

Necromancy

A roleplaying game by Holden Shearer

Preview for Patreon subscribers: Introduction and Setting

Introduction

Necromancy is a role-playing game, intended to be played by three or more people. All but one player will make up and narrate the thoughts, words, and actions of a single character. The final player takes on the role of the *Master of Ceremonies* (MC), what similar games might call the Game Master or Storyteller. The MC lays out the world the other players' characters act in and move through. She's privy to the secrets of that world, and runs all the other people and the monsters in it, while slowly revealing its mysteries to the rest of the game group.

Playing **Necromancy** takes the form of a conversation between players, from which a story will emerge. The MC follows certain rules to keep the conversation moving and the story interesting; the players, meanwhile, will sometimes trigger rules of their own by saying certain things.

The Pitch

*If someone asks what **Necromancy** is about, tell them this:*

Death has become the final line of defense between life and something much, much worse.

You play necromantic heroes in a ruined fantasy world trembling on the brink of annihilation, where all other powers are long extinguished. Marshal your human resources. Hunt terrible monsters in a dark and broken landscape. Try to carve out a future for the living, using the power of the dead. From ashes, be reborn.

The Situation

*If you're playing **Necromancy**, this is what your character is sure to know about the world:*

In the beginning, man made the world, and in the image of man he made it. With mighty sorcery we tamed and harnessed the very elements: earth, air, fire, and water were set to the service of great and shining empires. The devils below were enslaved, and the very sun set in harness. Great towers were crafted to marshal and direct the elemental forces of magic. For a thousand thousand generations the world bowed before our sorcerer-kings, and we enjoyed a golden age without privation.

In the end, we exhausted the sorcery that had mastered the world, and destroyed the world along with it. The fires guttered, the earth rotted, the air grew still and the water dark. The towers of old bled their failed magic into the land, twisting the world into an unending nightmare. The sun fell from the sky, and the devils, hateful and ragged from an infinitude of labor, slipped their traces. Those of us who survived staggered into the dark to scratch out a meager living as the world lurched into its twilight days.

The sorcerer-kings are powerless and dead. One school of magic remains, suppressed and forbidden during the long golden age: necromancy. The dark arts are the last arrow in mankind's quiver. Death stands as the final guardian of life, and monsters guard us against monsters.

What You Need

To play **Necromancy**, you need the following:

- A pair of six-sided dice. It's more convenient if everyone has a pair, but you can get by sharing a set around the table. Alternately, you might use a free dice-rolling app. The MC doesn't need any dice—only the players will ever roll dice.
- A deck of playing cards. Alternately, this can be swapped out for printable death deck cards or a web app—more details can be found in chapter XX.
- At least one copy of this book at the table. Physical and digital both work fine.
- Each player needs a *playbook* for the kind of character they're using. These can either be printed out, or loaded on your phone or tablet or whatever, or just kept open in a separate window on your computer. People play RPGs in lots of different ways. There's more detail about your character in this book, but the *playbook* contains the quick-reference rules and stat-trackers you'll need during play.
- The MC needs to have selected a *campaign book* for the campaign being played, and needs access to it during play. Three are included with this core book: *The Plain of Ashes*, *The Ruins of Anacrethe*, and *The Rotting Shore*.

What You Need to Know

This game is built on three simple pillars:

- **Hope and Horror:** The world is dead, but you're still here. In any other age, your characters would be figures of dread and terror—and likely you still are—but now you're also figures of hope. The players' characters are likely to be the most powerful people in the story. They can do things nobody else can.

It's dark fantasy. It's a horror game. You're part of that horror. But you also get to be incredibly cool. And you get to be heroes, even if just because there's nobody else left to do it.

- **Mysteries in the Dark:** The world is very old, with many forgotten secrets to uncover. The MC is the keeper of these secrets, and uncovering them is a key element of not only successfully completing a campaign, but understanding the forces you're unleashing and what they mean for you and the world around you.

- **Hunting Monsters:** The world is full of monsters, and they are far more awful than mere death. Regardless of what campaign you're playing through, you're going to have to protect people from these monsters, often by actively hunting them into their terrible lairs. You're the only ones with the strength to do so, and the monsters are always in possession of whatever you need to accomplish your goals.

Where This Came From

Necromancy is inspired by a number of sources, but these stand at the forefront:

- The video games **Dark Souls** and **Dark Souls III**, directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, inspired a lot of thoughts about the structure of storytelling and world-building, knowledge as an implicit player reward, and how it could be fulfilling to struggle toward even ambiguous or bleak goals.

- The **Kingdom Death: Monster** board game, created by Adam Poots, demonstrated how setting could be communicated primarily through aesthetics rather than exposition, and demonstrated motifs for “dark” fantasy unencumbered by that genre’s usual reliance on exaggerated human depravity.
- Capcom’s **Monster Hunter** video game series reaffirmed that the oldest activity in roleplaying games—killing monsters—could act as an ever-appealing play loop anchor in and of itself, and did a great deal to inspire the monster and combat rules.
- Above and beyond anything else, **Necromancy** owes its basic rule structure to the Powered by the Apocalypse game engine pioneered by D. Vincent Baker in **Apocalypse World**. It has also taken a great deal of inspiration from other Powered by the Apocalypse games, including **Monsterhearts** by Avery Alder, and **Dungeon World** by Sage LaTorra and Adam Koebel.

Chapter One: Imagining the World

The world your story will take place in is very different than our own. As such, it's important to establish some common ground in imagining this world, so that you can collaborate to spin a story in it that doesn't run into constant contradictions and ambiguities that slow down the conversation around the table.

History

The world is very old, with a very rich history, and almost nobody knows very much of it any more. These are the broad strokes that everyone knows: In the past the world was ruled by sorcerer-kings of amazing power, served by a legion of lesser magicians who formed the ruling class of a vast and interconnected society. By harnessing the forces of magic, they raised up a seemingly-eternal golden age: not a perfect utopia by any means, but an era where food and comfort were plentiful and wonders were commonplace. This age was maintained by a vast network of magical rituals and devices of surpassing potency and complexity, and was meant to last forever.

It didn't. The magic grew weaker over time, requiring greater exertions to maintain, until finally some drastic tipping point arrived. The old magic rapidly failed, and the world crumbled along with it, all of its natural components falling first into chaos, and then into utter ruin. The magicians lost their power as their world descended into pandemonium. Much of their magic simply ceased to be, while in other places the enormous forces they'd harnessed ran amok and produced dangerous aberrations. In the end, the sun fell from the sky, and people died in droves in the dark, scythed down by violence, starvation, disease, and worse.

The wizards of old are all gone now. The magic they wielded has been seemingly exhausted, and the world along with it. Entire generations have now been born, lived, and died in the eternal night their failure made of the world.

The Dark

There's no sun anymore. The oldest people still living—the great-grandmothers and -grandfathers—remember that bright hot orb traversing the sky, but only barely. It fell when they were still children: descended one day, and never came back.

Sometimes, when you look up, you can still see the fitful glimmering of stars, but most of the time those are gone too, hidden behind brooding clouds. There's no moon, either—just a dark, cold, endless night that has gone on for entire lifetimes now.

The darkness is ever-present, but rarely absolute. Far, far to the north there is a barely-visible peak, the Bright Mountain, whose tip shines with a golden radiance—weak, at this vast remove, but steady, casting the endless night into a landscape of murky shadows rather than absolute black. Most folk claim that mountaintop to be the place where the sun landed when it fell from the heavens, but no one seems to have ventured so far as to see for themselves and returned to confirm the rumors.

Still, light sources are a constant necessity in the long dark, and people have proven endlessly industrious in fashioning them. Lanterns burn oil, fat, and anything else that will take a flame. Animal dung smoldering in braziers provides light to village streets and common-houses.

Torches and kindling are in constant demand, made worse by the sparsity of vegetation. Chandlers have become among the most valued members of any community.

Geography

Maps survive from the old world, but they're not worth much now. Many of the rivers have dried up. Old roads are in disrepair, while new tracks have been made through the wastelands to avoid dangers the old cartographers never dreamed of. The settlements of old are almost all gone. Because travel is so perilous, the world has grown much smaller. These, then, are the boundaries of your world, as best you know them, all else being naught but ancient names in moldy books:

The heart of the new world is a vast wasteland known as the Plain of Ashes. In the golden age it was the breadbasket of a mighty kingdom, a land of rolling hills, terrace-farms and field-farms, greenbelts, great orchards, countless townships, and many branching rivers. Now it is massive expanse of blowing dust and ash dotted by bones and ruins, haunted by terrible monsters, with a few lonely pockets of survivors scraping out a subsistence living from the barren earth.

To the east, where the sun once rose, there stands the ruins of the great city of Anacrethe. Here necromancers once attempted to forge an empire to rule over the endless night, but their ambitions came to naught, and the city walls are now manned only by the wind and beasts. Farther east the world recedes into mystery across an impassable black desert, but sometimes there are rumblings of thunder, and you may have encountered the odd traveler or two that speaks of the distant east as a land called Levinheim.

The Bright Mountain stretches to the heavens far off to the north, across the vast expanse of the ashen plains, shining its wan beacon. Sometimes folks can't take the daily struggle any more, and they strike out north, seeking the mountain and maybe some kind of answer, or at least a different life. Occasionally they'll return, having turned back after a few days of horror and hardship. Otherwise, you never see them again.

To the west is a vast forest, said to be haunted by a kind of strange magic that gives even the necromancers pause. All that timber is a great temptation, but it's also reputed to be the abode of monsters even more vicious than those that haunt the plains.

Far to the south there stretches an empty sea and a rotting shore. People apparently live there, but you couldn't hope to guess how.

Finally, there are occasionally rumors that the Brass City still stands—a wicked place of mad noblemen and inhuman industry, far beneath the earth. But it's probably only that: no more than rumors.

Time

Nobody can really say for sure how long it's been since the sun fell from the sky—not with any sort of precision, anyway. Someone, somewhere, probably knows the current day and month and year, but if so, you've never met them.

Time is slippery now, you see. It's not that time itself has broken down like everything else—at least, you don't *think* it has—but all the old cycles have fallen into disarray. The sun never rises, never sets—"tomorrow" is a word with little meaning now. And without days, it's hard to have weeks, or fortnights. There's no more moon, either; perhaps it fell when the sun did, or perhaps it

always turns its dark face to the dying world below, loathe to watch its final slow thrashings. Even the seasons have melted together, making years hard to mark.

Women still have their cycles, of course, but those don't arrive with the neat precision of the sun and moon. Crops behave somewhat reliably, but their growing times are all different from one another. Perhaps the folks living on the shores of the southern sea can still measure by the tides, but that doesn't help anyone else very much.

For the most part, people just don't mark time anymore, living instead from day to day and hour to hour. Communities don't sleep at the same time; people curl up for a few hours when exhaustion finds them, or ennui, or boredom, that's all. You work when there's work to be done, and there's usually work to be done. Time blurs together, a sticky mass without cycles or boundaries.

Temperature

It's a little bit cold. Most anywhere you go, it's always a little bit cold. Not enough to worry about death by exposure, but enough so you just notice it. There are no more sweltering summer days, no more swelling of spring heat. There isn't really autumn or winter, either—sometimes the cold takes a bitter, toothy edge for a month or two, but then it goes away again. Certainly you've never seen snow—just windstorms full of dust and ash. When the old stories talk about snow, you imagine it was something like those, but even colder. It sounds terrible.

That isn't to say there's no warmth left in the world. You can always huddle up by a fire, or wrap a blanket or cloak around yourself, or tuck in with someone else. There's still flames, and the heat of a living body.

Some of the smarter folks you've met, they say the world's grown colder since the sun vanished, but not as cold as maybe it ought to be. It's because of the Low Fires, they think: the magical flames that burn deep, deep in the bowels of the earth, where the devils live. Maybe they're what's keeping the world livable.

I Have Many Questions About This!

The practical-minded reader may be thinking that a world without a sun would become a dead world in very short order, and where our Earth is concerned, you'd be very correct. Even forgiving the lack of an immediate global collapse of all energy systems, surely the world should at least be undergoing a protracted nuclear winter of some kind? How can plants photosynthesize with no sun? How can there be enough oxygen without plants? Shouldn't the world be stone-dead, rather than slowly dying? There are two answers to this, particularly if it gets brought up by someone at your gaming table.

The first is to quote the wisdom of the ancient sages: *“If you're wondering how Joel eats and breathes and other science facts / Just repeat to yourself: It's just a show, I should really just relax.”*

The second is that this is a world that stopped operating purely by natural laws *many* thousands of years ago, if it ever did in the first place. This is a setting that may or may not have always been held together by the energies of the four classical elements, and has *certainly* been governed by powerful sorcery harnessing, manipulating, and altering the world's natural energies for at *least* the full length of

recorded human history. There's still air to breathe because the elemental force of air isn't completely exhausted yet. Everything isn't a frozen wasteland because the Low Fires still warm the world somewhere deep below the surface. Some plants have managed to survive by adapting to draw sustenance from ash, or blood, or the miniscule illumination of the Bright Mountain, or other strange means, and have been capable of such impossibly rapid evolution because the raw energy of creation itself is constantly bathing the world in the form of unraveling spells and ancient sorceries winding down and running amok.

In short, assume things are bad enough—there's no need to wonder why they aren't even worse.

People

The world used to be set in service of the needs of humankind, but those days are gone, gone, gone. Now there's little light to be seen, little food to be had, little safety to be found, and few people remaining. The great cities of old are empty, monster-haunted ruins. Where people survive, they do so either by ones and twos, in small families in the hinterlands, or in tiny communities that would barely have passed for villages in the days of old.

They're still people, though. They know things used to be better. They keep the old stories alive as best they can. They fall in love. They want something better for their children than the crumbling nightmare they've lived through. They get bored. They conceive ambitions.

Most settlements are roughly communal, exchanging labor and aid freely within the community without any sort of tally-keeping; it's much more important to always know you can rely on your neighbor. Trade is for outsiders, on those uncommon occasions when outsiders appear. Government consists of a local strong-man or gang, or a group of respected elders, or a charismatic leader, or perhaps an ad-hoc council. Kings, parliaments, nations, these are things of the past. Money's not worth much of anything, not compared to skills or salvage.

Most folks are sedentary: they find a reasonably safe place and they hunker down and try to make a living. Travel is extraordinarily dangerous, and is thus the province of the daring, the ambitious, and the antisocial. It's easy to get lost, and even easier to get eaten while you're lost, and even when you find a settlement, it's never clear what sort of welcome to expect. As a result, most travelers can take care of themselves pretty well.

Gender

Because people are so isolated now, it's hard to generalize about men and women and how they get along. Such ideas don't spread the way they used to. In some places it has become a man's world and might makes right. In others a whole generation of men charged off into the jaws of something horrible, and old spinsters hold a lock on authority. But mostly, people just do whatever they have to do to stay alive and find things to make that life worth living. Bluntly, there's too damned much work to be done and not enough people to do it for practices that undervalue half of a settlement's population to hold up very well.

Also, while there just aren't as many people as there used to be, they haven't gotten any less complicated. Some folks aren't easily classified as women or as men. Some don't really feel like what others might assume them to be at a glance. And plenty of people find their attractions running in unusual directions. Not all settlements appreciate the ambiguities and complications

that such people bring into an already-hard life, but that doesn't make them any less real. Other settlements don't really care what a person gets up to or how they want to live as long as they pull their weight. You never really know what you're going to find when people come together, especially in the face of an endless night full of horrors trying to eat them.

Ethnicity

Travel was easily available to even those of modest means in the golden age of old, and so people of all descriptions went hither and yon all over the world, and often they settled down rather than going back where they came from. After many centuries of such travel and exchange, it wasn't surprising to see any sort of far-flung looks anywhere in the world, even in the smallest of rural townships.

Things are, of course, very different now. Travel is difficult and deadly, and most of the teeming populace of the old world is simply gone. Most settlements are very homogeneous, not due to selective exclusion, but simply because their numbers are too low to sustain much population diversity. That's not to say that such diversity within settlements doesn't exist, only that it's the exception rather than the rule.

As a result, it's common to grow up without ever seeing someone who doesn't look very much like you do. Exotic shades of hair, eye, and flesh are the marks of a traveler, an outsider. Such people can be a boon or a threat to any settlement, and are generally held at arm's length until it can be determined which they might prove themselves to be.

Race, Gender, and Your Story

Stepping outside of the setting and addressing you, the person reading this book, let's talk for a moment about how these subjects tie into the game you're going to play.

First, to be clear: this world isn't free of bigotry or xenophobia, but when they occur, they're largely based in either reasonable fear of strangers in a world of serious resource scarcity, or are the products of small-minded powermongers looking for levers to use against those they perceive as vulnerable to their predations. For the most part, though, people just don't discriminate that much. This doesn't come from a place of enlightenment so much as just not having the luxury of discarding anyone with useful skills who can contribute to a settlement's survival. Life is too marginal.

Second, the end of the world hasn't made human gender or sexuality any less messy than it has always been. Queer individuals have survived into the post-apocalyptic landscape, and they continue to struggle to figure out who they are and who they love. You can find such people in the settlements of the long night, and you can portray them as the heroes of your story, if you like.

Finally, while most of the settlements of the endless dark are quite ethnically homogeneous, this book takes no particular stance on what the majority of people look like in this part of the post-apocalyptic landscape, or how often you'll find enclaves of variant ethnicity to the dominant norm. Whether the majority of people in your story are dark-skinned, light-skinned, or otherwise is up to you, as is what those people would consider "exotic" or unusual.

When making your character, be aware that there's enough diversity in settlement populations thanks to the ubiquity of old-world travel that your heroes can look like whatever you want them to look like, whether that fits in with the dominant population appearance or not.

Knowledge

Books are heavy in any significant number, easy to damage, and hard to eat. That is to say, the great body of human knowledge hasn't fared terribly well into the endless night. Knowledge didn't become a thing of paramount value until people started to realize how much of it was being lost, and by then, it was often too late.

Of course, a lot of knowledge still waits out there for someone to reclaim it, but as has been mentioned, travel is dangerous, and the rewards of seeking after lost skills and facts uncertain at best.

As a result, humanity has fallen from undisputed masters of the world back into what their great-great-grandparents would have considered barbarism. Some communities have managed to retain complex metal or glass fabrication, but most haven't. Weaving, planting, harvesting, and simple-to-moderate carpentry are the current boundaries of practical achievement for most settlements. More than a few have rediscovered the practical benefits of flint knapping and mud construction in a resource-starved world where trade is at best sporadic and unreliable.

And resources are a constant concern. Those trees that couldn't adapt to a life in the endless dark died a long time ago, making wood a valuable commodity. Rocks, dirt, bones, tough grasses, and ugly creeper-vines: these are the most abundant substances with which the average settlement has the opportunity to work.

Religion

Several significant religions held sway in this part of the old world, all of which were variations on philosophical humanism. Some included elements of deism, but most did not. The golden age was the work of mankind, and mankind was the primary object of its exultation and adulation.

Man has fallen far from the pedestal upon which he set himself in those days, and shattered upon the unforgiving ground. A few scattered communities still uphold fragments of the ritual or theology of the old world, but most have either become areligious or adopted a host of protective superstitions and taboos. The most common theological adaptations of the new era are the flourishing of ancestor cults and death worship.

The ancestor cults either venerate direct forebears and attempt to beseech their intervention to protect the living, or offer veneration to the dead of the golden age, who possessed mighty works and wisdom that the living hope to tap into. Death cults vary wildly in practice and iconography, but commonly attempt to honor and propitiate what they see as the most powerful force in the endless night. Human sacrifice is thankfully rare, but animal sacrifice and blood offerings are common.

Most individuals accept the existence of the human soul, but its disposition after death remains a mystery. The black empire of Anacrethe held that death should not be feared, as souls after death descended into and then beyond a great abyss to learn the secrets forbidden to the living; this

roughly corresponds to common assumptions about death, though speculation about what awaits beyond the abyss—if anything—are widely varied.

Magic

Magic was the defining force of the old world. It held everything together, transformed the world utterly. The most powerful magicians of any given age ruled by dint of sorcerous might, served by a confederation of their lesser peers and supported by a vast network of arcane devices developed over many centuries of experimentation and ritual endeavor.

Magical talent was something people were either born with, or not. Its manifestation was difficult to predict: the children of sorcerers were often given to the gift themselves, but not always; and those with no ties at all to the magocracy might find a son or daughter displaying an aptitude for the mystic arts. From there, sorcery was a learned talent, developed through education and practice. The vast majority of non-magicians formed an underclass whose labor was utilized but rarely crucial: there were farmers, for a certainty, but spellcraft made the fields they labored in almost fertile enough to tend themselves.

In short, everyone interacted with magic or the fruits of magic on a daily basis. Silver ships carried pilgrims and tourists alike through the skies, while elites used the Hidden Roads to cross countries or oceans by walking only a few miles along imaginary paths. The weather was regulated by flying towers staffed with third-year apprentices.

You've never seen any of these things, but the tales still linger.

Of course, the magic had to come from *somewhere*, and that was the fabric of the world. Magic drew on the power of the wind and the sun and the tides and the good earth itself, converting the very essence of the world into tangible power. Perhaps that's what set it all so wrong, in the end. Perhaps people overreached and exhausted the very spirit of the world.

Now none of the old magic really works any more. Even those who know the incantations and have the gift of the Art cannot make it respond to their bidding. They raise a hand, intone the words, and make the proper gestures, but the power that should leap to their bidding usually just... isn't there. Only the power of death answers the call of magicians now: the one still-vibrant force in a fading cosmos.

Of course, relics of the old miracles abound, and many of them still contain traces of the magical energy of the bygone age. But many of those spells have run amok, and many of the devices intended to harness them have fallen into disrepair. Now most of the old magic left in the world is locked up in the flesh of monsters.

Monsters

Things would be bad enough were deprivation, ecological ruin, and endless darkness humanity's only woes, but they're not even in the running as the worst threat waiting in the long night. Most plants and animals died after the sun went away, but nature had been long suffused with the powers of mankind's sorcery, bent to serve humanity's needs, and many living things tapped into that vast cycle of power in their struggles to survive. Some of the results are benign—hardy grasses that feed on the ambient heat of the earth, rats that gnaw the ever-abundant corpses of a dying earth—but most are horrors adapted to a world of deprivation and darkness where mankind is the most abundant and convenient source of energy to be found. A new ecology has begun to emerge in the never-ending black, and mankind stands nowhere near its apex. Any

settlement that hopes to survive for long in the eternal night needs some kind of defenses against the monsters roaming through the dark.