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A churning sensation. A wet hiss. A shadow that didn't seem to correspond to anything. A foreign pulse inside your wrist. A click-click-clicking that followed you everywhere.

You pinched yourself but it didn't go away.

What this is

Abnormal is a game of body horror. Body horror breaks down the lines between natural and unnatural, witness and witnessed, human and other. The body becomes contested terrain, and the senses become untrustworthy informants.

Abnormal is a game for 1-3 players, about the struggle between a witness and a morphological horror. It should take forty to ninety minutes to play. To play you will need a four-sided die, eight small tokens (referred to throughout the text as fragments), the six custom cards included with this game, and a few index cards.

Filmography

Alien, Videodrome, The Fly, Splice, Dead Ringers, Scanners, Lost Highway, Eraserhead, Tetsuo the Iron Man, Rosemary's Baby, Drag Me To Hell, Pulse, Black Swan, Teeth, Thirst.

Dedication

This game is dedicated to Aaron Friesen.
Made with love by Avery Mcdaldno.
Illustrated by Soren Melville.

The roles

Abnormal has three roles.

Witness

The witness is the main character, a person slowly being consumed by a horrific force, and whose grip on reality is likely unraveling.

Horror

The horror begins with a single manifestation, though will likely spread, develop new manifestations, and begin to overwhelm the witness.

Support

The support are people in the witness' life who help them maintain a grip on reality. This is decidedly the smallest of the three roles.

If you are playing with a single player, you take on the roles of Witness, Horror, and Support. Your job is to alternate between these roles as the turn sequence requires. There are some special rules for playing solo scenes, mentioned at the foot of the Narrating Scenes section. Since only the Witness player has to make mechanical choices throughout play, playing all three roles is easier than you might imagine!

If you are playing with two players, the first player takes on the role of the Witness and the second takes on the role of the Horror. The two players share the Support role, trading off on being the Support player based on what makes sense at the time.

If you are playing with three players, each is given one of the three roles. Note that the Support player has the smallest of the three roles.

Setup

At the start of the game, the witness is holding their life together, but a hint of untenability exists. There are two support characters in the witness' life, but those relationships might be waning or problematic. And into this milieu the horror enters with its first manifestation.

Life Facets

The Witness player starts by picking two facets of the witness' life to describe, out of: work life, sex life, home life, social life.

For each of the selected facets, choose two of the descriptors below that describe it, and tell the other players a bit about it.

The facet of your life is: *monotonous, unprecedented, satisfying, strained, rich, vulgar, esteemed, timid, temporary.*

Name your character and describe them briefly.

Support Characters

The Support player now creates two support characters, and for each, chooses two of the descriptors below to describe them or their relationship to the witness. They tell the other players a bit about these new characters. Support characters are people who will come to the witness' aid when truly needed (regardless of whether they are on amicable terms normally). If you are playing with two players, each creates one support character.

The support is: *quiet, tired, ex, gorgeous, unseeing, domineering, sympathetic, needy, strong, frenetic, kind, connected.*

The First Manifestation

The Horror player now creates an initial manifestation for the horror. They do this by choosing two of the descriptors below. Don't describe the manifestation just yet - that'll happen when it first emerges in the second scene of the game. For now, just choose its descriptors and begin brainstorming what those might mean.

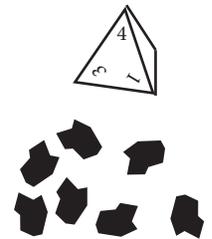
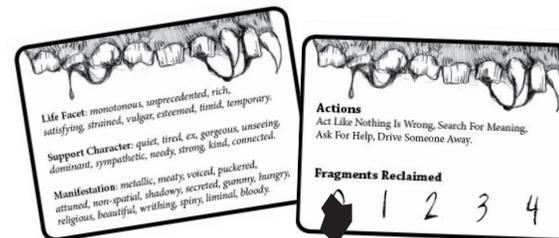
While body horror frequently features manifestations that occur within the body of the witness, this need not be the case with each manifestation you introduce over the course of this game. Consider some shadowy external phenomena.

The manifestation is: *metallic, meaty, voiced, puckered, attuned, non-spatial, shadowy, secreted, gummy, religious, hungry, beautiful, writhing, spiny, liminal, bloody.*

Card Placement

Place the Stage cards face down, forming a row from Stage 1 to Stage 4.

Place the two remaining cards face up. Take a fragment (one of your eight tokens) and place it on the zero spot of the Fragments Reclaimed track.



Game structure

The game alternates between Witness turns (in which the Witness tries to keep their life together) and Horror turns (in which the Horror tries to extend its reach). Most turns involve a short scene being played out.

The horror evolves over four stages: Awaken, Spread, Overwhelm, Normalize. As it evolves, fragments build up on each of the four stage cards.

There are two endgame triggers which cause the Horror to win:

Utterly Consumed: Seven fragments rest upon the cards.

Permanently Entwined: Two fragments rest upon the Normalize stage card.

The Witness may be able to stave off the horror and reclaim their life, by slowly realizing the underlying causes and points of infection that the horror has latched onto. This is represented by the third possible endgame:

Life Reclaimed: Four fragments have been reclaimed.

Narrating scenes

During scenes, the Witness player is responsible for narrating the witness' thoughts, and the Horror player is responsible for narrating their sensory experiences and any ways in which the horror manifests itself. The Witness player is generally responsible for narrating the witness' actions, though the Horror player is invited to narrate how the witness probes or investigates things going on around them (no "Do you investigate the noise?" is needed). The Support player narrates all the extra characters, including the two supports.

Tom is playing the Witness, and Mia is playing the Horror. Tom narrates how the witness is sitting at his computer, endlessly tabbing between social media accounts. Mia responds by narrating how the witness starts to feel an uncomfortable throbbing in his wrist. "At first it feels like a typing cramp," Mia continues, "but soon it's grown to an intense pain. You turn your arm to look, and see a writhing bulge of flesh on the inside of your wrist." As the Horror player, Mia can make that sort of investigative decision for the witness.

Playing Solo Scenes

In a solo game, play through each scene in your mind. As the scene unfolds, mumble aloud key descriptions and would-be dialogue. Keep a pen in hand, and throughout each scene jot down four or five words summarizing the content of the scene.

Jacqueline is playing Abnormal by herself. She mumbles her way through a scene where the horror presents a new manifestation to her right in the middle of a supermarket shopping trip. At the end of the scene, she looks down at her index card and sees the words "supermarket unease brisk shove rupture" recorded.

That seems about right.

The first round

Open the game with the Witness player framing a scene that takes place before the first manifestation reveals itself. Let this quick scene provide a glimpse at the witness' regular life, prior to the invading presence of the horror.

After this first scene has concluded, the Horror player unlocks the first stage (Awaken) and places a fragment upon it. They follow the instructions on that card, framing a scene where the witness encounters the first manifestation while attempting to go about their life. The scene should reveal the witness' initial reaction. Is it disbelief? Morbid curiosity? Disgusted panic?

Once these two scenes are complete, alternate between Horror turns and Witness turns (starting with a Horror turn) until one of the three endgame conditions has been met.

Tom is playing the witness, Doug, a database engineer with a girlfriend overseas on a tour of duty. Tom says, "Alright, Doug is at home, he's watching this nature channel show about tigers. He's eating leftovers from last night - spaghetti and meat sauce. He's kicked back in his easy-chair, with a pipe and a small baggie of weed on the little end-table next to him. The place is disheveled, like he stopped tidying several months ago."

Mia is playing the horror. The first manifestation is going to be "attuned, secreted." She unlocks the Awaken card and places a fragment on it. Following the instructions, she frames a scene where that first manifestation can appear. She starts, "Okay, it's later that same night. You turned the TV off for a while, but having nothing else to do, you've turned it back on. You're half-watching a show when the colours glitch out. They keep flickering between palettes. The sound is all fucked up, too - it's screechy and painful to listen to. Your eyes start to water immediately. Sticky, gummy tears well up in your eyes. And as the noise rises in pitch, you can feel sticky fluid leaking from your left ear, too. What's your reaction?" Tom and Mia carry on, finishing the scene.

When the scene concludes, Mia launches into the first Horror turn.

The horror turn

On the Horror turn, the Horror player rolls a four-sided die.

If the die face matches one of the already-unlocked stages, add a fragment to that card and follow the instructions on that card for framing a scene.

If the die face matches the next stage waiting to be unlocked, it is now unlocked - the player turns the stage card face up, places a fragment upon it, and follows the instructions on that card for framing a scene.

If a card already has three fragments on it, instead of placing a fourth upon it, place the new fragment upon the next stage card in the sequence (unlocking it if necessary). Follow the instructions for the card you actually place the fragment on.

If the die face doesn't match or unlock a stage, then unlock the next stage card but place no fragments this turn. No scene occurs, and the Horror turn is over.

Awaken and Overwhelm both introduce a new type of action that the Horror player may elect to do instead of rolling the die and taking a regular turn.

Mia starts her first Horror turn with Stage 1 (Awaken) unlocked. She rolls a 2. Since Stage 2 is the next in line to be unlocked, she unlocks it and places a fragment on it. She follows the instructions on the card and frames a scene.

Tom takes a Witness turn, and then it's back to Mia. This time, she rolls a 4. Since Stage 4 can't be unlocked yet, there will be no scene and no fragment placed. But she still gets to unlock the next stage in the sequence: Stage 3. She flips it over and her turn ends.

The witness turn

On the Witness turn, the Witness player chooses one of the following four options. Note that in the early turns of the game, you will often choose an option that doesn't actually have a mechanical effect (*Act Like Nothing is Wrong*, *Search for Meaning*). That's okay! But when the opportunity to remove fragments does appear, play tactically.

The Witness player should keep this page in front of them during play, as they'll likely need to refer back to it frequently.

Act Like Nothing Is Wrong

Frame a scene where the witness tries to ignore the horror and continue on with their life as normal. This scene might take place at work, the supermarket, home, or somewhere more exotic. The scene can involve support characters or it can be in isolation. The Horror player can choose to what extent the manifestations intrude.

Mechanical effect: You may take a fragment from either of the middle stage cards (Stage 2 or Stage 3) and place it on a different stage card. This does not trigger a scene.

This mechanical effect allows you to lump fragments together so that your next Search For Meaning or Ask For Help role might be more effective.

If there are no fragments on Stage 2 or Stage 3, no mechanical effects occur.

Search For Meaning

Frame a scene where the witness digs deeper, exploring the nature of a manifestation or dwelling upon the potential reasons that all of this surreality has beset them. This might involve obsessively monitoring changes in their own body, underground medical testing, or chasing shadowy figures down unlit alleyways.

Mechanical effect: Choose an unlocked stage card. Roll a four-sided die. If you roll less than the number of fragments on the card, remove one and increment the Fragments Reclaimed track by one.

Ask For Help

Frame a scene where one of the two supports comes to the aid of the witness, and tries to help them emerge from the clutches of the horror. They might drive the witness to the hospital, probe a strange orifice with trembling hands, join in an alarming ritual that just might work, or something else. Unless they are themselves infected, they don't fully understand what's going on, but still they try to help.

Mechanical effect: Choose an unlocked stage card and one of the two support characters. Roll a four-sided die. If your roll is less than the number of fragments on the card, remove them all and increment the Fragments Reclaimed track by that many. If your roll is a 3 or 4, the support becomes an Infected Support.

For details on Infected Supports, see below.

Drive Someone Away

While support people remain in the witness' life, they remain vulnerable. While it's important to have people you can ask for help, rules are introduced in the Spread and Overwhelm stages of the horror that turn your supports into a liability. You may decide it's best to drive them away, pushing them out of your life forever. Frame a scene where you do this. Your callous actions are definitely successful.

Mechanical effect: The support is no longer part of the game. You cannot use them in an Ask For Help scene, and they do not count as an Infected Support.

If you drive away both of your supports, you can no longer Ask For Help.

Infected Supports

Reaching out to people can save your life, but it can also endanger theirs. When you Ask For Help, your support characters can become infected by the horror.

A support becomes infected if the Witness player rolls a 3-4 during an Ask For Help Scene. Whether the witness knows it or not, the manifestations begin to spread and take on new hosts.

Each infected support that has not been driven away (with the Drive Someone Away turn action) reduces the threshold for the *Utterly Consumed* endgame by one.

In other words, if there is one infected support, *Utterly Consumed* triggers at six fragments. If there are two infected supports, it triggers at five.

Stages of horror

There are four stages to the horror: Awaken, Spread, Overwhelm, and Normalize.

Awaken

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where the witness encounters and contends with one of the manifestations of horror that already exist.

Use these scenes to highlight how the horror affects different facets of the witness' life, and to explore how the witness reacts to such occurrences. Imagine that our witness is tenderly kissing a lover, when suddenly their spine starts to do that shifting, molten-hot thing. Do they freak out and leave abruptly? Do they try to play it cool? Does their lover notice the grotesque spinal reconfiguration, or are they oblivious? What does this do to their evolving relationship?

Spread

When you place a fragment on this card, create a new manifestation of the horror. Frame a scene where the witness encounters this manifestation for the first time.

Humans are good at detecting patterns and inferring causality. In short, people find *the because*. The witness is experiencing all these biological and psychosexual horrors because of something in their life. When you create new manifestations and introduce them into the witness' life, do so with an eye to challenging and subverting these *because* statements. Give those playing (even if it's just you playing!) no easy and tidy causality. Keep it messy and uncertain and anxious.

When creating new manifestations, pick two descriptors from the same list that you picked from previously: *metallic, meaty, voiced, puckered, attuned, non-spatial, shadowy, secreted, gummy, religious, hungry, beautiful, writhing, spiny, liminal, bloody*.

Overwhelm

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene in which the horror overwhelms the witness' defences in some way - becoming permanently embedded inside them, enlisting the witness in a sinister mission, else.

The early Awaken and Spread scenes help establish the boundaries of what the horror can and cannot freely do. Overwhelm scenes let the Horror player supersede those implicit rules. The horror can set the witness on a course of action or further blur the line between witness and horror, parasite and host.

Normalize

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene in which the horror becomes more normalized, where the witness overlooks or accepts the role and place of the horror in their life.

In the Normalize stage, the relationship between the witness and the horror changes. While the manifestations will likely remain disgusting and scary to the players, they become normalized or welcome or permissible to the witness. The witness begins to accept a future that includes the manifestations.

There is a concept of play that is important to grasp for this game: bleed. Bleed refers to moments when the player begins to sincerely feel the emotions of their character, moments when thoughts and feelings *bleed* between the two entities. I mention it here in order to say: Normalize scenes will likely erode the bleed that has been established between player and character, and this is by design.

Endgames

There are three potential endgames: Utterly Consumed, Permanently Entwined, and Life Reclaimed. When one is triggered, finish playing out the current scene, and then move on to frame a scene based on the endgame instructions.

Utterly Consumed

Seven fragments rest upon the cards.

If there are seven or more total fragments on the stage cards, the Utterly Consumed endgame is triggered. Together, frame and narrate a scene where the witness is wholly and utterly consumed by the horror. This might involve permanent dissociation, physical digestion, demonic possession, or something equally catastrophic.

Permanently Entwined

Two fragments rest upon the Normalize stage card.

If there are two or more fragments on the Normalize stage card, the Permanently Entwined endgame is triggered. Together, frame and narrate a scene about how the horror has integrated itself into the witness' life and body, and remains there permanently. This might involve begrudging symbiosis, or oblivious parasitism, a fusing of two trans-dimensional entities, or something equally strange.

Life Reclaimed

Four fragments have been reclaimed.

If the Witness player has removed four or more fragments from the cards, increasing the Fragments Reclaimed track to four, then the Life Reclaimed endgame is triggered. Together, frame and narrate a scene about how the witness reclaims their life and excises the horror from it. This might include reuniting with supports, seeking help from new sources, a great cosmic battle, or the recognition of personal power that had previously been thought lost.

Manifestations From Recent Play

Not sure where to go with your body horror?

Below is an example taken from a recent playtest of the game, with Syr playing the role of the Horror player. Although not mentioned, Claire was the Witness player and I (Avery) was the Support player.

He was surrounded by voices and overcome with hunger...

Syr decided that the first manifestation would be attuned and voiced. They narrated how lonely professor James Harrison began to hear murmuring voices one night, as he plodded through a giant stack of papers waiting to be graded. The voices would stop whenever anyone else was around, and resume the moment they left.

During the next scene, James learned what the voices craved, what turned their frantic voices into a soothing gurgle: raw meat. Over the next few weeks, the voices became stronger and more willful, slowly gaining more control in each scene that they featured in.

When Syr was given the opportunity to create a second manifestation (by finally rolling a 2 and unlocking the Spread stage card), they chose to create one that was hungry and puckered. James Harrison was undressing for a shower when he caught sight of his back in the mirror. Tiny mouths had formed at the nape of his neck and along his spinal column. It was their voices he'd been hearing for weeks. It was their hunger.

James turned to an ex lover for help, but it was no use. She turned him away in disgust, and he retreated in shame. He realized that the mouths were part of him now, hiding underneath his shirt, always hungry.

The game ended with James becoming Permanently Entwined.

If you're still feeling uninspired, you can return to the filmography listed on page 1.

On boundaries

While body horror draws its power from discomfort, it is important to respect your boundaries and the boundaries of your fellow players. Be ready to retract anything you say if it crosses a line. Pay attention to the facial expressions of your fellow players, and if necessary check in and ask, "Is that too much?" Part of your responsibility in playing this game is creating a safe space for the players.

I strongly recommend playing the game while using the X-Card or a similar tool.

To use the X-Card, draw an X on an index card. Place it in the centre of the table. Explain to everyone playing that, *"This is an X-Card. If ever someone says something that you're not okay with introducing into the game, for whatever reason, you can touch your finger to this card. We'll pause the game momentarily and figure out how to get the game back on track, so that everyone feels okay with the direction that the game is going. Usually this will mean a quick substitution of the last thing that was said for something else. Sometimes it'll mean a water break or a short conversation about expectations and boundaries. You can use the X-Card for serious triggering content, but you can also use it for smaller things, like a name you don't want to have incorporated into the story."*

The X-Card is just one option, but having a safety mechanism when you play Abnormal ensures that you're able to push scary and unnerving content in the game while also knowing that everyone has tools to fix the situation if you end up pressing the wrong buttons.

There is good discomfort and bad discomfort, and playing Abnormal involves paying attention to which of the two you feel at any given moment.

A challenge

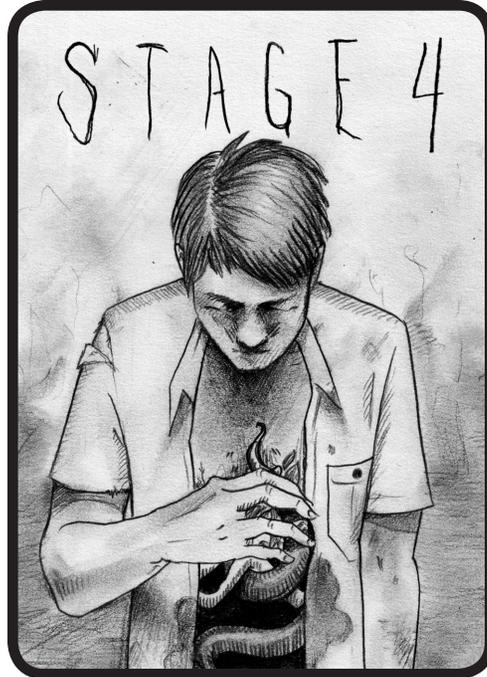
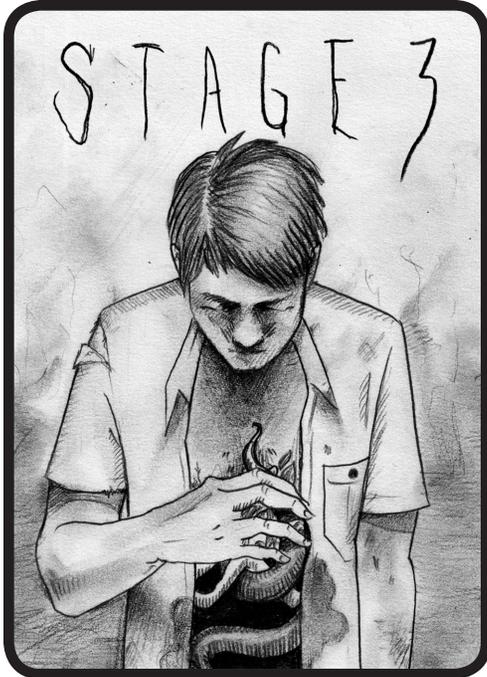
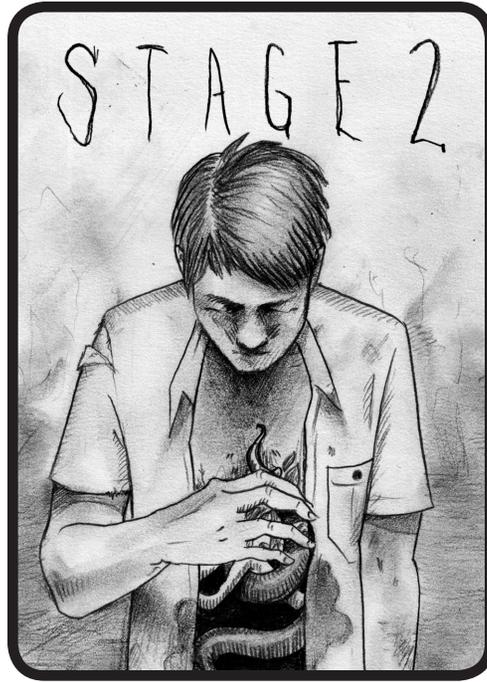
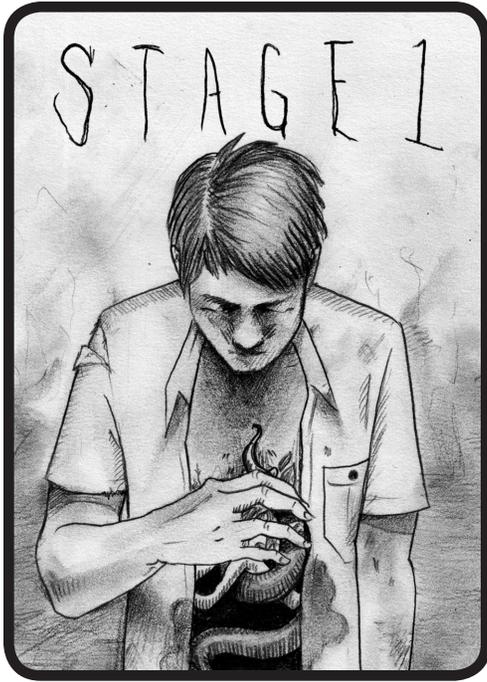
Body horror is a great way to explore fears and hopes around how we relate to our bodies. It can look at stigma, shame, selfhood, sexuality, health, and the contested space of normalcy.

People are often afraid of what they don't understand. While that fear is the driving force that makes body horror compelling, it has also resulted in a genre that is actively hostile to women and to marginalized bodies.

There is a difference between making grotesque the body, and punishing a body because you find it grotesque. The former is body horror, the latter is bigotry.

Body horror has a history of demonizing women's sexual agency, demonizing pregnancy, and relying on shallow rape metaphor when telling stories about women. This often goes unexamined and unchallenged. It has been *done to death*, so to speak, becoming tired and offensive.

I'd like to end this text with a simple challenge: do better.



To Print...

These six card-backs correspond to the six cards on the next page. If you have a double-sided printer, print these two pages double-sided with the printer set to "flip on short edge," they should come out correctly aligned.

If not, here's a legend for assembly:

Stage 1: Awaken

Stage 2: Spread

Stage 3: Overwhelm

Stage 4: Normalize



Life Facet: *monotonous, unprecedented, rich, satisfying, strained, vulgar, esteemed, timid, temporary.*

Support Character: *quiet, tired, ex, gorgeous, unseeing, dominant, sympathetic, needy, strong, kind, connected.*

Manifestation: *metallic, meaty, voiced, puckered, attuned, non-spatial, shadowy, secreted, gummy, hungry, religious, beautiful, writhing, spiny, liminal, bloody.*



Actions

Act Like Nothing Is Wrong, Search For Meaning, Ask For Help, Drive Someone Away.

Fragments Reclaimed

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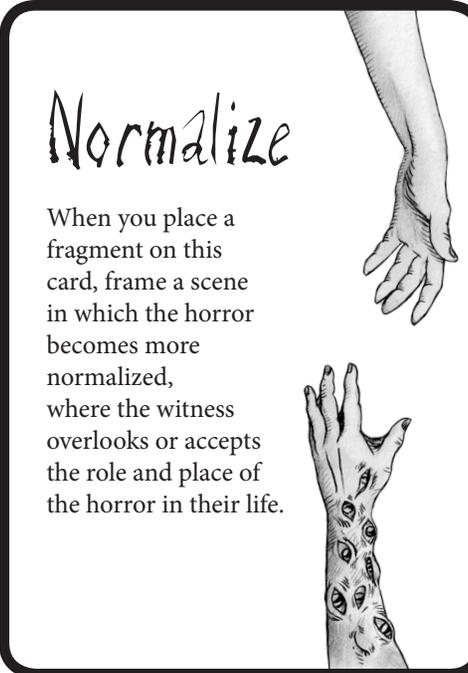
Spread

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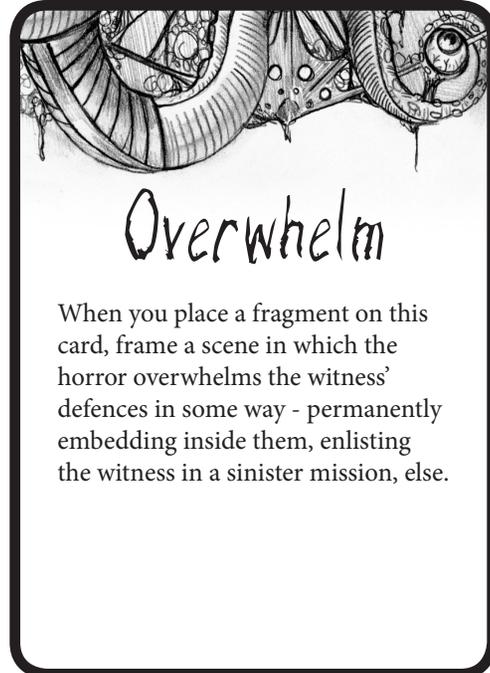
Awaken

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene where the witness encounters and contends with one of the manifestations of horror that already exist.



Normalize

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene in which the horror becomes more normalized, where the witness overlooks or accepts the role and place of the horror in their life.



Overwhelm

When you place a fragment on this card, frame a scene in which the horror overwhelms the witness' defences in some way - permanently embedding inside them, enlisting the witness in a sinister mission, else.