

GEIGER COUNTER

A GAME ABOUT SURVIVAL BY
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INSPIRED BY THESE SMALL PRESS ROLEPLAYING GAMES

CLINTON R. NIXON'S THE SHADOW OF YESTERDAY 2004

TIMOTHY KLEINERT'S THE MOUNTAIN WITCH 2005

CLINT KRAUSE'S ROANOKE 2006

D. VINCENT BAKER'S AFRAID 2006 (DRAFT)

AND THESE COOPERATIVE (MOSTLY) BOARD GAMES

JAMES ERNEST'S KILL DOCTOR LUCKY 1996

REINER KNIZIA'S LORD OF THE RINGS 2000

BRUCE GLASSCO'S BETRAYAL AT HOUSE ON THE HILL 2004

SERGE LAGET & BRUNO CATHALA'S SHADOWS OVER CAMELOT 2005

FEELING
FOOT



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I. INTRODUCTION

Geiger Counter is designed to emulate pretty much any movie in which most of the main characters die along the way. This includes survival horror and disaster movies, but also, potentially, war movies and other more serious faire. When I began working on it, I was specifically thinking about the *Aliens* and *Scream* movies, so you might want to start with something like that.

The genre traits *Geiger Counter* focuses on emulating include:

- a group of people struggling to survive against some manner of deadly menace;
- either a claustrophobic or linear setting, where the characters are either trapped in an enclosed area or being chased from point A to point B;
- most of the main characters being killed before the end of the film;
- characters often being killed not only by the menace but also by other characters pursuing their own personal goals; and
- the menace only being overcome once the main characters discover its true nature and come to a greater understanding of themselves and each other.

OVERVIEW

The players create a handful of characters and these characters move freely through a map of the setting that is drawn over the course of play. Each character begins with only 2 dice to roll in conflicts with the menace or each other, but the menace that is trying to kill them rolls up to 8 dice. The players' collective goal is for the characters to gather enough dice – through obtaining tools, learning more about the menace, and building resolve as most of the characters die off – so that at least one character will be able to escape or destroy the menace. Another way a character can harm the menace is by achieving their own secret goal, but pursuing that goal often leads to conflict with another character or exposing the entire group to additional danger.

HOW TO HOST A MASSACRE

Geiger Counter doesn't require a Game Master, but the play group still needs someone to organize the game, explain the rules to people who haven't played before (and maybe those who have), and walk the group through the process. That's your job. Here's some basic stuff you should know:

- The game should work well with anywhere from 4-8 players. Don't forget to count yourself, since you'll be playing, normally.
- In the event that everyone feels more comfortable having a Game Master, that might work too, but I want to make sure the game works without one.
- This game requires a bunch of six-sided dice. I use about 20-30 dice of one color for the main characters and 8 dice of a different color for the menace.
- You will also need a large sheet of paper (I tape six sheets of computer paper together into a giant rectangle), some index cards, and a pawn, miniature, or other small token to represent each of the 4-8 major characters (I sometimes use other dice, but that's not ideal).
- A session of play should last 2-3 hours, about the length of a movie. Occasionally, it may last as long as 4 hours. The first session is likely to be somewhat longer, as everyone gets used to the rules.
- There is no need to play the game over multiple sessions, since it's intended to run "one-shots" exclusively, but the rules easily support making "sequels" or "prequels" to previous sessions.

II. **STYLE SHEETS**

Geiger Counter uses "style sheets" to help make sure all the players are on the same page about the kind of survival horror movie they are creating. Style sheets include short, five-entry lists, containing examples of:

- settings,

- character types,
- menace dice,
- survival dice,
- advantage dice,
- goals,
- surprises,
- locations, and
- conditions.

Before gathering a group to play *Geiger Counter*, you should create a style sheet for the kind of movie you're interested in emulating. After the playtest, you can revise it to make it better, incorporating the creative input of the players and drawing on what you've learned.

Here's an example of the style sheet I've been using to run giant shark movies, to help you get an idea. It's already been revised twice.

FISH STORY 3

- **SETTINGS:** small beach town, aquarium, marine research facility, cutting-edge underwater resort, sinking cruise ship.
- **CHARACTER TYPES:** law enforcement, professional shark hunter, marine biologist, real estate developer, teenage child of another character.
- **MENACE DICE:** teeth the size of your hand, unnatural cunning, drowning, storm's a-comin', we're sinking.
- **SURVIVAL DICE:** too young to die, this is for my mother, true love never dies, you first, every man for himself.
- **ADVANTAGE DICE:** "happiness is mandatory," cell phone, "I'm a doctor," incredible sense of denial, "now see here," the sharks have serial numbers, lifeboat, fire extinguisher, explosive harpoon, the blueprints.
- **LOCATIONS:** beach, laboratory, starboard side, in the water, shark-proof cage.

III. **PRE-GAME SHOW**

The pre-game portion of *Geiger Counter* involves working with the group to figure out how you're going to implement the style sheet for this particular session. I generally do it in the following order.

1. **BRAINSTORM SETTING**

Facilitate choosing a specific setting, coming up with some basic details. Decide whether the setting is claustrophobic or progressive. Sometimes settings start as progressive and become claustrophobic at the end, or vice versa. That's okay too.

2. **PICK A DIRECTORAL STYLE**

Talk about who's directing this film or, more generally, what kind of directoral style the players are interested in. Is this a Scifi Channel movie with a poor script and bad CGI? Is this a big-budget action-thriller? Is this an ambitious college project or arthouse film?

2. **BRAINSTORM CHARACTER ARCHETYPES**

Brainstorm the character archetypes that would be present in such a setting, both as major and minor characters. You'll want 10-12 total. Many can be genre stereotypes, but it's also good to mix it up a bit with a few unusual ones, so the movie is not a complete cliché. Write these character archetypes down in a list that everyone can see, since each will be a character in your game.

3. **SEPARATE THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS**

Have the players decide which 6-7 characters are potential survivors, not just clueless mooks who are going to get killed instantly. Circle these on your list. Let each player pick one or two survivors. It's okay in really large groups if 1-2 players don't have survivor characters to play. Each potential survivor

character should have an index card for their write traits to be written on and a pawn or token to represent them on the map. Mooks can have index cards if that makes it easier to keep track of them.

4. CAST THE FILM

Invite the players to pick which actors would play these characters if you were actually making a movie. This can help provide a handle on how the characters are likely to “look” and behave. Casting mooks is completely optional.

5. PICK CHARACTER NAMES

The players should write down a name for each character who needs one. Some characters may be just fine as “Doc” or “Captain.” If your group has trouble with this, reach for the *Story Games Names Book*.

6. ASSIGN INITIAL DICE

Each potential survivor gets 1 Survival Die, which represents their will to live. Players should write down what form their passion to survive takes, what makes them a survivor.

Each potential survivor also gets 1 Trait Die, which should be the thing we immediately learn about a the first time they appear on screen. Trait Dice should be things that will be useful in surviving and defeating the deadly menace. Trait Dice can be physical objects, valuable knowledge, relationships with other characters (major or minor), and other potential advantages.

7. BRAINSTORM GOALS & KEY SHOTS

Invite players to silently brainstorm and write down secret goals that any of the characters could potentially have. Pursuing these goals should either put them at odds with other characters or make things more dangerous for everyone.

Next, invite players to silently brainstorm and write down really memorable shots that might be in the movie, ones good enough to include in the trailer. These key shots can either take the form of, either a brief description of an arresting image or a short, catchy line of dialogue that's not too character-specific.

Added together, the players (including yourself) should generate at least 4 goals and 10-12 shots. It's okay if some players can only think of one or two things, but everyone should contribute, if possible.

8. **ASSIGN GOALS**

Shuffle the goals place them in a pile. Invite players to draw a secret goal for each of their characters, if they like. This is optional, since not all characters should necessarily have secret goals, and players should feel free to ignore the goal they drew, if they don't think it fits, or draw a new one, if there are more left. Goals can remain secret, to be revealed later in play, or players can reveal them to everyone before play starts.

9. **THE TRAILER AND WORKING TITLE**

Shuffle the key shots and place them in a pile. Players should take turns drawing them until there are none left. Then, starting with you or a player who has a really great shot to start with, you describe the trailer by taking turns playing shot cards and describing them as bits of the trailer. Feel free to have ominous movie voiceover or not, whatever seems best. You should end the trailer at an appropriately dramatic moment.

The players should offer up a few suggestions for working titles for the movie, based on the trailer. What title is likely to pop up at the end of the trailer you just did? Pick one of these as the working title, to be potentially changed once you've acted out the film.

9. **EXPLAIN CONFLICTS**

Conflicts most often take place between one or more major characters and the menace. However, I don't consider it a good game of *Geiger Counter* unless there have been at least 2-3 conflicts between major characters. Minor characters cannot be involved in conflicts, because they have no dice to roll.

A conflict occurs...

- any time the menace attacks one or more characters,
- any time one character wants to gain a significant advantage over one or more others.

Each party in a conflict must roll at least two dice, meaning they have two dice applicable to the situation (including Survival, Trait, and Advantage Dice or Menace Dice for the menace). You cannot initiate a conflict without at least two dice and you automatically lose a conflict initiated against you if you can't roll at least two dice. The highest two dice on each side are added together and the highest total wins. If there is a tie, both sides lose.

The menace is the only entity that can roll its dice against multiple opponents independently. If the menace attacks a group and the characters choose not to cooperate in the conflict, all affected characters must try to beat the menace's dice. If there are multiple characters working together as one side in a conflict, their highest two dice, collectively, are used in determining the winner. Generally, characters should not be allowed to cooperate with the menace in a conflict, but that's a very dramatic reversal late in the game, so keep it in mind when betrayal needs that extra something.

There should hardly ever be more than one conflict in a single scene. Cut to what's happening somewhere else, and then come back if necessary.

10. **EXPLAIN CONDITIONS**

If a main character loses a conflict (or is part of a team that collectively loses a conflict), they gain a condition, which is a mechanical impairment chosen from the list below.

Players always choose which conditions their characters gain, but often the appropriate condition is obvious. Characters are free to choose the condition “Dead” any time they like, but their third and final condition must be “Dead.” Players whose main character is dead can continue to play minor characters and frame scenes as normal.

A condition’s “buyoff” describes a set of narrative events that can remove that condition’s mechanical impairment. However, conditions that are “bought off” still count towards a character’s maximum total of three. Additionally, conditions cannot be bought off until a character suffers some hardship due to the condition, whether being penalized in a conflict because they had no help or suffered a penalty, or purely in a narrative sense.

- **ALONE:** This character may only be framed into scenes by themselves or with the menace. *Buyoff:* Other characters stumble upon this character.
- **DEAD:** This character is dead, passing their Survival Die to another character. *Buyoff:* Another player frames this character into a scene, illustrating that they are not dead after all; this character then takes another condition to replace this one and regains their Survival Die from whichever character has it, unless they are also dead.
- **HYSTERICAL:** This character can only roll dice representing physical objects and Survival Dice in conflicts. *Buyoff:* This character receives comfort or is talked down from their hysteria.
- **INFECTED:** Any character in a scene with this character rolls a single die at the end of the scene; on a 1-2, they gain this condition. *Buyoff:* This character is cured of infection.
- **INJURED:** This character’s highest die is ignored in conflicts. *Buyoff:* This character receives medical attention.
- **LOST:** This character can’t be framed into a scene in an established location; they can only be in previously unknown locations. *Buyoff:* This character is led back to known locations or manages to find their way back.

- **PURSUED:** This character is being chased by the menace and is attacked in every scene that they are in. *Buyoff:* The character bests the menace in a conflict and manages to get away.
- **TRAPPED:** This character cannot leave their current location. *Buyoff:* This character is set free or manages to free themselves.
- **UNPREPARED:** This character can only roll non-physical dice and Survival Dice in conflicts, since they have somehow lost all their useful possessions. *Buyoff:* This character recovers their tools or gains new ones.

11. EXPLAIN MENACE DICE

The menace starts with zero dice and gains 8 total Menace Dice over the course of the first half of play. The menace gains a Menace Die, which is given a description just like any other trait, every time it appears or is hinted at in a scene, until all 8 Menace Dice are described. In conflicts, the menace always rolls all its dice, even if some of its dice don't seem to be applicable.

Before all 8 menace dice are described, the menace suffers no consequences from losing conflicts. After all 8 dice are described, the menace loses 1 Menace Die each time it loses a conflict. Losing Menace Dice can be tied to the menace losing specific abilities, or it can be viewed as a general weakening of the menace. Secret character goals, if achieved after the menace has all 8 of its dice, remove 1 Menace Die.

13. EXPLAIN SCENE FRAMING

Players will take turns being the “director” of scenes. I generally frame the prologue myself and then go around the table in a clockwise direction, but if one or more of the players have played before, handing the prologue to them is a great idea. It may make sense to let experienced *Geiger Counter* players frame the first couple of scenes, if possible, to provide an example for newer players.

Scenes in *Geiger Counter* should be as short as possible, since the game tries to run at near-movie speed. It's okay to have lengthy scenes every once in a

while, but most scenes should only be a few minutes long. The director of a scene is responsible for calling “cut” and ending the scene, but you (or other players) may need to prompt them by making a snipping motion with your fingers.

The director of a scene is typically responsible for playing the menace and rolling the Menace Dice, unless the director also has a character in that scene. In the first part of the game, until all 8 menace dice have been defined, directors should avoid framing scenes that feature their own main character. That makes things a bit easier and ensures that the spotlight gets spread around.

To begin a scene, the director should choose a location for the scene to take place in and the characters that are present in the location when the scene starts. Describing the scene as if it was a scene from an actual movie is a good approach. Remember the *Rule of Three*, which says that three colorful details make for gripping imagery, while more than that becomes excess fluff.

While a scene is taking place, is the players’ job to respond to the director’s vision and goals for the scene, but directors should strive to be facilitators and guides instead of demanding taskmasters. Directors should also take their cues from what the players have already stated their characters are planning on doing. If a character says they are going to Location X, then perhaps their next scene should take place in that location or in a location along the way.

14. EXPLAIN ADVANTAGE DICE AND THE MAP

Place dice on the play space (on top of the large, blank sheet of paper) in the following groupings: one group of 3 dice, two groups of 2 dice, and three groups of 1 die. These are Advantage Dice, which are one of the two main methods of characters gaining more dice (the other being gaining the Survival Dice of dead characters, which is explained in the next section). To understand how Advantage Dice are accumulated, it’s important to first understand how locations work.

The game starts with no locations defined, but with a general sense of the setting in which play is expected to take place. The current director can draw

a new location on the map at the beginning of their scene. An unlimited number of locations can be defined, but if a director wants to define a new location with Advantage Dice, they take one of the unused groupings of dice and place them within the borders of the new location they just drew.

Locations on the map don't necessarily need to join together to make a representational picture of the setting, though it's cool if they do or at least suggest what the setting looks like. Top-down views are the most common, but, if you want to shake things up a bit, you might consider what a cruise ship, castle, or underground military base looks like in a cutaway, with multiple floors layered above and below.

What Advantage Dice represent cannot be defined by the director of a scene, however, only by the players of characters in that space (whether in this scene or later scenes in this same location). When a major character is in a location with some undefined Advantage Dice, that character's player can say what the dice represent and either 1) place those dice on their character card or 2) roll those dice during any conflict that takes place in that location. Some dice may be defined as things that can't be picked up or moved (fref, "deck-mounted machinegun"), while others can be easily carried ("top secret security codes") or even transferred to other characters.

15. **EXPLAIN SURVIVAL DICE**

When a main character dies, their Survival Die is passed to a main character who witnesses their death, if there are any nearby characters. This die is renamed, indicating the character's growing desire to make it through. Priority for gaining Survival Dice, if there are multiple characters present, goes in the following order:

- to the main character who caused, directly or indirectly, the dead character's death and, then,
- to the main character with the strongest relationship to the dead character.

If a major character dies with multiple Survival Dice, their own die and one or more dice gained from previously dead characters, only that character's

own Survival Die passes on to a living character. As such, Survival Dice do not generally all gather in the hands of a single, unstoppable survivor. That would be too easy.

16. OFFER BASIC SURVIVAL ADVICE

It is critical that characters gain more dice, otherwise the menace is likely to kill everyone. Only by working together and accumulating dice (including Survival Dice) is the group likely to eventually best or escape the menace. However, even in favorable circumstances, most characters are likely to perish. The collective goal should be for one or two characters to defeat or escape the menace... but not necessarily your character. No, your character will probably die in an appropriately grisly fashion, providing their valuable Survival Die to someone else.

III. PLAY

In many early menace scenes, the menace might not attack, but just be implied in order to start building enough dice to take people on. Scenes without the menace also happen quite a bit.

WHEN IN DOUBT

- Kill a minor character.
- Flashback
- “Maybe it’s gone?”

EPILOGUES AND THE END

It’s okay if there are 1 or 2 Menace Dice left when the final one or two surviving characters have seemingly escaped from the menace. That just means it’s time for an epilogue scene. Flash forward a bit, perhaps, and show the character(s) enjoying themselves in total safety. But the menace hasn’t

been totally defeated! Have the menace show up and attack them one more time, either...

- playing out the final fight to see who wins in the end,
- ending the movie as soon as the attack happens, or
- implying the menace's continued presence and waiting for a future session in which you can play out the sequel.

We haven't done any sequel session yet, but I'm thinking that the menace might be able to start with any Menace Dice that remain from a previous session and thus be able to attack characters right off. Also, any characters that survived a previous session should start with a new Survival Die that reflects their past experiences. Surviving character don't have to necessarily come back, however. They could even be like Dr. Grant and skip a movie, showing up for *Jurassic Park III*.

CHOOSE A FINAL TITLE

RELEASE THE FILM

SPECULATE ABOUT A POSSIBLE SEQUEL