



OCEAN

Jake Richmond,
Atarashi Games

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 mysteries

Known for sure
Key role of Trust

Established fairly quickly
Names

The Mysteries

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:

- 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. Default play focuses on the Clues prior to attempts to escape, especially since clues to the mysteries must be bought with bonus dice, which only accrue through characters' struggling along, i.e., not escaped. However:

- Play may reach its satisfactory endpoint, as described above, without solving one or more mysteries.

Making it work

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.

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 a back-story ("the answer") which is actually worth all the hype and tension that has come to surround it. Resolutions provide revelations and triumphs, or their converse, for the characters, but in mechanics terms, among the players, they are stepping stones and pacing devices.

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.