responds by attempting to tear open Stig's abdomen to get at his liver. The GM spends another 2 Scuffle points for the creature, taking its pool from 10 to 8. The roll is high, a 5, which modifies to a 7. The ensuing damage roll is a 2, which the creature's Damage Modifier brings to a total of 4. Stig's Health drops to -2. He is now **hurt**, and suffers an increase of 1 to all Difficulty Numbers, including his opponent's Hit Threshold, which now becomes 5. He must make a Consciousness roll, against a Difficulty of 2, which is the absolute value of his Health pool. He rolls a 3, and remains conscious.

Now it's Stig's turn to hit back. Justin spends 2 points, reducing his pool from 3 to 1. He rolls a 2, for a total of 4. Before he got hurt, that would have been enough, but now he's just short of the mark. He tries to jab his thumbs into two of its eye sockets, but can't exert enough pressure to harm the thing..

The creature attacks again, spending another 2 Scuffle points, taking its total from 8 to 6. The GM rolls a 5, for a total of 7 – again enough to deal damage. The damage roll is a 3, plus the Damage Modifier of 2. The creature digs deep into Stig's internal organs, dropping his Health total from -2 to -7. He is now **seriously wounded** and thus unable to continue fighting. That puts Stig out of the fight. His Consciousness roll faces a Difficulty of 7, the absolute value of his Health pool. He could go even further into the red to strain for a bonus, but elects not to. There's no point in making the roll, which is guaranteed to fail. Stig passes out.

If Stig were alone as well as unconscious, the creature could and would proceed to finish him off, tearing him to bits. Fortunately for him, his friend Mitchell Blunt comes to help him, pounding on the hotel door. With its Scuffle down to 6, the creature doesn't feel up to a battle with a fresh opponent. As Blunt busts down the hotel door, it scuttles up through the window, leaving behind only a noxious stench as it disappears into the night.

Stig is seriously wounded and will die if not stabilized. Fortunately, Mitchell Blunt can stop the bleeding. A long convalescence now awaits the unlucky Stig.

Free-For-All Combat

Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent. The GM abandons the aggressor/defender model. Instead, the GM determines an order of action, ranking all participants in the combat according to their present *pool* values in the fighting skills they'll be starting the fight with—Scuffling or Shooting. Ties are broken in favor of characters with higher *ratings* in those skills. If characters are still tied, player characters win out over creatures and enemies, and early-arriving players win over late-arriving players.

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins. When called upon to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons. Some supernatural creatures may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession, and may divide them up between opponents within range, or concentrate all of them on a single enemy.

Creatures may choose to use their actions to deal additional damage to downed or helpless opponents rather than engage active opponents. They automatically deal once instance of damage per action. Only the most crazed and bestial human enemies engage in this behavior.

Characters who join a combat in progress come last in order of precedence. If more than two characters join during the same round, the GM determines their relative precedence using the rules above.

The fight continues until one side capitulates or flees, or all of its members are unconscious or otherwise unable to continue.

Armor

Armor may reduce the damage from certain weapon types. If you're wearing a form of armor effective against the weapon being used against you, you subtract a number of points from each instance of damage dealt to you before applying it to your Health pool. Light body armor, as worn by police officers, reduces each instance of damage from bullets by 2 points and from cutting and stabbing weapons (knives, swords, machetes) by 1 point. Military-grade body armor reduces bullet damage by 3 points.

Mitchell is shot by a street punk working as an unwitting dupe of the Esoterrorists. The GM rolls a 3 for the punk's damage, adding 1 point for his high-caliber handgun, for a total damage of 4. Mitchell wears light body armor, reducing the damage to 2 points. His Health pool decreases from 6 to 4.

Light body armor is heavy, hot, and marks you out as someone looking for trouble. All of these drawbacks apply doubly to military-grade body armor. Investigators can't expect to walk around openly wearing armor without attracting the attention of the local SWAT



team. Armor and heavy weapons may prove useful in discrete missions conducted away from prying eyes.

In choosing to make contemporary body armor highly effective against firearms, we're drawing on the portrayal of Kevlar vests in cop shows and movies. We make no claims for any resemblance between these rules and real life. The rules also favor close-up physical confrontations, which are more in keeping with the horror genre than firefights. GMs using the GUMSHOE rules in more realistic, horror-free investigative settings may wish to reduce the effectiveness of body armor against gunfire.

Creatures often have high armor ratings. They may possess hard, bony hides or monstrous anatomies that can take greater punishment than ordinary organisms. Most supernatural creatures are more resistant to bullets and other missile weapons than they are to blunt force trauma, slashes, and stab wounds.

Cover

In a typical gunfight, combatants seek cover, hiding behind walls, furniture or other barriers, exposing themselves only for the few seconds it takes them to pop up and fire a round at their targets. The GUMSHOE rules recognize three cover conditions:

EXPOSED

No barrier stands between you and the combatant firing at you. Your Hit Threshold decreases by 1.

PARTIAL COVER

About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.

FULL COVER

Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

One Gun, Two Combatants [optional]

If you are at the mercy of an opponent with gun well in hand and ready to fire, he can empty his entire clip or chamber at you before you get to him, or get yourself out of range. This situation occurs for example, if he holds you at gunpoint or charge him from more than five feet away with no cover. The Difficulty is 1 (an automatic hit), 2 if your Athletics rating is 8 or more and you are moving. He rolls one instance of damage, which is then tripled. Yes, we said tripled. And, yes, the tripling occurs after weapon modifiers are taken into account. This is why few unarmed people attack a gun-wielding opponent when he has the drop on them. If your opponent has a pistol but it is not well in hand and ready to fire, you may attempt to jump him and wrestle it from his grip. If he has a pistol well in hand but is unaware of your presence, you may also be able to jump him, at the GM's discretion. The characters engage in a Scuffling contest to see which of them gets control of the gun and fires it. The winner makes a damage roll against the loser, using the pistol's Damage Modifier, including the +2 for point blank range.

If you jump an opponent with an unready rifle, a Scuffling combat breaks out, with the opponent using the rifle as a heavy club.

Ammo Capacity

The Esoterrorists sets aside the loving attention to firearm intricacies characteristic of most contemporary-era RPG systems¹. For example, characters need reload only when dramatically appropriate. Otherwise, they're assumed to be able to refill the cylinders of their revolvers or jam clips into their automatic weapons between shots.

When reloading is an issue, GMs may request a Shooting test (Difficulty 3) to quickly reload. Characters who fail may not use their Shooting ability to attack during the current round.

Separated from his teammates, a wounded Mitchell crawls into a condemned tenement to hole up. Unfortunately for him, the building is inhabited by a passel of the supernatural creatures called kooks. The GM decides that limited resources will increase the sequence's sense of terror, and declares that Mitchell has only four shots left in his Glock autopistol, and only one extra ammo clip in his pocket. She plans to have the kooks gang up on him, forcing him to roll Guns to successfully reload as they rush him.

Range

The effect of range on firearms combat is likewise simplified nearly out of existence. Handguns and shotguns can only be accurately fired at targets within fifty meters. The range limit for rifles is one hundred meters.

Stability Tests

Even non-supernatural effects often prove emotionally destabilizing. Every violent encounter puts you at risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Any confrontation with the supernatural threatens a complete psychotic break, manifesting as a bizarre detachment from reality.

When an incident forces challenges your fragile sanity, make a Stability test against a Difficulty Number of 4.

If you fail, you lose a number of Stability points. The severity of the loss depends on the situation. As with any other test of a general ability, you are always permitted to spend Stability points to provide a bonus to your roll. However, it's never a good bet to spend more points than you stand to lose if you fail².

GMs should feel free to assess Stability Losses for other incidents, using the examples provided as a benchmark. Some especially overwhelming creatures may impose higher than normal Stability losses when seen from a distance, seen up close, or ripping your lungs out.

¹Should demand warrant, crunchier combat rules may be issued in a subsequent supplement.

²If you think it's not worth spending points to add to your rolls in cases where you stand to lose only a small amount of Stability, you're right. Players should save them for the really devastating traumas that surely await them later in the scenario, where a modest points expenditure can save you from a much larger loss.

Here's a Stability test in action:

Stig's current Stability is 8. While maintaining surveillance on a farm subject to crop circle manifestations, he sees a blurry, inhuman figure through his night vision goggles. Like any other Stability test, Stig's player, Justin, will be trying to beat a Difficulty of 4. Confident that this long-distance sighting constitutes only a minor brush with destabilizing weirdness, Justin elects to spend only 1 point to bolster his roll. Alas, he rolls a 1, for a result of 2, two lower than the Difficulty Number. Having failed, he suffers a Stability loss of 3. Having spent 1 point on his bonus and lost another 3 to the failure, Stig's new Stability pool value is 4.

Characters make a single roll per incident, based on its highest potential Stability loss.

Stig and his teammate Kacie are poring through a flooded basement looking for evidence. Animated corpses pop up from beneath the water to attack them. Stig drives off the creatures, but not before they tear Kacie open in front of his eyes, looping their rotten arms through her entrails. His player, Justin, makes a single roll, with a potential Stability Loss of 8, the worst of several pertaining to the incident.

INCIDENT	STABILITY LOSS
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to do serious harm	2
You are in a car or other vehicle accident serious enough to pose a risk of injury	2
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to kill	3
You see a supernatural creature from a distance	3
You see a supernatural creature up close	4
You see a particularly grisly murder or accident scene	4
You learn that a friend or loved one has been violently killed	4
You discover the corpse of a friend or loved one	6
You are attacked by a supernatural creature	7
You see a friend or loved one killed	7
You see a friend killed or loved one in a particularly gruesome manner	8



JEROME 06

Groups craving an additional point of complexity can occasionally alter Difficulty Numbers for Stability tests depending on the character's attitude toward the destabilizing event. Characters who would logically be inured to a given event face a Difficulty of 3, while those especially susceptible face a 5. A character whose daytime identity is that of a surgeon or coroner might, for example, face a lowered Difficulty when encountering gruesomely mutilated bodies. A stock car racer would get a better chance against car accidents. No character type gets a break when encountering supernatural creatures.

LOSING IT

Like Health, your Stability pool can drop below 0.

If your Stability ranges from 0 to -5, you are **shaken**. You can still do your job, but seem distracted. You can't spend points from the pools of your Investigative abilities. Difficulty Numbers for all general abilities increase by 1.

If your Stability ranges from -6 to -11, you acquire a **mental illness**. This stays with you even after your Stability pool is restored to normal. See below for more. You also continue to suffer the ill effects of being shaken. Furthermore, you permanently lose 1 point from your Stability *rating*. The only way to get it back is to purchase it again with build points.

When your Stability reaches -12 or less, you are **incurably insane**. You may commit one last crazy act, which must either be self-destructively heroic or self-destructively destructive. Or you may choose merely to gibber and drool. Assuming you survive your permanent journey to the shores of madness, your character is quietly shipped off to a secure Ordo Veritatis psych facility, never to be seen again. Time to create a new character.

MENTAL ILLNESS

If the incident that drove you to mental illness was mundane in nature, you suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD.) You are haunted by dreams of the incident, and spend your days in a constant state of anxiety and alert, as if prepared for it to repeat itself at any moment. Whenever your senses register any input reminding you of the incident, you must make a Stability test (Difficulty 4) or freeze up. If you freeze up, you are unable to take any action for fifteen minutes and remain **shaken** (see above) for twenty-four hours after that. Tests to see if you show symptoms of PTSD do not in and of themselves lower your Stability pool.

Tediously Obligatory Disclaimer

This game simulates mental illness as seen in pop culture, especially the horror genre. It should not be confused with real psychology. Although no disrespect is intended to those suffering the real-life effects of mental illness, we submit to those concerned by this issue that horror is meant to be irresponsible, disreputable, and upsetting.

If driven to mental illness by a supernatural occurrence, you face a range of possible mental disorders. The GM rolls on the following chart or chooses a disorder based on the triggering circumstance. The player is then sent out of the room, while the GM and other players collaborate on a way to heighten his sense of dislocation and disorientation.

1. **Delusion.** The other players and GM decide on a mundane detail of the world which is no longer true and has never been true. For example, there might be no such thing as a squirrel, a Volkswagen, or orange juice. Maybe John Lennon was never assassinated, or never existed in the first place. PCs and supporting characters deny knowledge of the chosen item, person, or event.
2. **Homicidal Mania.** The GM takes the player aside, tells him that he knows one of the other players is a supernatural creature, and tells him just how to kill the monster.
3. **Megalomania.** When the character fails at a dramatic moment, the GM describes the outcome of his ability attempt as successful, then asks the player to leave the room. Then the GM describes the real results to the other players, and invites the megalomaniac player back into the room.
4. **Multiple Personality Disorder.** At moments of stress, another player is assigned control of the character, speaking and acting as if he's an entirely different person.
5. **Paranoia.** The other players are instructed to act as if they're trying to keep straight faces when the affected player returns. Occasionally they exchange notes, make hand signals to the GM, or use meaningless code words, as if communicating something important the player is unaware of.
6. **Selective Amnesia.** The group decides on an event that did happen in the world that the player has now forgotten all about. He's married, or killed someone, or pseudonymously written a best-selling book. Everyone he meets refers to this new, verifiable fact that he has no knowledge of.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRIAGE

A character with the Shrink ability can spend points from that pool to help another character regain spent Stability points. For every Shrink point spent, the recipient gains 2 Stability points.

If a character is acting in an erratic manner due to mental illness, a another character can spend 2 points of Shrink to snap him into a state of temporary lucidity. He will then act rationally for the remainder of the current scene.

HEAD GAMES

Mental illness can be cured through prolonged treatment using the Shrink ability. At the beginning of each scenario, in a prologue scene preceding the main action, the character administering the treatment makes a Shrink test (Difficulty 4.) After three consecutive successful tests, and three consecutive scenarios in which the patient remains above 0 Stability at all times, the mental illness goes away.

However, if the character ever again acquires a mental illness, he regains the condition he was previously cured of. Permanent cure then becomes impossible.

A successful Shrink test undertaken during the course of a scenario suppresses its symptoms until the patient next suffers a Stability loss.

Regaining Pool Points

Spent points from various pools are restored at different rates, depending on their narrative purpose.

Investigative ability pools are restored only at the end of each case, without regard to the amount of time that passes in the game world. Players seeking to marshal their resources may ask you how long cases typically run, in real time. Most groups finish scenarios over 2-3 sessions. Players may revise their sense of how carefully to manage point spending as they see how quickly their group typically disposes of its cases.

(GMs running extremely long, multi-part investigations may designate certain story events as breakpoints where all investigative pools are refreshed. For example, a globe-hopping investigation where the team meets a separate team of Esoterrorists enemies in five different locales might allow refreshment of investigative pools after each group of enemies is neutralized.)

Use of the Shrink ability permits limited recovery of Stability points in the course of an episode. Full refreshment occurs between cases. It is possible only when the character is able to spend calm, undisturbed quality time with friends and loved ones uninvolved in the shadowy world of the Ordo Veritatis. In campaigns where the teammates' personal lives are a matter of background detail only, refreshment automatically occurs between episodes.

GMs who wish to add a soap opera element to their campaigns, in which the characters must balance the everyday pressures of ordinary life against their activities as covert battlers of the supernatural, can complicate this process. In this campaign type, the characters must work to keep their support networks intact. If they fail, they regain no Stability between episodes. As part of the character creation process, players must detail their network of friends and loved ones in a paragraph or two of background text, which is then submitted to the GM for approval.

The Health pool refreshes over time, at a rate of 2 points per day of restful activity. (Wounded characters heal at a different rate, over a period of hospitalization; see p. 37.) Use of the Medic ability can restore a limited number of Health points in the course of a session.

Pools for the physical abilities of Athletics, Driving, Scuffling, and Shooting are fully restored whenever twenty-four hours of game-world time elapses since the last

expenditure. The remaining general abilities refresh at the end of each case, like investigative abilities.

Improving Your Character

At the end of each investigation, each player gets 2 build points for each session they participated in. (This assumes a small number of 3-4 hour sessions; if you play in shorter bursts, modify accordingly.) Players who had characters die in the course of the investigation only get points for each session involving their current character.

These build points can be spent to increase either investigative or general abilities. You may acquire new abilities or bolster existing ones. If necessary to preserve credibility, rationalize new abilities as areas of expertise you've had all along, but are only revealing later in the series.



What Do Pool Points Represent?

Pool points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that each character gets his or her own time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little bit of your spotlight time. More active players will spend their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments to shine.

Remember, all characters are remarkably competent. Pool points measure your opportunities to exercise this ultra-competence during any given scenario.

Pool points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. The team members' ignorance of them is analogous to TV characters' obliviousness to commercial breaks, the unwritten rules of scene construction, and the tendency of events to heat up during sweeps.

We represent this most purely in the case of investigative skills, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to a purely fictional construct, the length of the episode.

However, where a pool could be seen to correspond to a resource perceptible to the characters, we handle refreshment in a somewhat more realistic, if also abstract, manner. Characters' ebbing Health scores are perceptible to the characters in the form of welts, cuts, pain, and general fatigue. Stability is less tangible but can be subjectively measured in the characters' moods and reactions. Physical abilities, also tied to fatigue and sharpness of reflexes, are also handled with a nod to the demands of realism.

DESIGNING SCENARIOS

THE GUMSHOE SYSTEM SUPPORTS A CERTAIN STYLE OF SCENARIO DESIGN. THE RULES ARE LESS IMPORTANT TO THE SUCCESS OF YOUR GAME THAN THE WAY YOU STRUCTURE YOUR ADVENTURES.

BECAUSE THE PLAYERS NEED TO KNOW THE BASIC MYSTERY STRUCTURE, TOO, IT HAS ALREADY BEEN DESCRIBED IN DEPTH, ON P. 27. THE FOLLOWING TIPS TAKE YOU FURTHER UNDER THE HOOD.

Calling On Abilities

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The rules offer a number of ways to call on abilities, depending on the situation. Choosing the right way to call on an ability is crucial to the forward momentum of your investigative plot. Make this choice according to the consequences of failure.

If the consequence of failure is that a character fails to get a piece of crucial information, success should be automatic provided that the character has the ability in question, and the player thinks to ask for it. (Even at that, you may need to improvise during play if no player steps up to claim the needed clue, bending the details of the scenario so that the same information can be garnered with a different ability, possibly by another player.)

If you have a piece of information that offers a fun sidelight on the action but is not essential to move through the story, you can make this available with a 1- or 2-point spend. Choose the cost of the spend according to the entertainment value of the information, not the game-world difficulty of completing the task.

If an action's consequence of failure might be madness, death or injury, by all means make it a test. If game world logic suggests that a supporting character will actively oppose the PC, make it a contest.

In a horror game, mayhem suffered by the protagonists is not an impediment to forward movement. Horror characters are expected to die early and often. The player creates a new

character, the Ordo Veritatis ships him to the scene, and bingo, you've got more meat for the grinder and the story continues.

For this reason, we advise you to structure Esoterrorist campaigns in an episodic manner, so that no ongoing plotline depends on the continued survival of any particular PC.

Ripped From the Headlines

Horror elements become more frightening when juxtaposed with recognizable elements of ordinary life. *The Esoterrorists* posits a world where events on the evening news frequently resound with a sinister secret meaning, for those in the know.

Here we borrow a device from TV procedural shows, using topical references to recent events to drive investigative plotlines.

To create scenarios, scan through the news for the most outrageous, distressing or unbelievable stories of the day. Add an additional layer of backstory, explaining how the Esoterrorists benefit either from creating this news event, or exploit it after the fact. Create a crime or supernatural event that tips the Ordo Veritatis to the existence of a possible Esoterrorist operation.

Should demand warrant, we'll produce more scenarios ripped from the headlines and dipped in blood-red supernatural menace. Legal concerns force us, like the writers of TV procedurals, to fictionalize the characters and situations. In the privacy of your own home, however, there's nothing stopping you from populating your gruesome mysteries with real, undisguised public figures.

Imprisonment As Plot Device

Obstacles where the punishment for failure is imprisonment or other loss of freedom to maneuver should be introduced with caution. If the characters can gain information while captured, and will be presented with a fairly easy avenue of escape afterwards, by all means, include them. You can allow tests or contests to avoid such consequences.

However, plot turns in which characters are arrested by the authorities and cannot escape invariably bring game sessions to a screeching, thudding halt. Either allow the characters to avoid them with automatic successes on Interpersonal abilities, or build an escape hatch into your story. The team's Ordo Veritatis superiors serve this purpose well. Assuming that the players are jailed in an industrialized democracy or Western ally, they can always get the characters sprung, after a suitable interval of nail-biting and discomfort.

Be wary of plot construction that demands characters accept captivity to gain crucial information. Many players would sooner have their characters disemboweled by torture dogs than accept even a brief sojourn in comparatively cushy confinement. Unfortunately, with this player type, you won't get very far by pointing out that getting captured is a genre staple. Their attitude is rooted in a deep-seated desire to maintain emotional control, and is not typically susceptible to argument.



RUNNING SCENARIOS

AN INVESTIGATIVE STORY IN ANY MEDIUM IS, BY ITS VERY NATURE, HIGHLY STRUCTURED. THE INVESTIGATORS LEARN OF A MYSTERY, THEN MOVE THROUGH A SERIES OF SCENES, EACH OF WHICH CONCLUDES IN THE ACQUISITION OF A CLUE WHICH SEGUES INTO THE NEXT SCENE. THE STORY REACHES ITS CLIMAX WHEN THE INVESTIGATOR DISCOVERS AND REVEALS THE ANSWER TO THE MYSTERY. IT MAY OR MAY NOT CONCLUDE, FOR EXTRA PUNCH, IN A PHYSICAL CONFRONTATION WITH THE STORY'S NOW REVEALED-ANTAGONIST.

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Structure can be difficult to achieve in the roleplaying medium. Guide the players too little and they lose the thread, resulting in a loose and sloppy narrative that provides none of the neat, order-making pleasure the genre is meant to provide. Guide them too much and they feel that their freedom of action has been taken away from them, and that they're merely observers moving through a predetermined sequence of events. (As you probably know, this latter syndrome is known in roleplaying jargon as *railroading*.)

The trick to successfully running investigative scenarios is to strike the right balance between the two extremes. The exact balance is a matter of collective taste. Groups prone to flailing about may welcome a strong structure with clear goals, a straight narrative path and definite resolutions. Players who resolve questions of procedure with swift efficiency, or who prefer to focus on characterization over storyline, require a looser hand on the structural tiller.

Perception Is (Nearly) All

Some groups are hyper-sensitive to issues of railroading. These concerns, which are absolutely legitimate, may be based on past bad experiences with controlling GMs who forced them to enact essentially passive roles in unalterable, preset storylines. If members of the group are avid roleplaying theorists, they may respond out of a general ideological

feeling that players ought to shape and drive the story, taking on responsibilities traditionally given to the GM.

The most important way to prevent players from feeling railroaded is to remain flexible and reactive to the choices the characters make. We'll discuss this a bit more in the next section.

However, nearly as crucial is avoiding the appearance of railroading. Some players may feel that the GUMSHOE system's reliance on automatic successes inevitably leads to a railroaded result. In practice, this simply isn't so. The degree of narrative flexibility a GM exercises is entirely unrelated to the game's resolution mechanic (or relative lack of same.) Flexibility remains up to the GM, and your ability to improvise within the basic structure of the investigative story, as it does in nearly any set of roleplaying rules.

As proof of this, we cite a weird phenomenon that occurred during playtest. The groups that expressed the strongest misgivings about possible were those whose GMs had done the most improvising.

This result can be partly attributed to variances in group tastes, but also suggests the enormous importance of maintaining the *perception* of free choice. When you're on a roll as a GM, you can create the perception of free choice even when players respond predictably to the scenario. On an off night, you can convey the impression of constricted options even you're improvising furiously to keep up with their completely unexpected choices.

Here are five ways to maintain the perception of narrative freedom:

- When using a prewritten adventure, paraphrase as much as possible. Avoid reading right from the scenario. Even if it's well-written, your narration, no matter how halting and tentative, will seem more spontaneous than canned text. Some GMs read too much of the scenario out loud because they have trouble extracting the necessary nuggets from a pre-written text. Judicious use of a highlighting pen can work wonders to zero in on the best details, which you can then weave into your own extemporaneous sentences.
- During scenes of character interaction, listen carefully to player dialogue and respond accordingly. Riff with the players. This is more important than spewing the supporting characters' clues or talking points, even if that means altering the characterization from what you see on the page.
- Encourage players to flesh out minor details of the setting and situation. If they ask you what the weather is like, ask them what they want it to be. If they ask if such and such an item is present at a particular location, tell them that it is and ask them to describe it. On rare occasions the mystery plot will turn on these little details, and you'll have to pull back from this technique and stick to your clue trail. Otherwise, seek out opportunities for player input.
- Tailor characters and situations to the player characters. If a player portrays a sloppy, rumpled reporter, confront her with a neat-freak, press-hating authority

figure. A character known to fall for sexy librarian types should meet successions of sexy librarians, and so on.

- Introduce story elements giving players opportunities to flesh out their characters' backstories. Weave old friends, acquaintances, mentors, colleagues and rivals into your supporting casts. If you yourself are still worried that GUMSHOE encourages or requires railroading, take heart in this last result from playtest. Each group submitted an account of the events of the sample adventure (p. 62) that differed radically from everyone else's. In each case the wide variances of incident arose from disparate player choices. Just like it's supposed to.



Any Track Is the Right Track

Although it may be, oddly enough, more important to maintain apparent than actual narrative freedom, we should still endeavor to provide the real thing to the maximum extent possible.

Fortunately, it's easier to provide freedom than it is to seem like you're providing it. Simply ensure that any clue, especially any core clue, is available not only to players using the ability specified in the scenario, but to *any player who provides a credible and entertaining alternate method of acquiring that clue*. The scenario is a foundation to work from, which ensures that there is at least one way to move through the story. It should never be regarded as the only way to get to the resolution. A group of players will often come up with better ideas than the scenario writer ever could. Give yourself permission to go with them.

One slight exception pertains: this advice pertains only to clues available in the current scene. Allow players to leapfrog scenes by acquiring information they're meant to get later only when pacing permits. If you're early in a session when the threat of leapfrogging occurs, and you're not confident you can improvise enough new intervening scenes to make a full evening's entertainment, by all means block the players' efforts. If you're zooming toward evening's end, leapfrogging may prove a blessing — just be sure to squeeze in all of the necessary ancillary information the players might miss by skipping ahead.

Scenes in the middle of an investigation can often be juggled around with no ill effect to the storyline. When this is the case, it's always better to let the players dictate pacing than to force them back into the order of events envisioned by the scenario.

The scenario is only the blueprint. The building happens during play.

Ending Scenes

In a novel or TV episode, writers can freely cut to the next scene when their characters have acquired all of the clues available in the current one. The characters might stick around for hours tying up loose ends and pursuing fruitless questions, but this doesn't happen on screen. We, the audience, are not forced to sit through such sequences.

This kind of concise editing isn't so easy in the roleplaying medium. Players don't know when they've got all the clues.

Here's a simple trick to gently steer them onwards, without unduly breaking the illusion of fictional reality:

Before play, take an index card and write on it, in big block letters, the word SCENE. As soon as the players have gleaned the core clue and most or all of the secondary clues in a scene, and the action begins to drag, hold up the card. When the players see this, they know to move on. (Of course, you have to explain the cue to them before play begins.) Easy, efficient, yet somehow not nearly as disruptive or jarring as a verbal instruction.

Compensating For Spotty Attendance

Older gamers most likely to enjoy an investigative campaign are sadly prone to scheduling disruptions. If your group is typical, you may not be able to rely on any particular player showing up on a given night. To compensate for this, give each player a pool of free-floating investigative points, which they can spend to gain a clue in investigative abilities they don't have. When this occurs, explain it as the character remembering a fact or technique taught to them by their absent teammates. Adjust the quantity of points as needed for your group's requirements.

THE LAWS OF ESOTERROR

THE ESOTERRORISTS COMPRISE A FAST-GROWING INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACY DRAWING FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE. CONSPIRATORS RANGE FROM WASHINGTON POWER BROKERS TO BACKWOODS CANNIBALS. THE ROOTS OF THE MOVEMENT TRACE BACK TO AT LEAST THE VICTORIAN ERA. WHEN THEY STARTED OUT, THEY WERE ABLE TO INFLUENCE PEOPLE ONLY THROUGH SUGGESTION. THEY PRACTICED RITUALS BUT THEIR EVOCATIONS WERE LIMITED TO PERSUASIVE PARLOR TRICKS, FROM KNOCKING TABLES TO THE SUMMONING OF ECTOPLASM.

Their generation-spanning plans for global control only began to come to fruition in the 1990s, at the end of the cold war. As old power arrangements shattered, Esoterrorist agents stepped in to fill the gap. For nearly a decade and a half their occult power has steadily increased. Their ritualists feed off the growing globalization of electronic media and the accelerating pace of dislocating social change. Whenever the world appears more disturbing or surreal than it is already, the veil between the ordinary material world, bounded by the laws of science, becomes permeable. Illogic becomes its own logic. The surreal gains physical form.

The Membrane

Central to Esoterrorist theory is the existence of the membrane, a barrier between the separate realms of objective and subjective reality. The world we live in is determined by immutable physical laws, which exist whether we mere humans like it or not. We can refuse to accept them, or pretend that different rules govern us, as we have for most of our existence on this planet. But concrete reality doesn't change. In the objective realm, there is no magic.

In the subjective realm, physical reality is what its inhabitants collectively declare it to be. Entities are mostly abstract in nature, and biological only in afterthought. They are forever changed by the minds of those around them, and exert the same influence on others. Those of great will dominate the others, changing the rules at will. These are our gods, demons, and monsters.

Like the eastern symbol of Yin and Yang, there is a tiny bit of subjectivity in the objective realm and a fragment of objectivity in the subjective. Without this tension the two worlds would wither and die. It is the membrane that maintains this tension, but keeps them forever apart.

Esoterrorist rituals seek to harness the fleeting elements of subjectivity in the objective realm and use it to poke holes in the membrane.

Materializing Supernatural Entities

The more porous the membrane becomes, the easier it is to materialize beings infused with subjectivity.

The creatures Esoterrorist rituals evoke don't literally travel here from the subjective realm, which they refer to with ominous terms, such as the Outer Dark. They materialize here, but for a few instants after their arrival obey the irrational non-physics of the Outer Dark. They then adopt an objective, biological form. At this point Esoterrorist ritualists impose a form on them via intense concentration. It is easiest to materialize a creature whose design and biology has already been worked out by others. This is why Ordo Veritatis teams most often encounter the same handful of disturbing creatures.

To create an entirely new form of monster, Esoterror practitioners must carefully design the creature from the skeleton up, with a working,

Magic Is Hard

Ravening creatures of tentacle and viscera have their uses but are hard to control. What Esoterrorists really want is the ability to wield magical energies directly, like wizards from fairy tales. They yearn to throw lightning bolts, to become invisible, to walk through walls and seduce with a stare. Thankfully for the Ordo Veritatis, all of their attempts in this direction have so far failed. They can perform rituals to materialize creatures, and that's pretty much it. They keep telling themselves that the next assault on people's collective sense of probability will finally rip a big enough fissure in the membrane to allow personal spell crafting. Esoterrorists call this the Great Project, or, for the more classically inclined, the Philosopher's Stone. Until then they must be willing to wield mundane power, through political maneuvering, financial skullduggery, and the occasional gruesome murder.

Recently the Esoterrorists scored a breakthrough in the Great Project, learning infuse magical effects into ritual objects. So far all they've learned to do with them is artificially induce various symptoms of mental illness. These range from hallucinations to delusions to risky or self-harming behavior. To activate the curse, the object must be placed in close proximity to a victim. They are often triggered by a particular action on the victim's part. The objects cannot distinguish between targets and non-targets. For example, a curse object might be created which influences the mind of the first person to unlock a particular door. The creator of the fetish cannot target a given individual, or exempt others.

if improbable, biology. Anatomists, natural historians, conceptual designers and Hollywood imagineers work together to build viable creatures. Sometimes they work as intended, and can be sent out to prey on the innocent and eat away at the world's objectivity. More often than not they explode in a shower of burning viscera, sending their designers skulking back to the drawing board.

The Contradiction

Esoterrorists want everyone to believe in magic and horror, but can't operate openly. Esoterrorists refer to this lamentable state as The Contradiction. Their members may occupy lofty perches of power throughout the world, but they're still a minority of paranoid whack-jobs. Whenever a cell is exposed, the Ordo Veritatis arranges for its speedy extinction. Hemmed in by a resourceful enemy, they must continue to scheme in the shadows, waiting for the day when the tables are turned, and it is the forces of rationality who must hide from the world's magic-wielding masters.

The insane scholars and intuitive schizophrenics who've stumbled onto the edges of the Esoterrorist mystery tend to overestimate its global reach. Its members are influential, well-placed, and effective, but, contrary to the conspiracy theories, they don't direct the course of all global events. However, they often try to piggyback on disasters and atrocities, exploiting them as a source of supernatural energy. For this reason they may seem more central to world events than is really the case.

For example, Esoterrorists weren't responsible for the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda. However, once they happened, they used their contacts in the media and government to enhance their devastating psychological impact. It was Esoterrorists who made sure that the text crawls under news shows, first used to provide updates in the hours after the attacks, became a permanent fixture of television broadcasts forever after. News crawls foster bizarre juxtapositions and information overload, increasing peoples' sense of an increasingly jumbled and irrational world. The energy from this psychic residue continues to spawn supernatural creatures throughout the industrialized West.

Horror Is Scary

The Esoterrorists setting is meant to be gritty, nasty, gory, and otherwise horrific. The characters achieve victory over dark forces through dogged investigation. This is not a power fantasy. Although the team members are super-competent, their extreme bravery and expertise is merely the entry fee to confront the supernatural at all. Violent encounters are always fraught with risk; they are never romps. The characters are never confronted with weak opponents to easily dispatch in order to feel tough.

CREATURES

IN A WORLD WHERE VAMPIRES ARE A POP CULTURE STAPLE AND THE DREAD ELDER GODS ARE AVAILABLE AS PLUSH TOYS, TRADITIONAL MONSTERS HAVE LOST THEIR POWER TO TERRIFY AND APPALL. ESOTERRORIST CREATURES MAY RECALL DEMONS, GHOSTS OR THE UNDEAD, BUT ALWAYS WITH AN UNEXPECTED TWIST. FOR MORE ESOTERRORIST CREATURES, SEE THE *BOOK OF UNREMITTING HORROR*.



Blood Corpses

These zombie-like entities rampage insatiably for human blood, consuming it through hollow claws, which function as both rending weapon and feeding tubule.

Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 12
Hit Threshold: 3
Weapon: +2 (Talons)
Armor: +2 vs. Shooting

Kooks

Kooks are demented, feral children sporting oversized heads, dark black eyes, and mouths with razor-sharp teeth. They prey primarily on children, but aren't averse to chomping down on Ordo Veritatis investigators who attempt to spoil their fun.

Athletics 8, Health 8, Scuffling 10
Hit Threshold: 2
Weapon: +1 (Teeth)
Armor: +3 vs. Shooting

Torture Dogs

These extra-dimensional hunter-trackers resemble giant mammalian cyborg weevils. Whirring power drills jut from between their oversized, prehensile mandibles. They use these to inject psychotropic toxins into the bloodstreams of their victims, which heighten their consciousness of pain, while keeping them awake for marathon torture sessions.

Athletics 8, Health 7, Scuffling 9
Hit Threshold: 4
Weapon: +1 (Drill), +3 (Mandibles)
Armor: +2 vs. Shooting, +1 vs. Scuffling

REALITY'S LAST DEFENDERS

THE EXACT ORIGINS OF THE ORDO VERITATIS ARE UNKNOWN TO ALL BUT ITS MOST SENIOR MEMBERS. FIELD AGENTS KNOW THAT IT AROSE IN RESPONSE TO THE NASCENT ESOTERROR MOVEMENT, AND THAT ITS ACTIVITIES HAVE ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS PREVENTED THEM FROM DECISIVELY PIERCING THE PROTECTIVE BARRIER BETWEEN THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL.

Organization

The OV, as insiders call it, is organized in a cell structure, to limit the potential damage of Esoterrorist infiltration. Members typically perform investigations under assumed identities, which last for only the duration of a single case. Mistakes in maintaining cover can lead to disaster: Esoterrorists love nothing better than to send assassins and creatures to torture and kill investigators' families and friends.

Teams stick together and rarely meet their peers. New teammates are shuffled in as old ones are killed. Rookies may be entirely new to the OV, or transferred out of defunct teams.

Briefings are conducted on site by high-ranking operatives, many of them ex-investigators. They invariably introduce themselves as Mr. (or Ms.) Verity.

Investigative Protocols

The Order can provide its operatives with substantial resources when necessary. For security reasons, investigators are however expected to maintain minimal contact with their cell leaders or Mr. Verity throughout the course of a case. It is better to exhibit a high level of Preparedness than to send in a field requisition for more equipment.

Investigators are fact-finders first and enforcers of the unwritten laws of civilization second. Once they've determined the dimensions of an Esoterror plot, identifying its principals and their bases of operation, they can step aside and call for back up. When

the perpetrators are easily taken down, the team may perform mop-up duties on its own. In the case of large concentrations of enemies or supernatural creatures, they instead call in Ordo Veritatis sweepers teams. These heavily armed paramilitary units perform the necessary killing, destroying, and burning, while the team heads back to a rendezvous point for debriefing. Efficient and overwhelming force is a hallmark of a Sweeper Team operation. Where possible, they rely on bombs and cruise missiles, exterminating from afar.

The Veil-Out

An investigative team's last responsibility on a completed case is to lay out a plan for the Veil-Out. This is the official cover-up for governmental and media consumption. The team must provide a plausible explanation for all previously publicized aspects of the case. A well-planned veil-out reduces public anxiety, debunking a case's supernatural elements and downplaying its distressing atrocities. The government and public are both willing participants in any veil-out. Authorities hate to admit to the existence of horrible forces they can't control. Ordinary people don't want to believe in the uncanny, or gaze too deeply into the abyss of human depravity.



OPERATION SLAUGHTER HOUSE

THIS SAMPLE SCENARIO SHOWS YOU HOW TO DESIGN A GUMSHOE GAME FOR THE ESOTERRORISTS SETTING. IT IS INTENDED AS AN EXAMPLE OF A TYPICAL CASE, AND IS THEREFORE NOT AS SIMPLE AS INTRODUCTORY SCENARIOS FOR OTHER GAMES YOU MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH.

PLAYERS, DON'T READ THIS UNLESS YOU'RE SURE THAT YOUR GM WON'T WANT TO RUN IT FOR YOU.

GMs, THE REST OF THIS SECTION IS ADDRESSED TO YOU.

Backstory

Here is the basic scenario structure, as you'll create when inventing scenarios of your own.

Investigation Trigger

High-ranking CIA official **Theodore "Rusty" Mistaugh** is found dead in a swank Washington D.C. hotel room, the scene bearing unmistakable signs of ritual murder. The team is given the cover identity of an FBI unit specializing in cult and ritual murder and dispatched to the scene to "lend a hand" to the lead investigators. Their real assignment is to determine if this is an act of Esoterror. If so, they're to destroy the Esoterrorists and any supernatural residue arising from their activities, and then to help construct a viable cover story to make the story seem as untroubling as possible to the mass audience of news consumers.

A Note On Names

Readers finding the names of characters in this scenario silly or unrealistic are advised to research real-life Washington scandals for their inexhaustible trove of colorfully oddball names. They will also discover that discordantly innocuous preppie nicknames are de rigeur for high-level CIA officials. Names of ongoing importance to the adventure are **boldfaced** when they first appear. Names of irrelevant characters are not.



Sinister Conspiracy

Mistaugh had his fingers in many pies. He was both a rising star in the Esoterror movement and a high-rolling bagman connecting corrupt military contractors to the CIA's vast and unaccountable black budget. His chief job for the Esoterrorists to supply victims to a human sacrifice ring operating in the Dominican Republic. The objective of this project, dubbed OPERATION SLAUGHTERHOUSE, is to generate the necessary supernatural energy to raise a small army of blood corpses. These will then ravage the neighboring nation of Haiti, providing internationally televised proof positive of the existence of the supernatural. This plan, if allowed to proceed, will make future Esoterrorist rituals much easier to practice.

Unfortunately, Mistaugh's other extracurricular adventures have been catching up with him. The arrest of corrupt congressman **Dick "Butch" Slimvarken** (R-Alaska) on bribery charges led the FBI to Mistaugh's door. This in turn prompted his CIA bosses to suspend OPERATION REROUTE, the project giving him access to the prisoners he then turned over to the Esoterrorists. With his usefulness to them at an end, and his notoriety threatening exposure of the entire plot, his Esoterror colleagues in the Washington power establishment had him killed.

To practice ritual magic requires the acceptance of personal risk. When they embarked on OPERATION SLAUGHTERHOUSE, all of the involved Esoterrorists had to swear that they would be humiliatingly sacrificed if they failed the organization in any way. Despite the probability of attracting the attention of the Ordo Veritatis, his co-conspirators had no choice but to choose a spectacular, attention-getting method of execution for him. Conserving resources, they made him one of the ninety required sacrifices to work their summoning ritual. As a side benefit, the horrible death of an important intelligence official will, if revealed, jolt the nation, contributing to a psychic atmosphere suitable for further Esoterror activities.

Trail Of Clues

A clue at the crime scene leads to the Islington Limo Service, a company at the heart of Mistaugh's hookers-and-bribery activities. Islington Limos leads to **Barry Milk**, the corrupt defense contractor behind the hooker ring. Milk leads them to Mistaugh's secret list of terror suspects. Investigation of this list reveals the existence of a secret "black prison" in the Dominican Republic, where the men on Mistaugh's list were sent, instead of Guantanamo. Investigation of the black prison reveals the plotters behind OPERATION SLAUGHTERHOUSE.

Antagonist Reactions

As long as the investigators are only onto the mundane bribery scandal, Mistaugh's Esoterrorist superiors take no action against them. Once they're close to the Dominican operation, they try to kill them with a fetish placed in their vehicle.

Scenes

Operation Slaughterhouse includes six Core Scenes and one Alternate Scene. As with any adventure, you will probably have to improvise one or more alternate scenes as the team pursues answers in an unexpected way.

Briefing

SCENE TYPE INTRO

Team members are contacted at home or while performing their day jobs and told to pack for an immediate trip to Washington D.C. Electronic tickets to Ronald Reagan airport await them at their various local airports. The characters arrive at the airport in the order that the players arrived for the game session. Drivers wait for them in the pickup area, holding up signs bearing the agreed-upon cover name, SURETY CONSULTANTS. They wait in the airport parking lot in a sleek black van, until all of them have been collected.

Exactly one hundred and eighty seconds after the last of them gets inside the van, they're joined by a gray-haired man in a fashionable new pinstripe suit, who carries himself with an air of patrician authority. He introduces himself as Mr. Verity, which of course is the same name all local case officers use. The moment he slides shut the van door, the driver glides out of the parking lot.

Mr. Verity passes each team member an identity packet including fake ID identifying them as FBI agents from the Cult and Ritual Crimes unit at Quantico. They're assigned false names. Distribute these to the characters as you deem appropriate: Warren Giler, Alan Beatty, Hume Frady, Joan Windust, Brad Whittaker, Alma Thorsden.

Read Mr. Verity's dialogue aloud:

"This is a tough one. You'll be maintaining your covers in the presence of experienced FBI agents and members of the intelligence community. There's no margin for error, which is why you were selected. Do not let us down.

"An apparent ritual killing took place in the early morning hours at the Weckdale Suites hotel in downtown Washington. The victim is Theodore 'Rusty' Mistaugh, head of Contracting and Procurement for the Central Intelligence Agency. The body is still at the crime scene, hence the rush. You will present yourselves to Special Agent Norah Brady, who is heading the investigation. While appearing to make yourselves available to her as consultants on the occult, you will steer them toward a mundane explanation of the case. The following goes without saying but I will say it anyway. As you direct the FBI to a veil-out, your primary priority is to determine if this is an Esoterrorist action. If it is, you don't need me to tell you what to do."

The van stops in front of the Weckdale Suites, a luxury hotel complex across the street from the Watergate Hotel.

It's time for the team to get to work.

Crime Scene

SCENE TYPE CORE

Federal and local cops are already all over the hotel room where Mistaugh's body was found. The following details are immediately apparent.

- There's blood all over the room, concentrated in the bathroom. The bathtub is full of it.
- Blood has been smeared in a geometric pattern on the wall behind the bedstead. The room's bland flower prints have been taken down and stacked in a corner to make room for the pattern.
- Mistaugh's nude body is in the tub, sans hands, feet, heart, and head. All five appendages have been placed on the bed, which was stripped down to a white sheet. Each hand holds a silver knife, arranged so that it faces the head. The toes of both feet point toward the head as well. Even an amateur can tell that this is a ritual murder. The heart is nowhere to be found.

Bureaucracy/Cop Talk: When approached by the team Lead FBI investigator Norah Brady is professional but a bit standoffish, as if uninterested in having her turf trampled by yet another pack of unknown colleagues. She addresses the team member with the highest Bureaucracy pool (fallback: Cop Talk), giving terse answers to any questions. The Cult and Ritual Crimes team has been foisted on her and she is not particularly interested in anything the team members have to say...

...unless an investigator spends 1 point of Bureaucracy or 2 of Cop Talk to impress her as deferential and on the ball. After that she is warmer and more forthcoming. She'll give the investigators more time, respect and information in later scenes, as they require.

In response to appropriate questioning **Norah Brady** provides the following answers.

- Mistaugh had checked into the room by himself. After a complete canvass of hotel staff and guests, they've found no one who saw him with anyone.
- No sounds were heard from the room, but the rest of the floor was unoccupied. The hotel rents the entire floor to a CIA holding company on a standing basis, and it is often unoccupied. The arrangement is maintained by Mistaugh himself. At his request, there are no security cameras on this level.

DNA Test Timing

In real life, DNA testing takes several days at best, assuming that the investigators have up-to-date facilities and manpower standing by ready to bump the samples to the top of the priority list. However, here we advise you to use the genre convention of police procedural shows, which states that test results come in at a dramatically appropriate moment, regardless of scheduling and budgetary realities.

- He had access to a private elevator, which is also not visible from security cameras. The key to that elevator does not appear to be in the room.
- But neither are Mistaugh's clothes or any other of his personal effects. He was identified by the night manager, Harley Porter, who is used to dealing with him as a frequent customer.
- Estimated time of death is 3 AM. It was Harley who found the body.
- Evidence collection found a used condom in the wastebasket. If asked, she will have the lab boys conduct a DNA analysis not for the semen in the condom, but for skin cells on its outer surface, which should reveal the identity of Mistaugh's partner. (See alternate scene "April Cohen," below.
- The CIA, whose representatives are present at the scene, will not elaborate on the nature of Mistaugh's frequent business at the Weckdale.
- The hotel room is immaculately clean of trace evidence—too clean, as if scoured by professionals. [Here Brady casts a significant glance at the CIA man, who makes a mute gesture of denial.]

Bureaucracy: With a 1-point Bureaucracy spend, an investigator can identify by demeanor and dress the CIA rep on the scene. He's **Austin "Rippy" Airedale**. This feat impresses everyone on the scene, especially Airedale, who is friendlier and gives the team member more info than he provided to Special Agent Brady. With the spend, he reveals:

- Mistaugh always had a flair for entertaining. The floor at the Weckdale was used to give a good time to foreign dignitaries and others the agency wanted to sweeten up.
- Mistaugh's career was suddenly on the rise after a lifetime of plodding. He was recently plucked from the middle ranks to his lofty position. No one is really sure why.

Without the spend, he responds to all queries with, "Sorry, that's on a need to know basis."

Occult Studies: The gory drawing above the bedstead mixes elements of hermetic magic, Voudoun, and Mayan blood sacrifice. The wild mix of elements from disparate cultures and traditions marks this as an Esoterrorist working.

1-point spend: The knife left in the victim's hand indicates his complicity in the ritual. The feet pointing toward the face is symbolic of failure. Conclusion—Mistaugh was an Esoterrorist, and has been slain for failing the conspiracy in some way.

Evidence Collection (Core clue): A fleck of gold leaf appears on the underside of a sheet of hotel stationery.

Document Analysis (Core clue): When studied in the lab (a high-res digital photo plus image enhancement), an entire pattern of gold specks reveals itself. When these are then

subjected to digital image enhancement, they're revealed as trace fragments from an ostentatiously fancy business card. The card comes from Islington Limo Services, Inc. **Filch** test, Difficulty 4: Gets the pad of stationery away from Norah and company, so that the team can follow the clue without alerting her.

Reassurance: The night manager, Harley Porter, an elegant, African-American man in his early sixties, is clearly shaken by what he's seen in the room. Porter discovered the body. He's also afraid that he'll lose his job or face other reprisals if he tells what knows about the powerful people associated with Mistaugh. Given the team member's **Reassurance**, he's prepared to offer more than he told Agent Brady. He speaks only if he can do it out of earshot of Brady and the rest.

—Room service guys delivering to this floor had to be specially vetted. More often than not Harley himself would make deliveries to the room. He sometimes saw men in the rooms who looked like oil sheiks and whatnot, but more often than not everyone in the room seemed American. Sometimes he recognized them as congressmen and lobbyists. When these men were present, there was always a poker party. Later these same evenings working girls would show up. Not all of the men present would stay for this phase of the festivities.

Islington Limo

SCENE TYPE CORE

Lead-In: Islington Limo business card impression found in Mistaugh's room

A simple internet search reveals that Islington Limo is headquartered in the nearby town of Angleton, VA.

Bureaucracy: Calls to federal government sources reveal that Islington Limo recently won several fat government contracts to transport Homeland Security officials from their offices to local airports, and vice versa.

Research: The owner of Islington Limo, **Charles "Chuck" Goodnow**, has a long rap sheet, having been convicted of 62 minor offenses ranging from check-kiting to misdemeanor assault.

(Put together, these two facts should put up a red flag; Goodnow ought not to qualify for a sensitive government contract.)

1-point spend: Islington Limo also has a long history of bankruptcies and lawsuits. It has often failed to provide the basic services it agrees to. It has not so far botched its government contracts.

A visit to Islington Limo reveals a shabby office in a grim, anonymous office park. There is no receptionist. When the team comes through the door, a heavy-jowled, middle-aged man leaps up from his computer terminal, quickly reaching over to turn the monitor off. They seem to have interrupted him in the act of angrily typing something. If they

conducted the research above, the team identifies him from various arrest photos as Charles Goodnow.

Surveillance: The character with the highest Surveillance pool gets a quick look at what's on the screen: a blog titled *DC AC/DC*.

Interrogation: By displaying their fake FBI credentials, the team can cast their interaction with Chuck Goodnow as an interrogation. He stonewalls them at first, but breaks down under pressure, especially if an investigator brings up the curious combination of his rap sheet and government contracts.

- Goodnow has supplied limo services to Mistaugh for a couple of years now.
- **(core clue):** It isn't Mistaugh who pays for the limo, but a defense contractor named Barry Milk, CEO of an outfit called Futurist Technologies. Milk has been hosting poker and hookers evenings for influential lawmakers for over a decade. Mistaugh only entered the picture recently. At this time the events moved to the CIA floor of the Weckdale Suites.
- It's Chuck who's in charge of supplying the hookers and getting them to the suite. He works through a couple of escort agencies in Virginia and Maryland. Sometimes he picks up independent girls with their own client lists, who include high-profile guests at the parties.
- Goodnow is only aware of Mistaugh's death if it has appeared in the news. Otherwise he is shocked and shaken to hear about it.
- Goodnow doesn't know squat about the occult, ritual murders, or anything else like that. He's just a hard-working sleazeball struggling to keep his business afloat. 1-point spend: Goodnow loses his cool during the interview and bursts into tears, begging the investigators to let him be. "I did nothing wrong here. Okay, so maybe I transported women across state lines for the purposes of prostitution. But it's not fair that the District of Columbia counts as a state line. The place is so tiny! How else are you supposed to get call girls into there?"

Bullshit Detector: Can be used to confirm all of Chuck's answers under interrogation to be basically honest, though self-serving.

April Cohen

SCENE TYPE ALTERNATE

Lead-ins: skin cell test on condom (Crime Scene) or *DC AC/DC* blog (Islington Limo)

Like the investigators, **April Cohen** leads a double life. By day, she's an intern at the Foundation For Readiness, a Washington think-tank espousing a variety of right-wing causes, with an accent on hard-line foreign policy. By night, she's a high-priced call girl. She was present at the Weckdale Suites poker party the night Mistaugh was killed. She adds color to the story but provides no core clues.

If the team asked for a skin cell test on the condom, it matches her DNA. Why is it in the system? Her father was killed at the Pentagon on 9/11, and she donated her DNA to aid in identification of remains.

Research pegs her as the anonymous author of the *DC AC/DC* blog, a tell-all account of her risqué adventures. The blog conveys the impression that she works as a hooker mostly out of a desire for crazy experience.

1-point spend: Reveals the circumstances surrounding her father's death, if not yet discovered.

The investigators can intercept her at her spacious D.C. condo or at her day job at the think tank. In person, April is a steely-eyed, composed and off-puttingly beautiful young woman in her early twenties. Her father's death has instilled in her an unflappable fatalism that makes her a difficult subject to break. She's not even especially concerned about exposure; in fact, she's been waiting for a juicy scandal, so she can turn her blog entries into a lucrative book contract.

Flattery, if directed at her writing skill and not her attractiveness, efficiently breaks down her barriers. After asking the team if they know any literary agents, she then provides the following information:

- She's an independent contractor, servicing a discreet client list.
- Chuck Goodnow never transported her to events, but he did just send her a threatening email warning her to shut down her blog, because someday somebody was going to connect the dots. She told him to get stuffed.
- She arrived as the guest of Representative Clement Seabright (R-South Carolina), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.
- April met Seabright at one of these parties, when she was there as the guest of recently indicted former Congressman Dick "Butch" Slimvarken (R-Alaska.) When Butch stopped coming to the parties, Seabright gave her a call, so she remains a fixture.
- Mistaugh got his huge promotion by schmoozing Clem Seabright and Butch Slimvarken and others, at these parties.
- Rusty was just the party planner. The funding came from a defense contractor named Barry Milk. The assembled congressmen and senators all treated Milk like their best friend. He contributed to their campaigns and they saw to it that he got juicy contracts from the CIA and Pentagon.
- Other attendees at the party included two defense contractors named Jeff and Pete, two high-class working girls who were introduced as Tori and Amber, and a guy who seemed to be a congressional staffer. His name was Ralph.
- Clem left first, then Ralph, then the girls, then Jeff and Pete. That left her and Rusty alone in the hotel room together.
- Rusty was a back-slapping boor, but kind of cute in an unreconstructed old-school chauvinist kind of way. She hadn't planned on doing it with him, but Clem hadn't been frisky that night, she drank too much champagne, and she and Mistaugh wound up as the last two people there. It just happened. A freebie. He said something about "going out with a bang," whatever that was supposed to mean.

- April left him passed out on the bed. She saw no one coming or going. She used her own key to the private elevator and didn't need Rusty's to get out without being seen.
- She shrugs when she hears Mistaugh is dead. "I guess that happens in his line of work."

Forensic PSYCHOLOGY (1 point spend): April has constructed her bad girl persona as a way of immunizing herself against the grief of her father's surreal and horrible death. If death can fall out of the sky to destroy a good person without warning, the only way to protect yourself is to live for today and care about nothing.

If the character confronts April with this insight, she seems to crack for a moment, then recovers her composure.

The investigator then realizes that this is the future of mankind if the Esoterrorists win. They want to turn everyone into shell-shocked nihilists.

Barry Milk

SCENE TYPE CORE

Lead-In: Chuck Goodnow's interrogation (Islington Limo)

Research: Barry Milk is the CEO of Futurist Technologies, a privately-held supplier of database systems and other cutting-edge info-mining software to government agencies. He's been a player on the Washington scene since the mid-90s. He is an unindicted co-conspirator in the bribery case against Dick "Butch" Slimvarken, who he bribed to the tune of several million dollars. In exchange, Slimvarken helped him sell software and expensive consulting services to the CIA and other intelligence agencies. Anonymous sources in newspaper accounts say that the Justice Department is building a case against Milk and a range of other unnamed suspects, including some inside the CIA.

Milk resists attempts to meet him in person, either at his home or office. He's afraid that the team is part of the bribery investigation against him. His lawyer has advised him not to talk to them. Here are two ways to get him to speak with them:

Intimidation: The team conducts a driveway ambush, surrounding him on the way to or from work.

Reassurance: A team member convinces him that they're interested in the Mistaugh killing and not the case against him.

These abilities merely allow the chat to begin. He denies any involvement in Mistaugh's death. (Honestly, as the use of **BULLSHIT DETECTOR** reveals.)

However, he won't say anything more than this without the use of another ability.

NEGOTIATION: The team must promise to intercede on his behalf with the Department of Justice if he provides information helpful to their case. "Not information leading to an arrest or conviction, mind you," he specifies. "Because this leads into the darkest, most tangled thickets of the forest, if you know what I mean. Where this takes you, you're not going to be making any arrests."

- Everybody thinks Mistaugh was just a paper pusher, but he was deep into CIA covert ops going back into the late seventies. Rusty once proudly showed him a picture of himself dating back to the Reagan-era US-supported insurgency against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government. It shows him posing happily with notorious contra leader Umberto Hurtado, holding the severed head of a Sandinista officer between them, like a hunting trophy.
- Over the last few months, Mistaugh became increasingly busy and distracted, like he was occupied by something else. Milk felt he was falling down on his party arranging job and wanted to transfer duties to Chuck Goodnow. But Rusty argued that he could keep up his schmoozing and "take care of his other thing, too."
- (**core clue**) A couple of months ago, Milk got nervous that Mistaugh was selling him out to federal prosecutors. So he hired a private detective agency to follow him. "My guy had a helluva time, Rusty was paranoid and crafty and kept making his people. Finally they tracked him to where he kept going. It wasn't a meet with those DOJ weasels. It was a storage locker. My guy snuck in there and found a ledger book." If prodded, Milk produces a photocopy of its contents. It's a list of names, all obviously Arabic, Persian, Pakistani or Afghan, with two dates next to each name. The second date is usually about two weeks after the first. The dates range over the last two years or so.

Milk refuses to make any incriminating statements, even off the record. On a 1-point **Negotiation** spend, the team member out-negotiates him, and he agrees to speak completely candidly:

- Yes, he's been getting fat for years from corrupt contracting. The post-9/11 world has been very, very good to him. Butch Slimvarken was only the stupidest and most careless of his bribe recipients. Both he and Mistaugh have been under a microscope since Slimvarken's conviction. He expects an indictment any day, but maybe this freaky murder will muddy the waters and win him a delay.

The Disappeared

SCENE TYPE CORE

Lead-In: Barry Milk's copy of Mistaugh's name ledger

RESEARCH: An Internet search for the various names on the ledger scores a few hits but no information of value. However, it does have a delayed effect. Within hours, wherever they happen to be, the team is swarmed by uniformed military intelligence types, led by the ramrod straight, ultra-formidable Colonel James Hornbeck. They're "invited" to attend an "information event" at an undisclosed location.

On a 2-point **Bureaucracy** spend, the team convinces Hornbeck to conduct his interview in a neutral location.

If the team is tempted to evade or resist, remind them of Ordo Veritatis protocol when a team seems to be in trouble with the authorities. They're to sit tight, appear to cooperate without blowing their cover, and wait for other OV officials to intercede on their behalf. Only if they're in danger of imminent harm are they to physically resist lawful authorities in a nation like the US, where the OV is active. If necessary, further calm the players with a **Bullshit Detector** reading telling them that Hornbeck is on the level.

Wherever the scene takes place, the team finds themselves on the receiving end of an interrogation. Their Internet search was traced and set off red flags. How did they happen to be searching for all of those names in sequence? What is their significance?

Bureaucracy allows the team to convince Hornbeck of the truth. The names came up regarding the Mistaugh murder investigation. They have no idea what they mean.

Impersonate (core clue) further convinces him that they're cleared for any classified information directly regarding the case, and that Hornbeck is just wasting his own valuable time by waiting for the paperwork to clear. On that note, Hornbeck is willing to provide information.

- The names are of terror suspects picked up on foreign soil, mostly in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The problem is, Guantánamo is filling up with fake suspects, mostly fingered by informants seeking cash, or prosecuting local feuds. So Hornbeck's working group, OPERATION REROUTE, has quietly been pre-processing detainees, screening out the most obviously innocent cases before they get to Guantánamo. Those deemed of no intelligence value are then given over to "those CIA jagoffs" for return to their home countries.
- On further prodding, Hornbeck confirms that the man in charge of transporting the cleared suspects was Rusty Mistaugh. Checking the ledger, he says that the first set of dates corresponds to when the various suspects were transferred from Pentagon to CIA custody. He assumes that the second set of dates corresponds to their shipment from various offshore CIA detention facilities to their home countries, but has no way of confirming this. He has no idea why Mistaugh would keep this classified information in a personal ledger stored in an unsecure facility like a storage locker.

Forensic Psychology: A 2-point spend shows that one of Hornbeck's aides, a ruddy-faced young woman whose name tag and insignia identify her as a Lt. Anspach, is oddly agitated.

A Fetish For the Road

SCENE TYPE ALTERNATE

Lead-in: Lt. Anspach from "The Disappeared"

Hornbeck is on the up and up, but his aide is a budding Esoterrorist who helped turn OPERATION REROUTE into a human sacrifice mill. When she sees that the team is getting close to OPERATION SLAUGHTERHOUSE, she makes a call to an accomplice



Why Not A Bomb?

The Esoterrorists plant a fetish, and not a bomb, because mundane explosions lead to trouble with mundane authorities. Better to arrange for an ordinary-seeming road accident.

and arranges for some subtle mystic sabotage to the team's vehicle.

When the team next gets into their vehicle, a black SUV supplied by the Ordo Veritatis, ask if anyone wants to make a **SURVEILLANCE** test. On a successful test (Difficulty 5), the character notices a small figure of twigs and mud stuck to the rearview mirror with a small piece of electrical tape. If the item is removed and discarded, the team faces no further danger from it.

However, if they either fail to spot it or foolishly leave it in the vehicle, it poses a hazard the next time the team hits the highway. (They have to do this to get from the Pentagon to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, for example.)

Once on the road, the magic of the fetish attacks the vehicle's driver. The driver is suddenly assailed by a vivid visual and auditory hallucination. The screaming faces of torture victims, most of them Arabic or Pakistani-looking, come streaming at his face. The driver must make a nonstandard Stability test (Difficulty 5.) In this case the penalty for failure is not loss of additional Stability points, but loss of control of the vehicle. The driver suddenly jerks the wheel so that the SUV barrels into the median and toward incoming traffic.

The character riding shotgun can grab the steering wheel and correct the vehicle's course on a Difficulty 5 **Driving** test.

If the character in the passenger seat fails to do this, the vehicle runs headlong into an oncoming Smart car. It crumples the car, flips up into the air, and rolls, only to be hit by a second oncoming vehicle, a half-ton truck.

Characters in the vehicle are unharmed if they make Difficulty 6 **Athletics** tests, except for the driver, who is still in the grip of the hallucination and unable to brace himself.

The driver, along with anyone who failing their Athletics tests, suffers a damage roll with a +3 modifier.

When they crawl from the smashed vehicle, the team sees that the driver of the Smart Car has been decapitated. This calls for a round of Difficulty 4 **Stability** tests.

If the players haven't found the fetish and decide to search the remains of their vehicle now, a new round of **Surveillance** tests is permissible, at Difficulty 5. On a success, they find it. The players will probably connect it to their driver's hallucination.



(If it weren't for the gruesome scene on the roadway, the players would have to make Stability tests for bearing witness to this evident magical effect. But they've already made their rolls for this one incident.)

Chemistry: Chemical analysis of the mud used in the fetish establishes it as coming from the southern coast of the Dominican Republic.

Occult Studies: (dependent on getting the clue immediately above) The fetish is a curse object, not actually native to the voodoo or Santeria traditions of the island. It's probably the generalized handiwork of Esoterrorists.

Prison With No Name

SCENE TYPE CORE

Lead-in: Hornbeck's evidence of Mistaugh's role in OPERATION REROUTE

BUREAUCRACY: The character knows that they've now got enough of a connection between one of Mistaugh's specific activities and his murder to pry information from Mistaugh's CIA superiors. They can approach Austin "Rippy" Airedale (from the crime scene), or, on a 2-point spend, someone even higher up in the agency food chain. Whichever CIA guy they speak to, he laboriously rechecks the team's valid, if ill-gotten, security clearances, heaves a sigh, and offers access to Mistaugh's work records concerning OPERATION REROUTE.

The CIA contact confirms that Operation Reroute was suspended last week, when Mistaugh's name surfaced in news reports regarding the congressional prostitution and poker parties.

FORENSIC ACCOUNTING: (core clue) After a full working day of blearily poring through Mistaugh's files, the team member discovers a number of irregularities in his expense accounts. Rusty was supposed to be shipping suspects within the Middle East and south central Asia. Yet there are repeated instances where he cashed out his airline tickets for destinations in the Dominican Republic. Also, he was directing hundreds of millions of dollars from various sources, often to companies in the Dominican. Many of them seem to be located in a small town on the nation's southern coast called Cabo de Heridas.

1-point spend: Also discovered is proof that Mistaugh was directly on the take from Barry Milk. When the time comes to work up a veil-out, they can leak this to the media. With Mistaugh reduced from heroic foot soldier in the war on terror to corrupt federal official, pressure from Congress and the press to solve his murder will diminish. They can even spin it as a suicide, when the time comes.

LANGUAGES (SPANISH): "Cabo de Heridas" translates as Cape of Wounds or Cape of Hurt.

Reassurance: Discovery of the Dominican connection calls for a second encounter with the CIA contact, to ask what the agency has been brewing up down in the Caribbean. The contact refuses to talk on the record. To get him to talk off the record, a team member must reassure him that under no circumstances will the leaking of highly sensitive data be tracked back to his desk.

Given this reassurance, the contact reveals that Cabo de Heridas was to be the site of a so-called "black prison." The team may have read in the news that such prisons exist in Eastern Europe, as part of the war on terror. The Dominican facility was to have been an overflow prison, taking suspects of more questionable intelligence value than Gitmo. Once the existence of already-operational sites in Eastern Europe was leaked to the press, the Agency reevaluated the usefulness of the Cabo de Heridas facility. They halted the project, replacing it with OPERATION REROUTE. Instead of housing low-level suspects, they'd start shipping them back where they came from.

The Cabo de Heridas facility was in an early state of construction when the project was cancelled. Only its foundations had been poured.

1-point spend: The CIA contact's nervousness on this issue suggests the leverage the team will have during the veil-out phase of the operation. The Agency is so anxious to prevent the another revelation of their secret prison initiative that they can be strongarmed into cooperating with the cover-up.

Slaughterhouse

SCENE TYPE CORE

Lead-In: existence of the Cabo de Heridas facility

Research: Acquisition of satellite imaging of the Cabo de Heridas site shows that the site is far more than a set of empty foundations. It's a complete compound, surrounded by security fencing, with guard posts.

It looks like a trip to the Dominican is in order.

RESEARCH provides basic background on the Dominican Republic, which you can reveal as needed during this part of the episode. This small nation occupies two-thirds of the Caribbean island of Hispanola, which it shares with Haiti. Though its human rights record isn't exactly spotless, it is, by third world standards, a functioning and reasonably prosperous democracy. In this it contrasts sharply with its neighbor, which is famous for its often devastating and seemingly irreconcilable political strife.

Occult Studies: Catholicism is the republic's dominant religion. The animistic religion of Vudu (as the locals spell it) is also practiced here. As elsewhere, it involves ecstatic invocation of spirits, who intercede on congregant's behalf. Many people blend Catholic and Vudu traditions, which trace their origin to the African nation of Benin. Practitioners distance themselves from the sinister portrayal of their faith seen in pop culture, and will take a dim view of Esoterrorist attempts to co-opt it as a force for evil.

Bureaucracy provides full travel documents for the group under their cover identities. 1-point spend: The team officially liaises with representatives from the National Police. They're allowed to carry weapons for self-defense purposes. They may question Dominican citizens but any other use of police powers must be exercised by the National Police. Their liaison is Sergeant Ramon Castillo, a rail-thin young man with a perpetually bored expression. **COP TALK** reveals that his uncle is a high official in the National Police.

Ramon has been briefed by his uncle on the Cabo de Heridas site. Like everyone in the upper echelons of the Dominican security axis, he believes that it is indeed a CIA black site taking overflow prisoners from Gitmo. He thinks that it is his duty to give the team, who are obviously low-level flunkies, the runaround until they give up and go home. He wants to dispose of this delicate diplomatic assignment with a minimum of fuss. When it comes right down to it, he doesn't much care what the Americanos do as long as their activities don't come back to bite him, or his uncle, on the ass.

Any halfway attractive female team member can get him drunk and use **Flirting** to get him to reveal all of the above. Ramon fervently believes in his powers as a ladies man and will continue to pursue the team member as long as she's on the island.

If the team visits the site during daylight hours, they find a quiet compound with no visible activity aside from the desultory guarding efforts of a few obviously local security officers. Wire mesh fence surrounds its perimeter. A dirt road winds to the front gate. A dense pine and hardwood forest approaches the fence on four sides.

There is no cell phone coverage at this remote location. The building receives what little power it requires from an onsite generator.

Bureaucracy suggests that this sure doesn't seem like an operational CIA black facility. It's too sleepy, with merely perfunctory security.

The guards are armed with submachine guns. If approached, they speak in halting English or fast-flowing local Spanish. They assure the team that they're lost and must turn back and follow the road to wherever they came from, to get wherever they're going.

Impersonate, where the team members pretend to be important US officials with the power to make trouble for them, reveals more (false) information. The facility is owned by an American coffee company which intends to sell fair trade beans in the US and Europe. Eventually it will be used for office space and coffee storage. Right now the buildings are empty. The two guards, Hector and Yuberkis, have been hired to prevent vandalism. They work a twelve-hour shift. Hector and Yuberkis are brothers but don't really know the men who replace them for the night shift. They're unfriendly guys, from the northern province of Puerto Plata.

1 point spend: The character convincingly claims to know their relatives in New York City. Hector and Yuberkis become friendly and forthcoming but still won't let them into the facility.

Bullshit Detector works on them only if the same character also has **Languages (Spanish.)** It reveals that the guards believe what they're saying.

On no condition will Hector and Yuberkis step aside to allow the team inside the facility. They intend to do their jobs well, even if they have to shoot it out with mysterious gringos.

If Ramon is present, he'll do the talking with Hector and Yuberkis. Unlike the guards, he doesn't believe the coffee story, but blandly repeats it back to the team anyhow. **Bullshit Detector** suggests a mild twinge of insincerity about him.

If, during daylight hours, a team member with **Archaeology** gets close enough to the gate to talk to the guards, he sees signs of well-disguised recent burials around the complex. At a quick glance, there are over thirty separate burials, most of them the rough dimension of a human corpse.

1-point spend: There are thirty-three coffin-sized burial spots, plus another six smaller spots where objects about the size of a breadbox could be buried.

(This clue is also available if the team gets itself inside the perimeter during daylight hours. See below.)

An especially gung ho group may try to attack Hector and Yuberkis right away. Although this is an acceptable option, you can indicate that they're quasi-sympathetic by having them engage in innocuous banter together (in Spanish, of course), as the characters approach. Maybe they're talking about football or whether Americans are taller because of all the bovine growth hormone they eat in their big fat American hamburgers.

HECTOR AND YUBERKIS

Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 6, Shooting 4, Stability 4, Surveillance 4
Damage Modifier: +1 (Heavy Firearm)

During the night the site is guarded by Eligio Figueroa and Francisco Peña, Dominican initiates into the Esoterrorist conspiracy. They guard the gate with rifles and eyes pointed inwards, though they turn back to the road if they hear any sounds emanating from it. (Astute players may intuit that they're trying to prevent something from getting out of the complex as much as they worry about unauthorized individuals getting in.)

ELIGIO AND FRANCISCO

Athletics 8, Health 6, Scuffling 8, Shooting 6, Stability 2, Surveillance 8
Damage Modifier: 0 (Machete), +1 (Heavy Firearm)

To get past the perimeter during the day or night requires a group **Infiltration** test at Difficulty 3. If the group leader fails, the guards show up to investigate; see below. If only some members of the team are going into the complex, suggest that they establish a communications link so that those left behind can advise the Infiltration team as they explore. If a member of the Infiltration team has **Photography**, he can set up a live video link via clothing-mounted camera. With such a set up, members of the watch team can use their investigative abilities remotely, by following the video feed. A character with **Electronic Surveillance** can set up the accompanying audio link before the team goes in. As the players fail or succeed, add vivid descriptive details to make the attempt seem suspenseful and dangerous.

Eligio and Francisco shoot first and ask questions later. They intend to kill the team members.

Hector and Yuberkis have been ordered to shoot to kill, but their hearts aren't in it. They point their weapons at the group and demand that they freeze. They search the team, confiscating anything of value on their persons, including their identification, and shoo them away from the property. "You're lucky we don't shoot you," they say. If the team kills or disables the guards, they can roam freely over the complex. If they kill Hector and Yuberkis, try to make the players feel guilty for snuffing a couple of hapless dupes.

In the unlikely event that the entire team is killed by the guards, have the players create new characters. Their first assignment will be to investigate the disappearance of an Ordo Veritatis team in the Dominican Republic.

If the **Infiltration** succeeds, the infiltrating team members make it to the building's entrance without being seen.

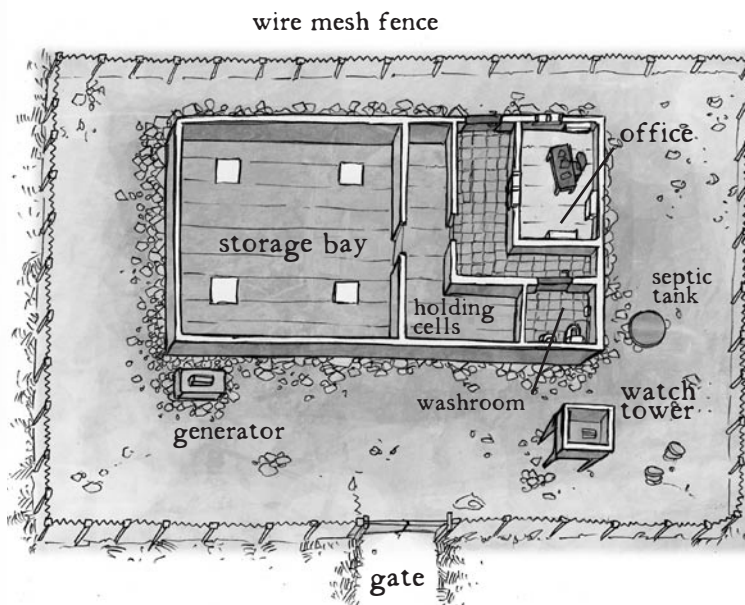
Upon opening the door the group discovers a video camera security system. The group member with the second lowest roll proceeds to disable it.

If the infiltration occurs during daylight hours and one or more infiltrating characters has **Archaeology**, they get the burial site clue given above.

OPERATION SLAUGHTER HOUSE

When the team gets inside the building, they find it to be a nondescript, prefabricated building, scarcely the ultra-secure facility it was intended to be when the CIA penciled it in as a black prison. It contains the following rooms:

- **Storage Bay.** A large, empty area with a few empty crates stacked along its northern and western walls.
- **Office.** A small area containing a couple of well-used metal desks, and a trio of battered metal chairs.
- **Washroom.** A utilitarian, military-style sanitary facility.
- **Holding Cells.** Behind a heavy locked metal door (Difficulty 4 **Infiltration** or **Explosive Devices** test required to open; **Explosive Devices** will alert guards, if still present) is a narrow corridor flanked by cramped cells. These reek of urine and fecal matter.



The clues, sorted by room, from least to most revealing, are:

OFFICE

Evidence Collection: Someone very careful and well-trained has scrubbed this area of all useful clues. Desk and chair surfaces have been wiped with a cleaning solvent. There's a computer power bar plugged into the electrical outlet but no computers or other electronic equipment present. Heck, there aren't even any pens or pencils in the desk drawers. Just a scattering of dust bunnies and a stray thumbtack. An empty corkboard hangs on the wall. A cracked CD thin case is lodged behind the legs of one of the desks and an empty plastic wastebasket.

WASHROOM

Architecture: Judging from the configuration of its washroom elements, the building was designed using off-the-rack military plans, for a small light-use administrative base. The plumbing is self-contained, leading to a septic tank outside. A small hot water tank inside the bathroom provides hot water for its sinks and stand-up shower.

Evidence Collection: Although well-cleaned, human blood residue is everywhere. It doesn't seem as if anyone was harmed within this room. More likely, blood-soaked rags were cleaned in its sink. A build-up of clotted blood can be found inside the drain, as if used multiple times by one or more individuals washing blood and tissue off their bodies.

HOLDING CELLS

As soon as the door opens (see above) the team hears a terrified, wailing plea in what sounds like a Middle Eastern language. The voice seems to be that of a young man.

Languages (Farsi): He's shouting in Farsi, begging for mercy in Allah's name. "I am not an animal to be slaughtered," he screams, over and over.

1-point spend: His dialect marks him as an Iranian raised near the Afghan border.

This is Cyrus Janghali, an Iranian peddler who sold household goods in eastern Afghanistan. He was captured by local tribesmen, to whom he'd sold shoddy merchandise, and handed over to a US military intelligence unit in exchange for a bounty. The tribesmen accused him of being an Al-Qaeda liaison to the Iranian government. Cyrus was shipped to Gitmo for extensive interrogations, after which the officers in charge decided that he was falsely accused. He was then shipped here, where he was imprisoned alongside six other men with similar stories. Janghali has heard them horribly murdered in the Storage Bay. (He doesn't know it, but the authorities at Guantánamo turned him over to Mistaugh's Operation Reroute. Mistaugh had him shipped here for ritual sacrifice.)

Cyrus assumes that the team has come to kill him. As far as he's concerned, one official-looking American is as frightening as the next. **Reassurance**, even if mimed, will calm him down and convince him that the team is here to help.

He last saw his captors X days ago, where X is the day before Mistaugh was slain. Each was an American with the broad-shouldered build typical of CIA field operatives. They apparently thought that he spoke no English, a misapprehension he did nothing to correct. As they shoved a week's supply of dried food and bottled water into his cell, they said that this poor bastard (meaning Cyrus) had no idea how lucky he was. If Rusty hadn't brought too much heat on himself with his hookers and congressmen sideline, they'd still have a steady stream of subjects. Now Cyrus would get to live until they found a new pipeline of victims.

If queried on this, Cyrus confirms that victims were taken into the death chamber three at a time. **Occult Studies** suggests that this ritual is based on the power number three, and that killing Cyrus on his own would confer no magical benefit. They've put him, and the facility, on ice, pending a new source of human sacrifices.

Cyrus can tell the above story in fluent Farsi, middling Arabic, or badly broken English. He denies wronging the tribesmen who falsely accused him. Characters who understand the language he's speaking in and have **Bullshit Detector** can tell this isn't exactly true.

If asked for more details about the deaths of his fellow prisoners, he becomes agitated, remembering the sounds of their horrible demises. He describes imitates a hideous inward slurping sound, which comes out sounding like an evil wet-vac vacuum cleaner. Janghali knows nothing of Esoterror and assumes his tormenters are agents of the Great Satan. He never believed that Americans were literally devils until this experience. Now he has heard it with his own ears.

If the team promises to free him and save his life, he gives them something one of his tormentors dropped when dragging out one of the other prisoners for slaughter. It's a writeable compact disc, which he's snapped in half, so that he could cut his wrists if they came to torture him. Back in the lab, the contents of the disc wrap up any loose ends the team has yet to resolve. See "Death In Powerpoint", below.

STORAGE BAY

Evidence Collection: Despite attempts to clean the area, residual blood spatters can be found throughout. This was the site of multiple homicides, committed over a period of many months. Blood patterns on the eastern wall match the designs found at Rusty Mistaugh's murder site.

Architecture: A nearly undetectable seam runs down through the center of the floor. It's a trap door, controlled by an unseen mechanism.

(available only after above discovery) **Mechanics:** The trap door is probably triggered by a tiny infra-red sensor unobtrusively mounted on top of one of the (now-disabled) security cameras.

On a Difficulty 3 **Mechanics** test, the character can modify any device capable of emitting an infra-red signal to open the trap door.

All characters looking into the pit below the trap door immediately make a Difficulty 6 **Stability** test. Those watching via video feed make the test too, but at Difficulty 4.) Inside the pit are four ravening blood corpses. If the trap door is opened, they leap up from the pit and try to jam their catheter-like talons deep into the team member's flesh, draining them of blood.

Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 12

Hit Threshold: 3

Weapon: +2 Talons

Armor: +2 vs. Shooting

If Cyrus is present in the room, one of the blood corpses goes for him. They've been smelling his warm and tasty hemoglobin for days now and are anxious to taste it.

If guards are still present outside the complex, they flee in terror at the sound of the fight against the shrieking blood corpses. They may be fanatics, but that doesn't mean they want to be around if the corpses break loose prematurely.

The team members know the protocol in cases such as this. While it's preferable to destroy any creatures you run across, escaping and returning to headquarters is always preferable to being devoured by a supernatural horror.

Given the opportunity, the blood corpses break out of the complex in search of freedom and a wider hunting ground. They'll swerve to feast on any guards still on the scene.

If the team defeats the blood corpses, they'll have free reign over the complex for the first time. If they haven't yet had the chance to notice the many well-disguised graves with **Archaeology**, they do so now. If they start digging, they find a corpse in each of the man-sized holes and a metal box in each of the smaller holes.

The bodies are all of men, most of obviously Middle Eastern extraction. Each has had his head, hands and feet severed, just like Rusty Mistaugh.

Forensic Anthropology reveals that all of them have been killed in the last eighteen weeks. The most recent of the corpses is X days old, where X is a week plus the number of days the investigation has taken to date. The wounds correspond to the weapons found at the Mistaugh crime scene. However, their hearts are not missing.

The boxes are locked, but easily smashed open. Each contains a series of Polaroid photographs depicting a murder victim being killed the same way Mistaugh was. In none of the images are the faces of the killers shown. Nor are there any useful identifying marks. The box also contains a human heart, wrapped in a freezer bag.

The sight of the first box's contents requires a Difficulty 3 **Stability** test of all who examine it.

The second box the team opens contains Mistaugh's heart (as later DNA analysis via **Forensic Anthropology** will confirm) along with Polaroids depicting his gruesome dismemberment.

Shadowy figures appear in the corner of one shot, accidentally reflected in the glassy surface of an art print removed from the hotel wall.

Death In Powerpoint

Back in a well-equipped computer lab, **Data Retrieval** allows the team to access data on the broken CD Cyrus gave them. It contains a solitary file: a Powerpoint presentation, addressed in a chillingly casual, almost businesslike tone to the trainee Esoterrorists who'll be carrying out the operation. It contains no evidence of any conspirator's identity, but does outline the nature of their plot, in punchy bullet points supplemented by flashy graphics.

The entire Operation Slaughterhouse scheme was meant to materialize an army of blood corpses. For every nine people ritually slaughtered (always in groups of three), the number of summoned corpses would double. With just over thirty dead, they had created four of the creatures¹. If they'd gotten to the eighty-first corpse, as planned, they'd have summoned two hundred and fifty six of the creatures, the maximum number the ritual can summon. This small army would then be transported to the Haitian border. They'd then be let loose to rampage across the country during an already tense election season, with the international media present in force. Images of the blood corpses would be captured on live cameras and beamed throughout world. (The presentation underlines this point with a crude animation of blood corpses spanning across the map of Hispanola.) The ensuing doubt and terror would make further Esoterrorist rituals easier to work.

One of the Polaroids of Mistaugh's murder also contains vital information. Shadowy figures appear in the corner of one shot, accidentally reflected in the glassy surface of an art print removed from the hotel wall. **DATA RETRIEVAL** allows the identification of two faces: cashiered former Agency men turned independent military contractors Duncan "Spinner" McGready and Oswald "Trip" Hartford. They're the ones with the tradecraft chops to skillfully scour a post-poker party hotel room of all trace evidence. On follow-up, both men are found dead in their homes of apparent suicide.

If the team is still in contact with Cyrus, he can confirm that these were the two men he saw repeatedly at the facility. They're the ones who gave him his food supply before departing the installation for the last time.

With the Esoterrorists tying up loose ends for them, it's time to declare the case closed and move on to the cover-up phase.

¹ If you've had to adjust the number of blood corpses present to accommodate the size of your group, you'll also need to correspondingly change the number of victims so far. Remember also to adjust the number of graves outside the building.

The Veil-Out

As they prepare the veil-out, team members know the protocol. Conceal the case's supernatural elements even from those you're enlisting in the cover-up.

CIA officials, who'd already decided not to proceed with a Dominican facility for PR reasons, have zero interest in letting it be known that a site they paid for is ringed with the ritually mutilated corpses of falsely accused Muslim men. Use of **Bureaucracy** or **Negotiation** on a CIA contact results in a promise of immediate action.

Media reports rule Mistaugh's death a suicide. Faked autopsy reports are inserted into the official record to confirm this.

A cruise missile destroys the Cabo de Herida site. That afternoon, Department of Defense spokesmen give a press conference touting the destruction of a joint al-Qaeda-narcoterrorist facility in the Caribbean, performed with the consent and cooperation of the Dominican government.



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THE ESOTERRORISTS

Character Name _____

Off-duty Occupation _____

Weapons _____

Investigative Abilities

ACADEMIC	Rating	Pool	TECHNICAL	Rating	Pool
Anthropology			Astronomy		
Archaeology			Ballistics		
Architecture			Chemistry		
Art History			Cryptography		
Forensic Accounting			Data Retrieval		
Forensic Psychology			Document Analysis		
History			Electronic Surveillance		
Languages*			Forensic Entomology		
Law			Evidence Collection		
Natural History			Explosive Devices		
Occult Studies			Forensic Anthropology		
Research			Fingerprinting		
Textual Analysis			Photography		
Trivia					

General Abilities

INTERPERSONAL	Rating	Pool		Rating	Pool
Bullshit Detector			Athletics†		
Bureaucracy			Driving		
Cop Talk			Filch		
Flattery			Health		
Flirting			Infiltration		
Impersonate			Mechanics		
Interrogation			Medic		
Intimidation			Preparedness		
Negotiation			Scuffling		
Reassurance			Shooting		
Streetwise			Shrink		
			Stability		
			Surveillance‡		

* 1 language per rating pt.
 † rating of 8+ increases Hit Threshold by 1
 ‡ rating of 8+ grants 1 pt Electronic Surveillance

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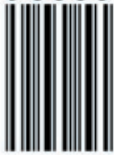
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