

The Scarred Land by Chris Dragga and Kate Hill

Player count: 2-20. Players will be divided into roughly equal sized groups no larger than five and no smaller than two. Depending on the circumstances, a dedicated facilitator may be necessary.

Length: 2 1/2-4 hours, depending on how long players want to walk the trails.

Required materials: Compasses or compass phone apps, cameras or camera phones, pencils, trail maps. At minimum, one of each per group plus an additional map. Optional: tape measure, rulers, lighter.

Outline of Play and Preparation: Decide upon a natural, relatively wild space (such as a state park or wilderness) with enough trails for each of the player groups to go in a separate direction. Once this is settled, gather compasses and maps of the area and assemble at a central location in the play area. The facilitator reads the summary aloud to the players and leads them through character creation. Then, begin play, starting with the in-character convocation and map-making lesson. After play concludes, run through the debrief exercises.

Summary (facilitator should read this out loud before character creation): A long time ago--perhaps 100 years ago, perhaps 200--a heinous crime was committed. The passage of time has since erased it from human memory, but the lingering psychic trauma has indelibly scarred the landscape. The place remains wild, radiating a sense of deep unease and hurt. You always had a strange affinity for this place--maybe you hiked its trails as a child, maybe you travel there to sit and collect your thoughts--but in the past several months, the landscape has begun to haunt your nightmares. For some of you, these nightmares are filled with a paralyzing terror, for others, an overwhelming malice. As the frequency and intensity of the dreams has increased, you have come to realize that the land is crying out for healing to all of you, the remaining relatives of the victims and the perpetrators. Over the past several weeks, you have found each other, online or by word of mouth, and connected with someone who claims to know how to set this right once and for all.

You have gathered here to do so. To this end, you will set out upon the landscape's trails, in search of the scars that most reflect the wounds caused by the crime. You will photograph these scars, document them, and mark their precise locations on a map, which when connected will describe a glyph. Then, you will use the nature of the scars to reconstruct what happened and use the glyph in a ritual to cleanse this place. With luck, the trauma will lift and the nightmares depart.

Character Creation:

Initial formation: Hand out character questionnaires and nametags and instruct players to fill them out. The facilitator should also devise a name; unlike the other players, their character is a supernatural investigator of some kind (paranormal expert, exorcist, etc.; the choice is up to the facilitator). At this point, the full playgroup should decide whether the facilitator is playing. If so, players should ensure that they can communicate with each other over distance (cell phone, walkie-talkie, etc.); if this is not possible, we strongly recommend that the facilitator wait at the starting point throughout the game. If the facilitator is playing, they should also answer the questionnaire, bearing their profession in mind.

Divide players into groups of two to five, keeping group size as even as possible and minimizing the total number of groups (if playing with four or fewer players, use a single group). Have each player introduce and describe their character to the rest of their group.

Relationship to the event: Instruct players, in their groups, to form a circle. Then, have players in each circle count off, alternating between one and two. Players who count “one” are related somehow to the victim; those who count “two” are tied to the perpetrator.

Inter-character relationships: In the same circles, go around again. Each player should specify how they are related to the character on their right. These relationships can range from distant (barista at a coffee shop a character frequented) to moderately close (colleagues in the same department at work). They should not be intimate.

Safety mechanics: The facilitator should read the following aloud to the players:

- **The Door is Always Open:** In general, players can leave at any time, with no explanation, provided they believe they can make it back to the starting area safely. If there is concern about this, the group should stop play and walk the player back.
- **Cut:** Say “Cut” loudly if a scene needs to be stopped immediately, such as if a person is in physical danger or the scene has gone to an uncomfortable mental or emotional place. Everyone stops what they are doing and deals with the situation at hand.
- **Largo:** Say “Largo” to another player if the scene has gotten overwhelming in intensity. If you hear “Largo”, pause, step away from the speaking player, and continue at a lower level.
- **Lookdown:** If you want to leave or enter a scene without doing so in-character, place your hand above your eyes, as if shielding them from the sun, and tilt your head down. When re-entering, once you stop making the lookdown gesture, everyone should act as if your character had been there the whole time.

If players are unfamiliar with hiking, cover the material in the Trail Safety Appendix as well.

Tone and screening content: Finally, the facilitator should note that this game centers around a horrible crime. This crime should be primarily human in nature, minimizing supernatural elements--the perpetrator should not have summoned Cthulhu, for instance. Because of this, some content may be upsetting to players. The facilitator should go around the group, starting with themselves, and ask players if there is any content they would like to ban (if preferred, this can be done with anonymous ballot, as well). Any such content should not appear in the game.

Gameplay:

Convocation and instructions: The facilitator should call the players together and recap the details of why the characters have gathered--terrible nightmares about this place, brought about by the lingering scars of some past horror. They should then ask each of the characters to introduce themselves in turn, with their name, pronouns, and reason for coming. The facilitator then explains how to cleanse the land of its trauma. In the groups they formed during character creation, characters must find evidence of the scars left, places with something uncanny to them, be it their appearance, wildlife, or even just the way they feel. They must photograph and describe these places to create a record of the harm caused that will allow them to interpret the nature of the events that occurred, as well as the specific nature of the characters’ relationships to those involved in the event. Characters must also mark the scars on a map. The most critical of these locations, when connected, will describe a glyph that is key to the ritual to purify the landscape. Thus, to ensure the ritual’s success, the locations must be as accurate as possible.

At this point, the facilitator should divide the players into their character generation groups and hand out a map, a pencil, and a compass to each of them, explaining that most GPSes lack the necessary precision for such spiritually delicate work. Note that players can use compass apps on their phones

should compasses not be available. The facilitator should then provide an overview of how to take bearings and measure distance with paces. For practice, they should then designate some landmark within easy sight and have each group of players mark it on their map. Groups should compare maps to judge accuracy. See the appendix for a brief overview of compass use, as well as for suggested compass apps.

Players and the facilitator should then determine how much time they have to search for scars, bearing in mind that exploration should be careful and deliberate. Allowing two hours--one hour out, one hour back--should work well, but time can be adjusted based on the size of the natural area and the level of fitness of the players. Each group should then decide upon a trail they will follow in their search, minimizing overlap with the other groups.

Discovery: Each group should then proceed down their chosen trail, watching for anything that may seem eerie or uncanny. They should expect to find at least one such location per player, per group. Areas at least slightly off trail are preferable, as these have more power by virtue of being less frequented. However, players should avoid taking extensive detours off-trail, as scars only manifest in the presence of some human activity (from an out-of-game perspective, players should aspire to leave no trace as much as possible). Note that what seems uncanny to one character may not seem so to another; however, all perspectives are valid, as certain scars only speak to certain people.

Once a scar has been found, a player should photograph it, write a brief description of it, and mark it on the map, using the methods taught previously. They should label the spot so that it can be easily matched with the photograph and description.

Reassembly: Once each group arrives back at their starting point, they should confer among themselves to decide which of the scars they found are the most important. Then, when all groups have arrived, the facilitator should gather the players together and ask them to describe what they have found.

In turn, each group should describe one of their scars, showing the photo if convenient, and explain why it seems eerie and wrong, possibly including supposition on the nature of the event. Then, they should mark the location of the scar on a fresh map. This should continue until there are at least five scars on the map and each group has contributed an equal number of scars (thus, if there are three groups, each group should contribute two scars).

After the scars have been presented and marked, the players should try to determine what happened. Characters related to the perpetrator should explain details about what the perpetrator or perpetrators did, who they were, and their motivations, along with how they themselves are related; characters related to the victim should offer similar details about the victim or victims. Each player should offer at least one detail, building on what others have said. This process should end once players have reached a consensus about the events or once each player has shared a detail, whichever comes last.

Ritual: With the narrative of what happened in mind, the facilitator should instruct the players about the key components they know are required to conduct the banishment/cleansing ritual of the land. Players should mostly guide the ritual, feeling free to structure it or elaborate on it however they wish. The components that need to be included are:

- A glyph needs to be drawn connecting the points chosen as important by the group. The points should be transferred to a clean map and then connected in whatever way the players decide. However, the shape must be closed.

- The space for the ritual should be set apart in some way, be through drawing a circle, creating a boundary, or some other method.
- Every player needs to somehow be involved in the ritual destruction of the map. Ripping it apart or burning works well (see the Fire Safety Appendix), but other methods are welcome.
- Players should decide if they feel the ritual works based on the unity of the group and feel of the ritual. If a group is more divided or antagonistic during the ritual, it may fail.

Debrief

Once play is over, everyone should get up and just walk around the space a bit, quietly. Use this time to feel yourself as you are and get back in your own mind. Once that is done, everyone should sit in a circle. If the group is large, divide up according to the groups that were on the trail, putting two to three groups together depending on their size.

During the debrief, each person (who wants to!) should take turns doing the following:

- Express an appreciation for another player--what stood out to you that you really want to draw attention to. You can have more than one, but don't go on forever!
- Share one part that stuck with you from the game that had an impact. Try not to get into critiquing the mechanics at this point.
- Share anything that you feel you need to address at this point.

Revisiting (optional):

The ritual may not have been fully successful. After a significant amount of time has passed--at least six months, if not longer--players should reconvene at the original location with the photos and descriptions of the original scars and the final map. Using the same groups, but on different trails if possible, players should attempt to find, photograph, and document the previous scars, noting how the area feels and any differences they observe. In addition, they should feel free to find and mark any new scars they may find. The same amount of time on the trail should be allocated as in the original discovery phase.

Once the players have revisited the scars and reconvened, players should review the new photographs and descriptions, as well as any new scars, and determine whether the original cleansing succeeded. If it has, they may proceed home, reassured in their knowledge that an old wrong has finally been atoned for. If not, they may attempt another ritual, of their own devising and incorporating any new scars, to purify the land for good. Should the players so desire, they can repeat this phase.

Multigenerational play: Rather than having the original players revisit, wait a much longer time (ten to twenty years) and have the children--or significant younger relations (blood or otherwise)--of the original players perform the revisiting phase.

Character Questionnaire

1. Name
2. Occupation
3. How do you know this land?
4. How did you find out about this gathering and how far have you traveled to get here?
5. How has your life become worse since the nightmares began?

Appendix: Compass Use and Paces

For taking bearings, we strongly recommend an orienteering compass, similar to [this model](#). To take a bearing, point the compass at the object you wish to find the bearing of, and then rotate the circular housing of the compass until the red box is aligned with the needle. Read the degree marking at center of the compass. Then, to find the bearing relative to true north, add the site's declination to the bearing (you can look up the declination of the site of play here: <http://www.magnetic-declination.com/>). For the sake of allowing others to find the scar, you should take bearings from the trail.

To measure distance to the object for which you're taking the bearing, measure the number of paces it takes for you to reach the object, where a pace is a normal step with each foot. Convert this to distance by multiplying by the length of your pace. If you don't know this length, we recommend that each person measure their pace during the warm-up phase using a tape measure; if a tape measure isn't available, estimation should suffice.

To mark the site on the map, locate the point from which you took the bearing and place the compass on it, aligned so that the needle is in the red box and both are parallel to north on the map. Then, swivel the housing of the compass so that the needle points to the bearing you measured earlier. This provides the correct angle; then, slide the compass so that the edge intersects the spot where you took the bearing, and use the ruler on the side of the compass to measure the appropriate distance, translating according to the map's scale. In many cases, this will be quite close to the trail, so we recommend recording bearing and distance on the map as well.

If you do not own a compass, you can use a phone app. We recommend [Compass 360 Pro](#) for Android; for IOS apps or alternatives for Android, [8 Best Compass Apps 2018 \(Sammy Garrard, SOutdoors\)](#) provides a useful list. To retain the flavor of the experience, we recommend using simpler apps that more resemble traditional compasses. If using this approach, you may also wish to bring along a short ruler for measuring distances on the map.

Appendix: Trail Safety

Because this game takes places in a wild area outside, players should adhere to basic trail safety protocol. Members of a group should stay within sight of each other and should ensure that they do not lose sight of the trail if they wander off it. In addition, players should do their best not to alter or harm the landscape, avoiding littering or taking objects.

Players should dress appropriately for the weather. This includes minimal amounts of cotton if the trail is at all likely to be wet and rain gear, if rain may occur. Should thunderstorms arise, the game should be postponed to another day. Pay attention to any warnings that may be posted for the area.

Appendix: Fire Safety

If choosing to burn the glyph, the glyph should only be burned in a designated fire safe area, such as a fire ring or grill. In addition, only burn the glyph if fires are permitted on the site; this can change from day to day, so it should be verified before beginning play.

Once the glyph has burned, pour water over the ashes. Dispose of all matches in the fire site.

Appendix: Acknowledgments

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Inspiration for the game came in part from [“The Eerie-ness of the English Countryside” \(Robert MacFarlane, The Guardian, 2015\)](#), along with *Annihilation* by Jeff Vandermeer and Kate’s obsessive listening to ghost story podcasts.

Appendix: Character Sheet for Printing

Name:
Occupation:
I am related to the (circle one): Perpetrator Victim
How do you know this land?
How did you find out about this gathering and how far have you traveled to get here?
How has your life become worse since the nightmares began?