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Sample file

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introduction

The world is a frustrating place. The people in it are wrong. Not all of them, and not all the time, but sometimes they just make us angry. We're told from a young age: walking a mile in another man's shoes, seeing things from another's perspective, living with tolerance and understanding—these are all good and laudable things. And that's true, but they're also *hard*. We're not really wired to give other people the benefit of the doubt or to understand them intuitively. We can do it, but it's contrary to our nature. Our nature is to assume we're right.

That kind of arrogance costs lives. People in power have, historically, let others die for them or because of them and justified it by being *right*. That they were, sometimes, right (at least arguably so) doesn't change the fact that the people who were "wrong" died, were injured, or were simply forced to live counter to the way they'd like.

We talk about people who are obviously (to us) *wrong* about something important as being "scary." The woman on the Internet video, for instance, looking at the rainbow created by a garden hose and claiming that this is some kind of chemical pollution issue and that water didn't do that when she was a kid is scary because *she probably votes*. She has the same voice in choosing leaders and policy that we all do, but she clearly doesn't deserve it, because she's a complete idiot. It's easy to think that maybe you should have an IQ test before you get a vote.

The family in front of you at Fast Food Chain, the ones with the screaming, overweight kids who scamper up and down and all over, who spill their food and generally act like animals—they're *wrong*, too. People shouldn't breed if they aren't going to control their kids. Hell, maybe they shouldn't breed at all. Maybe we should restrict it. Maybe there should be a license to have kids.

One more? Those people who gather together every Sunday and talk about a sky-faerie like murmuring together is going to accomplish anything? They're *wrong*. They're stupid. Well, at best, they're just not thinking it through, they're letting what they were told as kids override their good sense. We need to knock down the churches, outlaw the whole stupid notion of "god." What century is this, anyway?

If any of those examples made you a little mad, or a little offended, or a little uncomfortable, then you might see my point. We don't see other people's perspectives unless we try. Everything that isn't about us or resonant to us isn't really all *that* important. You can see it at work in your own social circles. I have friends who are huge sports fans. I couldn't care less about sports, and honestly I think the hoopla surrounding professional sports is kind of stupid. In years past, I've occasionally had to schedule RPGs around Super Bowl Sunday and it annoys me, because seriously? *Football?* A bunch of roided-up morons slamming into each other and *that's* what we're postponing a game for?



But then again, I don't schedule games on Oscar Night, either, because I'm on the couch watching the awards show. And I have friends who don't get it, but see, they're *wrong*. Or at least, they're not as enlightened or smart or something as me. I have moments when I think that way, and then I check myself, because obviously I'm not right just because my own perspective makes more sense to me.

You do this, too. We all do. And it's normal, but it *is* arrogant and it isn't a good practice for modern life. We can try and avoid it, but that requires paying attention to ourselves and each other and realizing that we're more than our own perspectives. And again, that's difficult.

So what does all this have to do with a roleplaying game? **curse the darkness** is a game about a world in which someone who was so sure He was *right* and that everyone else was *wrong* that he took over. He's invincible (as far as anyone knows), He's untouchable (so far) and He doesn't listen to reason, arguments or pleas, because He's *right*.

Maybe he is. Or at least, maybe he's got a point. But that doesn't excuse what he's done.

playing *curse the darkness*

curse the darkness is a roleplaying game. If you aren't familiar with this sort of game, I'm a little surprised that you're here (but welcome!). For those of you for whom this is old hat, read the next couple of paragraphs anyway. Yes, it's another "what is roleplaying?" section, but if you read it, you'll see my biases and know where I'm coming from, and that will help you enjoy the game.

In a roleplaying game, the players assume the roles of characters within the fictional universe of **curse the darkness**. That means that they describe their characters' actions, speak as their characters would, and consider the situation from that character's perspective. One player starts off as the Game Moderator (or GM, for short). The GM makes decisions about whether a given course of action is possible in a given situation, and how difficult that course of action is. The GM also acts out the parts of any characters not controlled by the other players, as well as the antagonists.

That's the basics of roleplaying. We could get into game theory, but honestly that's the sort of thing that's better discussed in person over a cup of coffee (or, I suppose, on the Internet where we can all be properly outraged by each other's assertions). Let's talk instead about what playing *this* particular roleplaying game is like.

curse the darkness is about a dangerous world. The creatures from the shadows—simply called "Them" in this book—are much faster and stronger than even the toughest human being. Fighting them toe-to-toe is usually a losing proposition. Likewise, they can emerge from any shadow big enough to admit them, and so the characters in this game are never really "safe."

The world, too, is hostile to the characters. A nameless individual (again, simply called "Him") took over the world in 4012, using His command of the shadow-creatures to kill large swaths of the population, level entire cities, and bring the survivors to heel. He doesn't ask that people march lockstep into battle for Him, or that they worship Him, or even that they acknowledge Him. He just wants everyone to get along, to take care of each other, and to take stewardship of the world seriously.

This is really the central conflict of **curse the darkness**: The characters are living in a dictatorship in which the dictator does not want adulation or credit. He merely wants the best of people, but He was willing to slaughter *billions* to drive the point home. Are the characters willing to live in that sort of world, where cooperation is expected but dissent is still fatally punished? Or will they rise up, work against Him, and do whatever they can to take back control?

In order to play **curse the darkness**, you will need the following:

- Copies of the Player Mat, one for each player.
- Copies of the Character Cards. You'll need one for each player initially and it's a good idea to keep a few blank ones handy.
- A copy of the Removal Challenge Resolution sheet.
- A copy of the Suit Assignment Sheet.
- Three decks of standard playing cards (including jokers). It's best if two of the decks are identical and the third is distinct, but any three decks will do. Two of the decks are separated by suit with the aces and jokers removed. These are the Players' Decks. The third is the GM's Deck.
- Two distinct types of small objects ("chits," as they've often called in gaming parlance — glass beads, coins, dice, etc.) to represent Memory and Between Points. I like it better if Between Points are black or gray and Memory Points are red, but whatever works for you.

All of the paper materials can be downloaded free of charge at <http://cursethedarkness.net>.

inspirations

curse the darkness has been a long time in the making. For most of that time, it was just a vague feeling things weren't right and that maybe it would be better if the whole world fell apart. And then my brother introduced me to a cover of John Lennon's "Imagine" by A Perfect Circle. That song put those feelings into images, and I saw Him standing on a balcony, looking over a shadowy, blasted landscape, feeling only hope that now, maybe, the world could fix itself. I loved that juxtaposition: that the end of the world came not from nuclear weapons or environmental despoliation, but from someone who had the power to say, "If you can't play nice, you don't get to participate." But I wasn't sure how I wanted to express that image—I'm not a visual artist and it didn't say "novel" to me. Instead, I just let it percolate.

Those feelings crystalized in April of 2010, when I found myself looking through a collection of photographs taken at a Tea Party rally. The signs that folks were carrying—just the sheer, blundering pig-ignorance of it all—really pissed me off. I needed to do something with that anger, and so I sat down and wrote this a short fiction piece, titled "Here's What Happened" (it's the first thing under the header in Chapter One).

I posted that on my blog and a few friends read it and expressed interest. So every day, I added a little more, fleshing out the world, describing how it happened, and letting my narrator muse on what it all meant. And little by little, I realized that this was the game I

wanted to write. It's fun, but it's not funny. It's bleak and kind of sad, but expressed in this world is the potential for heroism on a simple and easily understood level. The game you're reading is the result.

Rejoice
For we have been
purified
in the
crucible of suffering
& emerged
stronger for it

I would be remiss if I didn't mention some of the other games that helped me shape **curse the darkness**, both in terms of style and mechanics:

- All iterations of the **World of Darkness** (White Wolf Game Studio) helped me develop a sensibility for horror games and writing disturbing material. And, of course, they gave me the exposure to make this even remotely feasible. So thanks for that, guys.
- **Misspent Youth** (Robert Bohl) influenced the emphasis on the essential choice. In that game, a similar theme is expressed in the question that precedes every dice roll: "Who's going to stand up?"
- **Ganakagok** (Bill White) had a lot to teach me about player-directed worlds, as well as using an "end condition" for a roleplaying game. I also had a conversation with Bill at Origins 2011 that basically made the decision for me—I was *going* to publish **curse the darkness**.
- **Fiasco** (Bully Pulpit Games) was the first GM-less RPG that I played. It helped me crystalize how rules-lite I wanted to make **curse the darkness** and how much freedom I wanted the players to have (plus, it's an awesome game and I want more people to play it).
- **Unity** (sadly, never created). Some years back, my brother Jonathan had this awesome idea for a game called **Unity**, which proposed a world similar in some ways to the world of **curse the darkness**. I didn't realize it until now, but I may have taken some inspiration from our discussions. So, thanks, bro.

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Sample file

**Wayne and Lisa
hear THEM coming**

chapter one: here's what happened

Everyone remembers where they were when the Vatican fell. Or when the Dome of the Rock was pulled down. Or when Parliament and Congress were simultaneously invaded from the inside. During any one of the attacks, we know where we were.

But where were you when you found out about Him? When you found out that it was all connected?

So many crazy stories around before the truth came out. Honestly, if the Internet had survived, those crazy stories would have, too, *Pray, stay*. You don't remember because you're too young, but the Internet was a place where any insanity could thrive. You could spout any story you wanted and not only be heard, but be believed. The ubiquitous "they" that said mankind never landed on the moon, that Catherine the Great died having sex with a horse, that the late President Obama was a Kenyan-born Muslim — "they" found their voice and their pulpit on the Internet.

When you think about it, what He does isn't so different than the 'net. He opens a gate, and out they come. The gates are everywhere on Earth, because they're nowhere. A server, a website, a router... Oh right, I forgot. Hell, never mind. Like I said, you're too young.

I remember where I was when I learned the truth. I was in a big box store buying supplies. No riots that day, but the police were out front watching the store; it was one of the few in the city that had anything left. I had turned off my radio. I just couldn't listen to death tolls and speculations and fanatics anymore. And then the lights flicked, and the TVs in the back of the store went dark. And I turned on my radio, and I heard what everyone else heard.

It's over. What you knew is over. Ideology is over.

Ideology is the poison at the soul of the privileged. In the First World, people talk ideology over full bellies. In the Third World, people have been trained to kill and die for ideology over and above their own survival.

Some of our greatest heroes have said this, though never in so many words. They have said that to make any meaningful change in the world, we must let go of the chains of religion, politics, economics, and all of the other systems of beliefs that interrupt the real and true cycles of life. The hungry must eat. The cold must be given shelter. The world must be saved, and as long as ideology — any ideology — festers at the heart of the leaders, no salvation is possible.

Now it is possible. Now the shadows are open. Now the world has a savior.

From this moment on, ideology is forbidden. Any idol at which you worship — be it mythical figure, figment of economics, ephemeral political position — is shattered as of now. You have seen what I can do when I open the shadows. And now you will see it again. Turn your eyes, world, to Jerusalem in three hours' time.

We stood there, not knowing quite what to make of it. I heard people crying. I heard a man near me say that he had family in Israel. And all I could think was, “He’s going to nuke it.”

I wasn’t wrong. The effect was much the same.



In this chapter, you’ll discover the world of **curse the darkness**, what the world saw as our civilization ended, and the basics of how things work now. Much of this chapter is written “in character” from people who witnessed the end of the world, but you’ll also find sections of “plain talk” text, wherein I tell you what the intent is and how a given topic relates to your games of **curse the darkness**.

What you won’t find in this chapter is a blow-by-blow of the years 2012-2022, with lots of specific details about which parts of the world did what and why and for how long. The reason for that is simply that I don’t feel that sort of information necessarily makes for good games. It can be fun to read or write, but games of **curse the darkness** should revolve around the characters and their goals. The details of the world should evolve from those goals and the vision that the players have, so this chapter is more focused on helping you develop those details than on providing them.

With that in mind, we’ll begin with the “quick pitch” — what you need to explain to your players to get the ball rolling. You don’t have to read this verbatim; you can feel free to add or make up whatever details you think are interesting or that you want to include as “givens” in the story.

