

UNKNOWN ARMIES

A ROLEPLAYING GAME OF TRANSCENDENTAL HORROR AND FURIOUS ACTION



BY
GREG STOLZE
& JOHN TYNES

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In case you're wondering, we spelled "Magick" with a "k" just because we felt like it. Carry on.

ATLAS GAMES PRESENTS



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chapter one
overview

**UNKNOWN
ARMIES**



"IT IS THE CUSTOMARY FATE OF NEW TRUTHS
TO BEGIN AS HERESIES AND END AS SUPERSTITIONS."
—THOMAS HUXLEY

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO BELIEVE ANYMORE.
SO I BELIEVE I'LL HAVE A DRINK."
—DIRK ALLEN



Welcome to *Unknown Armies*—

UA for short. This is a roleplaying game about transcendental horror, which is another way of saying that we're going to explore the heights of human potential and find that everything isn't sweetness and light. We're going to see behind the mask of reality and examine the clockwork of existence, and find that everything isn't bearded gods and Thou Shalt Nots. We're going to look at what makes people tick, and find that our neuroses, obsessions, and fears define us just as strongly—if not moreso—than our aspirations, ideals, and conscience.

Is this a negative vision? Yes and no. It is a negative vision in that we're going to kick loose the rocks of the collective unconscious and find some nasty, squirming bugs underneath. It is not a negative vision in that there is still room for personal heroism. When characters can acknowledge and even embrace the terrible, naked face of reality and yet not lose sight of their personal goals and beliefs, when they can see the worst that the cosmos has to offer and still persevere, when hope can be maintained and even strengthened despite the lessons life has to teach, then we know life is worth living, even if it faces seemingly overwhelming odds.

This is also a roleplaying game about furious action, which is another way of saying that philosophy is all well and good but sometimes you've just gotta kick some butt. To put it less bluntly,

your characters and the people they meet in the game all have goals that are important to them, and when those goals are in conflict a common result is violence. By all means, negotiate whenever you can. But in UA the stakes are so high that you never know when danger is going to rear its ugly head. (Of course, the butt you kick isn't necessarily physical; it might be magickal, or even psychological.)

Design Goals

It's worth noting in brief a few of the design goals we had for this game, and some of the things that led us to create it, so that you know what you're in for and why we've made the choices we've made. We hope that you will adopt these as campaign goals as well—these are goals we think you should aim for in the course of play.

Accountability. Typical gaming campaigns have the characters committing murder, burglary, and any number of other acts that most societies—even the societies in the campaigns themselves—would consider reprehensible. Yet there's usually some sort of dubious justification for almost any crime the characters might commit. Kill three people in a bus station? They had the devil's taint! Break into a mansion and steal valuable old books? Their owner was an evil sorcerer! Burn down a building full of expensive

What is a Roleplaying Game? (John's Answer)

If you don't know, or you're just curious to see what I'd say, here's how I describe what a roleplaying game is. The analogy here comes courtesy of game designer Greg Stafford.

A roleplaying game is like *improvisational radio theater*.

It's *theater* because each player in the game portrays a single character, just as an actor on stage does. Each player creates his own character, and each time he plays, the character becomes more and more believable because of the time invested in portraying him. (Much as in a television series: the main characters in the first episode of the long-running comedy *Cheers* became a lot richer and more entertaining as the series went on, as the actors and writers got to know them better.) Also like theater, the game presents a story, rich with drama, mystery, excitement, and all those other things that the Greeks bequeathed to the western world through theater.

It's *radio* theater because unlike a stage play, the game's players don't walk around or use props, and there is no set. (Yes, there are exceptions, but let's keep this simple.) Typically, a roleplaying game is played around a table, which means that players mostly use their voices, faces, and gestures to portray their character. Instead of seeing a stage set with furniture, walls, and props, the locations and items in a roleplaying game story are described verbally and are often assumed to be there without being described. If a scene takes place in a warehouse, you don't need to be told that there are large crates, forklifts, and similar stuff. You can just get a simple description and move on.

It's *improvisational radio theater* because there is no script. Dialogue is made up on the spot, improvisationally, by the players. The story for the game will have been created, but it's a rough outline of events, not a moment-by-moment description like a script for a play or movie. The players all work together, through their characters, to both *follow* and *lead* the story. They follow it when events occur beyond their control—for instance, it could start raining, or someone the characters haven't met before could knock on their door—but most of the time they lead it, by making decisions and taking action to pursue their goals. No one knows for sure what's going to happen in the story of the game, and in particular the ending is very much up for grabs. The story is told improvisationally, which is both the major challenge and the core entertainment of roleplaying games.

Although the players only play one character each, there is a different kind of player. This player is like the director of your improvisational radio theater. He works out and presents the story, he plays the role of all the characters in the story besides the players' characters, and he guides the flow of the game. He also is responsible for judging the rules of the game, which are used to introduce an exciting random element to the story, and also to resolve what happens when characters come into some form of physical, magickal, or psychological conflict. This different kind of player is often known by a lot of different titles, including referee, narrator, game master, storyteller, dungeon master, and on and on. We're going to use game master—or just GM for short—but you can use whatever title you want.

If you've never played a roleplaying game before, it can be tough to learn on your own. The best way to learn is to find people who play roleplaying games and either watch them play for a while or, preferably, join in and play with them. Hobby shops often provide ways to meet up with other players, and many universities and schools have official groups that meet regularly to play roleplaying games.

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"CAN ANY PLAUSIBLE EXCUSE BE FURNISHED

FOR THE CRIME OF CREATING THE HUMAN RACE?"

—MARK TWAIN