



A game of
cultists vs. investigators

by Steve Hickey

Soth

Play cultists in small-town America trying to summon the dark god Soth.

- Conceal your murderous crimes
- Deceive family and friends
- Thwart meddling investigators

If you can complete three more rituals, Soth will rise.

Can you do it?

Duration: 1-3 sessions

Players: 3-7

Ages: 16+

Genre: Cthonic noir

System: diceless, low prep,
low complexity



Explain The Game

Once you've gathered to play, read the following aloud:

This is a game about cultists in small-town America.

The tone of the game is noir: bad people doing bad things, and keeping them secret in order to achieve their goals. In terms of genre, the game usually plays out somewhere between a thriller and a (very) black comedy.

We play the game to put the cultists under pressure: to see if they can summon the dark god Soth without being discovered or stopped.

At this point, you can describe some of *Soth's* media influences (below). I usually cite TV shows like *Dexter* and *Hannibal*, which have a strong focus on people plotting and getting away with murder. *Breaking Bad* illustrates the dilemmas faced by people who hide crimes from their loved ones.

Media Influences

Film and TV

American Gothic, Blood Simple, Breaking Bad, Dexter, Hannibal, The Player, Psycho, the Saw movie series (especially later entries), The Shield, True Detective.

For insights into small-town life in America, add *Fargo*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *Gilmore Girls*.

Novels and Short Stories

A Good Marriage by Stephen King, *Neonomicon* by Alan Moore, *The Ceremonies* by T.E.D Klein. For insights into small-town life, add *Salem's Lot* by Stephen King.



Set The Tone

Read the following aloud:

Most of us will play cultists. We'll describe the unpleasant things we do to summon Soth—like sacrificing friends and family.

That means we have to accept we'll be dealing regularly with the subject matter of murdering innocent people.

But for every other type of violence or abuse, every person at the table has permission to stop the game any time something comes up that makes you uncomfortable. We'll pause and discuss how to deal with that particular issue.

Here are a couple of techniques we might find useful.

*The first is the idea of **Lines**. These are subjects we will and won't allow into the game. As in, "That crosses the line for me." If something crosses a Line for someone, we should figure out how to modify the idea or remove it from the game.*

*We can also use the second technique—which is the **Veil**. This is about how much we choose to describe of a particular event. The Veil lets us draw a curtain over a problematic moment in a number of different ways: we can cut away entirely, we can describe it less graphically or more broadly, or maybe we can decide to only show part of it.*

What The Keeper Does: An Overview

The following 30 pages detail how the Keeper facilitates a game of *Soth*. Here's the high-level overview of what that involves.

Assess and Describe Consequences

As Keeper, you aren't in competition with the players. You aren't trying to stop the cultists from summoning *Soth*—although that can easily happen if the cultists' actions raise the suspicions of the people around them.

Instead, you decide on the consequences of the cultists' actions.

I use a metaphor of 'rock-climbing' to describe the players' and the Keeper's activities while playing *Soth*:

- ⦿ The players are 'the climbers'. They're trying to figure out their cultists' best next move and dealing with sudden set-backs.
- ⦿ The Keeper is 'gravity': relentless, always present, and making sure any mistake a cultist makes has consequences.

Facilitate The Conversation By Selecting Scenes

On page 11, I described the game as a conversation where the Keeper and the players take turns contributing and describing what happens.

When the conversation focuses on a group of characters in a single location, that's called a scene.

Scene selection is the process of deciding which scenes happen next.

Everyone shares the authority for selecting scenes: players will ask for scenes with their cultists and they'll set scenes up all the time. As Keeper, you also select scenes and you have two specific areas of responsibility:

- Orchestrating sequences of scenes
- Within a scene

Orchestrating Sequences Of Scenes

The Keeper ensures attention is focused on each cultist in a way that meets the needs of the players, the demands of the story, and the interest of the group.

Use your own sense of drama or the following principles to select which cultist(s) will have the next scene:

- Who haven't you seen for a while?
- Who are you interested in right now?
- Do we need to understand how things turn out for specific characters before we can continue?

It can also be good to pause after a burst of action and summarise what's happened. Ask all the players what each of their cultists are going to do next. To decide on the best order for the next set of scenes, think about the following:

- Which cultists will have scenes together?
- Who do we have to see first before we can continue (as above)?

Within A Scene

If you want, you can share responsibility with the other players for the following aspects of facilitating a scene:

- ① Define when the scene occurs, relative to the scenes that have already happened.
- ② Decide which supporting characters are present. As Keeper, you must decide what (if anything) they want to achieve. Base this on their most recent experiences in the story and their relationships with the cultists.
- ③ Decide at what point the scene starts. Do we follow characters and play out every moment? Do we start later in the scene—in the middle of a conflict or deep conversation? (Doing this will make a game of *Soth* run more quickly.)
- ④ Make sure all players in the scene have the opportunity to contribute. Two useful questions to facilitate this are “What do you do?” and “How do you react to that?”
- ⑤ If you feel like we should get an insight into a cultist's emotional state, you can specifically ask, “What emotion do we see on your face right now?”
- ⑥ End the scene. Scenes don't always need to be fully resolved before shifting to another one. It may be best to leave the scene on a cliff-hanger or in the middle of a confrontation. This can give a player time to think of a response; it can also hold peoples' interest while we cut to other situations.

You can return to the same scene later or you can leave some ambiguity about how it resolves.

Apply The Rules

The Keeper has primary responsibility for applying *Soth's* rules. You apply them in one of two ways:

- ⦿ **Invisible actions** (below): These are the moments the cultists can't see. Most invisible actions focus on the results of what supporting characters do.
- ⦿ **Visible actions** (page 55): These are when the game focuses on the cultists: what they can see and what happens when they act.

What The Keeper Does: Invisible Actions

The Keeper has eight specific invisible tasks. I'll list them here, and explain them in more detail in the following pages.

- ⦿ Evaluate Clarity, a score that determines how difficult it is for a cultist to remain undetected
- ⦿ Evaluate Suspicion, a resource that allows the Keeper to have supporting characters investigate the cultists
- ⦿ Use Suspicion to create Investigators (and teams of Investigators)
- ⦿ Use Suspicion to investigate the cultists and put obstacles in their way
- ⦿ Think about what's happening off-screen (e.g. away from the cultists, outside their awareness)
- ⦿ Conduct an end-of-the-day review
- ⦿ Decide what Servitors (supernatural creatures summoned and commanded by the cultists) do
- ⦿ Develop a mythology about *Soth*.

Evaluate Clarity

Clarity measures how difficult it is for each cultist to pass as a normal citizen in their town. A cultist adds one point of Clarity whenever any of the following is true:

- Ⓒ If they don't act on their Compulsion at least once per day
- Ⓒ Whenever they sacrifice someone in a ritual or murder someone
- Ⓒ If they have the 'Addict' Compulsion
- Ⓒ When they gain possession of the Tome of Soth for the first time
- Ⓒ When they become the new leader of the cult
- Ⓒ When they seize the initiative in a conflict.

There's a summary of these conditions on Keeper Handout 3 (How To Run The Game).

Evaluate Suspicion

Suspicion is a resource you create by secretly evaluating whether the cultists are covering up their crimes effectively.

There are eight ways the Keeper can gain Suspicion (explained in more detail on pages 43 to 45):

- Ⓒ When a cultist commits a crime or murders someone
- Ⓒ When a cultist deceives someone or covers something up
- Ⓒ If a player gives advice to another player when their cultists would not be able to talk freely
- Ⓒ If a player fails to use the 'Mask of Sanity' rules while having a lengthy or intimate conversation with an supporting character
- Ⓒ If a player doesn't need to use the 'Mask of Sanity' rules but their cultist comes across as creepy, withdrawn, or like they're acting out-of-character
- Ⓒ If you skip forward to the next ritual
- Ⓒ If investigators (either individuals or teams) remain at-large at the end of the day.

Record Suspicion on Keeper Handout 5.

Commit A Crime or Murder Someone

When a cultist commits a crime or murders someone, ask how they do it. Describe how the victim reacts and what they do. Apply the rules on page 59 for resolving murders, and (if necessary) the rules for resolving other conflicts (page 61).

Once it's clear how the situation is resolved, choose the option (below) that most closely matches the results. Each option generates a different level of Suspicion:

- Was it a perfect crime? (0 Suspicion)
- Could someone clever figure out the crime? (+1 Suspicion)
- Was there a loose end? (+2 Suspicion)
- Was the crime obvious? (+3 Suspicion)
- Does the crime seem linked to one or more of the cultists? (+5 Suspicion)
- Was a cultist caught red-handed? (+7 Suspicion)

An example.

A cultist struggles with his step-father in their kitchen. The cultist eventually strangles him with a dish-cloth, but not before his step-father hits his head on a table and bleeds profusely. The cultist then has to quickly tidy up before leaving for church.

The Keeper evaluates how the cultist's plan was executed. It definitely wasn't a 'perfect crime'. There will be loose ends ... but it seems likely that it will be linked to the cultist. The Keeper secretly notes that this murder generated 5 Suspicion.

What Happens When Soth Appears?

If the fourth ritual is successful, Soth appears.

The cult leader guides the group through creating the game's epilogue (described on Player Handout C).

Each player whose cultist has survived to this point narrates an epilogue for their cultist. Each epilogue:

- Ⓒ takes place one year after the previous one
- Ⓒ describes the increasingly horrid state of the world
- Ⓒ describes the fate of their cultist (and, if appropriate, other people from the town)
- Ⓒ introduces one fact about Soth.

Epilogues can't determine the fate of other surviving cultists, but can incorporate previously established facts.

Narrate Epilogues From Highest to Lowest Clarity

The cultist with the highest Clarity has the first epilogue (in the case of ties, narrate a joint epilogue). Epilogues then proceed in decreasing order of Clarity, finishing with cultists who have 0 Clarity.

Ending The Game

The game ends when the cultists' situation reaches a new and final status quo. This could be when Soth is summoned or when all the cultists are dead.

If the group is interested, the game can continue after the cultists are unable (or unwilling) to summon Soth. The consequences of their actions can still play out (investigations, police pursuits, etc).

Soundtrack

Here's some of what I listened to while writing *Soth*:

Genkai-1 by Biosphere, *New Seeds* by Boards of Canada, *Akrasia* by Heroin and Your Veins, *Powerchord* by Dimmer, *Death* from the FEZ soundtrack by DisasterPeace, *Queer (F.T.F.O.I remix)* by Garbage, *Utopia Overture* and *Utopia Finale* by Crisobal Tapia De Veer, *Devil Town* by Bright Eyes, *In The House*, *In a Heartbeat* by John Murphy.

Credits & Colophon

Writing and layout by Steve Hickey

Titles in WC Roughtrad by Christophe Féray (<http://www.wcfonts.com>) (CC BY-ND 3.0)

Body in Georgia

Acknowledgements

'Lines and Veils' concepts (page 10) from *Sex and Sorcery* with permission of Ron Edwards.

'The Game is a Conversation' concept (page 12) from *Apocalypse World* with permission of D. Vincent Baker.

The term "Keeper" has been taken from the game *Call of Cthulhu*, copyright Chaosium Press.

The die-drop technique for creating a map of the town (page 82) is taken from *Vornheim: The Complete City Kit* with permission of Zak S.



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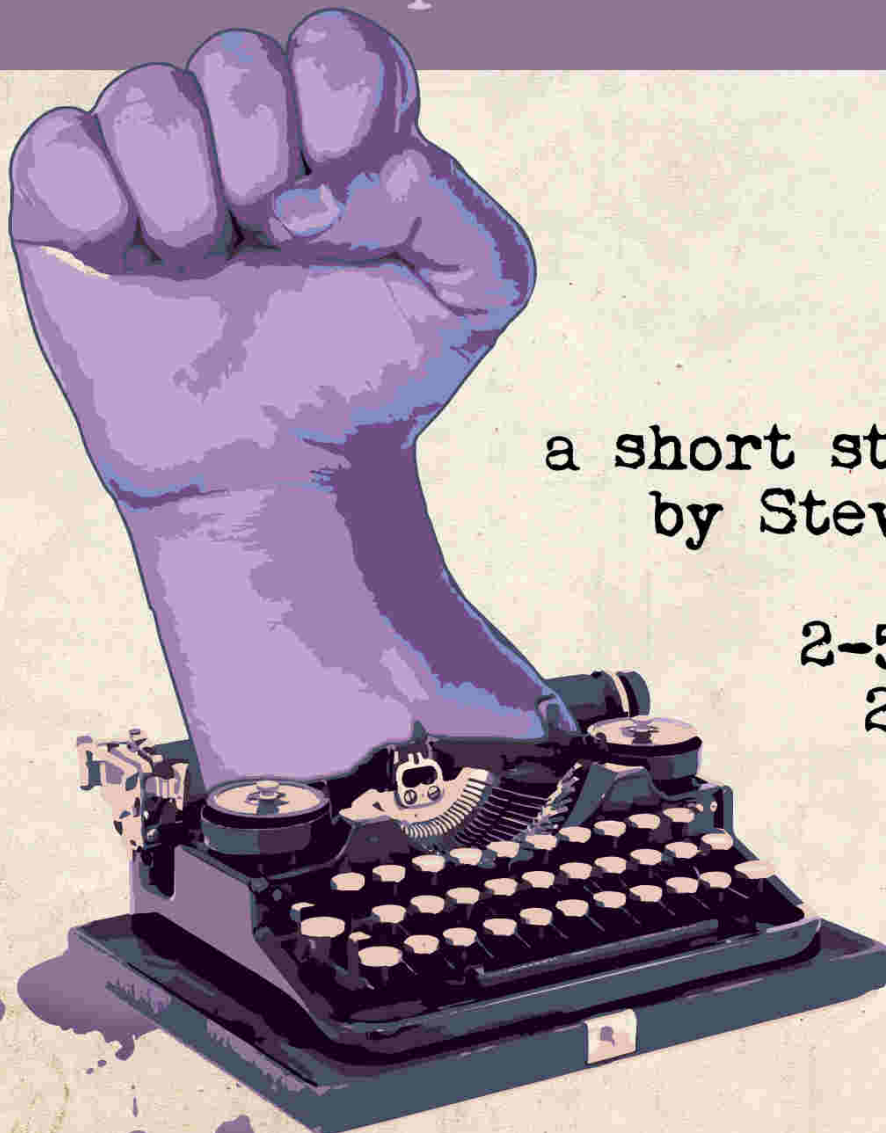
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Left Coast

Los Angeles, 1970.

A sci-fi author's novel
spills into real life.



a short story game
by Steve Hickey

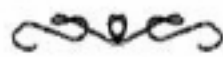
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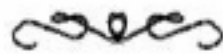
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