Dreampunk

Xavid

Dreampunk, by Xavid

Design and Development Contributions

Sarah Grace Tuttle

Artists

Sarah Morrison, Santiago Alzate, Jhenne Tyler, Kindred Styles, Chad Wyrwicz, Obaseun "godofiron" Ogunkeye, September-XYZX, steff bradley, Idefix, Nathaniel Santore, Camille "Karma" O'Leary, Finn J. Carey, Natalie Olivari

Playtesters

Thomas Mack, Andrew Clough, Edwin Karat, Sarah Grace Tuttle, Susanna Pretzer, Barbara Fleming, James Pretzer, Esteban Colon, Cory Bonifay and the Louisiana Zoueurs, Zoe Bloom, Neal Tanner

Other Feedback and Proofing

Juniper Roan and Susanna Pretzer

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What is Dreampunk?

At night, you sleep. And when you sleep, you dream. But these dreams are not idle imaginings, without consequence. No, through some curse or blessing, your dreams tap into something greater. What this means for you, what you will do to escape or to harness this, is for you to decide and discover.

When you sleep, without fail, you find yourself in the Dream, a persistent world where you meet others like yourself and many more entirely unlike yourself. It is a world of wonders and dangers, both personal and alien. Each night, it is your refuge and your prison. And each night, you fear you might not wake up again.

The Dream is not like the waking world. It is not solid and Euclidean. It resists attempts to scientifically determine its basic physics. It runs more on ideas and motivations than mass and energy. Nevertheless, it has cause and effect and consequence, though they can be twisted things.

For while you Dreamers have powers in the dream, abilities beyond what you may know in the waking world, that does not mean that the Dream is safe for you. For not all that enter the Dream manage to escape it. And those that do are always changed.

Tabletopping

Dreampunk is a tabletop roleplaying game, a game played by a small group, perhaps 2–6 people, who get together to collaboratively tell a certain kind of story. By default, I assume that this game will be played by friends and/or family sitting around a table together. During game, you'll all describe what characters do, what happens as a result, and play off each others' contributions.

Players

Most players will play a Dreamer, someone who visits the same uncanny world (the Dream) whenever they sleep. Something subtle ties the various Dreamers together: they'll end up meeting again night after night.

By default, one among you plays the Guide, tasked with representing the environment of the Dream and playing the non-Dreamer characters, the denizens of the Dream, also known as support characters.

The same player doesn't have to play the Guide every time; if you rotate who's playing the Guide, everyone creates a Dreamer character and the character for the player who's currently Guide happens to not show up in the Dream while they have the Guide role.

It's also possible to have everyone play a Dreamer and divide the Guide's role among the group. This possibility is discussed in "Distributing the Guide" on pg. 65.

Cards

Dreampunk is played with a deck of cards, but not a deck of ordinary playing cards. The cards should be surreal, artistic, and laden with metaphor. These can be the Dreampunk deck of cards, but other cards such as *Dixit* or *Mysterium* cards or perhaps tarot or oracle decks can also work well. Each Dreamer starts each session of play with a hand of 5 cards which will be used as a resource. Dreamers will refresh their hands back up to 5 cards when they wake from the Dream or find respite (see pg. 23).

Dreamers don't keep the same specific cards between sessions of play. Each player should return their cards to the deck when they finish playing for the day.

The Guide has moves that play the top card of the deck, but does not have a hand of cards of their own.

Safety, Meta, and Player Conflicts

The world of Dreampunk can get dark and intense. When it moves into nightmare territory, it can sometimes get into areas that may be difficult or unsafe for some players. Or there may just be directions or topics that feel unfun or unpleasant. Remember that players are more important than the game, and that everyone's safety and fun is more important than fictional concerns or strict adherence to the rules. Your characters may disagree or dislike each other, but players should practice kindness and work together to tell a story that's fun and safe for everyone.

The door is always open: it's okay for anyone to take a break from the game or stop playing at any time.

During play, anyone can say "Pause" at any time to freeze play, and that player can express what they need. This can be a practical matter like needing to use the bathroom or deal with dinner, or for safety reasons to state their boundaries or needs. If something that happened in game makes you unhappy or causes you difficulties, you can ask to change it, and you don't need to explain why. Alternately, sometimes discussing an issue without changing anything or expressing concerns about directions play might go in the future is what you want. Everyone at the table should work together to figure out something that works for everyone.

You can also use the Cut or Awaken moves (see pg. 24) as an "escape valve" to end a difficult scene or one that for whatever reason you don't want to continue.

The important thing is to prioritize players, establish the expectation that it's okay for people to ask for what they need, and live up to that expectation. Different approaches work well for different groups, so do what works for your table.[1]

Before playing, go around the table and discuss people's expectations: what they're looking for in the game and any topics or elements they particularly want to explore or avoid. Also be sure to check in with each other during play as well.

The default assumption in this game is that play is mostly cooperative, with Dreamers working together rather than fighting each other. Discuss with your table how hard and fast this should be. Both dreamer-versus-dreamer fights being entirely forbidden and them being allowed when appropriate can work well, but if different players have different expectations this can lead to unfun outcomes.

Overall, regardless of what you choose, it's everyone's responsibility to try to make the game fun for everyone at the table. If someone's not having fun, that's an indication that you should pause the action and figure out if there's something you should change so the game works better for everybody.

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[1] Some groups may find they prefer other safety tools; you may want to look at the X-Card by John Stavropoulos (http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg) or the TTRPG Safety Toolkit curated by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk (http://bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit).

Gameplay Agenda

This is a game of shared narrative, and it works best when everyone is working together to build the story. Everyone at the table should keep these goals in mind as they play to help the game work well.

Embrace dream logic. The Dream isn't a real place, with regular geometry and consistency. That's something to embrace. Don't restrict yourself to the logic of the waking world and ordinary ways of approaching problems. Don't try to understand the Dream in terms of civilizations, histories, and rules that you can pin down precisely. Instead, accept that themes, mood, and symbolism will drive what you experience.

Engage with the Dream. If events in the Dream just feel arbitrary, it's easy to feel like choices don't matter and no one can have a meaningful effect on anything. Therefore, engage with support characters and their conflicts and interactions to keep things meaningful even as the physical environment around you remains in flux.

Make everyone's contributions matter. Play off elements introduced by other players, including the Guide, and treat them as significant. If someone treats a decision as a big deal, support that in your play by making it feel consequential. If someone is interested in a particular element, consider playing with or against that element. Give everyone a chance to shine and be the focus at the table. Staying together as a group by default most of the time can help ensure everyone can be involved in what's happening.

Play to find out what happens. Neither the Guide nor Dreamer players should come to game with a specific plan in mind for a plot. The Guide player does not need to prepare an extensive scenario; at most, they should bring ideas they have for characters they might introduce or things that might happen and be willing to discard these ideas based on the flow of the game. Dreamer players may have ideas on how their character progression might go, but should be flexible and willing to evolve in unexpected ways. Each player has the power to do the unexpected, to take the game in unanticipated directions. The Dreamers have as much ability to decide where the story goes as the Guide, and that is to be celebrated. In all cases, the cards may prompt new and different ideas; take advantage of this.

Media Touchstones

The Dream isn't a predefined place detailed in this book; it's a world the group as a whole will explore and define during play, with inspiration from the cards and each other. Nevertheless, here are some movies and books that inspired Dreampunk and can help you get into the mindset of the Dream.

Movies

- *Ink* (Jamin Winans)
- *Paprika* (Satoshi Kon)
- *MirrorMask* (Dave McKean, Neil Gaiman)
- *Labyrinth* (Jim Henson)

Books and Stories

- *Every Heart a Doorway*, by Seanan McGuire
- "Red Dirt Witch", by N. K. Jemisin
- *The Dreaming Place*, *The Onion Girl*, and *The Blue Girl*, among others, by Charles de Lint
- *Un Lun Dun*, by China Miéville

The Flow of Play

Dreampunk can be structured in two ways. In a one-shot, a group gets together once to play and the game is over when they finish that day. In a "campaign", the same group gets together periodically in a multiple sessions, for a series of adventures linked into an overaching storyline and allowing for more character growth.

Getting Started

Someone who's read this book and is comfortable with the rules should explain the premise of the game, go over basic concepts, and answer questions.

Discuss who, if anyone, will play the Guide. Each non-Guide player should pick a playbook and start filling it out to create a character (see pg. 30).

While thinking about characters, also give everyone a chance to talk about what they're looking for in the game and anything they want to avoid.

Beginning Play

Before beginning play for the first time, it can be helpful to go around the circle and introduce your characters, what they look like, what sorts of possessions they might have, and perhaps something about their motivations or situation. This also helps establish characters as distinct from players, set expectations, and perhaps prompt ideas for interactions and character relationships.

Having each Dreamer player write their character's name on a folded index card can be a helpful indicator to help remember who everyone is.

Once everyone's situated, start play with a new chapter.

Chapters

A chapter is a series of scenes focused around a shared situation, problem, or goal. Perhaps an antagonist appears and the group figures out how to deal with them, or perhaps you're exploring a particular area or pursuing a particular objective. The chapter lasts until the focus is resolved or decisively abandoned; it could conclude within a single session of play or extend across several.

Chapters often start with with the Dreamers having just fallen asleep and there being a gap of time or context from whatever may have happened to them previously. Alternately, a chapter may follow directly from a previous chapter, when the resolution of one focus leads naturally to something to follow up on.

Before a chapter, discuss as a table what sort of focus you want to have. Think about any Needs you want to engage with, and what sort of focus might give you opportunities to do so. Chapters can have well-defined focuses, or they can be pretty much take-it-as-it-comes, but taking a moment to touch base can help come up with a theme that everyone's interested in.

After you've established the chapter focus, when you're ready to begin play, have each player, starting with the Guide, play the top card of the deck and interpret it to establish something about the starting scene. (This is functionally an Explore move; see pg. 23.) Once everyone has contributed, the first scene begins and anyone can begin roleplaying and taking actions.

There generally aren't formal "turns". Dreamers can act in whatever order makes sense narratively. Everyone should work to make sure that all players get their turn in the spotlight and no one gets left out. If things get too hectic during a conflict or other exciting situation, it can be helpful to take turns around the table to make sure everyone has a chance to act and that each move can be resolved before another player makes a move. Alternately, multiple Dreamers may work together with joint moves (see pg. 16).

Scene Breaks

A chapter in Dreampunk consists of a series of scenes, similar to scenes in a book, play, or TV show. During a scene, Dreamer players describe what they do, the Guide responds on behalf of the world and support characters to describe what happens as a result, and both will make Moves, working together to establish the story of Dreampunk.

A scene ends and a new scene begins when the time or location of the action changes. When a scene ends, discard the cards that have been played; the table is now clear for something new.

While scenes can take place directly one after another, there are often gaps of time or space between them. This allows the story to focus on interesting or meaningful events and skip past things that happened but aren't necessary to play out "on-screen".[2]

Scene transitions can be triggered whenever it makes sense, often using the Cut move (see pg. 24). For example, if your character suggests going somewhere, an immediate transition to the scene when you arrive can work well.

Waking up from the Dream often serves as a type of hard scene transition that can happen after a scene that resolves an ongoing effort, one of overwhelming intensity, or when it otherwise feels appropriate. This is often, but not always, proposed by the Guide. This triggers the Awaken move (see pg. 25) and then leads into a scene that may feel completely disconnected from the previous scene, sometimes serving as the start of a new Chapter. This does not mean that the events of the previous scene become irrelevant, but the disconnect might mean their relevance is not immediately visible.

In general, scenes aren't some strong and rigid structure; they're mainly noted to keep the table from getting too cluttered with cards and to avoid getting bogged down in uninteresting minutiae. Use them flexibly as fits your table.

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[2] Whether the characters actually perceived these events or whether the flow of the Dream just assumes they happened can be ambiguous.

Moves

When playing your character, you'll want to do things. Sometimes it's something you can pretty clearly do. Then you just say what you're doing, and it happens.

Sometimes, however, what you want to do is something hard or impactful or floundering or weird. Moves establish things you can definitely do, what that entails and costs, and perhaps something of what that means.

(If someone disagrees about what you can do, work as a table to propose tweaks or compromises to find something that works for everyone. Consider "yes, and" or "yes, but" improvisational responses to add wrinkles without rejecting what someone wants to do. The Guide also has a move, Resolve Doubt, for handling situations where a Dreamer can do something but the outcome is unclear.)

Every Dreamer has a base set of moves and a few unique moves based on their archetype concept, or "playbook". The main types of moves are Lucid Moves, which let a Dreamer play a card to reshape the Dream based on some element of the card played, and Twist Moves, which cause the Dreamer to falter or fail but let them draw a card in exchange. See the next chapter for more on Dreamer moves.

The Guide has moves, too. (See pg. 49.) The Guide tends to take moves reactively, responding to actions of the Dreamers or perhaps to their failure to take action.

In the next chapter, we'll discuss the moves all Dreamers share.