

chthonic harvest

a live puzzle RPG of
clearing **arcane UXO**



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This draft of CHTHONIC HARVEST was produced in July 2015 for Graham Walmsley's game design festival "Shit Chef," where designers were invited to make a game without the pressure of caring too much about the outcome. Despite that humble origin, I'm pretty happy with this game and hope that it's provocative enough that folks other than me actually play it.

For more information on UXO and global efforts at clearance and disposal, see the UN Mine Action Gateway: [mineaction.org].

Thanks to Jason Morningstar, Lillian Cohen-Moore, Gretchen S., Nick Wedig, Michael S. Miller, and Ben Wray for encouragement.

Many of the spells were inspired by Johnstone Metzger's *Class Warfare*, while the gear was inspired by Ville Vuorela's *Stalker*.

introduction

CHTHONIC HARVEST is a live puzzle RPG in which the players, aside from one or more Game Moderators (GMs), portray a group of convicted techno-sorcerers who are putting their banned magical skills to use by clearing and destroying centuries-old unexploded ordinance (UXO) from an ancient technomantic war.

play materials

To play CHTHONIC HARVEST, you will need:

- 3 or more players (including at least one GM), subdivided evenly into smaller groups if you have 8 or more players, with a GM assigned to each group;
- a deck of playing cards with only two jokers, or multiple decks if you have more than 4 groups playing;
- a variety of random household items to use as props, whatever the players have on hand;
- a room or tabletop space for each group of players; and
- copies of the character sheet for each non-GM player, plus a number of pencils and scraps of paper.

play options

To allow for varying levels of mobility and comfort among a diverse group of players, the game can be played in at least two different modes:

- **On the Floor:** In this mode, the playing cards that make up the game's puzzles are scattered on the floor and the players actually spend a fair amount of time on their hands and knees deciphering them.
- **On the Tabletop:** In this mode, the cards are instead scattered on the top of a table, so that players can sit or stand and not have to spend so much time on the floor. However, the game still requires a fair amount of movement around the table and hands-on manipulation of the cards to solve puzzles.

The hands-on and circling-the-table portions of the game might exclude some players, but consider the option of having a supervisor or foreman player who helps strategize and direct activity but doesn't manipulate the cards during play. Alternately, the GM role can be entirely hands-off.

In general, be aware of the needs of players and how you might accomodate them, but defer to their wishes in handling things.

the techno-arcanist war

Centuries ago, the Techno-Arcanist War decimated this region. The mechanical and human armies of a number of cyber-sorcerer monarchs did battle on these plains and in this sky, as well as in various cities that once loomed toweringly across this plateau. Now it is all an abandoned wasteland haunted by ancient spells and curses that still poison the land and torment anyone who passes through. It is known as the Blightland and is generally avoided except for scavenger bands that attempt to make a living by harvesting and selling dangerous relics from the war.

convicted sorcerers

All sorcery was outlawed after the war, and yet people continued to practice it illegally. You yourself were caught by the authorities of the Empire for practicing techno-magicks that you either learned from your family or by apprenticing in secret a member of the sorcerous underground.

As a punishment, you have been sent to the Blightland as part of the Empire's sorcerer-rehabilitation program, in which you will be expected to use your expertise to help clear and destroy ancient arcane UXO as part of the Empire effort to reclaim this region.

structure of play

CHTHONIC HARVEST can be played in a single session of a few hours or as a longer game or mini-campaign lasting a number of hours that could be split over multiple sessions.

Each session begins with the players loading up their characters with magic spells and techno-magical gear, preparing for the field.

Then, the GM sets up the puzzle for this session by scattering a handful of playing cards over the play space and describing various features of the terrain that will be relevant in solving the puzzle.

Next, the players work to solve the puzzle, using their hands to move cards around and invoking various spells and equipment that the characters brought to the fieldsite.

There are breaks in puzzle-solving after certain number of hours of fictional time, based on how long it takes the characters to do the tasks that the players have decided. These breaks are meals and snacks (imaginary or actually shared by the players) that the characters partake of on the work site or nights spent on guard against the weird dreams and real dangers of the Blightland.

Once the players solve the puzzle or suffer a giant catastrophe that indefinitely halts all work at the site, the game can end with a brief epilogue, or you can prepare for another session.



loadout

Hand an index card, post-it note, or other small piece of paper to each non-GM player. Here's how players fill it out.

sorcerer's name

First, your sorcerer's name is an anagram of your own name, mixing up the letters however you want. An easy way is to just flip your name backwards and then move a few letters around if you want. For example, my name backwards is Notlaw Nahtanoj, but I might prefer to be Nalow Hattonnaj.

If your character dies, is exempted from further clearing work after being irreparably harmed by an ancient spell, or is turned into a biomagical monster, you'll need to make a new character to continue playing. In such a case, you can either make a new anagram out of your name, or you can play the offspring of your previous character—numbered like monarchs, so Nalow Hattonnaj II—who's been assigned to fulfill their predecessor's labor quota or also been caught performing techno-sorcery.

If you play CHTHONIC HARVEST again, you're welcome to play the same character, at least until they're rendered unfit.

spell & gear slots

Underneath your name, you have 3 slots for spells and techno-magical gear. You can either have 2 spell slots and 1 gear slot, or 2 gear slots and 1 spell slot. Decide your allotment of slots now: are you more of a sorcerer (with 2 spell slots) or more of a technomancer (with 2 gear slots)? Write this on your card.

During the game, your slots will either be empty—meaning that you can absorb a spell that you encounter or attune yourself to a new piece of techno-magical gear—or full meaning that you can discharge a spell that you have already prepared/absorbed or use a piece of techno-magical gear that you are already attuned to.

Spells & gear function in more or less the same way. You expend a spell by casting it (creating an empty spell slot) and either have to recharge the same spell (which you can only do after a night's sleep) or absorb a new spell from an arcane UXO (which thankfully also removes a potentially dangerous spell from the weapon). Likewise, when you use a piece of techno-magical gear, it uses up your attunement with that device (creating an empty gear slot), meaning that you either have to reattune to it (generally by keeping it near you overnight) or attune to a new piece of potent techno-magical gear that you just pulled out of the ground. Unattuned gear still has mundane uses but is useless on arcane UXO.

Sorcerers start each session with the standard loadout, which is all three slots filled with prepared spells or attuned pieces of techno-magical gear. Choose your starting spells and gear from the following types, recording them on your cards.

types of spells & gear

Spells & gear are divided into 6 general types: 4 types that are useful for UXO clearance (“sensing,” “extraction,” “containment,” and “destruction”), empty slots (which are useful in their own way), and then a final catch-all type (“miscellaneous”) that includes spells and gear that are not obviously useful for UXO clearance, though they may be useful for other things around the work site or could be used creatively to help with clearance in unexpected ways.

Spells are represented in play as being recorded on players cards, while gear are represented by physical objects that players use.

- **SENSORY** spells and gear are for scanning downward-facing cards and asking specific questions about them before you try to flip or move them, such as what number is on a card, what color it is, what some of its possible effects are, and so on. Sensory spells have names like Goldrich’s Ghost-Sight, Lesser Dark Celestial Prophecy, or Human-Object Communication. Items of sensory gear have names like Spectral Radio Scanner or Rune-o-Sopic

Goggles and are represented in play by headphones, cellphones, laptops, tablets, sunglasses, or something else that could stand in for a bit of sensory mage-tech.

- **EXTRACTION** spells and gear help with flipping, moving, handling, and otherwise manipulating cards. Extraction spells have names like Teleport Object or Al-Mudhi's Rockshaping Technique. Extraction gear has names like Vulcanic Tongs or Intangible Lever Set and is represented in play by hand tools of a variety of kinds, kitchen implements, chopsticks, tool-like office supplies, etc.
- **CONTAINMENT** spells and gear are used for controlled detonation or for entombing certain weapons forever. Containment spells have names like Shining Mystic Aegis or Zolzzanar's Stable Chaos Portal. Containment gear has names like Electro-Phantasmic Force Blanket or Most-Gilded Cage and is represented in play by wide or heavy objects that can be placed on the floor or table to cover one or more cards, such as boxes, tupperware containers, heavy books, thick magazines, and so on.
- **DESTRUCTION** spells and gear are used for blowing up or otherwise dismantling the stuff that you extract from the ground, whether UXO, other magical gear, or ancient scrap metal. Ideally you either stand far back from the stuff you're attempting to vaporize or first use containment

spells or gear to limit the surrounding effects. Destruction spells have names like Orb of Extreme Annihilation or Caustic Return to Dust, while destruction gear has names like Infernal Cannon Wand or Crystalline Curse Charge and is represented in play by cleaning equipment such as vacuums, brooms, dustpans, and so on. Try to avoid wet or liquid-based devices, so as not to damage the cards or create safety hazards.

- **EMPTY SPELL AND GEAR SLOTS** have been previously mentioned and are useful in that they allow you to absorb a dangerous or useful spell from a device that you find or to attune to a piece of ancient magical gear that you pull out of the ground.
- **MISCELLANEOUS** spells and gear can be all sorts of things. They can allow you to read your coworkers' minds (forcing them to answer one or more questions truthfully), provide you with a few warm hearty meals, prevent you from being detected by roving bands of scavengers, allow you to escape from the work team in the night, or do random fantastical things like freezing someone in place, summoning a demonling, or allowing you to jump really high or far. They have diverse names and are represented by objects that are just as diverse. If you decide to start with a miscellaneous spell or piece of gear, remember that you are low-to-mid-level sorcerers, not powerful gods.



procedures

Now that the characters are all loaded up, it's time to put them to work. These magical UXOs aren't clearing themselves.

dividing the deck

While the players are loading up their characters with spells and gear, the GM should take the deck of playing cards, shuffle it, and divide it into four piles of roughly equal size. Each pile represents a single work site and a single puzzle or set of puzzles that the work team of sorcerers needs to solve. Once one site has been completed, the group can either end the game or move on to a new work site.

setting up a work site

When you're ready to move to the first (or next) work site, the GM takes one of the four piles of cards and first writes a list of every card in the pile on a scrap of paper, handing it to one of the players. You can just summarize simply, like: "A, 8 of clubs; A, 2, 8 of diamonds; 2, 6, 9, J of hearts; 4, 10, Q, K of spades; joker."

Then the GM shuffles the pile again, but also mixes the way the cards are facing such that some cards face backwards and other cards face forward.

Finally, the GM fans out the entire pile of cards in one of their hands—which can be awkward because there are a lot of cards—stands over the space where the game is to be played, reaches the hand with the cards up over their head at arm's length, and drops all the cards in front of the GM (not on top of their own head), letting them fall onto the play space and scatter as they will. If you are playing on a table and some cards fall off onto the floor, the GM should gather the cards that fall off and repeat the drop until they all land on the table.

different work sites

For the first work site, especially if it's your first time playing the game, you should pick an area that's relatively flat and free of obstacles. This lets you learn the basic procedures before moving on to crazier setups.

In later games of CHTHONIC HARVEST, you may know in advance that you are likely to play through multiple work sites, which means that the GM can set up multiple spaces in advance: writing down the contents of each pile of cards and scattering them.

Additionally, each subsequent work site should be somewhat different from the previous ones, including different objects that represent terrain features complicating your extraction efforts. For example, you might set up a number of small spaces that represent an ancient battlefield, the ruins of a city, a magical disaster site, a satellite in a decaying orbit, and so on. This allows your work team to progress through the sites, unloading and reloading gear in between.

For example, for a future site, you might take a simple cardboard box and drop your fanned pile of cards on top of it or partially inside of it, telling the players that it's a low-altitude atmosphere-cleaning drone that the ancients left hovering a few thousand feet above ground. You might also tell the players that they can't touch the ground during actual work on the site, but have to elevate their bodies in a chair or other piece of furniture (or maybe have the other players pick them up) any time they want to touch the cards. They can, however, descend back to earth for meals and sleep.

the goal

The goal of the game is for the sorcerers (represented by the players) to eventually remove all the cards from the play space. Ideally, they want to move the cards into stacks off to the side of the space, contain them or back far away, and then destroy them.

face up / face down

The cards should land both face-up and face-down in the play space, meaning that some of the cards on the contents list should be identifiable right away. The face-down ones will remain a mystery at first—to be gradually revealed over the course of play—and you may have to make some decisions about what to do with them without knowing exactly what they are.

stacked cards

Hopefully you'll also have several sets of cards that overlap. Such arrangements create particularly interesting puzzles because generally you have to move or remove the cards on top in order to gain access to the cards below, whether to move them or even just to flip and identify them.

counting cards

Since the GM has given you a list of all the cards in this work site (the area has already been scanned by satellites), you can check cards off the list as you extract and dispose of them, or even just based on the ones you can see face-up or after flipping them.

moving cards

Each player can only ever manipulate cards with one hand at a time. Any movement of cards should be done slowly and smoothly, not in a jerky or stuttery motion, since it's the GM's job to carefully examine everything you do with the cards and call you on it when you NUDGE, JOLT, or worst of all SET OFF a card. But smooth, slow, fluid motion is totally fine for UXOs and more jerky motion is fine for debris as long as you don't swing it around dangerously or drop it.

Sometimes, particularly when multiple cards are close together or even touching, you may want to involve multiple players each using a single hand. More than one hand doesn't typically help to move a particular card (though there may be exceptions), but it is sometimes helpful for other players to hold cards in place (to prevent them from being nudged or jolted) while one player moves or flips a particular card.

flipping cards

Flipping cards works just like moving cards: do it slow and fluid. Fingernail lifts and horizontal bend-and-pinches are popular. Flipping is more difficult than moving, so avoid nudging, jolting, or setting off cards, as the GM will definitely call you on it.

using spells / gear

When you use spells or gear, you get to break the rules, either by allowing you to do something or know something that you wouldn't normally be able to do or by allowing you to avoid some or all of the consequences of nudging, jolting, or setting off a UXO, allowing you to move cards without as much danger.

terrain complications

The GM is free to declare certain parts of the play space to be under certain rules called terrain complications. A chord running across the floor might be a high-voltage cable that you can't touch without risk of injury. Or, as in the satellite example, you might not be able to touch the floor when you touch the cards. The complications vary depending on the GM's whims, how difficult they want to make your life, and how the play space is set up.

keeping track of time

Each card in the game has a specific number of hours assigned to it, measuring roughly the amount of in-game time it takes to deal with that card. The GM (assisted by the players) should keep

track of the amount of time that passes in the game, so that you can take breaks as appropriate.

Players should break every 4-6 hours of in-game time to share a meal or make camp around the work site to catch a night's sleep. Meals are for in-character banter and scheming. Sleep is for the GM to give you weird visions and corruption for spending time in this magically decimated land.

breaking for meals

Meal breaks are free and open to the players to conduct in character, grouping together, splitting off into subgroups, doing whatever they like for roughly 15 minutes. Then back to work.

breaking for sleep

Breaking for sleep is for the players to handle for the first 5-10 minutes as they make camp and bed down. Then the GM is free to whisper in their ears, write them creepy notes about dreams or weird fever visions that they have at night, and do other things to try to unnerve them or just make them appreciate being in a stranded and magically cursed land.



UXO CODEx

Both the GM and players have access to this codex during play to help figure out exactly what they're dealing with.

black suits

Black-suited cards are ancient debris and gear picked up by the scanners, not ancient UXO. However, some black cards can be dangerous to touch or difficult to extract, which can make your work more complicated, particularly if the black cards are touching red cards, which are magical UXO. But, generally, you can just spend the time and equipment to extract them.

NUDGE: If you cause a black card to shift a tiny bit, without changing its physical position in the play space more than slightly, you're fine. Nothing happens.

JOLT: If a black card is jolted about, someone suffers a minor injury as you try to move it. The GM says who and how.

SET OFF: If you drop a black card or attempt to destroy it without proper safety precautions (distance or containment), someone suffers a major injury. The GM says who and how.

spades ♠

2♠	DEBRIS: Red-hot, magnetic ore	1 hrs
3♠	DEBRIS: Glowing rod, causes visions	1 hrs
4♠	DEBRIS: Invisible, radioactive sphere	1 hrs
5♠	DEBRIS: Engine that feeds on fear	1 hrs
6♠	DEBRIS: Freezing-cold gauntlets	1 hrs
7♠	DEBRIS: Clear, crystalline vehicle	2 hrs
8♠	DEBRIS: Series of gas-filled tubes	2 hrs
9♠	DEBRIS: 15-foot vibrating sword	2 hrs
10♠	DEBRIS: Leaking colossus arm	2 hrs
J♠	DEBRIS: Petrified leviathan	3 hrs
Q♠	DEBRIS: Rune-covered demon cage	3 hrs
K♠	DEBRIS: Giant turbine for ???	3 hrs
A♠	DEBRIS: Imploded planar gateway	3 hrs

clubs

2♣	GEAR: Handful of sink rings	1 hrs
3♣	GEAR: Custom artillery webbing	1 hrs
4♣	GEAR: Mobile shield-cannon	1 hrs
5♣	GEAR: Laser attitude scan glove	1 hrs
6♣	GEAR: Dual auto-linked handler	1 hrs
7♣	GEAR: Neural-aural analysis wand	2 hrs
8♣	GEAR: Arcane-proofed EVO suit	2 hrs
9♣	GEAR: Rune-free alchemy bomb	2 hrs
10♣	GEAR: Orb of insubstantiation	2 hrs
J♣	GEAR: Multi-drill infiltration rocket	3 hrs
Q♣	GEAR: Aerial recovery construct	3 hrs
K♣	GEAR: Self-generating tomb complex	3 hrs
A♣	GEAR: Disintegration platform	3 hrs

red suits

Red cards are the tough ones. Generally speaking, much of their power has leaked away, so you're not usually at risk of turning into a sentient malevolent blood tornado, but they can cause weird effects if you mishandle them. And god forbid you pull a rare, fully intact one without proper precautions.

NUDGE: Some minor effect leaks out of the UXO, a feeling, a sensation, an illusion, but something disturbing, upsetting, or uncomfortable. If it's harmful, it's nothing that a break and a little first aid can't fix. Tomorrow you'll barely notice any effects.

JOLT: A minor effect goes off, causing an issue that must be dealt with immediately (the entire area is on fire! your arm turns into a snake!) or something that—if not addressed eventually—will gradually corrupt, transform, or destroy your character, either through effects the players are asked to portray themselves or ones the GM triggers as appropriate.

SET OFF: The weapon goes off to the fullest extent it can, though remember it may have been weakened or corrupted with time. Sometimes a character may be transformed into a giant undead lich-leviathan and you'll be glad that you absorbed that Hurricane of Phantasmic Blades spell from the leaking orb cluster, so you can attack your transformed colleague while everyone else flees.

principled GM fiat

You might notice that, at this in this current version of the game, a lot is left up to GM interpretation in terms of what different spells and gear allow the players to do and what the effects of nudges, jolts, and setting off UXO is. This is both to keep this rules booklet to a reasonable length and because I don't really know how this game will play yet. Mostly likely, I (and other folks) will have to play it a fair amount to understand more clearly how things should work.

In the meantime, if you're the GM, make sure the players understand that you're going to be doing the best you can with these open-ended guidelines and then do just that: make judgment calls based on the information in front of you and what seems reasonable. If the puzzles seem too easy or too hard, that's fine as long as the players have fun. You have the basic idea and principles of the game from this document, so just try to be systematic and semi-consistant about your rulings and go from there, allowing them to accumulate into a set of practices that the group all understands and abides by.

diamonds



2◇	UX0: Contrary Urge Shell	1 hrs
3◇	UX0: Firebreathing Orb Cluster	1 hrs
4◇	UX0: Targetted Hate Generator	1 hrs
5◇	UX0: Sleep-Inducing Personnel Mine	1 hrs
6◇	UX0: Iron Rain of Terror	1 hrs
7◇	UX0: True-Seeing Revelation Grenade	2 hrs
8◇	UX0: Mind-Linking Network Sphere	2 hrs
9◇	UX0: Forced Mind-Erase Bomb	2 hrs
10◇	UX0: Unnatural Mending Particles	2 hrs
J◇	UX0: Container of Phantasmic Blades	3 hrs
Q◇	UX0: Chaos-Mirror Shard Scatterer	3 hrs
K◇	UX0: City-in-a-Bottle Special	3 hrs
A◇	UX0: Mark II Shadow Beast Gate	3 hrs

hearts



2♥	UXO: Memory-Altering Agent	1 hrs
3♥	UXO: Ark of Doomed Spirits	1 hrs
4♥	UXO: Burning Eyes	1 hrs
5♥	UXO: Invisible Servant Generator	1 hrs
6♥	UXO: Cask of Suffocating Darkness	1 hrs
7♥	UXO: Telekenetic Hurling Stones	2 hrs
8♥	UXO: Mind-Transfer Trigger Relay	2 hrs
9♥	UXO: Astral Projector Rod	2 hrs
10♥	UXO: Necromatic Summoning Bomb	2 hrs
J♥	UXO: Cloudkill Feeder Cannon	3 hrs
Q♥	UXO: Impassable Ward-Wall Mine	3 hrs
K♥	UXO: Dual-Rigged Gateway Tigger	3 hrs
A♥	UXO: Artificial Purple Worm Nest	3 hrs

joker 1

The first joker that you find is a legendary weapon that creates a necrotic sphere of magnetism that pulls all dead flesh to it, forming a giant undead lich-leviathan that will continue to grow and kill until all living things are part of its monstrous unnatural form.

NUDGE: All flesh in a nearby area feels sickly and unnatural.

JOLT: A nearby limb withers away into something skeletal and wicked-looking.

SET OFF: As described above.

joker 2

The second joker that you find is a giant techno-magical war machine bristling with ancient weapons.

NUDGE: You damage the machine in some fashion.

JOLT: One of its ancient weapons goes off, wounding several.

SET OFF: It awakens and decides that you're the enemy.

photo credits

COVER IMAGE: Aviano Air Base, Italy (July 24, 2002) – While donning their gas masks, participants in a chemical warfare class mark off an area where a simulated UXO was found during a training exercise (photo by Senior Airman Stephen Schester).

FIRST INTERIOR IMAGE: Baghdad, Iraq (Oct. 11, 2003) – Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technicians, assigned to the Bahrain-based Special Operations Task Force 56, work with Army EOD technicians to prepare unexploded ordnance (UXO) for demolition at a safe disposal area in the vicinity of Baghdad (photo by Journalist Seaman Erica Gardner).

SECOND INTERIOR IMAGE: Laos (2009) – UXOs lie undetected for decades (photo by AusAID / Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, CC-BY).

THIRD INTERIOR IMAGE: Taoun Village, Laman District, near Sekong, Laos (2009) – Team Leader Mr. Bowling Saengsouliya, of the Fondation Suisse de Déminage (FSD), worked with a detector at a UXO clearance area and, after carefully clearing soil from a location where a metal object has been located, unearthed this BLU-26 anti-personnel device [U.S.-produced cluster-bomb submunition] (photo by Jim Holmes / AusAID, CC-BY).

Centuries ago a technomantic war of perception-altering and reality-twisting weapons littered this region with magic spells wrapped in metal shells: unexploded ordinance (UXO) but very strange and arcane. These were buried in the earth, scattered about by cluster orbs, or even suspended in the sky.

Now it's up to your team of convicted techno-sorcerers to repay your debts to society by extracting and disposing of these things before they turn even more innocents into biomagical monsters. Leaking spells from the UXO have corrupted the area, so the work is weird and dangerous. Plus, you never know when one of these things might go off and recode your consciousness.

- **3+ players** • **2-4 hours** • **adult content**
- **1 session** with options for a longer campaign
- options to support **varying player mobility**

