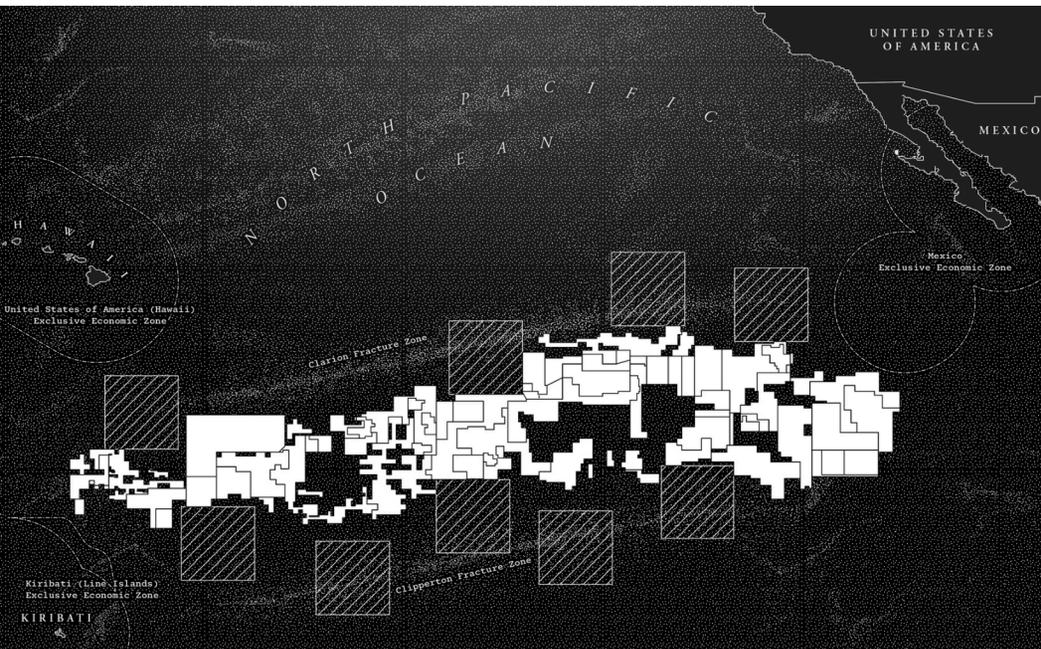


MILES

BELOW MIDNIGHT



a weird workplace-suspense larp
about mining the abyssal zone
(designed for online play)

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In the near future, giant excavators will mine rare metals from the ocean floor, piping them up to ships or floating platforms on the surface. The Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ), a 4500-mile expanse between Hawai'i and Mexico, contains billions of metallic nodules that cover the surface of the abyssal plain, more than 4km below sea level. Rights to mine this region are already being assigned by the International Seabed Authority (ISA), with mining companies ironically making the argument that these metals will be crucial to renewable energy development. The environmental devastation created by seabed mining will be both enormous and impossible to fully calculate, since humans still know so little about deep-sea ecosystems. Before playing, I highly recommend that you watch a [20-minute film on current efforts to develop these capabilities](#).

In *Miles Below Midnight*, we imagine the seabed mining industry ~50 years in the future, when many aspects of mineral extraction and processing have been automated. Miles below the Midnight Zone, in the abyssal depths, robot excavators react to commands from distant continents—ravaging the seabed with a few clicks.

PLAYER ROLES

To play this online larp duet, 2 players will portray employees of the fictional Canadian company Abyssal Minerals (AbMin), which started out independent but is now a subsidiary of ExxonMobile.

One player will portray the **Coxswain** or helmsman, responsible for the steering and wellbeing of the unmanned surface vessel (USV aka "drone ship" or "ghost ship") that lowers the excavator to the seabed and then carries mined minerals back to port.

The other player will portay the **Operator** or driver of the deep-sea excavator, an enormous 20-ton underwater tractor that will be lowered more than 4km down to gather metallic nodules.

Both of these duties are performed remotely, from offices or even work-from-home setups that are part of AbMin's secure network. Neither the Coxswain or Operator are asked to leave the relative security of shore. Instead, they merely login to AbMinNet, start a joint video conference to coordinate their activities, and go to work mining nodules in the CCZ.



AbMin USV *Cthulhucene-3*



AbMin Excavator *Rothschild*

COXSWAIN OPERATOR

NAME: _____ PRONOUNS: _____
 NATIONALITY: _____ LOCATION: _____
 YEARS & MONTHS OF SERVICE: _____ YRS _____ MOS _____
 PAST COWORKERS HAVE DESCRIBED YOU AS BEING...

WORKED WITH THIS OPERATOR BEFORE? NO / YES / UNSURE

YOUR ASSIGNED COMPANY DUTIES ARE TO:

- Monitor ship + Steer ship**
- + Jointly control lowering/raising of cable**
- + Monitor your Operator**

NAME: _____ PRONOUNS: _____
 NATIONALITY: _____ LOCATION: _____
 YEARS & MONTHS OF SERVICE: _____ YRS _____ MOS _____
 PAST COWORKERS HAVE DESCRIBED YOU AS BEING...

WORKED WITH THIS COXSWAIN BEFORE? NO / YES / UNSURE

YOUR ASSIGNED COMPANY DUTIES ARE TO:

- Monitor extractor + Steer extractor**
- + Jointly control lowering/raising of cable**
- + Monitor your Coxswain**

When the game session begins, the **USV Cthulhucene-3** has just arrived above today's assigned mining location, having sailed on autopilot through the night. Once the two employees login to the system, they have the following checklist of tasks ahead of them:

DAILY TASKS CHECKLIST

- Login to AbMinNet
- Review the Daily Tasks Checklist
- Complete the Peer Emotional & Psychic Assessment (PEPA)
- Check the Overall Status of AbMin USV *Cthulhucene-3*
- Check the Overall Status of AbMin Excavator *Rothschilde*
- Check the AbMinNet Inclement Weather (AWE) Report
- Complete the Go/No-Go Assessment for Mission
- Assume Control of AbMin USV *Cthulhucene-3*
- Assume Control of AbMin Excavator *Rothschilde*
- Ready USV's Hi-Lift Arm for Deployment
- Ready Excavator for Deployment
- Lower Excavator using Hi-Lift Arm Cable
 - Deploy Excavator from USV Deck using Hi-Lift Arm
 - Lower Excavator to Sunlit Zone (<200m)
 - Lower Excavator to Twilight Zone (200m-1km)
 - Lower Excavator to Midnight Zone (1km-3km)
 - Lower Excavator to Abyssal Zone (3-4km+)
 - Lower Excavator to Abyssal Plain Seabed (~4700m)
- Check the Overall Status of AbMin USV *Cthulhucene-3*
- Check the Overall Status of AbMin Excavator *Rothschilde*
- Check the AbMinNet Inclement Weather (AWE) Report
- Complete the Go/No-Go Assessment for Mining
- Move Excavator into Starting Position to Mine Area 29D

- Move Excavator into Starting Position to Mine Area 29D
- Mine Seabed Metallic Nodules in Area 29D
 - Mine Row Number 134 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 135 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 136 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 137 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 138 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 139 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 141 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Mine Row Number 142 & Recover Nodules to Ship
 - Complete Mining of Seabed Metallic Nodules in 29D
- Move Excavator into Position for Retrieval
- Raise Excavator using Hi-Lift Arm Cable
 - Raise Excavator off Abyssal Plain Seabed
 - Raise Excavator to Abyssal Zone (3-4km+)
 - Raise Excavator to Midnight Zone (1km-3km)
 - Raise Excavator to Twilight Zone (200m-1km)
 - Raise Excavator to Sunlit Zone (<200m)
 - Raise Excavator above the Surface
 - Return Excavator to USV Deck using Hi-Lift Arm
- Stow Excavator
- Relinquish Control of AbMin Excavator *Rothschilde*
- Stow Hi-Lift Arm
- Relinquish Control of AbMin USV *Cthulhucene-3*
- Complete the Peer Emotional & Psychic Assessment (PEPA)
- Complete Daily Tasks Checklist
- Logoff from AbMinNet

The game is played **primarily freeform**, with the players talking and gesturing to each other over video conference. But the **task checklist** provides the overall structure for the game.

CHECKING TASKS

Each item on the list has **two checkboxes**, one for each player. To **complete** and then **verify completion** of each task, both players have to check each task and then confirm with the other player that they agree the task has been fully performed. This creates an **overlapping, dual-responsibility** for the tasks, and the characters have been officially encouraged to respect this responsibility. Of course, whether they show “proper” respect or not is up to them.

PICKING PROMPTS WHILE CHECKING A TASK

In addition to the task checklist, there is also a series of prompts, which gives players things to think about (and maybe talk about?) while they are pretending to perform the required tasks. When it is time for one player to perform a task, they should pick a prompt semi-randomly from the appropriate “stack” of prompts, based on the guidelines below. (see “Picking Prompts”).

There is no card- or dice-based randomization method to choose a prompt, since this is intended as a freeform larp, so players are encouraged to pick a prompt several entries lower in the stack than their previous prompt, and simply wrap back around to the top once they reach the bottom. Not all prompts will be used.

Prompts are thoughts or images that flash through a character’s mind, via forces or reasons unknown. The players decide if and how they want to let the prompts inform their play. Some prompts are questions about the characters or events, and the players are free to answer however they like—although they may disagree or answer the same question differently!

PICKING PROMPTS FROM THE TWO STACKS

Surface / Sunlit Zone: Pick 1 prompt the Sun Stack

Twilight / Midnight Zone: Pick 2 prompts, 1 from each stack

Abyssal Zone/Plain: Pick 1 prompt from the Abyss Stack

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This game was originally designed for **Golden Cobra 2022**. It was inspired by the ingredients “Midnight” (as in the Midnight Zone) and “Reflection” (how the two players are asymmetrical reflections of each other and the mirroring of the sunlit areas and the abyss). Thanks to the organizers and judges for another inspiring year of Golden Cobra, one of the annual jams I most look forward to.

I would like to dedicate ***Miles Below Midnight*** to the indie TRPG ***One Missed Call*** by Caroline & Marc Hobbes, which inspired the 2-player set-up as well as the content of some of the cards. I will always remember playing *One Missed Call* at GameStorm.

This game is also doubtlessly inspired by the games I’m currently teaching at Carnegie Mellon University, including prompt-based games such as Takuma Okada’s *Alone on a Journey*, Graypaw’s *Treehouse Dreams*, Avery Alder’s *The Quiet Year*, Laura Simpson’s *Companion’s Tale*, Tim Hutchings’ *Thousand Year Old Vampire*, and Alex Roberts’ *For the Queen*.

I went through multiple different design approaches to this game over the past few weeks. The first involved climbing fully-clothed into your bathtub to play the on-board pilot of a submersible that was slowly filling with water. It was literally immersive! Approach number two simulated control of the extractor through a simple digital game designed in Bitsy. Maybe I will return to those ideas in a later game or future draft, particularly a digital interface.

MAJOR THANKS to all the activists, scientists, scholars, and other folks working to slow or halt efforts at seabed mineral extraction. You were a direct inspiration for this game, and I hope it plays a minor role in supporting your efforts.

A big **NO THANKS** to all the corporate and government interests involved in developing deep-sea mining. We **MUST** stop relying on fossil fuels for energy **WITHOUT** destroying the seabed in the process. That is a false choice! Letting mining companies control the discourse about seabed mineral extraction is just as big of a mistake as letting oil companies control the discourse on drilling for the past two centuries. Let’s not make the same mistake again.

SUN STACK

- 01. It sure is a long way down to the sea floor.
- 02. They don't pay you enough for this.
- 03. In the early days, some excavators were lost on the seabed.
- 04. The weather shows some signs of getting worse.
- 05. Your connection freezes for a moment, but then resumes.
- 06. The sound drops; have your partner repeat what they said.
- 07. It would be disasterous if a cat walked on your keyboard.
- 08. Assess your coworker relative to others you've worked with.
- 09. How did you come to work this job? Do you like it?
- 10. The previous crew left a note for you. What does it say?
- 11. What do you remember from the nightmare last night?
- 12. You're not supposed to take bathroom breaks on the job.
- 13. So much time is spent raising & lowering the excavator.
- 14. Which part of this job do you dislike the most? Why?
- 15. Is anyone waiting for you to get off work? A pet?
- 16. What book would you take to a desert island?
- 17. Occasionally you find trash, even in the Abyssal Zone.
- 18. You really messed up this part of the operation in training.
- 19. You wish you were actually under the Pacific sunshine.
- 20. You've heard rumors that AbMin may be in legal trouble.
- 21. You keep hoping to see a whale or giant squid.
- 22. Once the sun sets, it'll be night both above and below.
- 23. ExxonMobile will sell AbMin if it stops being as profitable.
- 24. How do you feel about the ecologies you are destroying?
- 25. Is this a career or just a job? How long do you plan to stay?
- 26. You have a loved one that you should call. Who?
- 27. You wonder if AbMin will let you re-train for the other role.
- 28. You've had trouble sleeping lately. Probably just stress.
- 29. There's a company therapist, but who do they report to?
- 30. Everyone ask about this job, but they'd never understand.

ABYSS STACK

- 01. Don't you want to darken your room further; it's too bright.
- 02. Many creatures living at this depth have never been seen.
- 03. You wonder when they'll get the new excavator model in.
- 04. Sometimes you forget that this is happening underwater.
- 05. Ah yes, that familiar claustrophobic feeling settles in.
- 06. Remember that one time, when you saw a ghost.
- 07. You need to reposition the USV slightly.
- 08. When you drop down, it's like the sun is setting, forever.
- 09. You're getting some really unusual readings.
- 10. What if the excavator kept dropping and didn't stop.
- 11. It's beautiful down here, like being on another planet.
- 12. What's the strangest creature you've seen at this job?
- 13. You may have to manually steer around a rocky ridge.
- 14. What past action do you regret the most?
- 15. You suddenly feel very cold, like your blood is ice.
- 16. The excavator is momentarily stuck, but then resumes.
- 17. Do you hear that grinding noise? Where is it coming from?
- 18. The Challenger Deep is 11km down, more than twice as far.
- 19. You hate this part, for some reason. You don't know why.
- 20. There's a brief flash of something in front of the cameras.
- 21. Sometimes you wonder if you'll ever see daylight again.
- 22. All the controls freeze up, forcing you to restart everything.
- 23. In what ways have you disappointed those you love?
- 24. The dust plume is making it difficult to see anything.
- 25. What is the song that you've been humming to yourself?
- 26. Even with the lights on, you can't really see anything.
- 27. It's like you're the only two people in the whole world.
- 28. You are holding your breath. Remember to breathe!
- 29. There's a vibration that's growing steadily stronger.
- 30. Even harder to see when everything is bumping around.