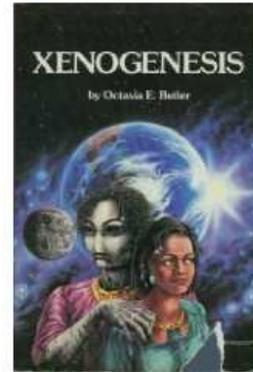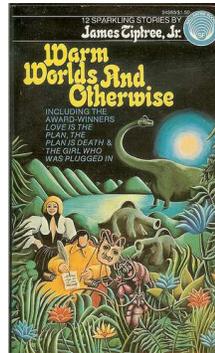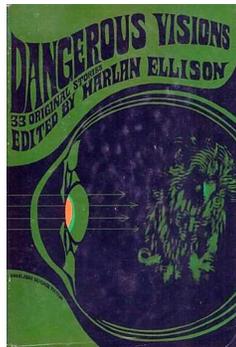# SIGN IN STRANGER
Emily Care Boss, Black and Green Games

Genre

This is a specific sort of late 1960s, 1970s science fiction, groovy but also disturbing, right at the political crux of gender roles and sexual identity, also at a time when pop culture was truly popular but not yet commodified into advertising-driven categories.

One common topic concerned encountering an alien culture in some kind of adverse or touchy context. Contact with the Other ultimately means transforming oneself, and passively critiquing formerly-held values and even identity. The stories are typically more oriented toward personal deconstruction and transformation than toward solving some logistical problem or battling some enemy, although those elements may be present as priorities for the characters.

They would make terrible movies. There is little catharsis or moments of truth; they don't even stand up well as polemic because the closing outcomes are highly personal for the main characters and presented as such. Whatever environmental or situational crisis is at hand isn't resolved. The stories don't really seem to end.

Sign in Stranger touches them dead center. From the text:
The point of this game is to give you all a long, sweet chance to see what's really in the inside of a person, peoples and a place. To explore the small things that make it difficult and awesome and rewarding to become part of a new place and culture. To learn to respect some of the obstacles people deal with, though in a fantastic setting with characters that are truly empowered to do what they will – over time, with application and determination.

Immediate setting

Humanity came into contact with interstellar culture in the worst way: a crash-landed Xsian space ship infected Montreal with alien diseases and required instant cauterization by the Xsian authorities, meaning annihilating the city. Human efforts to repel the "attackers" failed completely. The Xsians then invited humanity to join the Alliance, part of which entailed taking the Cure, meaning universal immunization but also an unpredictable and scary transformation. Most of Earth's people said "no."

Our characters are the exceptions: people who agree to take the Cure and become colonists … somewhere. They are somewhat subject both to the Terran Authority and also to the general Xsian "foreign service," but are mostly on their own on an alien world.

Prep

1. Generate three Word pools, with each player contributing five nouns, five verbs, and five adjectives. (These are replenished at the start of each session.)
2. Individually create worlds and aliens; do not share information at this step except for the names of the aliens.
3. Individually create Colonists and list all others' names on each sheet.
4. Collectively choose one of the worlds, add other players' aliens to some extent, and make its Color Table. (*note: choose between two conflicting sets of instructions for the Table*)
5. Proceed to opening play, with the Colonists meeting the Terran Authority Liaison, and establish the first Questions; make Planetfall.

These establish certain degrees of tension, confusion, and open-ended potential. But crucially, no one at the table has any idea of how anything is going to go. Note also that the rules do not specify *when* any of the canonical events occur, or what Earth is like at that time.

Characters

Everyone plays a Colonist, and anyone can acquire any number of other characters as rules imply or instruct that characters are added.

- Colonists receive Lunar Trainings, which are effectively character classes to set what Questions they investigate, and they have personal Goals. Goals are extremely unconstructed in play; they may be brought in, sought, escalated, or abandoned as people see fit. Each Colonist is continually transformed in terms of Resources, Troubles, Relationships, Injury, and Assimilation.
- Plot characters by definition introduce and keep adding adversity. The main examples are the Terran Authority Liaison, the Alien Employer, and the Xsian ambassador. These and other Plot characters may provide explanations for World Elements and provide help once per session, but may cause more trouble than they solve.
- Supporting characters can use the help mechanics once per session, and they can provide resolving or helpful explanations for World elements three times per session.

Alien characters also come with a Word of their own just to make things interesting. The Colony is itself sort of a character, with a sheet of its own and issues concerning Resources and Troubles.

System

No one person acts as central authority, but a certain in-fiction structural organization should arise depending on which characters get assigned to which players. A person with more Plot characters, for instance, becomes a little more GM-like. Exactly how this gets set up is left to play itself including people's personal inclinations.

Open improv, list-based improv, and fixed options are all organized pretty specifically at different points of play. A scene begins with a purposeful designation, but then proceeds without much structure until the active player feels like rolling.

As far as I can tell, the rolls serve to organize relatively free dialogue and to specify categories of added content, i.e., what must happen as opposed to resolving current conflicts. I'm not entirely certain that the system facilitates a genuine SIS, and it may border on roll-a-result story-boarding, but on the other hand, I have great respect for this topic of science fiction, as well as for Emily's personal grasp on it. So I'm hoping for an experience which brings that content (and its creation) right up to the forefront in a way which, at this point, isn't immediately clear.

Word pools and World Elements
We draw frequently from three Word pools – nouns, verbs, and adjectives – to add content to play. Once in action, they're called World Elements.

World Elements are not supposed to be literally the Words. From the text:
- Any explanation about what the things observed mean or how they function are purely theoretic. No definite meaning can be ascribed until a successful Investigation roll is made.
- When describing what is observed, DO NOT use the word itself. Instead, describe around the word, using it as a creative springboard and inspiration for what the colonists see.

  …

  In response to the planetologist's question: What does the landscape look like? The Noun "spaghetti" is drawn and hidden. The Description: "You see in front of you many sloping lines across the land. Sloping up and down, they sometimes curve around one another, sometimes disappear beneath others." [My note: the Color table plays its role here too; the above Description's effect would vary greatly depending on whether it's "gun-metal grey" or "slime green."]

In other words, if you draw "kangaroo," it doesn't mean a kangaroo enters the fiction. Instead, introduce anything of or about kangaroos as you see it, in terms of the perceptions of the affected character, regarding what was asked. The effect is intended to be open-ended and has its playful side, but aiming for parody or some kind of ironic or even specific incongruity isn't what the system is designed to do.

Events
A scene is specified to be a certain type, and you place one or more d6, sometimes other die sizes, into each of the categories for that type. The dice are rolled and each category is rated at its highest value. Some dice are Free, meaning you place them after rolling.

Scene type	Starter	Elements	Categories	Results	Resources
Investigation (indiv or mission)	Question (often TA Liason)	Noun *or* Adjective/ Verb	R: investigation, panic O: harm, assimilation, wild card	Trouble*, Surprise*, Fact, Injury, Change	Colonist (3) Colony (5)
Wild Card Exploration	Explore w/out Question	Noun	R: wild card, panic O: harm, assimilation	Trouble*, Surprise*, Fact, Injury, Change	None
Action	Goal	Noun *or* Adjective/ Verb	R: action, panic O: harm, assimilation, wild card	Enemy, Friend, Injury, Trouble*, Surprise*, Fact, Change	None
Flashback	Any	none	n/a	n/a	None
Group	Start of session (all) or later in session	none	n/a	n/a	None

R means required, O means optional or only required under certain circumstances.

Flashbacks are also used as subroutines in certain scenes. A Traumatic Flashback refreshes a character's dice when he or she is Panicked. A Prelude Flashback may generate a bonus die for an Action. Flashbacks may also arise as an in-scene feature of Group scenes.

* Indicates that a new World Element is added to play, usually a Noun.

A note on conflicts
Conflict is inherent to the resolution system and to the means for playing NPCs. You roll when fictional conflict is incontrovertibly present, it should arise from these techniques without strain. I think two principles will make it successful. (1) Don't force it. (2) Once it's under way, be fearless with its content, aiming at whatever psychological "hinge" points you can perceive for the involved player and/or character.

Immediate outcomes
- Facts may emerge when a Question is investigated. They are simply answers ("explanations"), and as such they generate Resources. Facts also come out through other encounters, but they don't make Resources in that context.
- Surprises are new World elements, usually Verbs, which crop up and provide raw material for later Facts and explanations.
- Troubles are expressed by drawing a new World Element and attaching a problematic Fact to it, either for a single colonist or the colony as a whole. They may also be incorporated into Plot Characters' sheets. Troubles follow a track which ultimately brings them to crisis points, forcing Action scenes.
- Panic sucks. It means your colonist has to roll d4s instead of d6s, and it doesn't go away until you have a Traumatic Flashback.
- Injury means your colonist has to discard the high die of a roll, replacing it with 1 if necessary. Cumulative injuries are possible and must be healed separately. Three injuries means incapacitation; four means death at the player's option. You can ward off the effects of Injury by sacrificing Resources, and a doctor can heal them.
- The Change may be actively sought in the course of Investigations or Actions, or you might receive a Change Injury, which means you include Wild Card results in later rolls.

Emergent outcomes
- Resources are added with successful Investigations, for individual colonists and then for the colony. They can be spent to ward off the effects of injury. Exact Resources amounts and the pressure they exert on play are left to the group's taste, but the Colony and Colonist sheets do include finite limits. New Resources are designated limited or infinite, probably following the sheet model. The negative consequences of no Resources left to play as well, aside from characters being more vulnerable to injury.
- Connections arise from Action scenes, specifically those which resolve Troubles. They're usually but not limited to alien friends, and they result in deeper and stronger ties to the new world, reflected in much better dice for helping.
- Assimilation is arguably the most thematic part of play, including whether your colonist doesn't even try or tries and fails. One's degree of assimilation affects the dice quite a bit, and the content of the Change at whatever level is a major component of narration and imagery.
- Ultimately, characters' relationships to the aliens, to the Terran Authority, and to themselves undergo massive reconstruction, in the context of the Colony's success or even survival.

Relationships, Bonuses, and Helping
Relationships among Colonists are identified through the events of play, and defined as Supporting or Stressful, which I think can also change via further events. You can also form Relationships with Aliens through Action scenes. Stressful Relationships may be exacerbated into Antagonistic ones, which has certain rules effects.

You gain a d10 in Investigation if your Lunar Training is relevant, which is usually the case when Questions are involved. You also get a d8 in a relevant category if an explained World Element and your Profession are involved (this seems a little clunky).

Helping (Investigations, Actions) is complex, because what die gets contributed, and to what category, depends on who is helping: human or not, with or without relationship, what kind of relationship, panicked or not, et cetera. The main point, though, is that the Helping character is placed at risk.

A note on imagery

One thing that really impresses me is that the actual imagined material is so wide-open at the start. Consider the images: not only the features of the alien, but the implications of artistic style, cultural conventions, interactions, and more. None of that is specified by the rules, nor even by the colors or the Word Elements. It will only be us, as we go along.

il001_001 fotosearch.com