

Great Unknown

A freeform, online sci-fi LARP by Tracy Cooper

Great Unknown is an online freeform live-action role playing game for one facilitator and 3-5 additional players. It is an exploration of what lies at the limits of our understanding through a science-fiction lens. It can be played using any video conferencing software.

Today your tiny gray planet was shaken, both literally and figuratively, by the arrival of a figure the likes of whom none on your planet have seen before. The leader of Larsh, the nation of your planet where this stranger has landed and is being held in the main administrative building, has called the leaders of the other nations to a virtual meeting with this newcomer to discuss what to do about this development. As one of these leaders who has seen both beautiful and terrible relationships between your species and others, the fate of your planet may be in your hands.

Content warnings: This game has the potential to deal with a variety of issues related to discrimination, colonization, and genocide. Participants' characters, especially the facilitator's character, may face dehumanization, objectification, helplessness, and violence and/or threats of violence.

Safety mechanics: The following safety mechanics apply to ALL players, facilitators, and any others present. If your group has other safety mechanics that you prefer, feel free to utilize those.

1. The participants are more important than the game. The participants' needs should ALWAYS be the first priority, regardless of impact on the game. If a player needs to leave for any reason, either permanently or for a quick break, they are welcome to do so.
2. Participants are expected to use the following modified version of the OK Check-In procedure, a mechanic developed by New World Magischola. If a participant wishes to bring up a topic that they feel may be uncomfortable to other participants, or if they sense that other participants may be uncomfortable, they should make an "ok" hand signal by touching their thumb to their pointer finger and leaving their other fingers up. All other participants should respond with a thumbs up (meaning that they are comfortable with the content being addressed) a thumbs down (meaning that they are uncomfortable with the content being addressed) or a hand wiggle (meaning that they are slightly uncomfortable or unsure). If any participant gives a thumbs down, the topic should immediately be changed. If no participant gives a thumbs down but any participant gives a hand wiggle, participants should tone down the intensity of the topic at hand and move towards another topic, and should continue to utilize the OK Check-In to ensure the comfort of other participants. Participants are also encouraged to use the thumbs down or hand wiggle signals to express discomfort with the subject matter at any time, whether prompted or unprompted. Participants not using video may type "Ok?", "thumbs up," "hand wiggle," or "thumbs down" into the text chat instead of using hand signals.

The role of the facilitator: While players play the leaders of the diiron nations, the facilitator will play the person who has landed on Mercury. See the section "Facilitator info" for important details. Do not let players read the "Facilitator info" section. You are also responsible for facilitating the preparation and debrief phases.

Background for players: You are a leader of one of the nations of the diron (DEER-on), a species of intelligent beings living on the planet Mercury. Your planet has recently quelled an invasion by beings from Neptune. Twice before this, you have had contact with beings from other planets, with drastically different results. See below for descriptions of each of these three encounters (all participants should be familiar with these encounters).

Your species and your world

- You have the innate ability to understand and speak the languages of all beings in your vicinity, which has facilitated communication with the other species you have encountered.
- You are the only species native to your planet.
- Your species does not require sustenance to live, which has facilitated the creation of societies in which participation in any profession is strictly optional and in which time and activity is given very little structure and is generally left up to the individual.
- Your species has never traveled outside of Mercury, and with the exception of the nation of Essel, diron cultures generally place little value on exploration of the universe.
- Each nation, separated by geography, has developed a unique set of cultural values described briefly below.
- Members of your species generally live for 120-130 Mercury years (about 30 Earth years) and reach adulthood at the age of 29 Mercury years (about 7 Earth years).

The nations

- Larsh - A nation that values technological progress. Known for its great inventors.
- Essel - A nation that values the gathering of knowledge as a path towards understanding of the universe and its inhabitants. Known for its scientific labs.
- Myre - A nation that values spirituality and finding harmonic connection with others and with oneself. Known for its artistic creation.
- Borland - A nation that values contentment and gratefulness and scorns the desire for what one does not already have. Known as the planet's peacekeepers.
- Storan - A nation that values natural processes and decay. Known for their keen understanding of the natural world as gained through observation.

The three encounters

- Your encounter with the Venusians of Venus 830 Mercury years ago (200 Earth years ago) was peaceful. They landed on Larsh seeking oxygen from your atmosphere to treat illness, and Lopar, who was the leader of Larsh at the time, allowed them to take samples from the atmosphere. They come back every 8 Mercury years (2 Earth years) or so in order to obtain more, but other than that, the Venusians and the diron do not generally interact.
- Your encounter with a Deimian of Deimos 200 Mercury years (50 Earth years) ago was also peaceful. They were participating in a rite of passage in which each being spends 50 days in isolation off of Deimos floating through space, and accidentally landed on your planet. After a brief interaction in Storan they were on their way.
- Your encounter with the Neptunians of Neptune this year was hostile. When they landed, they claimed to be visiting to learn about diron life, and the Esselians let them stay there, but they were found to be trying to create a weapon to kill all of the diron in order to take the planet for

themselves and their kind. As such, the leader of Essel organized their citizens to kill the Neptunians to protect their own kind. This was seen as a drastic but necessary move, since diron cultures generally view violence as a last resort.

The stranger: The newly arrived stranger walks on two legs and has two additional limbs and a head and torso (a humanoid figure). They wear a bulky white suit that obscures their entire body. They arrived in a long, thin, white spacecraft containing copious amounts of machinery that is unfamiliar to you, a fabric sack large enough to fit the stranger inside, a device that sprays water, and some biological matter that would appear to be for the stranger's consumption.

Playing the game

Preparation

1. Ensure that all participants have access to and have read through this handbook, except for the “Facilitator info” section, which should only be accessible to the facilitator.
2. Ensure that all participants know that they are expected to respect the safety mechanics listed on page 1. If your group has other safety mechanics that you prefer, feel free to utilize those. Safety mechanics apply to ALL players, facilitators, and any others present.
3. Players should each select a different nation to lead. One player must be the leader of Larsh.
4. Players should design their characters on their own, choosing their name and pronouns and considering the following questions and any other questions they wish. Feel free to choose a name from the examples provided at the bottom of this section or create your own. If using a name from the list below, check with the other players to make sure that no two characters have the same name.
 - a. What are your goals for your nation? What is your approach to pursuing these goals?
 - b. How does your cultural background inform your leadership and decision-making style?
 - c. What is your attitude towards each of the extraterrestrial encounters? For those that you were alive/in power for, what was your attitude towards the other species? Were you welcoming? Suspicious? How did you handle the situation or advise the participating leaders, or how would you have?
 - d. What is your immediate attitude towards this newcomer?
5. Players should introduce to the group their characters' names and pronouns and any other information the other leaders would likely know about them.
6. Participants should change their name in the call to their character's name and pronouns.
7. Players should take turns establishing one fact about the diron species (physiology, mannerisms, physical appearance, etc.). Repeat this process until each player has established three facts. Then, let each player establish at least one fact about the relationship between their nation and another nation. Any participant is welcome to veto facts that they are not comfortable with for whatever reason.
8. Review the “Gameplay” section together.

Sample diron names: Fress, Lassena, Tisor, Forti, Rontiyo, Barmle, Tiva

Gameplay

In this meeting with their fellow leaders and this stranger from another planet, the diron leaders may want to ask questions to learn more about this newcomer. Perhaps they would like to know about this species' relationship with unknown people, or how their values align with your own, or their reason for coming here. You may ask the newcomer to leave or rejoin the call at any time, which the facilitator may do by turning their camera off to signify that they have left (though the facilitator is encouraged to observe during this time) or on to signify that they have rejoined. You may wish to discuss privately with the other leaders your views and concerns, and to determine what other information you may need to make a decision. During this call, you should determine what is to be done with this newcomer. Will they be allowed to stay? Will they face scrutiny or other precautions to ensure they do not harm the diron population? Will their presence be disclosed to the public? If possible, these decisions should be made by consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, players may initiate a vote on any particular issue. The call is scheduled to end after 60 minutes, at which time the diron leaders should have explained to the newcomer their decisions. If possible, the facilitator should use the text chat to give a five minute warning before the game ends.

Debrief

Participants should have the opportunity to answer the following questions to the group:

1. How are you feeling?
2. Would you like to highlight anything that your character said or did that you would not have said or done out-of-character?
3. What is something that another participant said or did that you appreciated or that enhanced your experience?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Facilitator info - do not read unless you are the facilitator! The year is 2051. As a human astronaut sent on this mission by NASA, you were instructed to take samples of the planet's surface for analysis in the labs back on Earth. You did not expect to encounter living beings on the planet, and humanity is not yet aware of the existence of life on other planets. As an agent of science and a proponent of knowledge, you do not know how your superiors at NASA will respond or what further actions they will take if you tell them about your encounter. Answer all questions from the diron honestly from your character's perspective, but feel free to include your own spin. Some questions to consider for your character when preparing to facilitate this game:

- Why did you choose to join NASA? How do you feel about your job?
- What is your general relationship with your peers and superiors at NASA?
- How do you think NASA, and possibly humanity as a whole, will respond to the existence of intelligent alien life?