

Projects

A Manual of Ambition

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this release of this work is dedicated to

Cheryl & Joseph Couvillion

Foreword

This work was written, some years back, as a contribution to Mr. Soles' and Ms. Vega's **Unhallowed Metropolis**, and companion to the Corruption rules for the same.

Regrettably it was not able to see print therein.

You will find, of course, some remnants of its origin remain. Again and again its attention turns towards the hungry dead, where another generic product might speak instead of magic swords and orcs. The three real corruptions, unless I am mistaken, still evoke something of shared origins—

And as with **Unhallowed Metropolis**, this work assumes an all-powerful GM, whose role in the game is to shepherd the players through experience and delight in their misfortunes (while still somehow maintaining a fairness and a distance that allows them triumph in their struggles.)

Yet, for the reason that I am not Mr. Soles and I am not Ms. Vega, I think you will find this work is its own.

It is an investigation of a protocol for player-authored scientific and magical research and other large-scale practices in a gothic horror setting—a capsystem, more or less, for fitting stories like Dr. Frankenstein's into an RPG.

But! You will say, an RPG may already do this!

And of course it can.

So let me revise my statement.

These rules are a mechanism for analytically dissecting vague notions on how to tackle a large and complex project and finding within those notions the motivational organs that, galvanically stimulated, may produce the cool scenes your favored RPG can already produce for somewhat less vague ideas.

How to extract these systems from the colloidal substance of gothic horror is a matter I have yet to examine.

This is release 1 of this material; should my readers spot sufficient errors or issues, there may be a second.

Projects

A Manual of Ambition

Projects unfetter your character's ambitions. Use Projects to accomplish great feats of investigation, innovation, and effort – from personal development to alchemical research, from building corporate empires to destroying criminal empires.

You will use Projects to transform player intentions into stories about the scientific, technical, and personal achievements of the characters.

Some example Projects include the following –

- ✚ Training as a priest or exorcist.
- ✚ Seeking a cure for cancer.
- ✚ Reclaiming a city from demons or the undead.
- ✚ Coming to terms with grief.
- ✚ Suppressing an insurgency.
- ✚ Solving a murder – not so much the short-story kind of murder as the novel-length mystery sort.

This system is specifically designed for the genre of **Sin**. It's for telling stories in a world where the fundamental impulse of the world is corrupt or towards corruption. It's a particular kind of horror, where the world and the people in it are ultimately on some level unsalvageable—where the very things that are temporally greatest about humanity and its fellow-walkers on the earth are also the most damnable. This is a subgenre or interpretation of Gothic and Christian horror, and it is very bleak and in some ways immoral of itself. The stories created by Projects often feature the degeneration of the characters' moral and ethical stature and the spread of the taint of death through all their works. If this does not fit the genre of your game, then you'll need to adapt this system further or counterweight it in some fashion.

Corruption

This system relies on a substrate of Corruption rules. Three modes of Corruption exist, each a Trait ranging from 0 to 5; these serve as an intermediary between the Projects system and your game of choice. You'll want to give these rules specific to your system, but a summary follows:

Physical Corruption

This is the descent into infirmity and death, manifest as an obsession with things the character cannot do, cannot be, and cannot have. Translate this into your system as

- ✚ a motivational factor that makes it increasingly difficult for a character to be wise about their limitations; paired with
- ✚ a power that sometimes fulfills even unreasonable hopes.

The default, lenient mode is:

- ✚ give the character some physical flaw, such as a game leg, blindness, repulsive features, cancer, humanity, mortality, or feline traits;
- ✚ stipulate that the character cannot accept this flaw;
- ✚ when a character behaves rationally and uses caution and others' help to mitigate or avoid facing their flaw, roll 1d6; if it's under the character's Physical Corruption, their pride is stung.
- ✚ when a character's physical flaw might get in their way, roll 1d6; if it's over the character's Physical Corruption, the player may ignore the flaw, typically giving a short monologue on either the topic of "mind over body" or "how damned and doomed am I! But yet this once, I am not failing . . ."

Physical corruption may be used for any character defined by *a weakness or destiny that they cannot escape*. If the character has a crippling physical flaw that they don't see as a weakness, it's probably better ignored or, if you must cast it as corruption, handled as a form of intellectual corruption (that is, the madness that comes of living in a world that is mad.)

"Weaknesses" like mortality and humanity can be viewed two ways. By default, use a psychological lens: to overcome humanity is not "to fly" but "to walk among elves and dragons, or to live in nature, or to face gods, without crawling in shame." To overcome mortality is to overcome some inbuilt death and have time to complete your work, not the ability to not die when stabbed. For a weirder game, you can eliminate this rule and view such flaws and the ability to overcome them as literally as a game leg.

Emotional Corruption

This is the erosive loss of self-control in the face of human or supernatural urges. This is the form of corruption that includes actual moral failings; it also

governs malign insanity, possession, and mental influence of an alien, magical, or demonic character. Translate this into your system as:

- ✚ an agreement between player and GM that the character struggles with their sickness and may sometimes do bad things off camera; paired with
- ✚ a motivational factor causing the character to obsess over this failing.

The default, lenient mode is:

- ✚ give the character some unwanted behavior pattern, such as a drug habit, murder and other monstrous deviancy, dependency, compassion and generosity or heroism (e.g. for a demon), gambling, arrogance, boasting, stealing, self-mutilation, literary criticism, running with animals in the wild, or marrying strangers;
- ✚ stipulate that the character justifies this to themselves at the time, but is horrified after;
- ✚ when a character wishes to conceal their problem, recover from the consequences, or more generally compartmentalize it, they may roll 1d6. If the total is under their emotional corruption, the character earns the full support of grace and fortune.
- ✚ when a character wants to admit to the problem, fight it, or seek help, roll 1d6. They must roll over their emotional corruption or shame makes this very hard.
- ✚ when a character has free time between important dramatic scenes, roll a 1d6. If it's under their emotional corruption, they have a compelling opportunity to indulge off-camera in some fashion and spend the early part of the next scene obsessed either with guilt or with a seething combination of shame, self-congratulation, and frustration at the lost opportunity.

Emotional corruption may be used for any character defined by *a situation, interaction, or behavior they cannot escape*. Note that while tormented monsters have emotional corruption, cold-blooded sociopaths are probably better understood as physically or intellectually corrupt.

Madness (Intellectual Corruption)

This is the corruption of the higher faculties deriving from exposure to forbidden truths and mad theories. The regulatory power of the superego, evolved and adapted for a person living in a compassionate, virtuous, simple, and socially rich world, becomes a burning beacon of madness when a

character understands that the world is broken and the theories of acceptable virtue do not apply. Translate this into your system as:

- ✚ a scourge of forbidden knowledge and insight that imposes on the character a moral obligation to act; paired with
- ✚ an underlying hopelessness that may lead to tragedy even if the character takes up this burden.

The default, lenient mode is:

- ✚ give the character some mad insight—a thing they see that others do not;
- ✚ stipulate that this is at least partially correct;
- ✚ stipulate that it may motivate and drive the character to action;
- ✚ when the GM dangles this motivation before the character, roll 1d6. If this is over the character's Madness, then the situation is salvageable—something good may definitely be achieved. If it is under that Madness there are no guarantees;
- ✚ when you wish to draw on your Madness to achieve something extraordinary, roll 1d6. If it is under your Madness, this may be possible.

Madness may be used for any character defined by *a truth they cannot deny or repudiate*.

A mad insight need not be overtly supernatural. It covers Mythos knowledge and mad science, but also ideological possession (any -ism or religion taken to an extreme). It is also Madness to want a normal life if there is some factor in your life that you cannot reconcile with the world and society—whether that means being a Christian in Stalin's USSR or pre-Christian Rome, a homosexual in modern Saudi Arabia, or a magician who wishes to refuse the call of magic. Naturally, when your Madness is "to seek a normal life," the extraordinary accomplishments that one may draw on Madness to achieve are also normal—to make an emotional connection with someone; to help others; to find some sort of peace and happiness.

The Reclamation of Worcester

The Ipswich Game

An Example Project

The GM, Victor, is running a short-term game for two players – Mary and Alex.

Victor wants to run a short term (four-session) game, principally improvised, with a fair amount of combat. He wants a tight story but recognizes that improvisation leads to some meandering. He'd prefer compelling realistic reasons for each combat, but he's more than happy to make transparent excuses for a fight.

The Imperium spanned a thousand worlds. It claimed the universe for man.

But throughout it lay the void of space—

So terrible! So cold!

And Hell, as even children know, is ice.

One by one the worlds were lost to man.

It is understood among the eschatypes, soliloquands, and scholars that humanity committed some great and intimate sin. That God or a god came among its cities, perhaps, and was jeered at; unrecognized; castigated and cast out. That demons came, and they were welcomed.

The red-faced and shouting Diemetrices make contention that humanity was, instead, betrayed.

Saints of shadow were born in the great void.

They descended on the worlds, wearing their great black wings. They snuffed the lights of the human citadels. They brought the cold.

One by one the lights of the human empire went out.

A great stillness fell; a great darkness; and if you were to look in upon the worlds just then, you might be minded to believe humanity was dead.

Then lo!

A fire kindles.

From Caprica's ruins the Empire of Ipswich rises, with its hermaphroditic bastard on its throne. S/he secures her world from darkness, some say by sorcery. S/he summons up the Sacred Fire, to carry off our dead to warmer realms, and to cleanse the taint of shadow from our veins. She sends forth missions to the thousand worlds—to take them back for humanity and to seize their sacred relics from the dark.

Mary decides she wants to play Lt. Cmdr. Chrysoula Tzavel: an officer in the Ipswich military, sent to lost Earth to claim the sacred artifacts of Worcester and establish there a forward base for the later settlement by Ipswich, God, and Man.

This seems like a pretty good premise for a game, but also a difficult one to realize properly in play.

Victor says to himself:

I want her command decisions to mean something — but I don't know anything about the military, and neither does Mary. How am I going to run this?

Alex is playing Martel Kagin. He's a scientist-magician attached to Ipswich's navy. He's researching an experimental drug for making "extra-human" soldiers—blessed or exalted beyond humanity by an adaptation of the Sacred Fire that lights a "contained conflagration" in their flesh.

Victor says to himself:

I want to tell a story of Martel Kagin's mad science, but I want it to be Alex's story. Problem: the bastard plays his cards close to the vest, talks in mystic babble, and gets upset when you don't get what he's talking about. How am I going to run a game for him at all?

Victor solves these problems by creating two Projects — **The Reclamation of Worcester** and **The Refinement of the Fire**.

We're going to introduce the Project rules with a detailed study of The Reclamation of Worcester, including occasional glimpses of what Victor and Mary are thinking. We're also going to look in on The Drug, occasionally, but principally from the outside. That's so that you can get an impression of what Projects look like to the PCs who aren't directly involved.

Our Lt. Cmdr. Prepares for her Journey

The Ipswich Game

Here's how something like the Reclamation of Worcester might start.

The game opens.

Victor gives a scary opening monologue and then turns the floor over to Mary.

She doesn't have much investment in the situation yet, so she opens with a barrage of *reckless approaches*:

- ✚ She requisitions the necessary men and equipment.
- ✚ She has her cartographer draw up a star chart.
- ✚ She starts planning the route and the defenses on the march and how to establish a beachhead once they get there.

Approaches

Understanding the Example

In each stage of a Project, characters employ a set of *approaches* – things that let them make progress towards their ultimate goals.

Thus in one stage of an alchemical Project a character may rely on Paracelsus' principles. In another stage they might turn to Sophic Hydroliths instead. Early on they might rely on experimentation on rats to develop their ideas; later, when they have more funds, experimentation on corpses might prove superior!

Approaches begin with intentions – the conception of that approach that the player has.

They proceed by way of "*the Skeptic's Game*" – wherein the GM prompts the player to decide how recklessly or fearfully to pursue this intention.

Finally they bloom into actions. These use the normal mechanisms for play – detailed scenes, loose discussion of what happens, or a simple player-GM agreement that something has happened.

Recklessness

Understanding the Example

At every step of a Project players will choose between three basic strategies –

Reckless. The character dives headfirst into action, no matter what the consequences.

Skeptical. The character enacts their intention with their eyes open to the implications.

Fearful. The character expects foul hidden consequences and embarks only trepidaciously on their path.

The path a player chooses influences how quickly the Project advances. The reckless and skeptical paths move the story more quickly towards the fruits of the character's efforts. The skeptical and fearful paths allow the player to get more information from the GM before proceeding.

Here Mary is choosing recklessness – she doesn't want information from Victor about her options, she wants *things to happen*. Now.

Captain du Morge

The Ipswich Game

Victor opens the first *Stage* of Mary's Project. He calls it "Preparation" and he writes on the Project sheet that it has 3 PXP – three *Project Experience Points*. We'll talk about what Stages and PXP mean shortly.

Then Victor and Mary explore the consequences of her very first approach: requisitioning men and materiel.

Approach: Requisition Men and Materiel

The GM wasn't figuring that Lt. Cmdr. Chrysoula Tzavel needed to formally arrange for personnel and supplies – Victor imagined that was the kind of thing some higher-ranked officer would provide. So the most interesting interpretation of her headlong rush into recklessness is that the good lieutenant commander doesn't think that what someone would assign to her is adequate – she needs things to *her* specifications.

The way reckless approaches work is that the GM has a free hand. There's no need to *ask* Mary if she really meant to do that – it's what Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel does, and if it's not appropriate to the world, it's because Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel isn't

quite at home in the world. Victor can handle this in whatever fashion interests him the most.

So Victor creates Captain du Morge, a cranky old man who was *trying* to strand Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel with inadequate forces.

This kicks off an opening scene between du Morge and Tzavel where she has to stand up for her “absurdly excessive” requirements or stand down – either way, introducing a certain amount of tension with the forces back home.

The confrontation is something of a draw – du Morge succeeds at intimidating Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel into promising great things with less than she wanted but gives her more troops and supplies than he’d prefer to assign. The GM makes a mental note that while du Morge isn’t necessarily anything more than a bastard, he might actually be evil. Either way, even if he never shows up again, he’s a thematically key villain of the story. The GM opens up a new Stage, *Wrestling with HQ*.

A simple request made recklessly has become a lot more good and a lot more bad than the Lt. Cmdr. could have bargained for.

Project Stages

Understanding the Example

Characters make progress on a Project in a series of *Stages*.

Stages are born in ice or in fire – that is, from ice, the methodical application of effort, or from fire, the shocking events that push your story forward. Each Stage represents a new chapter of the ongoing story, a new phase of an operation, or a new heading in the characters' final Project report.

A Stage, in short, is the part where something new and different happens.

Every Project starts with one Stage. In this case, that's *Preparation*. But Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel has already opened another Stage of the Project – her confrontation with Captain du Morge was a shocking event that pushed the story forward, so it created a new Stage, *Wrestling with HQ*.

PXP

Understanding the Example

Projects advance by way of PXP – Project Experience Points. These measure how much cumulative progress the character has earned towards their ultimate goals.

In the Stages of a Project where nothing actually gets *done* but the characters still entertain the GM or lay important groundwork, the Project accumulates PXP. In the Stages where things happen and the characters achieve measurable and meaningful results, the GM spends the Project's PXP.

Ultimately, PXP are there to motivate the players to put their soul into the Project even when they won't see any immediate or direct results.

The Danger of the Route

The Ipswich Game

Mary's second reckless approach is ordering and studying the map of the route.

Approach: Study the Route

Studying the route is pretty much exactly the kind of thing the GM thinks our Lt. Cmdr. should be doing, so Mary's recklessness doesn't work against her at all.

The big thing about this approach is that it gives the GM a chance to talk up the dangers of the route and the wilds between stars to cue the players for interesting and exciting play along the way—

For there are the cold-born and shadow-taken, there, in the emptiness between the worlds. They are raiders, monsters, human in their lineage but caring nothing for the cold. They prowl the stars like hungry wolves, seeking human warmth but fearing the brightness of proximity to a sun. They make love to the corpses from the ships they kill. People say that if you spend too long in the dark, or under the gaze of the saints of void, that you will lose your heat, it will drain from you, and you will find a ship and make your way to join them, in the silence, cold, and dark.

Victor observes, in a private comment to the audience:

Foreshadowing makes danger more interesting for the players, since it bolsters both their sense of fairness and their suspension of disbelief when that danger manifests.

The first stage of this Project is complete. Mary's paid 15 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears into the Stage, with 5 more rolling over into the next. Victor awards her 3 PXP +1 PXP for entertaining him. Then he opens a new Stage, *Getting Underway*.

Blood, Sweat, and Tears

Understanding the Example

Into every approach the player invests a certain amount of passion. This is recorded in the form of Blood, Sweat, and Tears –

- The player tests the waters but then *abandons* their intention (2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears).
- The player is fearful, but the character still acts on their intention (3 BST).
- The player is skeptical, but the character still acts on their intention (5 BST).
- The player follows the reckless path and the character leaps into action (10 BST).

You have to pay each Stage its due in Blood, Sweat, and Tears before you can call it "done." The magic number here is 15 – it's 15 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears that Mary needs to pay to finish up a Stage.

Finishing a Stage usually creates a new Stage – which new Stage, of course, requires its own due in Blood, Sweat, and Tears.

Sometimes, if things have gone poorly, completing a Stage leads to a dead end; no new Stage begins.

The Projects rules encourage a certain measure of procrastination. You don't *have* to finish out a Stage before moving on to another. Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel could have dropped Preparation entirely and focused entirely on *Wrestling with HQ* –

But sooner or later, she'd have to pay Blood, Sweat, and Tears to the *Preparation* Stage, or risk stalling out on the Reclamation of Worcester.

Initial and Final PXP

Understanding the Example

When the GM creates a Project Stage, it has 3-6 initial PXP. This is the raw potential that that Stage has to move the story along. If the Stage was really fun to play out, though, the player can earn up to 4 extra PXP.

You can think of this PXP as an indicator of how important that Stage is to the overall story. The initial PXP measure how important the GM *expects* the Stage

to be when creating it; the final PXP measure how pleased the GM *actually* is when it ends.

Getting Underway

The Ipswich Game

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel has completed *Preparation* and opened two new Stages — *Getting Underway* and *Wrestling with HQ*. She leaves *Wrestling with HQ* alone for now and rolls over the 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears from *Preparation* into *Getting Underway*.

Approach: Plan Logistics, Defenses, Etc. for the Journey

Planning defensive formations and such for the journey is another example of the kind of thing that the GM thinks Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel should be doing. But it's also the second time that the Lt. Cmdr. has shown an intention to stare at maps and talk to her advisors — and, in general, when you do the same thing twice during a Project you're supposed to escalate in *some* fashion. Going by the rules for *New Ideas* on ppg. 76-77, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel can't treat this as a new approach unless she develops an unhealthy obsession with the matter.

Victor doesn't just declare that our Lt. Cmdr. develops an unhealthy obsession, though. Even though she's being reckless, he pushes the matter back on Mary and suggests that if she wants to do this as a Project approach she should figure out what Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is obsessing about.

Here's why.

Victor can control what NPCs do. But he's not terribly interested in the dramatic bite of some random NPCs thinking that Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is obsessive. She's a military commander managing the reclamation of Worcester. Having people think she micromanages just doesn't add much to the story. Similarly, he can push Mary to play Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel as a "micromanager who obsesses over maps and routes," but he doesn't have a very interesting vision of what that would be like, and so that's like ordering a player to bore you.

In short the only thing Victor would find cool or interesting about "studying the route" branching out into obsession is *Mary* finding a cool way to play a more obsessed character. And that's the one thing he can't do on his own.

So he pushes it back onto her to get her buy-in.

There are two good stories looming here. One is the story of an officer who is just way too involved. That way lays Emotional Corruption. The second is the

story of an officer obsessed with the void between the worlds, potentially on the path to weird Intellectual Corruption.

The player bites on the first story. She agrees that Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is totally obsessed with getting things right so she can protect her men from the endless dark. Victor pushes a bit harder, suggesting that if this is the beginnings of Emotional Corruption, that might increase the PXP for the stage. Mary's okay with that.

Mary's put a total of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears into the Stage – recklessness burns through Stages fast.

The Stage ends.

Victor suggests that since the *Getting Underway* stage is complete, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel should get moving. The GM awards 8 PXP for the stage's opportunity and creates a new stage: *The Trip*.

The Spare Stage

Understanding the Example

There's no direct benefit for the Project in having two Stages open (*Wrestling with HQ* and also *Getting Underway/The Trip*). However, it does mean that if *The Trip* leads to a dead end – e.g., the expedition founders and gets driven back – Mary will still have a Project Stage to work on.

Increasing Obsession

Understanding the Example

Here's what's going on between Victor and Mary as Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel gets underway.

Starting on pg. 75, you'll find a canonical list of the kinds of approaches that push Projects forward. These are general and flexible and should fit most of the ideas that the players come up with –

And, because this system is built on sin and horror, all of them come with a certain amount of "bite."

There's only so much you can do on a Project before you need to start escalating – before these rules drive you towards either more ambitious actions, more personal risks, or an increasing sense of madness.

There's a couple of different ways to express "I stare at the maps again and consult with my advisors some more" in these rules, but in both cases, the fact that the player is lingering on that point suggests that the character is going mad.

Emotional and Intellectual Corruption

Understanding the Example

Victor proposed two different risks for Mary.

One was Intellectual Corruption. Somehow the haunted void would get under Lt. Cmdr. Chrysoula Tzavel's skin. She would see some secret there. It would obsess her. She would perform unrealistic, doomed investigations of the cosmos or the coming of the saints. Eventually madness would claim her – leading, most likely, to physical degeneration or the death of her entire force.

The risk she chose, instead, is Emotional Corruption, in the form of an obsession with the suffering of her troops. It's not that she does stupid things. It's that the *entire mission* is putting her people through a meat grinder—and no matter how she justifies this to herself, no matter that it's the entire premise of the game, she can't escape the shame and horror of it.

As with all Emotional Corruption, this is a license for the GM to torment the PC with their failings and an implicit agreement that the PC, rather than dismissing or fighting that torment, will devote to it their most vividly-described obsession. Bad things *will* happen to Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's troops—and Mary will play out our Lt. Commander's unhealthy, excessive reactions.

The Journey Begins

The Ipswich Game

The first step of this trip is “we launch.”

<p>Approach: We Launch <i>+5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears</i></p>

This is a step that had to happen sometime, of course. But it's still an important moment of transition. It dramatically increases the risks attendant to our Lt. Cmdr. and the Project as a whole, and it counts as a new approach.

Mary slows down the rush of recklessness at this point and offers her first skeptical approach. There are two reasons. First, she has a little more investment in the character now. Second, she's established excessive planning

as a character trait now. She knows that the natural combination of planning too much and then acting recklessly is “idiot commander who only pays attention to the theory.” So she feels that it’s incumbent upon her now to be a bit more careful.

So Mary chooses a skeptical approach to setting out. She talks to the GM for a while in advance about what the risks and such actually are – just to make sure she doesn’t forget something vital or rush into danger. This leads to the cultivation of the specific plan, which involves clinging close to regions dense with stars, regularly checking her troops for signs of degeneration or obsession with space, keeping her fleet tightly bunched together, and sending out small scout ships constantly along the way. In general, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel does the kinds of things that Mary and Victor agree are smart.

And then a few scout ships do not return.

Naturally, the Lt. Cmdr. blames herself – but not for very long, as . . .

<p>Approach: The Cold-Born Attack! <i>+3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears</i></p>

Perhaps it is the hand of a saint of shadow. Perhaps it is simply the degeneration of the world. They have stumbled on a fleet of reaving cold-born. They boil around the ships, far from any star. Their presence is a breath of ice that pierces the abstraction of combat displays, ballistics, and artillery computation. It makes the world phantasmagoria and horror on the bridge.

A few ships are lost.

More are boarded—the cold-born, needing neither heat nor oxygen, plunging like locusts down upon the ships, cutting their way in with metal claws, whispering through the groaning vents and shudders of the ship: “I love you. I love you. Your heat I shall devour.”

Mr. Kagin is currently nightmare-haunted due to work on his own Project, the details of which we will not discuss. He goes into a mild delirium and flees in an escape pod.

Tzavel and a few NPCs go after him. They have several dogfights while rescuing him and getting back to their troops. This sequence takes several minutes of game world time and a larger chunk of player time. Then the battle ends. The cold-born ships are wreckage. Their boarders have been flung away to fall eternally through space.

Victor opens a new stage, *The Cleanup*, because bad stuff happened. He also awards 6 PXP for *The Trip*. Neither the stage nor the trip itself is finished, of course, but the big dramatic event of the Stage happened.

Skepticism

Understanding the Example

The best way to understand skeptical approaches is this. The character wants to take a certain action, but first, they listen to the voice of reason inside them. Is there something obvious they're missing? Do common sense, or common decency, or common knowledge, or basic logic argue against it?

So the player and the GM talk through the *immediately obvious* implications of the character's intention in the world and how a reasonable person would implement it.

Put another way, the player has an idea for what they want to do, but doesn't want to do it if the GM thinks it's going to be idiotic or mean in some way that the character really should know about.

GM-Driven Approaches

Understanding the Example

You might wonder: how does the attack fit into the Project?

Here's what's going on.

The GM has the right to declare the random animosity of others as part of the Project's story. In a long-term game, this is typically a carefully-considered thematic statement. In a short-term game like this one, though, it just means that Victor wants to keep the story humming along. So he's decided to count the costs of random cold-born and shadow-taken attacks towards the Blood, Sweat, and Tears that Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel owes this Project.

In particular, for the purposes of accounting, this attack gives 3 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears.

Earning Your PXP Mid-Stage

Understanding the Example

Suppose that a character is working on a gerontological rejuvenative and in the process finds himself compelled to go home and murder his aged father.

This is the kind of thing likely to serve as a mini-climax in the ongoing story – something that accelerates the story of the Project towards its inevitable conclusion. The character is measurably closer to the end of the Project, because the *story's* that much further along.

But at the same time, murdering people doesn't *cause* scientific progress. The character still has to do actual research. That's the difference between Jack the Ripper and Einstein – murder isn't enough to reform physics!

So the Project rules don't give you your PXP when you earn a new Stage (through disaster or effort). Nor do they give you those PXP exactly 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears later. You get your actual results sometime in the middle of a Stage.

When Victor created *The Trip*, it gave Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel a chance to blood her troops and get closer to Worcester. She's done that. She's gotten everything that *The Trip* has to offer. Now she just has to finish paying for that progress with another 7 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears.

The Cleanup

The Ipswich Game

The Cleanup focuses on the disposal of the lost. The dying, humanely slain. The corpses, given with great ritual to the sacred fire, that their souls might never know the cold; and a few, who were maddened by the encounter, judged—redeemable, salvageable, needing only rest or penal service, or tainted too much by the shadow and the cold and necessitating death by burning or the void.

<p>Approach: Staying Up All Night +10 <i>Blood, Sweat, and Tears</i></p>

Our Lt. Commander explicitly pushes herself hard through the night. She circulates through the troops, sits for a time with the suffering, disposes of corpses with heartfelt prayer, judges those who had gone mad, and struggles to maintain the morale the rest.

She's "tottering and exhausted" when the cleanup ends.

Victor reads this as an intention to push her dedication and Emotional Corruption even further. So Victor and Mary open up the Skeptic's Game. Mary opts for recklessness.

As quickly as that, Victor has everything a GM could want from this stage:

- An opportunity to play random soldier NPCs;
- A chance to talk up special effects for Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's increasing stress;
- A chance to get Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel to snap at Mr. Kagin; and
- A point of Emotional Corruption.

After playing everything out, Victor happily throws another 5 PXP at Tzavel and also spends 3 PXP, buying Mary a bonus — *Troop Loyalty 2*, a freeform Merit that adds +2 to any rolls that test the loyalty of her troops.

At this point Mary has a choice. She's gotten everything she can out of *The Cleanup*, but it's not over and it hasn't created a new stage.

So if she wants the remnants of the night hanging over her head for a while, she can leave it there. Or if she wants to get *The Cleanup* over and done with, she can try to finish out the stage with something random.

She leaves it there.

The First Result

Understanding the Example

You can earn *bonuses* from Projects to reflect specific, individual results. For example, if your Project is "develop a cure for cancer," then your Project may develop bonuses for treating an individual cancer type. Bonuses are optionally rated from 0-5; for example, a level 1 bonus might indicate progress on a treatment for a rare lymphatic cancer. A level 5 bonus means that you can cure that particular cancer. The GM rates bonuses when the character can improve them later and doesn't, otherwise.

Think of bonuses as freeform Merits or Skills that the GM gives you to reflect your progress. Some of them will have concrete effects in play and others won't.

Completing the Trip

The Ipswich Game

Mary wants to put more Blood, Sweat, and Tears into *The Trip*. So, once the troops get moving again, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel starts recklessly planning how to take a beachhead in Worcester, on Earth.

"For surely," she says, "the shadow will not simply let us take it back."

Approach: Planning the Beachhead
Rejected by the GM as insufficiently new.

Victor isn't really interested. He notes:

There'll be danger, right enough, and you'll need a beachhead. But I don't think 'more planning' is actually saying anything new about the Project at this point. You can get really obsessive, of course, or make a plan lively in its strangeness, but I'm not sure it's worth it. Why not just reveal your plan in play?

At the same time, though, both Mary and Victor feel that it would fit the story if Mary finished out the Stage before the fleet reaches Earth. This isn't necessary, of course – Victor is just as capable as he's always been of declaring, "The first of the human worlds is near at last" – but it seems to fit. So Mary keeps thinking.

Approach: Solvein's *Tactics and the Void*.
+5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears

Mary offers, "Maybe there's a rare military text from the ancient days that talks about what it's like on the planets where the saints of shadow still rule, and how to fight them. Maybe I could read it and it would show me things both desirable and feared—"

Mary picks the skeptical path, and Mary and Victor talk.

Victor and Mary both have ambitions here. They're imagining these corrupt ideas that help at first in the battles to come but then—because of their origins in time—bring the chill and darkness into Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's heart. As a spoiler for this example, though, that's not actually going to happen. It's going to wind up, despite their best efforts, as something of a loose end – dramatic potential that neither of them really knew how to exploit.

That's okay, and you should expect that kind of thing to happen in your games as well. Think of it as the price for running your fiction live, as an organically growing and developing story, instead of tidying up its loose ends for publication.

For now, our Lt. Cmdr. adopts a new, more diffuse fleet formation based on Solvein's *Tactics and the Void*, saying:

"They were drawn to our fire—to our concentration of life. If the heart of our fleet formation is the void, they will not see us, will not feel us. We will pass within a billion miles of them, and they shall not know our heat."

Approach: Landing

+5 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*

Mary's within spitting distance (13/15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears) of finishing out *The Trip*, so she declares that she's ready to start the reclamation as soon as the fleet reaches Earth. She wants to plunge her ships down at the edge of Worcester and come out with guns blazing and—

And hopefully look cool instead of dumb.

The Stage completes.

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel already has the PXP from this stage, so the completion of the stage only gives one benefit: it creates a new stage, *The Beachhead*.

Thus ends the first session of the Ipswich game.

Unfinished Stages

Understanding the Example

If Tzavel were unable or unwilling to complete the Stage, she'd still get to travel and eventually reach the city. She just wouldn't get to say, "*The Trip* ended, give me a new Project Stage!"

In these examples, we're going to think of unfinished Stages as lingering, unresolved baggage, but you can think of them however seems appropriate.

If Tzavel actually *ran out of things to do* while en route, she and the GM could just assign some of the early events on Earth to this stage. Victor could have figured out some weighty dramatic meaning for this or simply renamed the stage *ex post facto* to *The Trip and the Arrival*.

In the unlikely event that Mary ran out of Stages on the march — dead-ending the Project on every level — she could still complete the march. However, the Project itself would already be dead. Our Lt. Cmdr. just wouldn't have the resources in morale, men, supplies, and spirit to actually reclaim Worcester. The reclamation effort would flail around for a while until — if desirable in the interests of fun play — Victor gave Mary another opportunity to start the Project up.

The State of the Project

The Ipswich Game

Reclamation of Worcester	
Project Completion 0	
Reclamation of Worcester	Troop Loyalty 2
0 – Not Started	
...	
15 PXP	
Stages –	
1 – <i>Preparation</i> (Complete)	
2 – <i>Getting Underway</i> (Complete)	
3 – <i>The Trip</i> (Complete)	
4 – <i>The Beachhead</i> (3 PXP available, 3 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	
A – <i>Wrestling with HQ</i> (4 PXP available, 0 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	
B – <i>The Cleanup</i> (PXP already earned, 10 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	

Between sessions Victor cleans up his notes and numbers the Stages in a fashion that makes sense to him. He also prepares a few fights and does some serious thinking about Kagin's Project.

Here's what things look like to him.

The Reclamation proper hasn't started. That's why it's labeled "Project Completion 0" above. However, the Project has earned Mary the bonus, "Troop Loyalty 2." The first three Stages (*Preparation*, *Getting Underway*, and *the Trip*) are over and done. The fourth stage, *The Beachhead*, beckons.

The *Wrestling with HQ* Stage is currently just potential. Mary hasn't done anything with it or paid any Blood, Sweat, or Tears towards it. Basically, all it means is that at some point, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel might advance the story by wrestling with headquarters in some way. On the other hand, *The Cleanup* is sitting there, partially finished, practically demanding that Mary pay it a few more points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears sometime down the road. Something

should happen, Victor thinks, to bring the cleanup from that very first fight back to the fore.

It's worth note that Victor's reasoning on *Wrestling with HQ* and *The Cleanup* is purely a matter of personal interpretation – these rules tell you how to progress through Stages, but it's up to the GM what the Stages *mean*.

The Beachhead

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Landing

– Willingness to Act

+2 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "The Trip"

+3 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "The Beachhead"

The Empire of Ipswich has come to Worcester-in-the-Wastes.

And something wakes.

They are nightmares. They are things of shadow. They move and it is not motion. They kill and they do not die. They open twisted symbols that are not faces and spit out deathly cold.

They rise from everywhere on the cold and naked Earth.

They are like the fingers of a dead god, crooked with mindless hunger.

In the furor of the landing, the GM looks into how Mary expects the Reclamation to start.

"We hole up in Worcester," she says. "We can't stay in the ships. At least, Solvein doesn't recommend the ships. Look at their frosted wings—the void clings to them and they will not warm. If we are to bring life back to Worcester, we must live in Worcester. We can't pretend that space is anything but our enemy. We must drive through our foes, claim a great building of Old Earth, and fortify it and begin thereby to make this a human city once again."

The GM opens with a few combat scenes. Tzavel and Kagin are temporarily isolated and surrounded by the beasts; the PCs guard a demolitionist as he plants charges; and other things like that.

They raise the torch-banners of the Sacred Fire, and it saves them.

Where that fire burns, the creatures become mortal. Cut, they are cut. Shot, they stagger. Burned, they ignite, and writhe with it. The human legion charges through the horde of monsters towards Worcester. In the end, shrieking, the monsters rise into a whirlwind of ice and darkness and ascend up towards the stars—

And there is peace.

Approach: Setting Up a Base Camp

– New Technical Idea

+10 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "*The Beachhead*"

"Let's talk about this base camp," the GM says.

In the skeptic's game, Mary goes for recklessness. She's already committed to abandoning the ships by leading her people into the city. Plus, she's confident enough that this beginning is correct that she doesn't care if there's some other way she *should* do it.

So they make their camp in Worcester.

Our Lt. Commander has a base. That's what the GM thinks of as the most important bit of the stage, so Victor awards 4 PXP for the stage and spends 3 of them to buy the Project a *Security* of 1.

Approach: Incendiary Defenses

– New Technical Idea

+2 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "*The Beachhead*"

+3 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "*The First Night*"

The GM discusses basic defenses with Mary to see what she has in mind. She talks about sorcerous or high-tech barricades, which Victor expects is pretty standard, and "incendiary defenses of the sacred flame."

Victor has no idea what Mary means by this, so Mary throws out some milibabble about seeding the area around the building with sacred firebombs that the army can remotely detonate if a foray of reavers shows up, or if there are more of the freakish shadow-creatures.

Mary is not entirely sure that the sacred fire can be used this way. The GM has been a bit vague about what it really is. She's also not sure how the incendiary

defenses would play out—what if she blows up her own people? She'd been pretty confident in the idea, but now that the GM's questioned it, she's not as confident. He offers her the Skeptic's Game, and she goes for the skeptical approach. The GM suggests that the firebombs be just regular fire, like any other weapon—fatal against the dark if defended by life and the banners of sacred flame, meaningless without that. Since humanity *is* here, defending the place, it's a reasonable tool; the big risks are that the bombs will trigger accidentally and kill people or burn the barricades. Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is prepared for these risks — particularly since she can set the charges a fair distance from the base — and so she proceeds.

The Beachhead completes. The GM opens a new stage: *The First Night*.

The Willingness to Act

Understanding the Example

One way that characters can push a Project forward is to *act*, and to *act in new ways*. They can take new risks; they can undertake new adventures; they can expose themselves to dangers, failures, and sorrows that they had not faced before.

The first few times a character does this, it'll be pretty straightforward. They'll stop theorizing and start implementing, for the first time. They'll put their money where their mouth is, for the first time. They'll dirty their own hands, for the first time. There's a certain amount of that that has to happen in every Project and the players are welcome to clear one or two Stages of the Project thereby.

Eventually, of course, the characters will have done most of the things that it's safe and reasonable to do. *Then* willingness to act starts looking more like willingness to break their own rules; to gamble with what they've earned; and to put pressure on people or situations they'd rather not put pressure on.

Mary's gotten three approaches out of Willingness to Act so far — when she took her very first action ("requisition men and materiel"), when she took her first risk ("heading out"), and now that she's taking the larger risk of landing by Worcester. She *had* to do all these things, sure, for the Project to move forward — but still, when it came time, she did them.

New Technical Ideas

Understanding the Example

You can also push a Project forward by proposing and applying a new technical idea — you *think of something new*.

Just like you get to move your Project forward by doing things you pretty much had to do, you get to move your Project forward by coming up with ideas that are pretty obvious – e.g., "set up a base camp." All it takes is at least a *little* brain sweat on the player's part and at least a *little* bit of interest from the GM.

You can get about three Project approaches from any given technical idea. This doesn't have anything to do with the amount of play time you put in – Mary could spend most of the game working on her base camp and its defenses and it would still be one technical idea. Instead, the more you want to *advance the Project with that idea*, the more obsessive and weird about it your character has to become. A given technical idea offers about three approaches before your character goes mad.

You can pursue as many technical ideas in a Project as you like. The only drawback is that around the point where the GM says, "That's stupid," it stops helping you and instead puts you right on track for a dead end.

The base camp and its incendiary defenses are Mary's first two technical ideas – these rules call it a "new study" when you study someone *else's* ideas, rather than your own, so neither reviewing the cartographer's maps or reading Solvein's work counted as a technical idea.

PXP Numbers

Understanding the Example

If you're wondering where the PXP numbers in this example come from, there's rules for that on ppg. 64-66.

Freeform Skills

Understanding the Example

Mary's earned a second bonus from this Project – one point of the Skill "Security." This is a freeform Skill which the GM defines at the point of award – "you roll Security to decide how well your basic defenses hold." Victor's not defining any stunts for it yet but he promises to come up with some later if the Project's Security continues to rise.

The Incinerator

The Ipswich Game

Approach: The Incinerator

– New Technical Idea

+5 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "*The Cleanup*"

+5 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* that Victor accidentally forgets about. *Oops!*

As Victor scrounges up his notes for the big first night demonic attack, Mary says, "Whoa."

"Hm?"

"The centerpiece for the base is *totally* the bonfire—no, not the fire. The incinerator. We would care about defenses, sure. About power, sure. But most of all, we would care about *returning our dead to the fire*. We would have picked whatever building called out to us for that, whatever would be most symbolically or practically relevant for taking all the people we lost along the way and saying: go not to the cold, but to the fire. Maybe some kind of waste disposal building or factory or lab. Maybe a temple marked with a symbol of fire. Whatever. Something that *burns*."

"How about a steel factory?" offers Alexander. "A giant mostly-open steel factory where we can immure the dead in superheated metal?"

"Or an actual Old Earth waste incinerator," Victor says.

"Your Mr. Kagin can get it up and running."

Mary goes for it – recklessly. They build their camp around the waste incinerator of Worcester, they bless it in the Empress' name, they mark the barrel of the thing with sacred signs. And because it is a thing of the 22nd century, not the 21st, when they light it up it is like a great pillar of fire that rages in the center of the city and transforms it.

By mutual agreement, this approach closes out *The Cleanup* and opens a new stage – *The Burning of the Dead*. Sadly, Victor only applies 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards the Project, an error which goes undiscovered until the fourth session, when everyone agrees to pretend it didn't happen.

Mary leaves the new Stage alone for now.

The First Night

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Demons Attack!

- Enemy-Driven Escalation of Conflict

+3 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*

That night there comes a cold-born emissary.

He walks uneasily on the street, as if the warm earth burns him. His eyes cannot look to the incinerator's light.

He says, in a voice that is not his own voice, but many-toned:

"We shall permit this occupation, and there is a sacrifice. He shall know whom he must be."

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel guns him down.

And slowly through the night the shadows gather. They dance around the building, and their footsteps leave ice behind. They are a massive demon army, guided by some unseen mind.

In deciding how to narrate what follows, the GM has Mary roll against the Project's *Security Skill* to see how well the basic defenses hold. Mary rolls 13 for a total of 14.

Mary looks pleased with the roll, so the GM describes incendiary traps burning large numbers of the shadows and the defenses holding relatively well – until one of the barricades collapses and the monsters rage among the troops.

This leads inevitably to combat.

Soldiers die. Shadows scream. The incinerator is wounded—in the side, cut by a spear of darkness sundering its fire.

The shadow that touched it burns.

Tzavel joins the fray. The fight rages. The monsters are beaten back. But Mary is not really focused on the fight. She is principally worrying about how to complete the stage. She feels like the Lt. Commander needs to do *something* that first night, what with it being the stage's name and all.

Approach: Challenging the Shadow

- New Technical Idea

+2 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel presumes that somewhere there is a saint of shadow—

That dark breath of the void whose will animates the army.

She conceives the intention to go out and challenge the saint of shadow to a fight.

The GM thinks this is stupid. More to the point, the GM doesn't have any idea how to handle it if it happens. So he suggests that it's dangerous and probably stupid and that unless Mary has a good idea it wouldn't lead to good play. Mary decides not to follow up on the idea. Still, even without action, the intention itself contributes another 2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears to the Stage.

Approach: Bait for the Shadow

- Renewal of Dedication

+7 *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* to "*The First Night*"

+3 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "*The Burning of the Dead*"

Mary asks if our Lt. Cmdr. has some kind of rocket launcher so she can get someone up to an upper window to snipe the saint of shadow.

"He is imminent in them," Victor says.

"He won't come out to play until the darkness claims you."

Mary proposes luring it into a trap, offering herself as its prey.

As Faceless Adjutant #1, Victor objects strongly, pointing out that she can't go risking her life personally every time something happens. Further, he argues, the emissary *specifically* used a masculine pronoun for the subject of its interest.

"Kagin?" Mary asks.

But Alex shakes his head. "I'm the last person it would want," Mr. Kagin giggles. "It hates me, doesn't it, the shadow? I would be no sacrifice, but a phoenix in its nest."

So, biting her nails, Mary recklessly proposes: "Identify who it *does* want, and use *him* as bait."

One of her soldiers confesses to it.

It's young PFC Reynolds.

He looks at her, fey and distant, and admits: "It's been in my head, ma'am. Calling me. Says I was born to it, seven generations back but born to it. That the Reynolds' are of the saints, and they'd have taken me sooner if I hadn't been, begging your pardon, ma'am, in the Bitch in Ipswich's reach."

Then in a long gasp of fear, "But ma'am, it's cold!"

The approach is reckless. There is no turning back.

"We'll draw it out," our Lt. Commander says, "through you. We'll offer you to it. But we won't let it have you. I promise. You'll live or you'll go to the fire, Reynolds, not the cold."

This is the first time that Tzavel has pushed someone's risk beyond the basic situational risk of being in a military conflict. Since it's a trap based around making Reynolds seem vulnerable, the GM can't let Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel have overwhelming force, but Victor does decide to play it fair: he takes most of the monsters and soldiers off of the table (letting them cancel out) and pits Tzavel, Reynolds, Kagin, and Tzavel's adjutant against the saint of shadow and a few of its monstrous pack.

Reynolds dies—

Embraced by the saint shadow's wings, kissed, transfigured into something else and then shot by Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel, weeping, to be fed to the Sacred Fire.

The saint of shadow dies, caught in a crossfire between Kagin and our Lt. Commander. Its monstrous horde disperses, screaming.

Kagin is cut open.

He is bleeding.

He is open, and the cold comes in, settles in the wound, blackens and turns his blood to ice, and whispers in his mind,

*Oh creature that has slain me,
I shall renew myself within your flesh.*

Save for one agonized glance at Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel, he does not reveal his fate.

The soldiers scatter the last few of the shadow-things.

The night ends.

Victor awards 8 PXP for the stage and spends 4 of them to move the Project as a whole forward to Completion Level 1. He creates a new stage, *The First Block*.

Abandoned Intentions

Understanding the Example

As strange as it might seem, **A Manual of Ambition** assumes that even abandoned intentions move the Project forward. There's plenty of IC justification for this, and one could babble at some length about how the road to success is littered with failures and half-formed thoughts – but that's not the reason.

The reason is: it keeps the story moving.

Players can't just dilly-dally coming up with ideas and discarding them until something seems right – the show must go on! Eventually, if the players can't find something worth pursuing, the GM will either close off the Project with dead ends on every Stage or kick the players into motion with suggestions on things they might pursue.

Renewal of Dedication

Understanding the Example

One approach to pushing a Project forward is demonstrating a greater emotional investment in it. The character emotes, rants, skimps on food and sleep, fritters away their principles, and otherwise descends the path of increasing obsession and sacrifice in the Project's name. They're certain that this will help them get what they need to do done – and maybe they're right.

This is Mary's third Renewal of Dedication. The first was during the planning stage, when her obsession with the troops first manifested; the second was when she stayed up all night cleaning up after the first attack; and the third is here, when she serves PFC Reynolds so poorly, and in the Reclamation's name.

The Madness of Chrysoula and Martel

The Ipswich Game

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel obsesses about PFC Reynolds' death for a while.

Victor turns his attention to Alexander and Kagin's Project. It's a bad point in the game for Mr. Kagin to die, but it seems like a cop-out to just have the saint of shadow fade away. Victor and Alexander agree that Kagin has one distant hope —

He might survive if he tests his Project, the experimental adaptation of the Sacred Fire, on himself.

He does so.

He does so; and he tells our Lt. Commander of it.

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is the only person who knows that he has done this, or, in fact, that he was wounded at all.

While Victor and Alexander work out how to handle Mr. Kagin's fate, Mary thinks about how to play a feverishly dedicated "sacrifice everything for your men" commander who's just sacrificed one of those men on the altar of the Project — and is now obsessing about it. Victor returns his attention to her and pushes on this a bit. He has one of Reynolds' buddies, Jonathan, accuse our Lt. Cmdr. of murdering PFC Reynolds. This gives Mary a way to burn off Tzavel's stress. She tells the guy off, advancing on him and ranting about insubordination and the foulness of his suggestion. He begins shouting at her about the cold and monsters and the risks they're in and Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel says, "That cut you have—It's gotten into you, isn't it? It's calling you, isn't it? I hear the shadow in your voice."

And she shoots his brains out.

Approach: Moment of Insanity

— Renewal of Dedication

+5 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "The Burning of the Dead"

This is a lot further than Mary had to go and so Victor recognizes it as a declaration of intention. He asks her:

Just where are you going with this, Lieutenant Commander Tzavel?

"I figure that my obsession," Mary says, "isn't exactly leadership, so much as *knowing what's right for them*. And I'm in the zone on that right now."

"How far are you willing to go to back that up?"

"What happens if I say 'as far as it takes?'"

They play the Skeptic's Game, although Victor already knows – from the fact that she asked a question but also expressed confidence – that she's going to try the skeptical approach. She does.

Mary wants to check, before going down this road, if there's anyone in the unit likely to push for an immediate court-martial. Mary isn't really interested in playing out the next session or two in a makeshift brig. Victor answers that the Project's already bought Troop Loyalty 2 and that for all anyone knows – even Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel – the guy *could* have been shadow-taken, going cold, longing even as he shouted at her for the airless endless dark.

So Mary goes for it. Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel cements her dedication and her certainty and her Emotional Corruption becomes 3.

Approach: The Incinerator

– New Technical Idea (further exploration thereof)

+5 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "*The Burning of the Dead*"

Then Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel obsessively supervises the repairing of the incinerator so she can make Reynolds its next meal.

Approach: Thematic Moment

– GM-Driven Push

+2 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "*The Burning of the Dead*"

+1 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "*The First Block*"

At this point, Victor's figured out some ideas for how the story *should* end – possibly with Tzavel killing her own unit and lovingly putting all of their bodies in the sacred fire, possibly with Captain du Morge or some hero from the troops fighting her outside the incinerator and pushing her in as a demonic outbreak happens in the base – so he throws in a thematic element: as Kagin writhes feverishly and the drug spreads through him, Tzavel dreams of the birth of the Emperor/Empress in a sacred flame.

That closes the stage. It opens a new one – unnamed, at the moment, but later to be named *The Cleansing of Worcester*. It earns Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel 8 PXP.

Thus ends the second session of the Ipswich game.

Corruption and Commitment

Understanding the Example

Sometimes the most shocking part of an approach happens before the players and the GM discuss the consequences. For example, you might note that not much actually *happens* after Victor and Mary agree that Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's Corruption rises.

In cases like this the key elements of the outcome are either psychological or implicit.

Basically, the thing has happened – here, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel has murdered a man – but there's still a choice to make: will the player and character *own* it as part of the direction of the Project or will the player and character turn back, shuddering, from the road that has already cost them whatever it's cost?

The murder happened in ordinary play. It didn't need the Projects rules and it didn't use them. And then Mary had the choice to say either:

- "Yes, exactly, that's the story of the Reclamation of Worcester;" or
- "No; that's too far; that's not where I'm going."

Staring at Jonathan's corpse, she decided that she was in the right when she murdered him; and *that's* the forbidden thing that bought her another point of Emotional Corruption and contributed Blood, Sweat, and Tears to the Stage.

Thematic Moments

Understanding the Example

The GM can push a Project forward by way of "thematic moments" – events that contribute to the story's atmosphere. This option exists to help the GM pace Projects when there's a limited amount of time available to game. Victor has about 15-20 hours to tell the whole story of the Reclamation of Worcester and of Mr. Kagin's drug, so he'll use thematic moments now and again.

The State of the Project

The Ipswich Game

Reclamation of Worcester Project Completion 1	
Reclamation of Worcester 1 – Underway	Security 1 Troop Loyalty 2
...	
28 PXP	
Stages –	
1 – <i>Preparation</i> (Complete)	
2 – <i>Getting Underway</i> (Complete)	
3 – <i>The Trip</i> (Complete)	
4 – <i>The Beachhead</i> (Complete)	
5 – <i>The First Night</i> (Complete)	
6 – <i>The First Block</i> (4 PXP available, 1 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	
A – <i>Wrestling with HQ</i> (4 PXP available, 0 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	
B – <i>The Cleanup</i> (Complete)	
B-2 – <i>The Burning of the Dead</i> (Complete)	
B-3 – <i>The Cleansing of Worcester</i> (4 PXP available, 0 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	

Between sessions, Victor develops a plot idea for Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel to tie Captain du Morge back into the story and kick things towards final resolution. He's also prepared a modest number of fights.

The First Block

The Ipswich Game

Approach: First Walls

- Willingness to Act

Reckless: +10 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The First Block"

Approach: Clean out the Region

- Willingness to Act

Skeptical: +4 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The First Block"

+1 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters"

The GM opens the third session by asking Mary to describe the next steps in Solvein's recommended process of reclamation.

"It starts easy," Mary says. "You haven't kindled life yet, but you need to keep away the dark. So you take the region you're starting with, and you surround it with sacred barriers, and people who will share their warmth with them. And then you scourge every hint of shadow and darkness from that place, and place the substances of life—sun symbols, seeds, the banners of the sacred fire. And then you improve the barrier, and you hunt the void again. Rinse and repeat, and expand your taken territory each time. Towards the end you set up some basic services—and then somehow, at some point, the city comes to life."

They play the Skeptic's game on this basic plan. As quickly as that, the stage ends. Since this took about three minutes in play, the GM has Mary make a roll — as if it were a moderately difficult task — to decide whether things go well and she gets the stage's 4 PXP. Mary rolls 6, which is barely enough.

The GM spends 14 PXP to increase the Project Completion Level and its Security and then opens a new stage, *Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters*.

Rolling for Opportunities

Understanding the Example

Sometimes a Stage or two or three goes by like lightning. The players do the right things, and the GM's happy with that, but it's not interesting story — it's one of those bits that a novel would gloss over or a movie summarize with a montage. This *should* happen sometimes, for verisimilitude, but because it's

not as cool as actual interesting story, these rules slow down progress a bit — instead of just giving the players the benefits of these Stages, the GM can make a player roll for them. Used properly, this rule makes sure that players are *willing* to blur through Stages quickly when it's appropriate but aren't necessarily *encouraged* to do so.

Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Establish Electrical Power and Clean Water

- New Technical Idea

Reckless: +10 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters"

Approach: Gardens in the Ruins, and Sacred Space

- New Technical Idea

Reckless: +4 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters"

+6 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Letters from Home"

This stage is straightforward. Victor declares that he's hand-waving the fact that they killed the major agent of shadow on the scene and is going to have enemies abound anyway. Mary picks some things the reclamation team is working on. Then our Lt. Cmdr. and the inexplicably muscular Mr. Kagin fight shadow-taken and cold-born monsters at scenic and relevant locations. On one occasion junkyard robots from the ruins of Old Earth oppose them instead. Occasionally Mr. Kagin will get too close to her during these fights and she'll freak out (for no reason she can afford to explain to her troops).

To decide whether the overall effort to build up a place that can defy the saints of shadow works out, Victor suggests that Mary's technical advisor, Mr. Kagin, roll either a mental trait or an appropriate technical Skill. Alex, not having any appropriate Skill in constructing sacred spaces beneficent to human life and repelling demons and shadows, opts for a generic mental trait. He rolls a 12 and earns Mary the benefits of the Stage. Victor awards 5 PXP and, more importantly, spends 15 PXP to increase the overall Project Completion Level and buy a point of Life Awakening for Worcester. Then he closes the stage and moves on to stage 8 — *Letters from Home*.

Letters From Home

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Improving the Barriers

– GM's Instinct

Skeptical: +5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Letters from Home"

Somewhat nervous about this stage title, Mary proceeds skeptically to the next step – improving the sacred barriers some.

If you read the Intent rules on ppg. 75-81 carefully, you'll find that this approach is a bit of a lame duck. Mary was thinking of it as "Willingness to Act," and it does seem a bit like it falls under that aegis – but it doesn't. It doesn't meaningfully increase the scope of what Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is doing, either in cost or effect. It doesn't require that she push on anyone or anything she hasn't been willing to push on before. It's not a new technical idea or a new study or an escalation of conflict. There's no risk, no real player effort, no moral degeneration.

But it feels appropriate to *Victor*.

It feels to him like there's a change in Project scope here, that upgrading to permanent structures instead of makeshift barricades moves the Project along. It feels like it's bringing the light of Ipswich to Worcester.

And so, even though it doesn't fit any of the standard approach types, it counts.

Since Victor supports the idea, Mary enacts this approach.

Approach: Thematic Moment

– GM-Driven Push

+3 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Letters from Home"

Then Victor pulls out his new plot idea.

Mr. Kagin, down by the sacred-fire-nee-incinerator, finds uniforms.

More precisely, neatly stacked in cabinets in the basement of the camp, he finds five thousand uniforms of the Ipswich Empire.

At exactly that moment he realizes that some of the weird grey waste in the base of the incinerator – previously unmentioned, since Victor thought this up after session 2 – is the remnants of human bone.

Approach: Thematic Moment

– GM-Driven Push

+1 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "Letters from Home"

+2 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* to "Reckoning with the Past"

Tzavel practically tears the building apart looking for information. She finds a diary. She discovers that this wasn't the first attempt to reclaim Worcester. One "Lt. Cmdr. du Morge" had tried it, before, and failed.

The Stage closes. It was quick and Mary didn't contribute much to it herself so the GM offers her a roll to seize the opportunity in the Stage. He treats it as a complex task and she fails, rolling a 7. She earns no PXP, nor does Victor spend any.

The GM opens stage 9 – *Reckoning with the Past*.

Reckoning with the Past

The Ipswich Game

Approach: The Diary

– New Study

Reckless: +10 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Reckoning with the Past"

Mary wants our Lt. Cmdr. to throw herself into studying the diary to figure out what happened. She's confident enough to just dive in, so it's the reckless approach for her.

The GM tells the story of the previous Reclamation attempt:

We stayed at the ships, of course, as long as we could. But they grew cold. They began their longing for space that is their home.

So we abandoned them . . .

Wall after wall we built. Raised we the banners of Ipswich here and there. And we feared that the cold-born would come for us, as they had promised that they would, the voice whispering in me:

"I will follow you, I will find you, I will root where you would have rooted, I will unfold like a phoenix in your chest—"

. . . the diary gets weirder as time goes by. He didn't seem to encounter monsters, but he raves about . . . something. He gets more and more maddened, distracted, heated, strange. Then he writes something about saving his men from the saint of shadow's wings; and it ends.

Approach: The Diary

– Further Study

The Road Not Taken: +2 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Reckoning with the Past"

Mary thinks about this for a bit.

Then, taking the fearful approach, she starts trying to read between the lines.

Victor asks:

Why are you afraid?

"I don't want to obsessively study this if it means that Tzavel's going to start eating people or something," Mary explains.

Victor thinks for a bit, and then begins to describe Tzavel's awake-to-the-point-of-hallucinations-fogged mind getting lost in the diary. She can practically *see* what happened to du Morge – how calculating he'd been at first, and how the shadow had spread through the hearts of his men, how they were growing chill –

How he'd had to kill one; how he'd consigned it to the fire; how the ashes had reborn themselves as flesh, and stood forth to accuse him, crying, "Murderer! Murderer!" –

Mary raises her hand to stop Victor.

"You can stop there," she says. "I throw the diary at the wall and race to find out if the guy I killed has already been burned."

"I don't know," says the GM.

"Would he have been?"

". . . damn it," says Mary, or possibly Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel.

Even though Mary didn't follow through on this approach, Victor is reasonably happy with how this went. He hands out 4 PXP for the stage. The Stage isn't finished, though – there's still at least a bit of Blood, Sweat, or Tears needed to finish out the *Reckoning with the Past*.

New Studies

Understanding the Example

One of the ways to push a Project forward is to immerse yourself in the study of dangerous ideas.

Dr. Frankenstein immersed himself in old alchemical works. Psychiatrists and police immerse themselves in madness. To read the works of cultists and revolutionaries is a traditional danger in stories such as these. But in **A Manual of Ambition**, and to the extent that the GM finds it interesting rather than stupid, *any* work can be dangerous – anything, studied in excess, can prove detrimental to the harmonious balance of humors in the spirit, body, and brain. The reason is simple – if it's important to the story that you're studying it, clearly there must be *some* corrosive influence.

The first time you look into some work, it's *usually* nothing more than giving the GM a chance to dump thematic information on your head. After that, though, it starts to seep into the substance of your brain.

Fearfulness

Understanding the Example

The best way to understand fearful approaches is this. The character's overwrought mind sees signs and portents; fear fills them and they strain with every sense to know what dangers there are that they propose to tempt.

In discussing these approaches the GM must act as more than just the voice of reason – the GM must *foreshadow* what might come with premonitions, omens, dreams, and even supernatural hints.

Players generally choose the fearful approach when they sense that the GM has something in mind but want to make sure that it fits their character before they commit to going down that road. It's standard for already fearful players to back away when they find out what the GM has in mind – but that's okay, because it's common for them to return to that point later, with a fatalistic sense of inevitability, and go down the formerly abandoned path.

The Cleansing of Worcester

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Sending a Message Back to Ipswich

- Willingness to Act

Reckless: +10 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The Cleansing of Worcester"

At this point Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel sends a warning back to Ipswich. It's also a challenge to du Morge.

"He is an agent of the endless void," Mary sends.

It will take days to reach Ipswich. It will take days for a reply to come back.

"I believe it woke within him; that his men consigned themselves to the fire rather than succumb to it. I believe—I believe that he let the cold into their spirits. If he still lives there, bear this in mind—"

And afterwards, buries her head in her hands, not knowing what shall come of this, but knowing that to send such a message speaking of her superior, and who would know that she had come here and what she would find must somehow be naïve.

This approach properly goes to *Wrestling with HQ*, but Victor errs, and places it under *the Cleansing of Worcester*.

Approach: Headlong Rush into Corruption

- Renewal of Dedication

Reckless: +4 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The Cleansing of Worcester"

+1 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Reckoning with the Past"

+5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel"

Mary reviews the Approaches on ppg. 75-81. Peeking inside Mary's mind, we see the following reasonable options for where to go next –

- Take greater risks with the troops, possibly leading eventually to a wipeout;
- Push herself to greater lengths of obsession;
- Expand on the *Tactics and the Void* thing that's kind of floating around;
- Obsess more on the incinerator;
- Obsess some about Reynolds and the murdered guy; or
- Read the diary more thoroughly.

She'd like to make Victor happy right *now*, while the story is focusing on the reclamation effort, so that she can push the Project's overall Completion Level to 4. So she picks the option most likely to appeal to Victor's sensibilities.

Mary looks the GM in the eye and says, "It's time to start the purges. It's time to find the shadow-touched among my men and consign them to the fire."

And Victor smiles.

Tzavel goes out and fights monsters; or hunts for them among her troops. She immerses herself in corrupt passions, blood, and death. Her Emotional Corruption rises to 4. She earns 6 PXP for the stage; Victor spends 16 to advance the Project to Completion Level 4.

The group eats. Victor thinks. Then he closes *The Cleansing of Worcester*, dumps the leftover Blood, Sweat, and Tears into *Reckoning with the Past* to close *it* out, and opens two new stages: *The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel* and *Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players*.

Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players

The Ipswich Game

Right now, Mary is feeling that her character is quite corrupt enough already — with an Emotional Corruption of 4, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel will be spending most of her non-combat time obsessing about the horrible things that happen to her troops.

So Mary leaves *The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel* alone.

As for Victor, he's not so kind to Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel; it's time to *do* some horrible things to her troops.

Approach: Establish Patrols

- New Technical Idea

Skeptical: +5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players"

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel establishes a patrol through reclaimed Worcester. One patrol vanishes; three days later, it returns as cold-born, its leader laughing over the communicator at our Lt. Commander and preaching a gospel of cold and death. He tears down sacred barriers; he topples the banners of the flame; shadows come in around him, until finally she guns him down.

(She does not give him the fire. Instead, she sinks his corpse, bound, into a river, and spends a while ranting at Mr. Kagin to justify herself.)

Approach: Block Sewer Access

- New Technical Idea

Skeptical: +10 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players"

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel starts the work on blocking the old sewers so that monsters can't get in that way. While down there, she sees Reynolds' buddy, Jonathan — the man she'd killed.

She draws and fires on him.

He blows away as puffs of smoke.

"Up above," Victor says — a thematic event technically associated with the next stage —
"the incinerator rages."

In the cleanup afterwards, Victor closes this stage, awards Mary 6 PXP for the opportunity therein, and opens *The Incinerator*.

Approach: Thematic Moment

- GM-Driven Push

+5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The Incinerator"

Thus ends the third session of the Ipswich game.

The State of the Project

The Ipswich Game

Reclamation of Worcester Project Completion 4	
Reclamation of Worcester 4 – Well Underway	Life Awakening 1
	Security 2
	Troop Loyalty 2
. . .	
8 PXP	
Stages –	
1 – <i>Preparation</i> (Complete)	
2 – <i>Getting Underway</i> (Complete)	
3 – <i>The Trip</i> (Complete)	
4 – <i>The Beachhead</i> (Complete)	
5 – <i>The First Night</i> (Complete)	
6 – <i>The First Block</i> (Complete)	
7 – <i>Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters</i> (Complete)	
8 – <i>Letters from Home</i> (Complete)	
9 – <i>Reckoning with the Past</i> (Complete)	
10 – <i>Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players</i> (Complete)	
11 – <i>The Incinerator</i> (4 PXP available, 5 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	
A – <i>Wrestling with HQ</i> (4 PXP available, 0 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	
B – <i>The Cleanup</i> (Complete)	
B-2 – <i>The Burning of the Dead</i> (Complete)	
B-3 – <i>The Cleansing of Worcester</i> (Complete)	
B-4 – <i>The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel</i> (5 PXP available, 5 out of 15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears)	

The last session of the game begins.

The GM provides a situation recap for Mary.

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel has 4 Emotional Corruption. This means that she's beyond "I know what's best" and into a territory with the lower and upper bounds of:

- "You troops *belong* to me" and
- "I'll protect you from death by killing you myself."

This is part of why she's hunting for any sign that a person might be shadow-taken or becoming cold and dragging them to the incinerator to burn—perhaps, the GM suggests, as du Morge once did before.

There's a looming threat, the summary continues, regarding the incinerator or the sacred fire and the man that Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel murdered. There may be more details in the diary, but the Lt. Cmdr. vaguely suspects that excessive study thereof would push her over the line.

There's Solvein's book floating around; it hasn't really done anything in the game.

(Here, Mary realizes, "Hey, there could be a connection there. Like, I could abuse Solvein's tactics as part of the purges or to bind the life in the troops to my will or something. But that might be more along the lines of Intellectual Corruption.")

There's some potential situation with du Morge and Ipswich that hasn't manifested yet.

There are three unfinished stages — *The Incinerator*, *The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel*, and *Wrestling with HQ*. Victor is fine if Tzavel wants to do random city development, e.g., getting the street lights working or a secondary incinerator going. But it'll go under one of those stages, if so, and Victor warns that he intends to cue partially off of the stage name to know which thematic events to use.

The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Use Solvein's Tactics to Control the Men
— New Study (further exploration thereof)

The Road Not Taken: +2 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel"

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel reviews Solvein's *Tactics and the Void*, wondering if she can use it as a tool for keeping the soldier's "bound to life and flame."

Unfortunately when Mary talks this idea out with the GM, it doesn't "hook" for either of them.

Approach: Gamble Everything on Solvein's Tactics

- Willingness to Act

The Road Not Taken: +2 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "The Corruption of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel"

Victor offers as an alternative that possibly something in Solvein's book might offer a "new tactic" that pushes Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel into making a terrible mistake in a confrontation with shadow or void creatures, something that kills or almost kills a lot of the soldiers, thus pushing her over the edge.

Mary is actually tempted by this. In session 1, the big thing was winning, but at this point she has an investment in Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's decline and fall. However –

"I'd kind of like to have a symbolic moment of victory," Mary admits, "before things fall apart."

They agree to handle this as a fearful approach; Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel draws up plans to implement one of Solvein's more dubious maneuvers but is dogged by a terrible intuition of doom and concludes, "This isn't right. I need to do something else first, and I'm running out of time."

Seizing the Cathedral

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Reclaim Worcester Cathedral

- Escalation of Conflict

Skeptical: +5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Wrestling with HQ"

Thus, driven by Mary's desire for a big potential victory before everything falls apart, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel decides to jump straight for the most ambitious part of the operation –

"Let's seize City Hall."

But Alexander is googling as Mary talks, and he says, "How about the Cathedral?"

He shows Victor and Mary pictures of Worcester Cathedral and its looming tower; and in that moment, the ending of the story is decided. The Reclamation force sweeps boldly up to claim the Worcester Cathedral.

There is something there.

There is something, not turned upwards towards space or God; nor warm; but a thing that dwells there, monstrous in its scope, a demon leftover from some ancient age.

Its twisted flesh is routed from the pews; the lectern tumbles; there's a huge fight, and –

Approach: No Support from Home

- GM-Driven Escalation of Conflict

+5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Wrestling with HQ"

The staticky voice comes over the communicator –

Commander, I've just decoded a message from home—

Oh, God, commander,

Ipswich is lost.

Repeat, Ipswich is lost.

The Empress is dead. Chaos reigns.

All available troops return at maximum possible speed. Over.

Commander? Commander, God, our home—

Approach: Abandon Ipswich

- Renewal of Dedication

Skeptical: +5 Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Wrestling with HQ"

"He's shadow-taken," Tzavel says, into the radio. "Shoot him."

And she can hear the cold and distant retort of a gun.

She can see where this is going; she can see clearly how the shadow can spread its wings once more over all the worlds of man;

So she shakes her head.

So she smashes her communicator. She says, to those around her, panting by the corpse of the demon of ancient Earth:

"This will be our home."

Mary and Victor play the Skeptic's Game, and Mary goes with skepticism:

"Can we live here? Can we make enough of a place here to survive, with Ipswich lost?"

"Some of them will hate you for it," Victor says, "but you can try."

The stage closes. The reclamation has gone as far as it will ever go, but Victor doesn't know that, so he assigns 7 PXP and spends 5 PXP on a bonus, **The Phoenix-City of Man**. Then he opens a final stage, *Worcester in the Wastes*, aka *The Survivors*.

Escalation of Conflict

Understanding the Example

The last way that players can advance a Project is to escalate their conflict with some enemy. In Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's case, there are two enemies: headquarters, as malignly if remotely represented by Captain du Morge, and the shadow. In seizing Worcester Cathedral, Victor and Mary agree, Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is hoping to reclaim the city's heart – to perform that meaningless and yet crucial alchemical transformation from a dead and shadow-taken city with an enclave of the living to a living city endangered by the void. She is *pushing* on the enemy; and for that reason, the Project advances.

Worcester-in-the-Wastes

The Ipswich Game

Approach: Thematic Moment

– GM-Driven Push

+3 *Blood, Sweat and Tears to "Worcester-in-the-Wastes"*

Technically, it's not meaningful nor overly realistic that the Ipswich Empire has suddenly fallen; while du Morge is clearly in some fashion to blame, it isn't thoroughly justified in the game. But the important thing is that it fits what's

going on with Tzavel and that the players are sufficiently into it. They don't mind.

"Ipswich is burning," Mary says; and "we're on our own.

"We have to accelerate."

And looking out at the room, she can see that the ranks are swelled with men of ash and bone: men and women who burned. They are grey-faced; they are staring at her; they are flakes of ash; and Reynolds and Jonathan and all the maybe-possibly-shadow-tainted that she's purged are among them. And they are silent.

Victor's feeling pretty smug. He hasn't wholly decided whether Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel is mad or if there's legitimate reanimated-burned-people horror going on, and it doesn't really matter: the scene, he thinks, is just right either way.

Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel holds out her hand to the people of ash.

"Join me," Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel tells them.

". . . What?" says the GM.

"They're the fire, aren't they? They're sacred, aren't they? Cleansed by it, one with it, standing against the cold? For Hell, as even children know, is ice."

"They're reanimated dead people."

"It's not okay?"

<p>The GM stops tracking Blood, Sweat, and Tears. <i>The Project ends.</i></p>

And in finality ending the Reclamation of Worcester, Victor concedes,

"It's good."

That's the end of Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel's Project, although in theory someone else could pick it up at that point.

The game ends like so:

There is whispering all around Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel. The ash people lead her towards the incinerator so that she can be remade pure.

Mr. Kagin tries to organize the remaining soldiers in the cathedral against a major gathering of the shadow's forces. Solvein's tactics fail them; the soldiers die; Mr. Kagin has to flee.

Flexible game timing lets Mr. Kagin catch up with Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel at the incinerator. They fight there, her trying to plunge into the sacred fire, him trying to stop her. The outcome, which turns on a handful of die rolls, we will leave unspoken.

Afterwards there is only the marching of the dead: and if their souls are in fire or in emptiness, we do not know.

Final State of the Project

The Ipswich Game

Reclamation of Worcester

4

Reclamation of Worcester 4 – Well Underway	Security 2
	Infrastructure 1
	Troop Loyalty 2
	The Phoenix-City of Man
...	
10 PXP	
Stages –	
1 – <i>Preparation</i> (Complete)	
2 – <i>Getting Underway</i> (Complete)	
3 – <i>The Trip</i> (Complete)	
4 – <i>The Beachhead</i> (Complete)	
5 – <i>The First Night</i> (Complete)	
6 – <i>The First Block</i> (Complete)	
7 – <i>Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters</i> (Complete)	
8 – <i>Letters from Home</i> (Complete)	
9 – <i>Reckoning with the Past</i> (Complete)	
10 – <i>Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players</i> (Complete)	
11 – <i>The Incinerator</i>	
A – <i>Wrestling with HQ</i> (Complete)	
A-2 – <i>Worcester-in-the-Waste, or The Last Survivors</i> (Complete)	
B – <i>The Cleanup</i> (Complete)	
B-2 – <i>The Burning of the Dead</i> (Complete)	
B-3 – <i>The Cleansing of Worcester</i> (Complete)	
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Additional Project Stages (Created through Actions, Consequences, Events, or Blood/Sweat/Tears)											

**A Project
(Big Picture for Reference)**

High-Level Summary

This section summarizes the basic concepts you'll see at play in the Projects rules.

Project Results

Project Completion

The overall status of your Project is rated from 0-5. For example, if your Project is "develop an industrial empire," then Project Level 0 means that you don't have an industrial empire. Project Level 5 means that it's mighty.

Level 1: You've made some progress.

Level 2: You've made notable strides.

Level 3: You've done something worthy of note.

Level 4: You've achieved something impressive.

Level 5: You've achieved something legendary.

Many Projects "finish" at level 3 or 4.

Sometimes the GM will find it convenient to break the Project status down into multiple independent levels. For example, a Project to rebuild a dead city might have an overall Project Level that measures how much of the city you've occupied and restored, a Safety Level that measures the safety of your people, and an Infrastructure Level measuring how much of the city's functions you've repaired. You can think of these as part of the Project Level or as bonuses — whichever suits your preference.

Bonuses

You can earn bonuses to reflect specific, individual results. These encompass any result that you can imagine, including a new ally, a 2% edge in the cost of production of some good, a third arm, or the ability to proceed normally through life without intestines in your body. Each bonus takes the form of a merit, skill, or a dubious unclassifiable advantage invented by the GM at the time of the result and assigned an appropriate cost.

For example, a mad scientist decides to create an army of beast-people. Early in the Project he might earn a bonus, "Evolutionist," allowing him to make a roll to impart bestial traits to a person. Later on, the GM might upgrade this to operate like a Skill, Evolutionist 3, with a +3 bonus on the roll and a stunt that

allows him to convert large numbers of humans into beast-people at a 70% success rate without rolling at all.

PXP

When a character makes progress on a Project but doesn't make *enough* progress to buy up the Project Level or earn a bonus, the Project earns Project Experience Points (PXP). These accumulate until spent on a more specific result.

Self-Improvement

Certain Projects – specifically, programs of self-improvement – allow characters to improve their own Skills and other Traits. This usually makes the Project Level superfluous and the GM may disregard it if so desired.

Undesirable Results

It's the GM who decides what you actually get as a Project advances. Specifically, it's the GM who decides when to *spend* PXP on increasing the Project Level, buying a bonus, or improving the character. Players can get a discount if they don't want a given purchase, but they can't veto the expenditure.

The Human Condition

An Example Project

Jill is playing in a shared-world online game using **A Manual of Ambition**. The characters are ordinary people with extraordinary dreams in a world wracked by "Vinison's Plague" and peculiar divine visitations. The game plays out on a bulletin board so there's no fixed length – it'll keep going as long as both Jill and the GM are interested. For most intents and purposes this is a one-player game but Jill's PC occasionally corresponds with other characters in the community and other GMs may choose to treat the events in her game as either canonical or false.

Jill is curious about human nature. So she wants to play a mad scientist dedicated to exploring the question:

Can I make people not quite so, you know, annoyingly people-ish?

Right now this is a pretty vague question, and she isn't really sure what she means by it; the GM, of course, is even more lost.

But science can't wait on the confusion of fools, so she establishes a Project to pursue her goal – **The Human Condition**.

Measuring Results

The Human Condition

Jill's Project begins at Completion Level 0. She can start publishing her results around level 2-3, but to actually change humanity, she must get to level 5.

Jill could theoretically pick up bonuses ranging from "Techniques for Improving the Human Capacity for Empathy 3" to "Widely Quoted in the Literature." She could also improve her own traits (her Mind or Essence or Phrenology, perhaps) or acquire some unique personal ability such as the persuasion-resisting "Bitter Cynicism."

As Jill works the GM will assign her Project PXP. You can think of this as "useful progress." The GM *spends* these PXP to buy the various advances and bonuses the Project earns.

Sometimes the GM may want to buy Jill a bonus that she doesn't want – let's say that Jill isn't really excited by improvements to Phrenology. In that case, the purchase still goes through, since you learn what you learn and gain what you gain, but it costs fewer PXP than it otherwise might.

Developing a Project

Stages

Characters make progress on their Project in a series of stages.

Each stage of a Project contains within it like a pearl an opportunity for the character to earn a reward – that is, PXP, and possibly also a tangible result purchased with PXP.

In order to pursue this opportunity characters choose a series of *approaches*. Approaches represent the character's conscious intent and also those intentions that they hide from themselves – intentions not recognized by the character but observed or called out by the GM or the player.

Characters can pursue each approach fearfully, skeptically, or recklessly. These rules call this decision "the Skeptic's Game." Relatively fearful strategies increase the warning the GM gives regarding the approach's consequences. Relatively reckless strategies affect how valuable the approach proves in play.

When a character takes action pursuant to their approach, it may lead to troublesome consequences; it may corrupt them; and it may allow them to realize the opportunity associated with that Stage.

Completing a Stage

Each Stage demands that the character pay a certain amount of Blood, Sweat, and Tears. Each approach that the character investigates pays a certain amount of that toll – including approaches that the character, eventually, backs away from. When the character has put enough effort into the Stage, it "completes."

At that point, when the Stage completes, and if the character has not realized the opportunity that that Stage offered, they receive a final opportunity to do so. The GM makes a judgment call:

- Has the character outright earned some form of progress?
- Or should the player to make a roll to earn that progress?
- Or should the player, perhaps, pay some cost (sacrificing character possessions or traits, increasing a corruption gauge, or otherwise making a sacrifice) to earn that progress?

Even if the character makes progress at the very beginning of the Stage, they must still pay the Stage its due in Blood, Sweat, and Tears. The reward they have earned represents raw and unpolished progress, like a burst of insight. Completing that Stage helps polish those ideas to facilitate further insights. Mechanically, this is represented by the rules on new Stages below.

New Stages

Characters may open up a new Stage of a Project – with a new achievable reward – in three ways.

First, the GM creates a new Stage each time events dramatically escalate the effect the Project has on the character's life. For example, when a character – desperate to conceal the evidence of their illicit research – moves their lab to a monster-infested sewer, that's likely to open up a new Stage. More tamely, shifting from "I'd like to do this" to "I'm investing most of my fortune in this" opens up a new Stage.

Second, when a player pays the full due of Blood, Sweat, and Tears and completes a Stage, the GM usually creates a new Stage. The exception is dead ends – if the GM feels that the completed Stage was a dead end both dramatically and in terms of in-character value, no new Stage materializes.

Third, if the character is entirely boxed in – all the current stages have led to dead ends – the GM may allow the character to spend 10 PXP and some amount of in-character time to create a new Stage.

Multiple Stages

These rules allow characters to develop multiple Stages of a Project simultaneously. This represents the idea that large Projects are often asynchronous – a character investigating a crime, for example, can "develop a better understanding of the suspect's history" in one Stage and "study the crime scene" in another. There's no reason why the character can't go back and forth between these Stages, switching with each new approach.

Developing a Project

The Human Condition

The GM names the first Stage of Jill's Project "Figure out what the Hell Jill is doing."

In this Stage Jill recklessly studies sociology, diving in without even *considering* the possibility that sociology will drive her mad. She proceeds recklessly with studies of anthropology. This gives the GM ideas – horrible tribal practices, primitivist revulsion towards modern society, shamanic visions – there's all *kinds* of meat there. But as risky as it is to identify too much with other cultures, she's just reading anthropology texts, so nothing bad happens this time either.

The GM names the second Stage of Jill's Project "Investigate concepts of humanity."

Jill's player asks the GM for suggestions. The GM picks a wildly inappropriate name out of the ether and recommends that she start by delving into Tertullian's "Orogeny" and other works. Jill is skeptical but follows up on this notion. The GM advises Jill that early works often influence the later Project and Jill goes ahead.

The GM has decided that Tertullian – evidently *not* the Carthaginian theologian – is to be Jill's introduction to a savage concept of humanity that identifies it strongly with the animals and suggests unawakened wilderness life as a higher, purer state. Regardless of whether Jill follows up on this, it's always going to be part of the GM's notes that Tertullian's works influenced the beginning of the Project – which makes it very likely that it's going to influence her results *or* that she's going to react wildly against it, as by seeking to eliminate the wilderness. Otherwise, why would the hypothetical story of Jill's Project have mentioned Tertullian at all?

Jill doesn't actually wind up rejecting it. In fact, Jill's player immediately theorizes that in the GM's particular vision of the game world, it's humanity's Fall from the innocent animal-like state in Eden that prompted the divine punishment of the Plague. In a conversation with a friend, she rants wildly about this. This level of emotional investment is in itself an approach that pays Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards the completion of a Stage.

In such a fashion do Projects progress.

Character Improvement Using Project Rules

In general a character's professional development uses the Project rules. These are independent of a character's own experience points, although it may be appropriate from time to time to spend character experience points on Project-related matters.

Group Projects

Characters have two options for developing Projects as a group.

The first, standard option is hierarchical. One character leads the Project. Other characters can assist with the implementation of approaches but cannot initiate new approaches. If they do take independent action to advance the Project, it uses slightly different rules, as noted in *The Skeptic's Game*, pg. 68.

The second option is cooperative. Some group of characters lead the Project. Each can initiate approaches and pursue them and the results – sometimes, with the exception of Corruption – are binding on them all.

Solitary and Group Projects

The Human Condition

Jill is handling this Project on her own. A friend of hers, Mandy, joins the game for a little while in the role of Jill's protégé Tomas – a young fresh student whose mind Jill can mold. The two of them share a second Project, ***Tomas' Professional Development*** – Mandy can come up with approaches to improve Tomas' Intelligence, Wit, and scientific Skills and *so can Jill*. Sadly, Mandy's husband is an abusive personality willing to take aggressive steps to isolate her from contact with the larger world; Mandy vanishes from the game and from Jill's life and Jill never finds out why.

Positive Results

This section discusses the positive product of a Project to date. For information on developing these results and any negative results along the way, see later sections.

Completion Level and Bonuses

The overall results-to-date of a typical Project are measured by its Completion Level. You'll mostly use this as a static rating – a common reference point to the progress of the Project. If necessary, you can treat it as a rolled Skill, e.g.:

Player: "Can my industrial empire deliver these rails on time?"

GM: "Roll your industrial empire's Completion Level; it's a complex task."

You'll record more specific results as bonuses. A Project that attempts to create super-soldiers but instead produces ravenous beast-warriors might have had a base Completion Level of 2-3 (never actually succeeding) but an expensive, meaningful bonus, "Can Make Ravenous Beast-Warriors."

For research, one way to think about this is that the Project Completion Level is foundational research that others might want to study even when repulsed by your failures. Bonuses are more specific outcomes. For complex criminal investigations, the Project Completion Level shows how much progress you've made on the big picture while bonuses describe your information on the various individual targets. For applied technological and industrial development, the Project Completion Level represents the basic infrastructure and bonuses represent various developed applications.

Personal Improvement

As noted above, Projects can also improve the character directly. Like any other Project result, improvements to character traits happen when the GM decides it's the logical thing to spend PXP on.

Project Experience Points

Over the course of a Project's development characters may earn PXP.

The base assumption is that characters have the opportunity to earn 3-10 PXP for the Project from each Project Stage. Determine the amount as follows –

- **Basic Award:** 3 because the character took the Project to this Stage and realized its opportunity.
- **Bonuses:** 0-3 for creating the Stage in a cool way –
 - Doing things that interest the GM.
 - Doing things the players enjoyed.
 - Doing things very much in genre.
 - Doing things very much in-character.
 - Doing the right things.
 - Making sacrifices.

- **Bonuses:** 0-3 for doing cool things in recent play –
 - Playing out Corruption and possibly other things (flaws, disabilities, or whatever) well.
 - Buying in to the GM's emotional cues (playing out fear during scary bits, expressing awe during awesome events, etcetera).
 - Impressing the GM with neat ideas.
 - Being very much in genre or in character.
 - Making sacrifices.
- **Bonuses:** +1 if the stage has been particularly traumatic for the characters.

The GM chooses which bonuses apply, deciding the first bonus at the time of the Stage's creation. **A Manual of Ambition** uses these numbers on the assumption that typical play earns 6 PXP per Stage: that, in short, the GM should offer 1-2 point bonuses of each type freely and reserve 0- and 3-point bonuses for special cases.

Spending PXP

When a character fulfills the opportunity offered them by a Project Stage, in addition to assigning PXP, the GM may choose to spend some of the Project's accumulated PXP on some result. There is a "serendipity" discount for things that the GM does not believe *a priori* that the player or character hoped to find.

PXP is spent as follows –

- Increasing a the Project Completion Level –
 - To level 1 – 4 PXP
 - To level 2 – 8 PXP (3-6 with serendipity)
 - To level 3 – 12 PXP (5-9 with serendipity)
 - To level 4 – 16 PXP (7-12 with serendipity)
 - To level 5 – 20 PXP (10-15 with serendipity)
- Increasing a Project Skill or a major Skill-like bonus –
 - To level 1 – 3 PXP (1-2 with serendipity)
 - To level 2 – 6 PXP (3-5 with serendipity)
 - To level 3 – 9 PXP (5-8 with serendipity)
 - To level 4 – 12 PXP (7-11 with serendipity)
 - To level 5 – 15 PXP (9-14 with serendipity)
- Assigning any other bonus
 - As appropriate.

It may also be appropriate to spend PXP as whatever form of XP exists in your underlying system, most likely with some appropriate conversion ratio.

These rules use PXP to give the players a tangible reward during otherwise unproductive Stages and to allow the GM a flexible vocabulary for expressing pleasure. Thus, it's better to jack up the costs of the various purchases than to skimp on handing out PXP, and it's better to buy a few bonuses for cheap than to hand out extra PXP for them.

Positive Results

The Human Condition

The second Stage of Jill's Project was *Investigate Concepts of Humanity*. The GM concludes that she *has* made progress in this Stage, so she realizes its opportunity. The GM was happy with her when he made the Stage, and started it with 5 PXP. He's also happy when it ends, so he gives her Project 7 PXP all told.

Jill starts in on the third Stage of the Project. Jill sends in a request for funding (for "an investigation of the application of pre-modern ontologies to reducing Plague and epiphanic incidence") and searches recklessly for sponsors among her peers. She picks up a bit of a reputation as one of those wild-eyed fringe scientist types, but the GM's willing to give her some rope, so she picks up –

- a corporate grant
- correspondence with two interested fellows, Salére and Morbin.
- 5 PXP.

The corporate grant is a bonus, costing 2 PXP; Jill can eat Indian food instead of ramen for a few months.

Next Jill begin comparative studies of the vitality of humanity and the lower animals. She proceeds cautiously but the very pursuit pleases the GM. The GM assigns her the PXP for the new stage and a second bonus – *Emulating the Beast-Mind*. Her studies allow her to understand and emulate the primitive but supernally alert consciousness of a beast; this 8-PXP Merit allows her to tap that power at need.

Project Stages

Each Stage of a Project is characterized by three things –

- Its narrative description.
- The opportunity to make progress.
- A series of approaches that characters take to the Project in that stage.

The narrative description has no meaning in the rules. It's just something the GM uses to communicate to the player about what the Stage should be about. Victor, for example, named each Stage. He could, instead, have written a paragraph of material, such as –

The Cleanup —

It is after the battle that the combat takes its toll. It is when the fighting is over that things become unbearable at last. I want this Stage to tell the story of a strained Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel dealing with terrible loss, desperate exhaustion, and grim truths. I want you to help me capture the feeling that it's the aftermath, not the army of the void, that really hurts.

Or he could have left all the Stages as nameless, numberless, mutually equivalent voids.

The default is that the GM names and numbers each Stage and that players cue off of that and any other hints the GM bestows.

In each Stage the players can "realize" a unique opportunity to make progress. This means that the GM feels that they *did* make progress on that Project in that Stage. The GM awards some PXP and possibly spends PXP on bonuses, the Project Completion Level, or character traits.

In play the players will differentiate Project Stages by filling them up with unique approaches. That's why the GM description is optional – even if the GM hadn't specified any differences between the Stages, "comparative studies of the vitality of humanity and the lower animals" makes a different Project Stage than "reading up on sociology."

The Initial Stage

Projects begin with a single Stage. It contains an opportunity to make progress. Instead of a bonus for "creating the stage in a cool way" it offers a PXP bonus

for "choosing a cool Project." This is often 0 – GM-created Projects and self-improvement Projects don't have to start with a bonus.

Initial Stage

The Human Condition

Here's a complete picture of the first Stage of Jill's Project.

The GM seeded the Stage with 3 PXP, plus 1 for coming up with a cool Project – a total of 4 initial PXP.

The narrative description was: "Stage 1 – Figure out what the Hell Jill is doing."

Jill followed two approaches –

- Studying sociology;
- Studying anthropology.

The GM decided that this was, in fact, progress, and Jill realized the opportunity for the Stage. The GM gave her 4 PXP, plus 2 for being interesting during the Stage – a total of 6 PXP. The GM also had the opportunity to spend accumulated PXP on some result, but didn't, because all Jill had done so far was study.

Approaches

Each approach develops in three steps – the *intention* that spawns it, the *Skeptic's Game* that decides whether the player pursues it, and the *actions* that the players take to bring that intention to fruition. We begin by examining the central piece of each approach – the Skeptic's Game. You will learn more about the rules for intentions and actions once we have explained the Skeptic's Game.

The Skeptic's Game

The Skeptic's Game is a model for achieving positive goals in a world riddled with corruption. It's based loosely on the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Here's how it works.

During the development of a Project a character will consider many different ideas, approaches, and actions.

When the character first conceives the idea, approach, or will to act, we'll call it an *intention*.

Every intention manifests a risk. Everything you study, everything you think about, everything you do has a chance of changing who you are.

The Skeptic's Game determines how the character manages that risk.

Picking a Path

When you start the Skeptic's Game, you'll already know what intention you're talking about. You can find more details on ppg. 75-81.

Players in the Skeptic's Game

In the Skeptic's Game, the player chooses between three paths —

The Fearful Path. The character is fearful. The GM uses omens, portents, premonitions, or OOC conversation to give the player a good idea of what lies ahead if they pursue this intention. The player then chooses whether to proceed.

The Skeptical Path. The character listens to the voice of reason and is alert to the world. The GM gives common-sense advice and makes sure that the player understands what the character would know about this intention. The player then chooses whether to proceed.

The Reckless Path. The character dives into action. The GM *can* warn the player about some dire consequence and give them a chance to back out, but only if it will make the game more fun for the GM to do so — otherwise, the GM just enacts the appropriate consequences.

The Paths as a Guide to Communication of Risk

Let us take as an example the study of corpses — the character conceives the intention to spend a year with stolen corpses dissecting and studying them to learn more details regarding anatomy.

Players on the reckless path don't get to know the consequences. They don't even necessarily know what their *character* can see about the costs of that path — they commit their characters to that course of action blindly. Here we imagine that the character is well aware of the risks that the character might suffer legal trouble; that a year amidst death is likely to strain their minds and their participation in their social circles; that, in some settings, the corpses

might awake. But the player doesn't get to know that before deciding. The GM is allowed to tell them some of that, at the GM's pleasure. The player is allowed to guess or assume. The character is certainly allowed to compensate for these risks as best they can. But the player isn't allowed to ask the GM a bunch of risk-related questions before translating intention into action. Characters on the reckless path can take risks that their player would not normally have had them take.

Players on the skeptical path get to explore the consequences that their character should be aware of. That is, the GM and player should both do their best to make sure that the player has both a common-sense and an in-character understanding of what the character is setting themselves up for *before* the character implements their intent. Here the GM makes sure the player knows that buying corpses is illegal, for example. However, if there's a hidden cost that the character can't know – like, if the police are already spying on the character, so that buying corpses is an exceptional risk – the player probably won't know either.

Players on the fearful path get a bit more risk information than their character would normally have. For the character this comes in the form of suppositions, omens, malaises, and paranoias – or simply such an excess of caution that risks reveal themselves, if not immediately, then before their manifestation. Here the GM can talk with the player about the likely consequences of their plan. This is not always comprehensive – while the GM should detail most of the risks in both kind and in magnitude, the GM is allowed to keep secrets. If a character simply can't discover a risk in advance, then the GM can limit their description to an ominous feeling or portent or keep silence entirely.

The Moment of Decision

After the player and GM communicate on risks, to such extent as the path suggests, the player decides whether their character takes action.

Scoring the Skeptic's Game

The Skeptic's Game assesses the result in terms of *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*. As noted on pg. 14, this looks like so:

- The player rejects the approach after talking things out with the GM (2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears).
- The player takes the fearful path and then has the character take action (3 BST).
- The player takes the skeptical path and then has the character take action (5 BST).
- The player takes the reckless path and the character leaps into action (10 BST).

Using the Skeptic's Game

Each Stage of a Project requires a due in Blood, Sweat, and Tears. For a single-PC Project, or a hierarchical Project run by a single PC, each Stage demands 15 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears. For cooperative group Projects, the GM sets the due for each Stage, usually based on the table below –

BST	Number of Cooperating Participants
20-25	2
30	3-4
30-45	5-6
45	7-10
60	11+

These numbers are chosen wholly in the interest of enjoyable play and if it improves that end the GM may adjust them to their heart's content. Excess Blood, Sweat, and Tears rolls over to pay the due for some other Stage of the player or GM's choice.

The Benefits of Blood, Sweat, and Tears

From a player's perspective, Blood, Sweat, and Tears have two benefits and one rare drawback.

First, the more Blood, Sweat, and Tears a character pays into the Project, the closer the current Stage comes to completion. The faster characters complete each Stage of a Project, the faster they can develop useful results.

Second, the more Blood, Sweat, and Tears a character earns from a given intention, the better their chances of earning the Stage's opportunity with that intention.

There is one case in which players don't want to pay Blood, Sweat, and Tears into a Stage – when their ideas are boring the GM, annoying the GM, stretching the GM's suspension of disbelief, or otherwise making it more likely that the GM will declare the Stage a dead end and rule against their obtaining any benefit therefrom.

Strategy in the Skeptic's Game

The Skeptic's Game is a game about controlling outcomes.

Sometimes a given approach leads to an outcome that the player won't like. This is partially predictable – GMs assign outcomes based on their understanding of the world and the story, and that's something that players can develop an understanding of. However, it's never wholly predictable, because even people who understand the world face unexpected outcomes.

The more information a player has, the more they can control their outcomes by picking approaches with risks they like taking. At the same time, the more information they get, the less Blood, Sweat, and Tears they pay to the Stage, and the less valuable that approach is towards completing the Project.

The optimal strategy depends on the GM and the circumstances. If the player is happy to roll with whatever punches the GM throws, the reckless and skeptical paths are best. If the GM is actively inclined to push events in directions unpleasant for the player, then the skeptical and fearful paths are best.

The GM also has a strategy in the Skeptic's Game. The Skeptic's Game assumes that the GM prefers players to take the reckless and skeptical paths – both because they're less work and because they're indications that the players are having fun with the GM's ideas. However it also assumes GMs prefer to play gloves-off, picking outcomes without worrying whether they're too harsh. So the GM's strategy is to moderate their risks *just enough* to make the players more reckless.

Note that even the most fearful player strategy won't prevent every bad outcome, and even the most moderate GM strategy won't prevent players from falling back on the fearful approach when they're nervous. That's okay – the strategy of the Skeptic's Game plays out relative to your gaming group and its natural tendencies towards fearfulness, recklessness, and moderate or harsh Narration.

Uninspiring Intentions

In general both of these strategies reverse in instances where the GM is unhappy with the players' approaches. The Skeptic's Game functions best when

the GM vetoes truly problematic ideas, expresses any unhappiness, and works with the players to find approaches that everyone enjoys. That said, when the GM is only mildly unenthusiastic players might want to move forward – but in the absence of GM enthusiasm they shouldn't invest much Blood, Sweat, and Tears in any given approach. Instead, they should take the fearful path to determine the source of the GM's disillusionment or outright reject the uninspiring intention and move on to something better.

Playing the Skeptic's Game

The Human Condition

Around Stage 6, Jill sets some solid goals for the Project – she thinks she's going to "unchain" the human collective unconscious, reducing individual members of the species to beasts but releasing a greater humanity-mind to guide the entirety in its actions.

She decides to hypnotically experiment on her friends and herself to contact the humanity-mind.

The GM treats this as an intention. Jill and the GM play the Skeptic's Game.

Here's what Jill can do.

She can follow that intention recklessly. Maybe that will make her a pariah among her friends. Maybe she'll regress them to beasts and they'll maul her. Maybe she'll wake up three years later, naked, in Antarctica. But it's 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears, which is practically a whole Stage in itself.

She can follow that intention skeptically. That gives her a good opportunity to survey the risks from the perspective of a scientist in the world – does Jill, professionally, consider hypnotism of this sort safe? Are her friends the type to cope or to freak? Will the humanity-mind kill her to keep itself asleep? These are all good questions to know the answers to. On the other hand, Jill's been playing the game for a while – she might think she already knows these things, and skeptical approaches only pay 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards the Stage's due.

She can follow the intention fearfully. That would push the GM to reveal his hand – instead of "you wake up three years later," she might get, "You have terrible dreams of losing yourself for years – grim forebodings that your awareness of yourself is hanging by a thread." But on the other hand, what if this is the right approach? What if it's a good idea? Then it's a waste to only get 3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears from it.

In the end, she'll choose based on her own characteristic opinions and her sense for the GM's plans.

Intentions

Think of the story of a Project as the slow revelation, corruption, and/or evolution of the character's intentions.

Imagine that the story advances each time the players find out something new about those intentions – whether it's a corruption or evolution of the characters' attitudes or simply the first time the group reveals a given truth in play.

Intentions become manifest in the game when something happens to reveal them to the players – when some event in the game world is the *revelation* of that intent. When that happens the GM may recognize the intention and begin the Skeptic's Game. The Skeptic's Game does not give the player the power to undo that action that revealed their intent – rather, backing away from their intention is a sign the character means to go "thus far, and no farther."

With the GM's permission, players can state their character's thoughts and use that internal monologue as the revelation of intent.

Returning to an Intention

Characters may revisit abandoned intentions in a different Stage and with the GM's permission. It is a peculiar characteristic of the brink of the abyss that it is wide and narrow simultaneously, so that a character may flirt with it and run away to find themselves still at its edge.

The Language of Intent

Here are the principal intentions recognized by **A Manual of Ambition** and the associated revelations.

New Studies

The character intends to immerse themselves in some source of knowledge – either for the first time, or deeper than ever before.

Here are some examples –

Books. The character delves into secret texts.

Interrogation. The character interrogates people with relevant information.

Research. The character seeks out more information about an area, event, or thing.

This intention is generally revealed when the character begins that course of research.

Expect up to three progressive approaches from each source of knowledge, triggered by three revelations of the character's rising interest –

- The character begins the investigation.
- The character shows excessive interest in the investigation.
- The character shows unhealthy interest in the investigation.

For example, a police officer might begin with a casual questioning of a murder victim's widow; she might escalate to illegal searches of the widow's family home; from there she might rent the victim's apartment, dress in his clothes, and start calling and pestering the widow in an imitation of the victim's voice.

Similarly a scientist might begin by studying the notes of Newton; continue by hunting down Newton's secret alchemical texts; and finally display an obsession wherein unearthing Newton's corpse and forcing it (with a galvanic bellows) to speak seems a reasonable approach.

A Manual of Ambition assumes that characters normalize what they investigate. Police become jaded to murder and mystics to the mysticism of their texts. Those scientists that look too deeply behind the mask of death accept its taint into their own lives. In this fashion every investigation works the character of its subjects into the nature of the Project.

The principal risks of these intentions are drifting Project objectives and Intellectual Corruption.

Study

The Human Condition

Jill studies sociology and anthropology. Later, she also studies psychology and statistics; this leads to a dead end when the GM gets bored. It's her investigation into Tertullian's works that shapes the Project most, though – not only do Tertullian's insights move her Project briskly along, they drive her mad.

New Ideas

The character intends to explore an idea or approach – either for the first time, or deeper than ever before.

Here are some examples –

Formal. The character applies a new formal process like "Can we get anywhere with better record-keeping and statistical analysis?" or "What if we streamlined this organization?"

Technical. The character explores a technical idea like "What if we try reclaiming the tar sands?"

Technobabble. The character explores an idea phrased as alchemical technobabble, such as "What if I built a substance without qualities?"

The player or character must generally explain this idea before revealing the intention. Then the intention is revealed when they begin studying it.

These intentions are limited to ideas that the players cannot reasonably explore in interactive play. Thus an intention like "I'd like to explore pitting these factions against one another." is valid when the characters are building sociological models and crunching the mathematics of discontent. When the characters are living and breathing among the two factions they wish to put at odds, it's not an idea – it's a set of actions.

A Manual of Ambition is fiction, so there's very little difference between technical ideas and studies – in practice, it doesn't matter whether the characters get their ideas from the classics or from their own heads, since ultimately it all comes from the players and the GM.

Ideas

The Human Condition

Jill does a comparative study of the vitality of humanity and the lower animals. This is a new idea. Later she considers the possibility that direct electrical stimulation to the lizard brain would be more efficacious than hypnotism. This is also a new idea.

Renewed Dedication

The character makes a greater emotional investment in the Project.

Here are some examples –

Determination. The character clings doggedly to the Project despite discouragements.

Obsession. The character neglects food or sleep.

Cruelty. The character forsakes ethical principles.

This intention is generally revealed with an action that displays the increased commitment. Sometimes the intention is instead revealed immediately before that action – the character lurks outside the home of a proposed victim, intending to abuse them in the Project's service, but decides to turn back after playing the Skeptic's Game.

The character may choose the approach of increasing their dedication to a Project many times over the Project's lifespan. However they must genuinely raise the bar of their zeal on each occasion.

Typically the first revelation of dedication takes the form of emoting – the character *acts* more invested and loses their cool a little bit. Afterwards their dedication reveals itself in the form of increasing sacrifices made upon the altar of the Project, both sacrifices they have the right to make and sacrifices that they do not.

A Manual of Ambition assumes that characters minimize the things they have already sacrificed: thus killers lose sight of the value of life, fanatical workers lose sight of the value of sleep, those who spend freely value money less, and slave-keepers lose sight of the value of others' freedom. This has an inexorable effect on the character who makes such investments and (on some occasions) the result of their labors.

The principal risks of these intentions are Emotional Corruption and increased personal risk, with a small chance of drifting Project objectives.

Renewed Dedication

The Human Condition

Jill's first renewal of dedication is her rant on the nature of humanity in the second Stage. Later on she insists on promulgating her "mad theories," sacrificing her reputation and the stability of her home life. It's common to sacrifice food and sleep on the altar of Projects like these but Jill's a bit of a health nut and her player doesn't want penalties. Near the very end of the Project, Jill steels herself for the final renewal of dedication – destroying everyone she's ever known, including her paralyzed lover, in the process of unleashing the humanity-mind.

Willingness to Act

The character expands the range of their activities.

Here are some examples –

Implementation. The character puts their ideas into practice for the first time.

Personal Involvement. The character personally involves themselves for the first time.

Pressure. The character puts pressure on a new category of person or situation.

Force. The character uses force on a new category of people or situations.

Characters generally reveal the intention to act by acting, although – as with emotional investment – preparation or tentative action can be as revealing as the action itself.

The character may choose the approach of expanding the range of their activities many times over the Project's life. They generally begin this path when they implement their ideas for the first time. If the Project is such that personal involvement is actually a meaningful step – with criminal conspiracy as a canonical example of where it is meaningful and self-training the canonical example of where it is not – then the second revelation is often one of personal involvement. After that it is common to continue expanding the character's activities for the duration of a Project.

A Manual of Ambition assumes that characters normalize their actions: thus, the more forceful a character's activities and the broader the range of activities they take, in pursuit of the Project, the more appropriate they'll consider such actions. This has an inexorable effect on the cost of the Project – both financially and in terms of its consequences for the world, the character, and others. It is also common for this to affect the character or the outcome of the work.

The principal risks of these intentions are increased Project cost and increased personal risk, with a small chance of drifting Project objectives, Emotional Corruption, or Intellectual Corruption.

Willingness to Act

The Human Condition

Some of the approaches Jill takes over the course of the Project that show increasing willingness to act include:

- Requesting a grant;
- Seeking contacts among her peers;
- Testing her theories by hypnotizing herself;
- Testing her theories by hypnotizing friends;
- Political intrigues against her former advisor to get tenure;
- Breaking the law to get a human brain to experiment on;
- Cutting into a living human brain;
- Cutting into her paralyzed lover's brain;
- Preparing to destroy awakened humanity to unleash the humanity-mind.

Conflict

The character provokes or escalates a conflict on behalf of the Project.

Here are some examples –

Attacking Monsters. The character tries to clear monsters out of a region needed for the Project.

Internal Struggle. The character attempts to eliminate management that's getting in their way.

Wagging the Dog. The character aggravates a conflict to justify requiring more resources to deal with it.

The intention to provoke a conflict is usually revealed by the first aggressive act. Whether the character can back down again depends upon the forcefulness of that step. Sometimes it is possible to reveal this intention before the point of aggression, as by discussing the intent with associates in a smoky back room or by taking a preparatory step that is not aggressive in itself.

A Manual of Ambition assumes that conflict is an *a priori* indication of narrative relevance. GMs should consider increasing conflict a valid reason to move a Project to a new, more advanced stage. Assume that this applies only to Projects pursued "on camera" – that this is a characteristic of stories and not the world.

A Manual of Ambition also assumes that conflict inherently tends to increase over a Project's lifespan rather than dying out. This is exaggerated for Projects

"on camera." Accordingly, picking a fight may increase the overall long-term risks to and costs of the Project.

Conflict

The Human Condition

Not every Project involves attacking somebody. Certainly Edmond Dantés' story would have suffered had he never moved against his enemies, but Dr. Frankenstein could build his monster, Dr. Lydgate his hospital, and Charles Darwin his theories without ever throwing a punch. That said, Jill initiates conflict against her former advisor as part of earning tenure. Later, arguably, she starts a fight against the rest of humanity.

Summing it Up

Watch for the following –

- The character's looking into something new.
- The character has a new idea.
- The character is making new sacrifices.
- The character is taking a broader range of actions.
- The character is starting or escalating a conflict.

When you notice something like this happening, that's a revelation of intent!

GMs and Intentions

As GM, you'll use intentions as a tool for advancing the story.

You only need this tool when the game is too slow for your tastes – when either the players are bored or when you're interested in picking up the pace.

You can exploit these intentions in three ways. The first is passive, so you have to start using it before the game slows down. The second and third are active, so you can use them to pick up the pace when it's desirable to do so.

Hands-Off Approach

To use this approach, tune your senses and listen for potential revelations in the things the players say.

Your goal is to notice whenever a player, in describing their actions, describes an event or desire that matches one of the intentions above. When they do, start up the Skeptic's Game.

To use this approach well you need to be enthusiastic – it works best when you're metaphorically perched like a hungry buzzard waiting to swoop down on appropriate statements.

Note that players have a kind of veto on intentions – they can decide against following the path that that revelation opens up – so you can't really *hurt* the players by watching for revelations of intent unless you focus on catching intentions that you or the players don't really like.

The hands-off approach is good for long-term player-driven games.

Hands-Off Approach

The Human Condition

For most of the game, Jill's Project relies on this hands-off approach. The GM waits for Jill to come up with ideas.

Tour Guide Approach

To use this approach, pick out Project-related intentions that would interest you and suggest them to the players. If your game has a defined story arc or pre-generated characters, you can treat these as character intentions and trigger the Skeptic's Game each time you bring one up. Otherwise, let the players pick and choose which they will explore.

Your goal is to give the players enough options to make them feel invested in what happens while still focusing their attention on the kinds of directions you'd like the story to take.

This approach also needs enthusiasm – it works best when you're excited about every idea you throw at them. It's a very good approach for short-term games with a defined story arc because you can give the players controlled freedom within that arc.

Tour Guide Approach

The Human Condition

Late in the story the GM wants to introduce a romantic subplot. He comes up with a set of ideas for how Jill could meet the dashing Drake Chettam and how things might progress – up to the point where he discovers her intentions, recoils in horror, and breaks his neck on the way to report her to the police. (Jill has picked up a bit of Intellectual Corruption focusing on her difficulty in maintaining a normal life, so the GM doesn't feel at all guilty about dooming her to unhappiness.)

The GM handles this as a new Project – *Learn the Futility of Love* – and runs it almost as a Choose Your Own Adventure. He offers Jill choices of intentions along the way, and her choices of which she follows up on determine the shape of the story. Some of these intentions include the Idea, "Sneak into Big Ben," the Study, "Investigate Drake Chettam for sinister intent," and the Willingness to Act, "Show Drake Chettam some of your research."

Cooperative Approach

To use this approach, you encourage the players to provide you with revelations.

You can do this by asking them, of course – e.g., "I'd like you to expand your activities," or "Hey, could you toss a few ideas for research paths on the table so we can move on?"

You can also do this through temptation –

- Suggest to the player that by making certain sacrifices they can make progress or gain a positive modifier on their roll to do so. For example –
 - "You're not getting anywhere this stage, but you know, you're thinking that if you cut back on sleep a little you might be able to get things done."
 - "No, still no good. Damn those restrictive rules that keep you from doing experiments on humans!"
 - "Maybe if you lived the life of a killer for a few days you'd understand this guy's mind better ..."
- Suggest to the player that by expanding their range of activities or initiating a conflict they can make progress or gain a positive modifier on their roll to do so. For example –
 - "It's that damnable Blake. If you could just get him to back off a little ..."

- "Maybe if you put some more money in it ..."
- "It's hard to say without an actual baby to run the cognitive tests on."
- Present someone with a source of information that they could pursue –
 - "My God! This library has ... you didn't even know most of these books had *survived!*"
 - "Naturally, naturally, if you'd be willing to *help* me, I'd, I'd *consider* letting you have access to the late doctor's work ..."
- If you like the kind of ideas your players come up with, encourage them to come up with them. Otherwise, listen for revelations of new ideas but don't tempt the players to provide them – although you can have NPCs suggest ideas you find palatable.
 - "I don't know. Throw some technobabble at me."
 - "Your financial advisor is suggesting that some streamlining is in order."

Players and Intentions

As a player, you also have access to intentions as an option for consciously advancing the story.

You only need this tool when you're not sure what to do but the GM is expecting you to come up with something. Then you can pick an appropriate intention to kick off a new approach.

The GM may allow you to declare that intention either as a player or by sharing your character's inner monologue with the group. Alternately, you may need to reveal it through play.

Declaration of Intent

The Human Condition

Early in Jill's Project, before it fully takes shape, the GM names one Stage, *The Study of the Proximity of Death on Human Consciousness*.

Jill conceives the following intention: psychological experimentation involving the proximity of corpses. The GM could immediately trigger the Skeptic's Game. But he doesn't have to. He could say, ". . . Like what?"

Similarly, if you're flirting with breaking the law to serve a Project, you might have to walk right up to the line – or even a little over – before you can use a fearful approach to know what might happen to you on the other side.

Acting on Intentions

Actions have consequences.

Thus when a character

- takes that first action that reveals their intention,
- chooses to pursue that intent with further actions, or
- does something unusual while pursuing some intent,

This leads to consequences in play.

These consequences come in four sorts –

- Opportunities for progress;
- Creation of new stages;
- Project-related risks; and
- Miscellaneous in-character consequences.

Opportunities for Progress

When a character takes action regarding some Project Stage – that is, by revealing an intention, following through on that intention, or taking in-character action relevant to that Stage's in-character description – they may realize the opportunity for progress embedded in that Stage.

The fuel for this is GM happiness. If at any point in a Stage a GM thinks –

- "They're doing exactly the right things to make progress." or
- "They're doing the wrong things, but damn, this is fun."

Then the characters immediately realize that Stage's opportunity for progress.

Creation of a New Stage

When events and actions dramatically increase the effect the Project has on the character's life – the level of the sacrifices they've made for it, the investments they've made in it, or the losses they've suffered because of it – it creates a new Project Stage.

For example, you create a new Stage when you break your own ethical rules in pursuit of a vaccine; when you increase your financial or personal investment in a Project by an order of magnitude; when your son abandons you because he objects to the Project; or when an enemy discovers your investigation of their personal affairs.

Project-Related Risks

Intellectual Corruption

Characters who immerse themselves in studies or ideas may suffer Intellectual Corruption.

Any time the player elects to act on an intention, the GM can apply Intellectual Corruption. This is a risk that a fearful approach should always reveal and that a skeptical approach should almost always reveal. This represents the GM's belief that the character is pursuing something that will taint their conceptions of what they *should* aim for.

In general the GM should pace the allocation of corruption based on the length of the game. In a long-term game, players earn Intellectual Corruption only from intentions that the GM could reasonably describe as milestones on the road to madness. In a game of modest length, players risk Intellectual Corruption any time they study peculiar ideas or embracing peculiar obsessions. A short-term game is more dangerous: simply skimming the wrong sources or thinking about the wrong ideas can corrupt a character's Intellect.

Project Drift

If a character's studies and ideas feel like they should taint the Project, but are not so extreme as to taint the character themselves, this yields a drift in the Project's objectives. The GM should note this – either to the players or themselves – as a reference point for deciding what the Project's outcomes should look like.

Emotional Corruption

Characters with too great an emotional investment in a Project may suffer Emotional Corruption. This madness is rarely a direct and obvious outgrowth of the emotions that spawn it – rather, strain on the irrational mind spreads from the initial stimulus to natural receptors in the unconscious and corrupts the character's characteristic inclinations. Thus some innocuous indulgence, such as an excessive dedication to charitable work, may bleed off into monstrous gluttonies or lusts.

Any time the player elects to act on an intention, the GM can apply Emotional Corruption. This is a risk that a fearful approach should always reveal and that a skeptical approach should almost always reveal. This represents the GM's belief that the character is pursuing something that will dismantle their emotional health and cause them to deny their own or others' needs.

In general the GM should pace the allocation of corruption based on the length of the game – in a long-term game, players earn Emotional Corruption only through actions that the GM could reasonably describe as moral degeneration. In a game of modest length, "unhealthy" actions and experiences risk Emotional Corruption. In a short-term game, ordinary stressors can corrupt a character's heart.

Project Risk

If a character is making unhealthy sacrifices for a Project, but somewhat short of those that would increase their Emotional Corruption, this tends to increase the strain on the Project as a whole. The GM should note this – either to the players or themselves – as a reference point for deciding the pace and level of the risks that the character will face in future Stages.

Project Cost

The wider the character's activities, the more the Project is likely to cost – not necessarily in money, but in the Project's native coin of pain, sorrow, time, stress, effort, goods, or goodwill. The GM should keep this in mind when considering the appropriateness of future approaches and any costs the GM charges for progress at the end of future Stages.

Physical Corruption

Characters who tamper with forbidden things, strain their body, or are incautious with the substances of death risk Physical Corruption.

Any time a player with a flaw or habit that *could grant* or *has granted* Physical Corruption elects to act on an intention, the GM can apply Physical Corruption. This is a risk that a fearful approach should always reveal and that a skeptical approach should almost always reveal.

These risks are unpredictable and can come up at any time, but should be very rare.

In general the GM should pace the allocation of corruption based on the length of the game – in a long-term game, players earn Physical Corruption from Projects only through negotiated story events or through such extraordinary folly as eating demonic corpses, injecting themselves with mold from corrupted lands, and so forth. In a game of modest length, players can earn Physical Corruption from crawling through slaughterhouses, sleeping with vampires, trapping themselves in a burning building, living in a sewer, or strenuous or filthy employment. In a short-term game, players can earn Physical Corruption from minor cosmetic surgery, smoking, or exposure to the London smog.

Miscellaneous In-Character Consequences

Remember that the GM need not phrase every consequence of a character's actions in terms of the Project or Corruption rules. Though it might create a new Stage and invite Emotional Corruption, murder also leaves a corpse. That corpse, regardless of the Project that gave it existence, can lead investigators to the character's door.

Consequences

The Human Condition

Over the course of Jill's Project, her Intellectual Corruption peaks. The Project's goals drift, although this is hardly noticed by the player as her own expectations for it drift at the same time. Jill also picks up two points of Emotional Corruption and one point of Physical Corruption along the way, manifesting as a ghoulish misanthropy, a pallor, a cough, and the desperate yearning for humanity to be pure.

Other Characters' Intentions

There are three cases – not counting cooperative Projects – where other characters' intentions or actions can pay Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards the completion of a Project Stage.

Conflict

Enemies start pushing or push harder against the Project.

Here are some examples –

Demons or Monsters Attack. The character is beset by demons or monsters—physical manifestations of Sin.

Enemies Push Back. Someone who will suffer as a result of the Project pushes back against it.

Managers Attack. The character faces resistance within their own organization.

Enemy-driven conflict can contribute towards the completion of a Stage just like player-initiated conflict. The first aggressive act reveals this intention.

A Manual of Ambition allows enemy-initiated conflict to move a Project forward on the assumption that such conflicts are emblematic of the Project and its storyline. For example, if the character suffers demonic attack in Stage

two, there's a real chance that the final act of the Project will play out amidst a full-fledged demonic outbreak and collapse of local services. The first demonic attack isn't random – it's part of the Project's story.

For this reason enemy-initiated conflict only yields points when the GM initiates it – either by having an NPC initiate the conflict or by suggesting the conflict to a player. The GM decides how much Blood, Sweat, or Tears each escalation pays – normally, somewhere between 3 and 5 points' worth.

Enemy initiated conflict can –

- Yield points towards the completion of the stage.
- Realize the stage's opportunity for progress.
- Create a new stage, if it substantially raises the stakes for the character running the Project.
- Have miscellaneous in-character consequences.

It does not normally yield a risk of corruption – those who advance their Projects purely by waiting for enemies to act are among the purest, if the least effective, in the world.

Enemy-Driven Conflict

The Ipswich Game

Enemies never drive *Jill's Project* forward, but we *have* seen an example of how this works –

When the cold-born attacked Lt. Cmdr. Tzavel on her flight to lost Earth, that was an enemy-driven escalation of conflict. Later, when the GM added a saint of shadow to the mix, that escalated the conflict again.

Thematic Events

Something happens that the GM considers thematically resonant with the Project's story.

Here are some examples –

Cold. The temperature falls to a new low.

Death. The characters encounter a greater sign of the works of death.

Degeneration of Society. Another institution of society collapses.

Eerie Effects. The GM escalates the eeriness of miscellaneous effects.

Using thematic events towards the completion of a Project is an optional rule best suited to short-term games with a 1-4 session running length or for major Projects pre-planned by the GM. It is also occasionally useful for GMs inclined towards artistic flourishes and metaphor. Here there is no division between revelation and intention; rather, when the GM reveals the thematic event, the GM also pays 3-15 Blood, Sweat, and Tears into some Stage or other.

Thematic events can –

- Pay Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards the completion of the Stage.
- Allow the character running the Project to realize the Stage's opportunity for progress.
- Increase the characters' Corruption (*not recommended except for 1-session games*).
- Have miscellaneous in-character consequences.

They do not normally create a new Stage, save by completing the current Stage.

Thematic Events

The Ipswich Game

Thematic events never drive *Jill's Project* forward, but we *have* seen an example of how this works –

When Victor cut away to show the incinerator raging at the end of session 3, that was a thematic event.

Unrequested Help

Characters start trying to advance the Project on their own without coordinating with the character responsible.

Here are some examples –

Interference. An interfering character thinks they know better how to approach the Project.

Isolation. The character responsible is unable to contact the characters in the field.

Rivalry. An associate tries to prove themselves by figuring out a good approach before the character responsible.

In these cases it is possible to advance the Project. However it is markedly less efficient. Modify the rewards of the Skeptic's Game as follows –

- The player determines some of the costs and the character *abandons* their intention (1 Blood, Sweat, and Tears).
- The player follows the fearful path but decides the character *acts* on their intention (2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears).
- The player follows the skeptical path and decides that the character acts (3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears).
- The player follows the reckless path and the character leaps into action (5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears).

Unrequested help can –

- Yield points towards the completion of the stage.
- Allow the character running the Project to realize the stage's opportunity for progress.
- Risk Corruption for the character helping.
- Impose Emotional Corruption on the character running the Project (*not recommended except for 1-session games*).
- Create a new stage, if it substantially raises the stakes for the character running the Project.
- Have miscellaneous in-character consequences.

Unrequested Help

The Human Condition

In the brief time when Mandy participated in the game, Tomas made a single attempt at advancing Jill's Project without her. He went to his wealthy family and began earnestly explaining the benefits of Jill's work in the hopes of earning her additional financial support.

Mandy and the GM played the Skeptic's Game. Mandy followed the skeptical path. For this reason Tomas realized, halfway through his earnest explanation, that his parents would probably *loathe* Jill's Project as the "egalitarian claptrap of proletarian science;" Mandy abandoned the intention, Tomas bit his tongue and did not continue, and the matter ended there.

This unexpected and unasked-for effort paid one point of Blood, Sweat, and Tears to **The Human Condition**.

Projects In Play

Having committed to an approach characters must act on it in play. Having resolved (after such caution as fearfulness or skepticism demanded) to proceed, they enact their intention until the GM releases them from doing so.

It is entirely up to the GM and the group *how* to play out the various approaches. It is reasonable to play through complex, detailed scenes; to play through loose summary-scenes; or to simply declare that the character pursues the approach and have the GM name the consequences.

Miscellaneous Play

Sometimes the characters are not implementing any specific approach or are working on multiple Projects simultaneously.

It is useful to charge this play time to a specific Project, with particularly shocking events contributing to that Project's advancement.

If a player is not working on any specific Project, the GM decides what their default Project is –

- Training in the character's career;
- A "life's work" chosen by the player; or
- A Project that the GM creates to correspond to the overall story.

Choose one default for all characters and keep it standard for the course of the game.

If the GM considers it reasonable for a player's action or intention to contribute towards any of two or more Projects, the player chooses which Project they are working on.

Consequences in Play

When you play out the pursuit of a Project in detail, it is generally possible for a large number of events to happen that nobody – not even the GM – precisely intended.

These events can have consequences just as the characters' intentions do. In particular the GM should watch for great sacrifices, inspired brilliance, incredible folly, and displays of madness.

Corruption

Characters can suffer corruption from certain assaults, certain tragedies, and certain choices, even if there's no Project involved.

Miscellaneous events in play can increase a Project's risks, increase a Project's costs, or cause a drift in some Project's objectives. The GM should take a note for later review when they feel this might have happened.

Creation of New Stages

Shocking events that dramatically increase a character's investment in a Project, loss during a Project, or sacrifices made for a Project can create a new Stage.

Blood, Sweat, and Tears

You can earn additional Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards a Stage from various events in play.

- Small accomplishments that seem relevant can pay 1-2 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards a Stage.
- Playing out Corruption or other psychological issues deriving from or relating to a Project can pay 1-2 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards one of that Project's Stages.
- Prolonged interaction with NPCs or settings closely associated with a Project can earn 1-5 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards one of that Project's Stages.
- Events that seem in retrospect like they should have been an approach – the character accomplishes something relevant to the Project, but never played the Skeptic's Game or thought through the intention – can pay 3-5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears towards a Project Stage.

Opportunities for Progress

Characters generally cannot realize opportunities for progress based on random events in play. The principal exception is miscellaneous events that the GM recognizes after describing them as a revelation of enemy-initiated conflict, a thematic event, or unrequested help.

Projects in Play

The Human Condition

The GM feels like playing out some combat, so a mugger mugs Jill. This doesn't go very well; Jill winds up badly hurt. This is a shocking event that could add a new Stage to some Project – but which one? Well, for Jill, it's pretty obvious – *The Human Condition*.

Later on, Jill manages to cheat her way into ownership of a small manor, wherein she will conduct her experiments. This whole affair isn't really *about* changing the nature of humanity, but nevertheless, it's progress on something. The GM tosses a few points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears into the current Stage.

Completing a Stage

When a character pays enough Blood, Sweat, and Tears to complete one Stage of a Project completes the GM has two decisions to make.

Creation of a New Stage

The GM must decide whether to create a new Stage.

Expect to create a new Stage 80% of the time or more. However, if the GM feels that a Stage was a dead end both dramatically and in terms of in-character value, no new Stage materializes. The only other source of new Stages is shocking events that escalate the character's involvement, so if you create a new Stage 80% of the time, players will need to suffer dramatic setbacks or escalate their character's involvement every 5 Stages. If they get into trouble *more* often than that, they'll be able to leave some Stages unfinished.

If a player runs out of Stages due to dead ends, the GM creates a new initial Stage by spending 10 PXP. The character cannot continue working on the Project without investing some in-character time in reevaluating the situation. If the Project has fewer than 10 accumulated PXP, the Project's reversals and difficulties have drained the character – they must spend personal experience points at some appropriate conversion ratio to make up the difference before restarting the Project.

Opportunities for Progress

If the character pays the Stage's due in Blood, Sweat, and Tears, but the character has not yet realized the opportunity for progress, then the GM can give them one final opportunity at the end of the stage.

In general the GM has three options for making the opportunity available —

- Give it to the player outright. ("I'm happy with that Stage. Have some PXP / have a bonus.")
- The GM can sell that opportunity to the player for —
 - In-character assets like money;
 - Taking specific actions;
 - Sacrificing a point of a Skill or other Trait;
 - Short-term or long-term penalties on some dice rolls;
 - Increasing one of the Corruptions.
- The GM can give the player the chance to roll to realize that opportunity —
 - An easy roll (e.g. 6+ on 2d10) for
 - Stages dominated by reckless Approaches or
 - Stages where the player contributed shockingly cool ideas and actions.
 - A moderate roll (e.g. 11+ on 2d10) for
 - Stages dominated by skeptical Approaches or
 - Stages where the player contributed unusually cool ideas and actions.
 - A hard roll (e.g. 16+ on 2d10) for
 - Stages dominated by fearful Approaches and rejected ideas.
- The GM may give the player the chance to roll, and, if they fail, to buy the opportunity.

Here are some guidelines that the GM can use.

If You're Happy, Give Them Progress

If, thinking back on the stage, you think —

- "They did the right things to make progress." or
- "They did the wrong things, but that was fun."

Then the character immediately realizes that stage's opportunity for progress.

Free Progress

The Human Condition

In the first Stage of her Project, Jill didn't really *do* anything – there wasn't any point where the GM said, "Wow, that's what you needed to do."

– but it was still, overall, the right start. So she made progress when the Stage ended.

If You Have a Cool Idea, Give Them Progress or Let them Buy It

If you as GM have something you'd really like to spend the Project's PXP on, then make sure you get the opportunity to spend it that way by deciding that the character realized the opportunity for progress.

If you have something you'd sort of like to spend the Project's PXP on, then make sure you at least offer the opportunity for progress to the player at a price.

If the Characters Fail, Offer a Cost

If it's pretty clear that what the character did *didn't work* but at the same time it was a reasonable choice on the character's part, you can offer an opportunity to buy progress.

Purchasing Progress

The Human Condition

It's stage 8 and the GM's not happy with Jill's combat Skills. She just can't fight well enough to make combat entertaining. The GM notices that Jill's working on stuff that could theoretically *help* with that – that is, studying primeval patterns in the brain. So the GM decides to award her some sort of combat benefit as a bonus.

There's a problem, though – Stage 8 kind of sucked. It ended with three "I don't want to go that way after all" approaches in a row – 6 points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears that didn't make anybody happy.

The GM thinks.

Then the GM says, "Well, that didn't work out very well, but if you're willing to splurge on some really good equipment and take a -2 on rolls to interact with the scientific community for a while, I think you could unlock something really cool."

That's one example. Later, there's another – when there's a chance that Jill might see into strange hidden truths of the mind, the GM offers to bump a mental Trait up one level in exchange for a point of Intellectual Corruption. This is on top of the normal Stage bonus, and the GM offers it mostly because he thinks it would be cool.

If Times were Hard, Offer a Roll

Offer a roll to realize the opportunity if the Project stage took things in particularly scary directions. This encourages the players not to flinch from doing scary things.

If You Hurried Through, Offer a Roll

If you're playing things out in an abbreviated fashion, so that the players don't have to do that much, then offer a roll instead of automatic progress when you're happy or the players did the right thing.

Rolling for Progress

The Human Condition

Jill never rolls for Progress – her GM prefers to levy a cost.

Realizing Opportunities

The Ipswich Game

In *The Reclamation of Worcester*, Mary realized the opportunity in the Stage before it ended on 4 occasions:

- *The Trip*, where Mary made progress after the dogfight;
- *The Cleanup*, where she made progress after Tzavel became corrupt;
- *The Beachhead*, when she made progress after establishing a base; and
- *The Cleansing of Worcester*, where she made progress after cool things happened (coincidentally, just before the Stage ended.)

Victor gave Mary free Progress at the end of the Stage on the grounds that the Stage on the whole was cool in *The Preparation*; *Getting Underway*; *The First Night*; *The Burning of the Dead*; *Reckoning with the Past*; *Transparent Excuses for Tormenting the Players*; and *Wrestling with HQ*.

On three occasions Victor made Mary roll for her progress:

- *The First Block*, which was cool but went very quickly;
- *Transparent Excuses for Fighting Monsters*, which was GM-driven; and
- *Letters from Home*, also a heavily GM-driven Stage.

Victor never charged Mary for a Stage's opportunity – he'd generally rather his players roll.

Results

The bonuses that the GM hands out, and the benefits of increasing the Project Completion Level, depend not on general rules but on the events in play. Here is a checklist of things to consider when deciding what kinds of outcomes the characters have earned.

- Do you want to move them straightforwardly towards their goal?

- How far do you think they should have progressed?
- How far do *they* think they should have progressed?
- Do you want to give them strange and twisted bonuses as intermediate results?
 - Are you giving out PXP fast enough to make this anything other than cruel?
 - Do you want to be cruel?
 - What kinds of strange and twisted ideas do you like?
 - What kinds of strange and twisted ideas do the players like?

Here is a checklist of things to consider when coming up with unusual bonuses

—

- What kinds of things did the characters study?
 - Are those sources characteristically prone to
 - madness?
 - deviancy?
 - corruption?
 - flaws?
 - controversy?
 - subversiveness?
 - evil?
 - wisdom?
 - How thoroughly did the characters dive into those studies?
 - How well do those studies sit with the core purpose of the Project?
 - How well do they sit with other studies and ideas?
- What kinds of ideas did the characters pursue?
 - How do those ideas interact with the themes you'd like to develop?
 - What are the likely flaws of those ideas?
 - Are the ideas
 - Mechanistic, inclined to distance the character from humanity?
 - Organic, inclined to remove the character's healthy detachment?
 - Mystic, prone to take the character into regions demarked only by hope, faith, and unreason?
 - Narrative, inclined to fit within an established genre or subgenre?
 - Rigorous, likely to snap under pressure?
 - Loose, likely to twist and pervert under pressure?
 - Abstract, likely to brush complications under the carpet?
- What kinds of passions did the character show?
 - What would egg the character on to greater passion of that sort?

- What would seem satisfying to a character consumed by such passions when a more balanced character might object?
- What kinds of activities did the characters pursue?
 - How can the moral consequences of those actions find parallel in the results?
 - How will others' reactions to those activities influence the results?
- What kind of conflicts did the Project experience?
 - How do they constrain what it is possible to accomplish?
 - What ideas might they inspire for pushing the Project further?
 - How can the Project's results be adjusted to make the conflict thematically sharper?
- What are the themes and motifs of your game?
 - How can you use an intermediate result to emphasize these themes?
 - How obvious and interesting are these themes to the players?
- What's in your notes on possible Project risks, drifts, and costs?

Results

The Human Condition

Jill's first bonus is a corporate grant. This reflects the GM's willingness to explore her situation as an ivory tower research scientist.

Later, she earns a bonus with comparative studies of the vitality of humans and animals. The GM looks over the list of questions. Jill has studied broad and analytical and mostly unimpeachable sources, save for Tertullian's somewhat misanthropic work. Her ideas have been bureaucratic and a bit mechanistic. She's shown a passion both for science and for viewing humanity as Fallen. The Project might have drifted a little with her reading of Tertullian's work. The GM sees Jill as suspended between two worlds — trying to build a savage jungle in the halls of academia and find bureaucratic justifications for nature red in tooth and claw. So he gives her a bonus that, he imagines, brings out the most detached and proto-academic trait in the animals — that intense stillness in observation with which an animal's senses take in the world and hold frozen any human they look upon. This is *Emulating the Beast-Mind*.

John Grey's Project

The Dream and Sorrow Institute

An Example Project

Gayle, the GM, is running a long-term game for five players – Peter, Susan, Lucy, Edmund, and Jill. This game is set in an alternate reality where weirdness is common, ordinary science is underdeveloped, and gods and monsters now and again walk among the human throngs. The game focuses on the Dream and Sorrow Institute (DSI), theoretically an authoritarian political think tank but in practice an organization conducting various illicit researches and gray operations on behalf of the CIA. When characters die they are typically replaced by family members, acquaintances, mentors, or students – anyone with a similar connection to the DSI and an ability to take over their role.

When our story begins, Peter is playing the dissolute and drunken DSI operative, Marvin. Susan is playing a pharmacologist – inventor of a number of drugs and pharmaceuticals ranging from penicillin to ibuprofen, that had not previously been developed in this alternate world. Lucy plays a crazed but cheerful psychic. Jill is playing the wife of the Dean.

Their stories most likely fascinate—but we will not speak of them herein.

This is Edmund's story.

Edmund is playing a scientist, John Grey. He's trying to create a serum to reanimate the dead. The CIA and its rivals have a number of mechanisms for doing this, but they've been troubled by the tendency of the dead to become intractable soulless killing machines that hunger for human flesh and brain-meat, monstrous vampires that start plagues of vampire-kin, or unruly and mindless beasts. His idea, though, is to add something to the corpse-awakening procedure—chemical and electrical stimulation of that portion of the brain responsible for transcendent mystical experience. Isn't religion the opiate of the masses? Why not also the opiate of the dead, to make them tractable labor? This example focuses on Grey's Project.

Gayle notes,

Neither of us has the scientific background to handle this kind of Project — even if reanimating the dead worked, which it doesn't. So we accepted from the beginning that this wouldn't be an experiment in hard science fiction but a mythic voyage of science. The Project rules, in this regard, needed to serve as the navigator, with Edmund as the captain and I the sea.

In practice, the DSI game emerges as something of a soap opera with zombies, gunfights, espionage, and mad science. Gayle even makes a house rule that dead characters can come back three sessions later if they can give a suitably shocking story as to how they survived.

DSI is full of grand ambitions so all five players have multiple Projects in the air. Gayle drives these Projects forward principally by listening for cues. She has an expressed intention to kill characters off without mercy, since they're somewhat replaceable, but she doesn't do this quite so often as she thinks she does. In this environment, Peter and Lucy laugh off danger and proceed with reckless abandon; Edmund, however, is congenitally cautious and favors fearful and skeptical approaches.

We're going to show you exactly how Edmund's Project develops from a vague concept into Dr. John Grey's doom.

Stage 1 — Sweat and Promises

Initial PXP: 4

John Grey's Project begins when the Dean of DSI hands him the mike at the Christmas party and asks him to explain a bit about his researches ("happy working zombies, wot?"), against a background of tipsy applause.

Exploiting Transcendental Experience (New Technical Idea)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Social Commitment to Project
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

After a bit of a social gaffe comparing the Pope to an electrical stimulation device, Edmund comes up with the foundational idea of the Project — exploiting the brain's capacity for transcendental experience. This, he lectures stuffily, is a section of the brain that normally remains quite active in the

awakened dead. (Although it is "arguably subject to atrophy in certain water-adapted specimens dredged up from Atlantean waters.") The opiate of the masses, so useful for social control of the living – why can't it also control the dead?

Afterwards, John Grey stumbles home to his apartment sweating with fear because he has no idea if this idea makes any sense. Gayle encourages him to pick a path.

"Fearful," Edmund says.

Gayle rethinks her encouragement:

No way! I don't want to have to do omens and portents when the Project's just starting — I don't know what's going to go wrong yet! Why don't you go with skeptical and tell me what you're worried about?

"– mostly, that it won't work at all and that the whole Institute will laugh at me and I'll have to live in a cave with an eyepatch and practice revenge against DSI."

*"I'm fairly sure that won't happen," says Gayle.
"Although I can't actually stop you from moving into a cave and wearing an eyepatch."*

"– Okay."

The next step in his researches, of course, is to drug the dead.

Obtaining Corpse Access (New Scope of Action)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Trivial Risk of Dying
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

In particular, he wants to reanimate a corpse in the standard and traditional fashion (the CIA's Frankenstein 2.0 "lightning rig") and dose it with Susan's "most marvelous invention," an ergot derivative developed to chemically reproduce aspects of the KGB's psychics' psychological landscape: lysergic acid diethylamide.

John Grey visits the "vitamorgue" – the players' term for the underground DSI cells where revivable bodies sleep – and asks the cadaverous old man who manages it about accessing DSI's corpse supply.

"Really? Already?" Gayle asks delightedly.

Gayle encourages Edmund once again to pick a path. Edmund goes with the skeptical path again just in case the vitamorgue turns out to have a strict "one corpse checked out, one corpse checked in" policy, but it does not.

Synthesizing Susan's Most Marvelous Invention (New Scope of Action)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Dissolute Operative Rampage -> Coverup
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Finally, Edmund synthesizes a batch of the drug. He picks the skeptical path a third time, and Gayle summarizes the risks:

"You won't be able to keep Marvin from getting access to it. Susan certainly couldn't. Plus, like most drugs, it corrodes the sanctity of the social order and leads to depravity, a breakdown of civility, and a putative loss of Heaven's grace."

Edmund smiles thinly.

"I'll live," he says.

He rolls poorly on his Medicine roll to make Susan's ergot derivative, burns a daily power for a reroll, and this time rolls well.

Inevitably Peter's dissolute operative Marvin goes on a hallucination-driven rampage, ranting about the Eleusinian Mysteries and the gates of Hell. DSI denies the involvement of any DSI personnel and Edmund files a report with the Dean gravely recording his "vast surprise" at Marvin's successful access to his "carefully controlled" supplies.

This closes the first stage of the Project, earning 7 PXP and creating a new Stage.

Stage 2 – How Badly It Bites

Initial PXP: 6

Careful Experiment on Reanimated Corpse (New Scope of Action)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Reckless)	-> Actions	-> Trivial Risk of Dying
		-> 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

"I really want to know how badly this is going to bite me," Edmund says.

Reasonably, Gayle points out,

"What, you're going to not revive a corpse and give the drug to it?"

Edmund sweats.

"Fine," he says. "I'll do it. John Grey will do it. Even if it's not a good idea. But I'm going to as careful as a hen in a foxhouse."

Edmund injects the corpse with vital fluids, charges it with lightning, and awakens it in the Frankenstein rig. It flails viciously, but remains bound to the rig. He rolls a medium value on his roll to administer the drug – a failure or a success, at Gayle's whim, as she has not specified the difficulty of the task.

"The zombie is still strapped to the rig. Carefully, you extend a fake human hand impregnated with a microdot of LSD, and---"

Gayle stage-shrieks.

"What? What happened?"

". . . Oh, just some street-person screaming outside. Probably getting eaten by some monster or other. "

There's a quiet.

"It's fine, Dr. Grey. Everything's fine here. No danger. No trouble. The zombie . . . may or may not be hallucinating."

"What?"

"How can you tell? It's dead, and it's strapped down, and it was already . . . hungry."

Study Zombie Pupil Dilation (New Technical Idea)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Fearful)	-> Actions	-> Eventual Doom
		-> 3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Hesitantly John Grey attempts to measure the zombie's pupils with a Medicine roll. Gayle treats this as a new technical idea because it's helpful to her to start establishing how Edmund plans to monitor the zombies' reactions. They play the skeptic's game. Edmund goes fearful.

"Will it rip off its restraints and kill me?"

"Eventually. . . . Eventually. You can tell. As you lean in and shine the light into those dark points. If you keep doing this, eventually you'll be food unto the dead."

"But not today?"

"Of course not. Death's just getting to know you."

Gayle's got a kind of a vision of what it is to look deep into a zombie's eyes and figures it might be an emblematic symbol of this Project but she can't think of a good way to really impress Edmund with it right now so she files it at the back of her head.

"Does it— I mean, is it responding at all?" Edmund asks. He rolls a 14.

"You think it might be hallucinating," Gayle says. *And then, suddenly knowing where this should go, she says,*
"But how are you going to see inside a dead man's mind?"

Analytic Zombie Encephalogram (New Technical Idea)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Construction of the Analytic Zombie Encephalogram Mk. 1
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Another player might very well have responded to this by researching the behavioral psychology of zombies, but not Edmund, and hence, not John Grey.

“We need some kind of encephalogram or analytic device wired up to computers and brain maps so we can figure out what it’s experiencing. Will that work?”

"No computers," Gayle says. "Not in this dark alternate reality where there is no Internet. No spam. No slash. No AIM beeping every time Edmund starts working. The world of DSI is not like ours; it is terrible, sorrowful, and grim."

“But how do I get my email?”

"There is a room beneath DSI wherein are 8,000 men arranged in rows, and their eyes cut out, and abaci in their hands, and with clicks and clacks their endless calculation; and their faces are grey and the ceiling drips water on them and at times they write on papyrus and send such messages up. But that is not email. You do not get email, properly, at all."

Edmund doesn't ever wind up asking Gayle if she's serious, and so we also will never know.

Instead of hooking his devices up to computers, he gathers great reams of tickertape and books of tables and studies it late into the night; and even then, Gayle tells him, it will be a rudimentary analysis unless he can get better equipment and a bigger lab. But he works on it.

As John Grey pores over the initial results, the stage closes, earning 7 PXP and creating a new Stage.

Stage 3 – "The Big Problem in Docile Cadaver Research"

Initial PXP: 5

Analytic Zombie Encephalogram (New Technical Idea)	3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears carry over.
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Zombie Perspective Interface (New Technical Idea)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Construction of the Zombie Perspective Interface Mk. 1
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

"The big problem in docile cadaver research," John Grey admits to his mistress —

Jill's PC in *this* game, Branwen, also the wife of the Dean and secretly the half-sister John Grey thought he'd killed when he was 16 —

"is getting a better picture of what the awakened dead experience."

"Maybe you could wear some sort of helmet that makes everything look like food," she suggests.

"That's why *you're* not a scientist," John counters.

After a bit, Edmund observes to Gayle, "I should make a helmet that makes everything look like food."

"Yay zombiecam!"

John Grey begins building one.

"How does it work?" Gayle asks.

"I have no idea," Edmund says.

"Really?"

"Well," he says. "I mean, some kind of kirlian monitoring effect or something. Life-sensitive crystal arrays. Image analysis by brain slices. Whatever. Something to highlight probable targets of zombie attention."

"How would you define those?"

". . . comparison to the analytic zombie encephalogram, I guess," Edmund says.

"Cool."

They play the skeptic's game. Edmund is skeptical, but there's really nothing that John Grey knows about this approach that Edmund doesn't. Once he commits to the approach, Edmund rolls Science to write out the blueprints and starts in on the manufacture. Edmund rolls low and fails, but since Dr. John Grey's a right proper mad scientist all that adds is time and cost. Gayle still lets him *build* the device over the next seven months.

Wearing ZombieCam to Parties (Renewal of Dedication)	-> Noticed Retroactively	-> Actions	-> Fight with Branwen
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Naturally, Dr. Grey has to wear his zombiecama at the next party and inappropriately freak out other DSI members with his descriptions of how they look "to the reanimated dead. "

This leads to a blowup between him and Branwen and to Dr. Grey stalking home in a funk thinking sardonically about how edible people he passes on the street are.

Gayle thinks about this some and says,

"It's a little late, but I'm thinking that should have been a renewal of dedication. I'm willing to pay you 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears for it."

"Okay!"

Testing Zombie Behavior (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Fearful)	-> Actions	-> Combat
		-> 3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Edmund decides, "I don't have enough data for the upcoming project reports."

"That's true."

"I've got to get more *out* of the drugged zombie. Can I release it into a larger cell after drugging it?"

"Sure," Gayle says.

"It's certainly not fully balanced and its behaviors are kind of weird. Eventually it tangles up the encephalogram."

Edmund was hoping to cue Gayle into giving him more points of Blood, Sweat, and Tears, but he didn't make it explicit and Gayle doesn't recognize this as an expanded scope of activities. This is because it's not – the risks of letting the zombie into a larger cell are essentially equivalent to having a zombie in the lab in the first place.

"Hm," Edmund says. "I'd like to expand the zombie observation into a broader context. How far would I have to go before I can get meaningfully differentiable results?"

"Relatively free behavior with a victim nearby, both with it drugged and with it undrugged."

"I'd like to try that," Edmund says. "Maybe lock a drugged and an undrugged one in a room with Peter, get him to kill 'em slow so that we can take observations?"

"Seems like a plan. Skeptic's Game?"

"Fearful!" Peter chimes in.

"Wimp," Edmund says, adjusting his glasses.

"If he's not going to get fearsome visions of impending doom when Marvin risks himself for this, I sure as heck better!"

"Fearful it is," Edmund says.

"Hm," says Gayle.

She thinks.

"I myself don't know the risks since the combat game isn't scripted. So how about this: we'll run it as a combat, but if Marvin gets killed, we'll rewind time, have observer Edmund realize it's about to happen, and let him shout a warning or trigger snipers to shoot the zombie legs or something. But if Marvin blows things badly enough to get killed twice while fighting two zombies, one of them on drugs —"

Sadly, Gayle does not get to finish her sentence, as she is giggling helplessly.

"What?"

"This is eating Marvin's brain — on drugs!"

It almost happens. Marvin has an obligation to fight slowly, which hampers his style. Late in the fight, he has to dart in and disentangle the cords when the zombies wind their AZE cables around one another. It takes him too close and distracts him too much and the teeth of a zombie almost close on his neck. Fortunately, Edmund realizes what's going down and he shouts a warning, and it doesn't happen again.

After the fight, Gayle closes the Stage and opens a new one. She reflects on whether Edmund should earn the Stage's PXP and concludes that she's reasonably happy. Plus, the zombicam is looking more or less functional and she wants to spend 1 PXP to buy it as a bonus. However, she has an idea, so before assigning 6 PXP and spending 1 she says,

"I'll give you double PXP if you'll take a point of Intellectual Corruption."

"Eh? For what?"

*Says the GM:
"I've got an idea."*

Edmund thinks about this. "Nah," he says.

Edmund is mistakenly assuming that Gayle is trying to pull a fast one on him – that he should be evaluating the offer itself for hidden teeth instead of trying to figure out whether he wants to follow Gayle's direction or his own.

"Okay," snuffles Gayle.
 "But can I keep this idea around? It's really cool."

At this point Edmund realizes what's going on. He doesn't want to embarrass himself by correcting his earlier statement, though, so he goes with, "Sure!"

Stage 4 – Frames of Reference

Initial PXP: 4

Testing Zombie Behavior (Expanded Scope of Activities)	1 point carries over.
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Requisitioning a Psychic (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Fearful)	-> Actions	-> Involving Lucy's Character
			-> Ticking Susan off.
		-> 3 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

"Can psychics tell what's going on in zombie brains?"

"No, " Gayle says.

Edmund rubs his chin. "What if we tried to 'tune' a handy DSI psychic to the zombie frequency with zombicam data and miscellaneous stimuli to help match her brain to the encephalogram?"

"Hey!" says Lucy, who's playing the handiest DSI psychic.

"I dunno! What do you think would happen?"

"I'll fearfully set up the experiment."

Gayle thinks about it.

*"I think mostly you're likely to get in trouble with Susan's project,"
Gayle says,
"for tampering with her psychic."*

"No horrible death things?"

*"You're scraping around the surface," Gayle says.
"Even if you could somehow get in, which would be a Project in
itself, you'd still just be scraping around the surface of the zombie-
mind."*

Edmund hasn't been assertive about this idea. He *wants* to peel back the protective shell of death from the inner secrets of the zombie mind but he hasn't put that forward as something that should happen. Instead, he's proposed a lab experiment and asked Gayle how it would work out. That's why Gayle's understanding his request as something very different: "I'd like to expand my operation to include requisitioning psychic resources." Which is a valid approach but won't get him very far.

Edmund says, "What can I do to get deeper?"

Gayle thinks about this.

*"The problem is that you don't have a common frame of reference,"
she says.
"To start understanding death, you must first understand death. So
you'd need to bypass that through direct experience somehow, I
think."*

Edmund considers that.

"But I don't *want* direct experience of death," he says.

Few people do.

"Do you still want to bring Lucy's psychic in?"

"Yeah, sure. Fearfully."

*"You think it should be pretty safe. The biggest risk is a false positive:
any reading she gets off of a zombie is more likely to be a
hallucination than an insight into the dead."*

Feeding Dead Rats Cheese and Drugs (Unique Technical Idea)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Edmund says, "Time to start on the physical stuff. We need to start working on the physical implications of faith."

"Life is a liquid," says Susan, wisely, "and faith a waveform radiation."

"That'd be weird," Edmund says.

Edmund thinks.

"I'm going to start with giving dead rats transcendent experiences, move up to identifying the individual chemical substances that react, and use that to find the physical essence of faith. If it's radiation, that's all good with me."

"How do you give dead rats transcendent experiences?"

"Artificial heart pumping and life support plus drugs or cheese."

Even though Gayle's looking at him a bit funny, Edmund rolls Science and gets a critical success. He points to the dice with a "See? See? I *knew* drugs and cheese were transcendent to dead rats." attitude, and Gayle finds this, of course, entirely convincing.

Brewing Faith Liquid (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Challenge to Dr. Grey's Faith
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

"Where do you go from there?" Gayle asks.

"Hm," Edmund says.

He's savoring an image of a lab full of dead rats with green liquid pumping into their limbs, cheese dangling over their noses, occasional limb twitches, and various play wheels and climbing tunnels with no purpose whatsoever, the rats being dead.

"Once we've got the rats stimulated," Edmund says, "I need to be distilling stuff from their brains to make some kind of . . . thingie."

"Thingie?"

"Some kind of faith liquid."

Gayle considers this.

"How are you doing the distillation?"

"Probably successive refinement processes to screen out elemental and spiritual impurities."

"Won't that leave you with an empty vial?"

"Nonsense," Edmund says. "I'm a mad scientist. It has *something* in it."

Gayle's got a problem here. Edmund clearly thinks that this has advanced the Project, and in a real way it has. However, it hasn't advanced the Project in any way she can recognize as a new approach – it's part of the same technical idea as the rats.

"Okay," Gayle tries.

"What changes in John Grey's story now that he's doing this? Is he getting obsessed with the rats, or spending too much time with the faith vials, or announcing the results, or what?"

"Hm," Edmund says. "I think that what really changes is that Dr. Grey's getting a bit weird about the concept of faith. Like, he's opening himself up for Emotional Corruption later – not yet, but later – because he's challenging the idea that *anyone* can have a higher purpose, whereas I think he's secretly believed all his life that it's just the masses who are meaningless."

"Okay!" Gayle says.

"I'll let you have that outcome if you go skeptical. But go reckless and I might just make up my own!"

Edmund works on this for a while, making four Science rolls over the course of a session or two to give Gayle a sense of the cost in materiel and effort of this Project Stage.

Analytic Zombie Encephalogram (Further Study)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Not Followed)	-> 2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears
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"And from there?"

"Okay," Edmund says, thoughtfully. "It's time to dig deeper into the AZE reports. How much can I get out of them if I work hard?"

"What do you want to get out of them?"

"I need to be able to stimulate a zombie to do something other than thrash around or leap at the nearest food source."

Gayle thinks.

"You can get that," she agrees.

"I'm delving into the AZE reports, then," he says. "Fearfully."

"You're risking *Intellectual Corruption*, of course. I mean, studying the details of how a zombie thinks and responds to stimuli? But that's not all."

"It's *not*?"

"Somewhere beyond," Gayle says, "and as you flip through your notes late at night in your lab, you see — I don't know. Something. A long time ago, you were out getting a bagel and you walked past this half-dead guy on the street and he was shouting about the end times and 'the light that knows not life.' And he had this desperation in his eyes, which made sense, because he got clubbed by the police and dragged off not long after. I don't know. It's hard to say what reminded you of that."

Edmund gulps.

"That's the idea, isn't it? From before?"

"Maaybe," Gayle says.

"I'm going to drop the papers and go away and take a long, hot shower."
Edmund says.

"Huh," Gayle says.

"Huh?"

"That's it for the stage," Gayle says.

She looks over events.

"And, I guess, for the Project. I'm happy with you, but that's a dead end if I've ever seen one. Lucky John Grey!"

". . . really?"

"Tell you what," says Gayle. "I'll give you an easy roll to get the opportunity for the stage, and we can make it some kind of mind-widening thing — buy up some of John Grey's mental abilities."

"Cool."

And that's what happens. Gayle has 24 PXP to spend. She converts them into character XP and spends 12 of them to buy up one of Dr. John Grey's mental traits. 12 wouldn't normally be enough, but there's a serendipity bonus in play — Dr. John Grey, who wouldn't have conceded that he *could* get smarter, certainly wasn't *looking* to get smarter.

Stage 5 — The Light That Knows Not Life

Initial PXP: 3

Demanding Funding (Expanded Scope of Ideas)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Reckless)	-> Actions	-> Moral Burden
		-> 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	-> Combat

The annual project report and assessment approaches. John Grey has nothing.

"You know," says Branwen, in a casual meeting, "most people who get fired from DSI seem to wind up in the vitamorgue as useful corpses. Isn't that a weird coincidence?"

"Ha, ha, ha," says John Grey, stuffing another tea cake in his mouth.

Then Edmund looks painedly at Gayle.

"I've got to restart that Project. Does it have 10 PXP left to spend on that?"

"Sure!" Gayle says.

"Do something cool! Hit the ground running!"

"I recklessly demand funding for engineers and mathematicians to build an improved analytical technology for the AZE! And interns to comb over the results! And by gum I'll obsessively study their filtered-down notes myself!"

"One at a time," says Gayle.

"One at a time!"

"Don't kill me," Edmund says, nervously. "And let's start with the funding."

Gayle looks over the Project chart.

"No trouble bringing the engineers and mathies and interns on board," Gayle says.

"Phew," says Edmund.

"You smooth-talk the Dean, who's glad that you're getting assertive about giving this Project what it needs. You get the mathematicians set up building the analytical model and the engineers going over the equipment and the interns with their giant stacks of paper and woeful hollow faces and such. Are you giving everyone full details on the Project, or just the raw numbers, or just a raw problem statement about analysis?"

"Probably the raw numbers," Edmund says.

"Combat begins."

"What?"

"I can't help it!" Gayle says.

"Eustace the mathematician is trying to kill and eat you!"

"That insufferable prat!" says Edmund. "Is this because I swindled his father out of his grain elevator fortune?"

Zombie Behavior Modification (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Realizing the Stage's Opportunity
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

One fight later, John Grey is alive.

He stands there panting over the bloodied body of the mathematician.

"What the Hell?"

He restrains Eustace. The man babbles about "the light that knoweth not life." The formal report from DSI interrogators reads, succinctly,

"Subject acquired the delusion that zombies have direct experience of God."

John Grey doesn't think about it.

He *could* think about it any time he wants to.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he says, "Cancel the obsessive study. I just want to generate a false stimulus now, something to get a zombie to walk away from food. Towards – towards, whatever."

Edmund gestures. "Towards that part of the AZE data I'm not thinking about. Towards that."

"Check."

Just in time for the quarterly report, John Grey's project bears its first fruits.

He earns 6 PXP, bringing the Project up to 8, and Gayle spends 5 of them on a bonus. *Zombie Remote Control*. A straightjacketed zombie with headset wires stuck into its brain, legs free, marching left, right, or forward at John Grey's command.

Stage 6 – Faith Alone

Initial PXP: 3

Studies of Faith (Expanded Technical Idea)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Intellectual Corruption
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Edmund feels like the Frankenstein rig is inadequate to his purposes. It's the wrong way to wake the dead. But without using prior work he has no real idea how to generate the vital principle.

So he tries to work with what he has, asking, "Can faith alone make life?"

This isn't a new technical idea, and it isn't in itself an obsession, so this serves as the frame for progress in the stage rather than progress in itself.

Edmund makes Science rolls every IC week, but neither burns down his lab or rolls a critical success that might wrest some generosity from Gayle. Mostly this just stains his hands and generates a larger supply of hypothetical faith liquid.

The next actual progress comes during an unrelated story when Edmund admits in conversation, "I find myself blaspheming or praying around certain of the corpses to determine which will make them livelier."

This represents a certain unhealthiness of behavior and attitude and therefore Gayle triggers the Skeptic's Game.

"Would you like to invest that bit of extra effort into the whole faith thing?"

"Skeptically."

"You're developing the concept of faith as a natural, zombie-awakening force, which opens you to a fundamental perversion of your drives."

Edmund considers.

"Oh, fine," Edmund sighs. "Dr. Grey's hardly been sane all this time anyway."

Dr. Grey picks up his first point of Intellectual Corruption.

Risking Lab Assistant (Renewal of Dedication)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	-> Actions	-> Vicious Lab Assistant Resentment -> Realizing the Stage's Opportunity
		-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

"I don't think that faith alone can make life,"
Gayle concludes, after a particularly dismal Science roll.

In fairness, many would argue that Edmund is rolling the wrong Skill.

"Really?"

"I think it's definitively proven by this astonishingly faithful rock you just made."

"That was my lab assistant's," denies Edmund, suavely. "I certainly don't make faithful rocks."

"That would be stupid," Peter agrees.

"Then how about we run Frankenstein current *through* a faith IV," Edmund proposes, "to facilitate awakening the dead? If it's a bit dangerous and mutates one of my lab assistants, that's a risk I'm willing to bear."

"Alas for Puddleglum! Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Skeptical – just how bad can it be?"

"Well, you could wake up a zombie with the capacity to perform miracles, sort of like Jesus only hungry for brains, but that's unlikely. Although man, what a good storyline. Hmm. Or Puddleglum could revolt and eat you. Or the faith could explode and make John Grey a priest. A wacky man of the faith with a congregation of zombies. I'll triple the PXP if I can do all of that!"

". . . In terms of likely risks . . ."

"Probably vicious lab assistant resentment, plus you might get a zombie. "

"That's good in my book."

Edmund rolls Science to see where things go. He rolls poorly. Puddleglum doesn't look quite the same way at Dr. John Grey after his hair falls out and his feet go all funny. He doesn't look at Dr. John Grey the same way at *all*.

But on the fifth try, Dr. John Grey achieves the second, rather quixotic, result of his Project.

He's working with the corpse of Lucy's psychic's evil twin's daughter Melissa, and what he gets isn't quite a zombie.

It's not quite a zombie at all.

It's a bonus. It's a marvelous and twisted bonus. It's the *Grey Revivification Technique* bonus.

For two and a half minutes, it's a little girl, memory and cognition and all.

Then it's just something screaming to die.

Inside the GM's Head

Here's what's going through Gayle's head right now as she improvises the development of Edmund's Project.

There's something – she's not totally sure what – out there that zombies experience that make them kill the living. They're not just mindless. They are *rapt* to the extent that they do not care for the life they kill. That thing they experience is the "light that knows not life."

John Grey's seen the edges of it.

Eustace has seen the heart of it.

And one thing that she's decided is that up until Edmund either hits maximum Intellectual Corruption or tells her otherwise, Dr. John Grey isn't looking at it head-on. He's doing everything he can to keep it *out* of his researches.

She's just decided that a zombie without that experience is a person, a wakeful intelligent person with no desire to kill; but also that a person without that experience can't survive – they go mad.

What about all the living people who presumably don't have that experience? Well, Gayle's not perfect, so she's probably decided something about that, but she's trying not to plan that far ahead – if she nails down how this works, then Edmund can play guess-what's-in-the-GM's head and come up with a perfect docile-zombie serum. Instead, she focuses on the story going on right now.

Background Material Study (New Study)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Reckless)	-> Actions	-> Reading More About Your Brain on Drugs
			-> Emotional Corruption
		-> 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

"Before I go any farther with this," says Edmund. "At some point, I have to dig through the standard brain studies of supernatural, drug, and transcendent experience. And I'd like to do that now, before I have to face anything weirder without background information."

"Sure thing."

"What the heck. I'll do it recklessly."

"Can I be brutal?" Gayle says.

Edmund looks at her. "Huh?" He makes a face. "Um, okay."

"It's just," she says, "that it seems dramatically pretty clear that this is an ego-risk for someone like John Grey. I mean, he's been all, 'bah, the peons, they're just manipulable brain-meat,' but reading all that while trying to cross-reference it with your own thought processes and poking at the meaning of transcendental experience — at some point here he's going to go, 'oh, I'm brain-meat too.' And the stress of that's likely to push out into Emotional Corruption, like you mentioned earlier."

"As he gropes for self-affirmation?"

"Yeah."

"Well, reckless is reckless!"

Dr. John Grey, who started with a point of Emotional Corruption, gains a second point thereof.

The Stage closes, earning 4 PXP and opening a new Stage.

Stage 7 – The Prolongation of Agony

Initial PXP: 4

Background Material Study (New Study)	5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears carry over.
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Subject H (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Reckless)	-> Actions	-> Emotional Corruption
		-> 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

It's another session and another day in the lab.

"Two and a half minutes isn't very good," comments Marvin.

"Hm?"

"I mean, sure, it's great for DSI. Bring a body back, get two and a half minutes to get data out of them, but it's not like you can really *crack* a person in that time."

"I don't know why they go mad, quite," Dr. Grey admits.

"They might run out of faith?" Marvin says. "Like, a lot of people need faith to get through their lives in warm bodies, so maybe it's harder when they're cold."

"Does the faith in a patent Grey-Revived Corpse decay or stay stable?" Edmund asks Gayle.

Gayle thinks about this.

"What'll you do if it decays?"

"If the faith's got a half-life of two and a half minutes," Edmund says, "then I suppose we can drain a lot more rats and see about keeping someone with us longer."

"Will you?"

"Recklessly!"

"All right!" says Gayle. "Some poor people die and gets nabbed by DSI's corpse-men and you hook them up to a steady flow of faith-irradiated life and see how long you can stretch out their afterlife before they succumb to utter despair. Eventually, you get Subject H, a dead man held stable somewhere before the point of desperate screaming to die by a constant infusion of distilled faith. He huddles there in his restraints and his IVs, shaking, cold, and saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'"

"What a weird dead dude," says Edmund.

"Behold," says Puddleglum. 'He calls Elias.' And he giggles and rubs a sponge of vinegar across the man's forehead to keep it fresh. And Subject H cries out, a great shout, and struggles, and then a pulse from the machine sends a new dose of faith into his blood and he

writhes and mutters and says, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' And Puddleglum cackles and says, 'Behold.'"

"I have the worst hunchback ever," says Edmund, but he's actually creeped out.

"Apostate!" screams Puddleglum, and shoves a spongeful of vinegar into Dr. John Grey's mouth."

A short time passes.

Edmund discusses the readings and such he's taking on Subject H.

*"Incidentally," Gayle says,
"I think you're probably going to pick up Emotional Corruption from keeping a person around in that state. I mean, sure, he's already dead, but damn."*

The stage closes, earning 5 PXP and opening a new stage.

Stage 8 – A Glimpse Into Abaddon

Initial PXP: 4

Edmund talks for a bit about what he's doing and Gayle realizes that he's more in the dark than he should be – that he's focused more on figuring out what Gayle's already decided than on experiments in the world. Just as Dr. Grey has to see the physical results of his experiments to make progress, Edmund has to know what firm decisions Gayle makes as the result of his Project approaches. Gayle leaves some of her speculative ideas on the shelf but she tells him all of the things that she's firmly decided.

The lab report comes back on Subject H.

"What you've got so far is that your zombies are hitting despair as soon as they notice that something is missing. You're not sure what it is. No safe amount of faith — safe in the sense of not producing weirdo mutation type stuff — is going to keep them from seeing that missingness eventually. And no safe amount of faith is going to sustain them in a state much better than Subject H's. All the faith you can give them — it's still like a bandaid after seppuku. Whatever it is that's missing, it's related to the thing that zombies experience that makes them killers and possibly it's also related to why zombies' higher brain functions don't usually return. You're pretty sure that Subject H isn't infected with the light that knows not life memplex — but not entirely sure."

Edmund gets four ideas from this – not necessarily the same ones you would, or that Gayle has in mind. One is that he could probably bring back the dead as freakish mutants; one is that he could look into cutting off some of the brain function of his revived creatures so that they can't think about their despair in any clear way; one of them is that comparing Subject H's AZE with a zombie's might lead somewhere; and lastly he could interrogate Subject H about the light that knows not life.

He discards the idea of freakish mutants because Dr. John Grey isn't that kind of scientist and he can't compete with the Finnish *Love and Emptiness Institute* scientists when it comes to making freakish mutants anyway. He shelves the idea of the AZE comparison for reasons of prudence and decides that the logical order for the other two ideas is to interrogate Subject H before lobotomizing him.

"Can I get corruption just from talking to him?" Edmund hesitates. "Skeptical path?"

"You're at the point where almost anything thinky or investigative you can do about this risks breaking the fragile barriers you've got in your head," Gayle says. "Your faith is in tatters, something big and brooding is out there, and the only way you've got to avoid it is to push others into your path."

Edmund meditates on this.

"Then it's got to be the Dean," he says. "I'll tell Branwen over lunch about the marvelous Subject H and imply that maybe she should get over her anger. That I think that we're close to a breakthrough that'll push me right to the *top* here at DSI but how I'm a little nervous about taking the final step and pressing him on the subject of the light that knows not life. I figure, unless Jill has a better idea, she's still mad at me, she'll tell her hubby, and he'll take over on that interrogation. Then I can close my ears."

"That's slimy!"

Interrogating Subject H (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Not Followed)	<table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="781 1644 1008 1812">-> Actions</td> <td data-bbox="1008 1644 1315 1812">-></td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" data-bbox="781 1812 1315 1854">-> 2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears</td> </tr> </table>		-> Actions	->	-> 2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	
-> Actions	->						
-> 2 Blood, Sweat, and Tears							

Tricking the Dean (Expanded Scope of Activities)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Reckless)	-> Actions	-> Only The Liveliest Awfulness
		-> 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

The Dean in fact does come in to personally supervise this next stage.

Edmund glares exaggeratedly at Jill. Jill grins.

Then:

"I'm going to sit next to his bed and tell him everything that's going on with the Project and ask Subject H about the light that knows not life. All clinical and 'do you know where you are?' and taking his blood pressure and stuff. And I'm going to do my best to have a kind of casual disregard for what follows."

"How he reacts to hearing about that light?"

"Yeah."

Gayle thinks about all this. She has to decide whether Subject H can change his condition simply from hearing about the situation, and also how to make it interesting. She decides that since Dr. Grey is at the edge of insanity just from his work so far, that that work is certainly sufficient to overcome the effects of faith distilled from addled dead rats. So Subject H's condition changes. But to what? If he turns into a normal person or zombie, then not much of interest happens. If he fakes being a normal person, then strikes, that's potentially of interest. But Gayle decides that the best way to maintain tension is not to answer whether this action is right or wrong, which means a morally ambiguous transformation.

Subject H's brow smooths. He says, softly, to the Dean, "On the other side, even what you have done to your Lucia is forgiven."

Then Subject H goes still and distant.

The Dean is pale and sweating.

Not all the Dean's shaking of his shoulders rouses Subject H until that night, when the dead man talks Puddleglum into cutting off his head and leaving it on

John Grey's porch with the light of a brain-candle reflecting from its staring, empty eyes.

The Dean collars Dr. Grey later.

"I'm closing your lab," he says. "I'm shutting down the Project. I'm moving everything to a private address."

He pushes a piece of paper across the table.

"I want a comprehensive report in three weeks or you're fired."

Murdering the Dean (Expanding Conflict)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Reckless)	-> Actions	-> +2 Emotional Corruption -> Combat
		-> 10 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	

Edmund thinks.

"So I'm close enough to get there," he concludes, which isn't what Gayle meant to imply, but which she owns as a reasonable story development.

"Yeah, that's fair."

"I need some kind of balance – something between the mortal faith that can keep a subject human and the immortal abyss that allows a dead person to survive. But if I think about the abyss too much, I go insane, and if I let anyone else do it, they try to kill and eat me."

"Edmund!" says Gayle, shocked.

"He's the Dean!"

". . . well, metaphorically."

"Yeah."

Edmund thinks. "Three weeks is probably just enough time to *think* I can keep myself sane and fail, so I need to kill the Dean."

Gayle makes sad puppy eyes because she likes the Dean, but then she brightens because she remembers that next in the line of succession is the cabaret vampire Claude.

"Skeptic's game?"

"Reckless," says Edmund. "I have to do this."

And when the Dean visits for a weekly report, Dr. Grey shoots him in the back. A robot spider from an unrelated Project bursts from his back, but Edmund shoots that too.

"That's going to put you in the high-end range of Emotional Corruption," Gayle notes. "Not Intellectual Corruption, since this is purely for the benefit of your own cowardice."

"That's fine," Edmund agrees.

After a moment, he says, "Oh, hey, cool, free corpse."

"You know," Gayle says, "when you're looking into the mirror that night, your eyes are like that zombie's eyes, back at the beginning."

"Oh?"

"You can see all the way through them right to Hell."

"Hell," says Dr. John Grey, adjusting his tie, "is a physiological condition in the brain resulting from inadequate levels of environmental faith."

"10 PXP for the stage," Gayle says, quite pleased with that coda. "And I'm opening two new ones, though I can't imagine this'll last long enough for you to need the spare."

Stage 9 – Perfectly Sane

Initial PXP: 6

Murdering the Dean (Expanding Conflict)	7 Blood, Sweat, and Tears carry over.
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The AZE (Further Study)	-> "Skeptic's Game" (Skeptical)	<table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="769 300 1003 520"> -> Actions </td> <td data-bbox="1003 300 1313 520"> -> Intellectual Corruption -> Realizing the Stage's Opportunity </td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" data-bbox="769 520 1313 569"> -> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears </td> </tr> </table>	-> Actions	-> Intellectual Corruption -> Realizing the Stage's Opportunity	-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears	
-> Actions	-> Intellectual Corruption -> Realizing the Stage's Opportunity					
-> 5 Blood, Sweat, and Tears						

"If I give it four months," Edmund says, "do I think I can pick around the edges of what I'm seeing and build a good balance of faith and . . . horrible abyss thinking thing . . . without maxing my Intellectual Corruption?"

"Yeah," says Gayle.

"Or going unlimited on my Emotional Corruption? Or, heck, maxing physical?"

"Sure."

"Then I'm going for it."

In that fashion Dr. Grey resolves the matter and builds the first of a breed of new unloving creatures – reanimated dead sustained perilously between mad craving and a lingering sense of humanity by the bulky and awkward tanks of radioactive rat-brain & LSD material on their backs. In the distance they see, and sometimes speak of, the light that knoweth not life; but unless their IVs come loose, they do not reach for it.

And Dr. Grey, of course, becomes a darling of DSI, and he's stayed "perfectly sane."

"Perfectly?" Gayle asks.

"Perfectly," Edmund confirms. "I mean, except for the liking death and the state of constant fear and sometimes wanting to kill and eat people or know more about the light that knoweth not life and drugging himself every night when he goes to sleep lest he see it and one day, probably, not."

It's always wacky good times at the DSI, right up until Dr. John Grey recognizes that life is a delusion and God has always been in the distant empty spaces

where the evil dead know him; and his teammates must, of course, make shift to put him down.

Three sessions later, he comes back.

The Butcher's Bill

At the end of this story, Dr. John Grey has Intellectual Corruption at level 3. Increasingly his awareness of the truth puts him in conflict with authority figures. He will see mad horror where others only see a relaxed Unitarian service. He'll see the abyss in the eyes of back-bench ministers when he meets them at posh clubs and he will recognize that they need to die.

At the end of this story, Dr. John Grey has Emotional Corruption at level 5. Increasingly he finds that he's done nasty things to people and must cover up the evidence.

When Gayle lets him come back, he's somehow lowered both Corruptions to 2 – but he has Physical Corruption 3 in the form of a peculiar curse. He knows there are pure things in the world. He has to serve them. He has to save them. He is inadequate – his very nature is inadequate – but he has to try. The things that speak to him at night in his dreams tell him so, and promise that it is good.

Dr. John Grey has spent the cost of more than 15 failed Science rolls, and mutilated his assistant, and murdered the Dean; but of course, nobody cares about *that* kind of trivial nonsense at DSI, not when there's science to be done.