

STALKERS OF THE ELDER DARK

BASIC RULES FOR ROLE-PLAYING GAMES OF COSMIC HORROR

BY

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For my beautiful wife, Robyn, who
made my life less scary with her patience
and loving support while also creating
incredible things for this game which are...

Artwork by James S. George and,
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Finally, with special thanks to the
writers of pulp horror. Lovecraft and his
followers called up cosmic things to
entertain and terrify us, and we appreciate it!

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INTRODUCTION

This is a game of cosmic horror. The stuff of pulp fiction from the 1920s. Here, authors imagined a universe of terrifying evil humanity was ill-prepared to face...

Until now. But first, and for the uninitiated, an explanation of the genre. Cosmic horror, for all its supernatural pretensions, was always naturalistic, doubling as a cautionary tale in a new age of science. For humankind was not alone in the universe. It shared its space with innumerable alien races. Terrible races with unassailable intellects and devious intentions towards our kind. And these, in turn, had religion in the form of doubly alien gods. Elder things seeking entry to our world and stopping at nothing to get there.

This is what scientific discovery had to offer humanity, although the knowledge was nothing new. It was revealed in foul books thought to drive their readers mad with revelation.

Stalkers of the Elder Dark is set in this world. Our world. And the pulp writers who birthed the genre might live there as well. They were on to something, even if they got some details wrong. And perhaps they did this on purpose to protect others (and themselves) from the truth...

This game sets things straight.

And, of course, the 1920s were the perfect time to explore the terrible truth. The Great War was over, and the world was getting better day by day. Airplanes buzzed overhead while automobiles made the world a little smaller, even if large areas were still uncharted. The phonograph brought music into homes while magazines brought news and stories to the masses. It was the best of times...

Except when it was not. For despite its scientific advancements, there were still huge pockets of ignorance in the world. A high fever could be deadly, and death came calling with the regularity of a family friend. There was law and order to be sure, but prohibition bred a new world of crime, and corruption was everywhere to be found.

Indeed, many evils were left to simmer in suburban homes and remote farmhouses, where the unspeakable routinely played out. In the 20s, humanity looked out to the future while inhabiting a dark and deeply troubled past.

Now, enter the cosmic horror...

The typical protagonist was an isolated antiquarian seeker with time and money enough to learn the terrible truth. Perhaps they inherited a family home and unearthed something troubling about their ancestry. Or maybe they bought a strange piece of art that revealed the cosmic powers at work in the world. One way or another, darkness came calling, and these stories usually ended badly.

At least until now, for this game imagines a pushback of sorts, with characters from diverse backgrounds coming together against the dark. Maybe they win out. Or perhaps death (or worse) overtakes them, for the things they fight possess incredible power and never sleep. This is humanity's fight to win or lose, but by working together and pooling their resources, victory (or at least a stalemate) is possible...



ROLE-PLAY

One player becomes the *Watcher*. This person is in charge of the setting and supporting characters, which include alien horrors from beyond. This takes time and should be done well before the first game begins. Among other things, the Watcher maps out important locations and keeps detailed notes about the things to be found there.

Everyone else becomes a *player*. Up to five is best, although friends can always make other arrangements. These can be academics or explorers, gifted artists or bootleggers running from the law. But while they all come from different backgrounds, their terrible discoveries require them to work together for the survival of everything they know.

During a game, the Watcher describes what the characters see and hear around them, and the players decide what, if anything, to do about it. Dice are rolled and the rulebook consulted when difficult actions and/or combat with enemies occurs, although these rules emphasize strategy and decision-making over complicated mechanics.

This is *role-playing*. These rules matter, and they contain a lot of content vital to the game. But ultimately, the players matter more, and their choices rule everything.

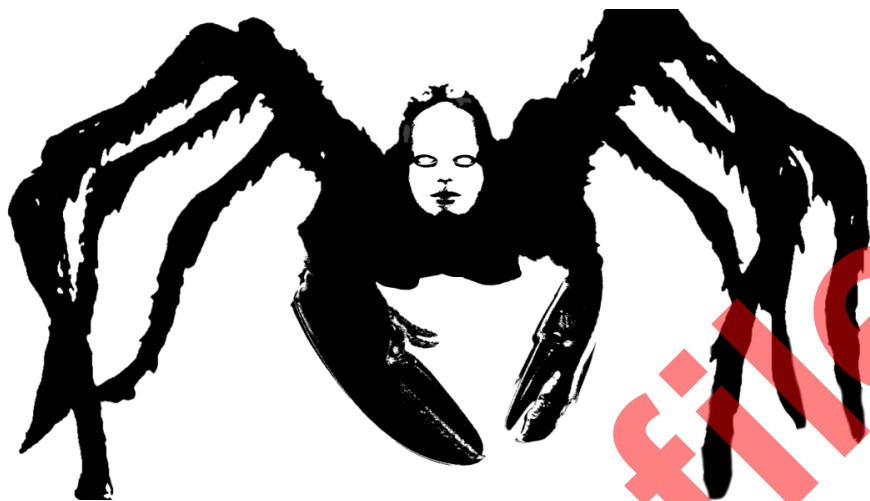
In short, this is a game by the players and for the players, who are free to be as creative as they need to be to overcome the challenges of cosmic horror. Moreover, the Watcher is always free to add or change anything and make the game their own. This is the first rule...

And the adventures need not end. In fact, it will probably take several sessions to complete a single mission, for want of a better term. Each new session picks up where the last one left off as part of an ongoing narrative, where success is not assured. The characters may die or be driven mad by exposure to cosmic monstrosities, and when this happens, the player simply creates a replacement and the game goes on with a new cast of heroes. But those who do survive earn valuable experience and acquire new skills and abilities...

And with new skills comes new strategies against the dark (but also new and more terrifying foes).

DICE AND DANGERS

For added fun, dice are rolled, although their use is limited to only the most dangerous and/or difficult of situations, for good strategy and role-playing should always be more important. Even so, dice add an element of risk and uncertainty, making them an essential part of the experience.



This game uses ordinary (six-sided) dice. When an action requires two dice, this is written as 2d6, with 2 being the number of (six-sided) dice to be rolled. Dice are used when attempting difficult actions and in combat, for rolling is a physical action that heightens the drama and creates a sense of risk as the players roll and hope for the best.

MINIATURES

Finally, (25/28 mm) *figures* can be used to represent characters and their enemies in battle. When this is done, one inch on the tabletop equals ten feet in the game. This adds spectacle and makes encounters all the more tactical, although using miniatures remains completely optional.

And this is the game. Just as humanity begins to master their world, cosmic horrors threaten existence itself...

- ONE -
STALKERS OF THE DARK

"And what is sin?" said Cotgrave.

'I think I must reply
to your question by another. What would
your feelings be, seriously,
if your cat or your dog began to talk
to you, and to dispute with you
in human accents? You would be overwhelmed
with horror. I am sure of it.
And if the roses in your garden sang
a weird song, you would go
mad. And suppose the stones in the road began
to swell and grow before your eyes,
and if the pebble that you noticed at night
had shot out stony blossoms
in the morning?

'Well, these examples
may give you some notion of what sin really is."

- Arthur Machen



Character creation is the first step for players, although the following rules should apply to most supporting characters run by the Watcher as well...

BACKGROUNDS

Consistent with the conventions of the genre, those exploring the unknown need both the time and resources to do so, which rules out many. The kindly small-town doctor has obligations and perhaps a family, and the game is ill-equipped to deal with this effectively. Therefore, most characters are limited to the following, although the Watcher can flex their creative muscles on a case-by-case basis here...

Academics include old professors and well-read people of leisure who devote their (considerable) free time to the study of some discipline. If actively employed, assume most are guest lecturers with abundant time to travel and go on adventures. Academics roll action dice to recall details about the game world, adding +2 when citing facts related to their area of expertise. This makes them very useful.

Of course, not every field of study lends itself to cosmic revelation, so players must choose one *specialty*. These include anthropology, history, and paleontology shown on Table I and described as follows...

Anthropologists study human culture and development, including religion and local myths, making this an excellent way to stumble upon the supernatural truth whispered of in ancient (and current) folklore.

Historians focus on written history and have ample opportunity to follow clues about reputed supernatural happenings. A quick survey of the literature suggests just how relevant this specialty can be to a game.

Paleontologists study prehistory and are in an excellent position to excavate Earth's supernatural antiquity.

