



## OCEAN

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### The lab rat wakes up

It's a long-standing, simple, but powerful science fiction device to impose utter alienation: a character awakens with fragmented memories at best, and he or she examines the environment only to find it ambiguous in terms of history and purpose, and full of frightening dangers. And perhaps most difficult, he or she may be part of a group of similar Survivors, as the game calls them, forced to deal with cooperation, trust, and emerging secrets.

I'm not sure about the earliest stories of this type, although I wouldn't be surprised to see them as far back as the 1910's. All you need to change is the technology. Recent popular examples include *Cube* and *Lost*, both of which illustrate the genre's riskiest feature: if you get too jazzed about "what's going on," you'll probably be disappointed. These stories aren't really about the back-story, but rather the personality clashes and social conflicts, much like a good zombie movie.

The game provides a perfect amount of starting material, both in text and in comics form: a gleaming underwater facility, glimmers of information and identity, and a lurking threat. It also identifies the Mysteries flawlessly:

- Who am I? What has been done to me and why? Who are these people and can I trust them?
- What is this place? What is it for? How can I escape? Or should I try to resolve something here?
- What are these monsters? Did they invade the place, or are they part of its purpose? Are they really trying to kill us, or are they up to something else? Do we fight them, or try to stop what they are doing, or simply try to stay safe?

### Known, established, and unknown

Play itself is the means for addressing the above-named mysteries. Certain things are known for sure, but the players establish the rest as the characters struggle to survive and investigate. So first, the characters discover that there are crucial mysteries they must investigate, and then they must discover their options once enough is known about the dangers they face.

The players themselves are not really seeking in the same way the characters are; instead, they collectively provide the answers. The intrinsic problem is avoiding circular logic, having one's guy seek question X and providing the pre-planned answer for him. Making this dynamic work is left entirely

unplanned, although not unstructured, and that's probably the crucial distinction to grasp in order to see what the game can offer.

The transition between characters' first encounter with the mysteries – which typically manifests as some kind of immediate danger – and understanding the mystery's causes shouldn't be abrupt, because the game's primary mechanisms rely on hovering in it for a while. Therefore the art of developing information from what is already known is the key, so that what started as frightening curveballs becomes, instead, a coherent bank of data which seems inevitable in retrospect.

## System: story and moments

### *Emergent, soft-touch system*

There isn't a lot of GMing for the game, in terms of one person setting the stage and conflicts for everyone else, but conversely, there is a whole lot of imposing adversity for characters into play, in the form of Obstacles. Imposing Obstacles is not mandated, but any person can impose them upon his or her own character as well as upon others, at any time. Doing it, though, requires a clear understanding of why; nothing kills this game faster than hyena-like savagery toward one another as players.

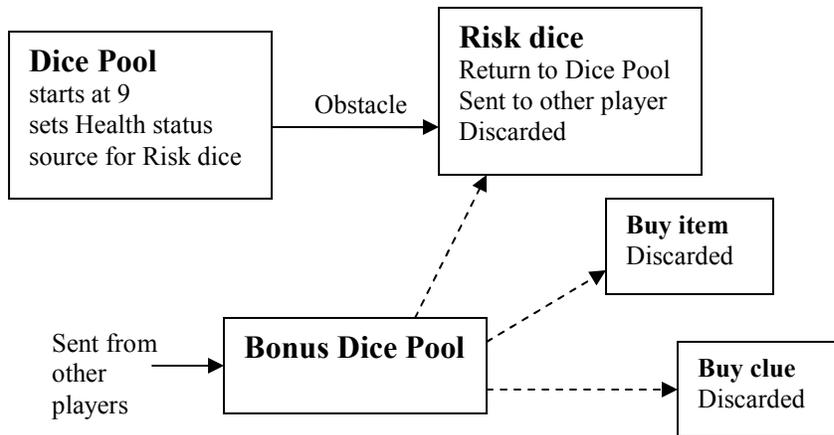
Instead, shared aesthetic and social expectations are absolutely required to play Ocean at all. It cannot be treated as a player-centric experience of solving a puzzle and surviving threats. Approached as problem-solving, it shuts down because one cannot arrive at a real strategy. You can't beat the scenario or beat the other people at the table. Such a player may well decide in frustration that the best solution is simply to kill everyone, his or her own character included.

The game procedures exist for purposes of enriching the imagined situation and ongoing fiction, rather than beating it in any fashion. This is no small task: it's what the authors of shows like *Lost* and *The X-Files* so often fail to do, i.e., provide *enough* of a back-story ("the answer") to be actually worth all the hype and tension that has come to surround it, but which serves as a motor for resolution of the personal conflicts that have emerged. Therefore acquiring answers to the Questions provides revelations and triumphs, or their converse, for the characters, but in mechanics terms, among the players, they are stepping stones and pacing devices toward this more challenging end.

The fun of the game lies in becoming genuinely interested in the characters as people, and developing sympathy for them. My main advice for fostering this at the table is, one can't get too hung up on the initial trust statements, in terms of either depth of feeling or longevity. If each character fanatically loves one of the others to death and despises another, and if that's fixed in stone, then the chance to grow to know and like any of them is sharply diminished. It's a good idea to treat that particular part of character creation as a first impression, with a full range for development after that point.

### *Dice dynamics*

Play begins with a single dice pool for each player, which effectively if unpredictably decreases as the character continues to cope with obstacles, which requires allocating dice from that pool. These dice variably return to the pool, are discarded, or most importantly, are sent to one of two other players (different per player) to form a secondary dice pool. This one may be spent against obstacles as well, but also to gain items for increased character effectiveness (including recovering from damage), and to add information to illuminate the mysteries.



Therefore the overall number of dice in the game gradually decreases throughout play. Per character, the basic dice dynamic concerns the decrease and possible disappearance of the first pool, and the ongoing growth of and expenditure from the second, both deeply tied into the appearance of obstacles during play as well as into the various conditions of finishing the game.

Conceivably, play might proceed to the point in which the original pools are gone, and everyone is working with bonus dice pools which then steadily shrink. If that occurs, then a genuine tension could emerge regarding whether the Mysteries can be solved at all.

### ***Character death***

It's wide-open: basically, anyone can kill player-characters almost at will. More than any other issue, the group's collective ability to make this a feature is the litmus test for whether this is a game for them. Nowhere else does the light touch count, such that bleating "Danger! Roll the dice!" is probably the single least constructive thing one could say – whereas consider instead: "So that's why the robot is trying to kill you ... And you've done it again? I think it's time for the robot to show up just in time to see that."

## **Endings and Agenda**

The text's only weakness is unfortunately central: it breaks down concerning how play ends. There are two variables: solving the mysteries, which is an all-group issue, vs. escaping to safety, which is an individual-character issue, as well as frequently referring to either as "winning," without explaining how play might end without winning. It's not merely vague, but contradictory in more than one direction. Talking with Jake only partly resolved the problem for me.

In order to play, I arrived at my own interpretation which borders on re-writing certain passages of the game. I've removed the stated but unmanageable claim that the goal of play is to solve the three Mysteries, re-interpreting or even re-designing that part of play to be an emergent property. I've also removed all mention of winning, which as far as I can tell simply means successfully having fun with the game.

1. Play ends when every character has met his or her fate, or if desired, when enough of them have done so for the group's satisfaction. Fates include death or escape to safety, as follows:

- Death is an unambiguous mechanics outcome, and although the character has died, the player remains actively participating in the game.

- Escape to safety is identified in play itself, effectively a permissions issue. When a character has overcome an obstacle, or is presented with an obstacle, which seems sufficient to the group consensus for true escape, then it is. (Also, escape to safety should not be confused with physical movement out of the immediate station environs or indeed with any other particular shift in location.)

2. Mysteries may be solved along the way. It may seem as if this were the goal of play, in general. Most of play focuses on the Clues prior to attempts to escape, and those Clues must be bought with bonus dice, which only accrue through characters' struggling along, i.e., not escaping. However, play may reach its satisfactory endpoint, as described above, without solving one or more Mysteries.