

Chapter XX: How to Play the Game

Necromancy is a game that runs on structured play. It can be run with as few as three people, though four or five is ideal. Each person participating in the game takes on a fixed role, which doesn't change from session to session:

- One person is the *Master of Ceremonies* (MC). If you've played other roleplaying games, they might have called this person the GM, Dungeon Master, Referee, Storyteller, or Keeper. (You can, too, if MC seems silly.) The MC's job is to *depict the world* and *keep the conversation moving*. The MC has her own special set of rules to follow in chapter XX.
- Every other person is a *player*. Each player's job is to portray and control single *character*. If something happens to a player's character that removes them from the story—usually death—then they make a new character.

The ultimate goal when playing **Necromancy** is to tell a cool story and have fun with your friends. That said, there are definite goals to pursue within the fiction created by your conversation and the way that conversation bumps into the game's rules. We'll get into those now.

(As an aside, although the MC doesn't follow the same rules or occupy the same role as the players, she's still *playing the game*, and as such, shares the overarching goal of having a good time. Also, she does the most heavy lifting to get the game from beginning to end, and as such, you should buy her pizza.)

Biome Play and Campaign Books

In many fantasy roleplaying games, the players create characters and then the MC (GM, DM, ST, whatever) spins up locations, allies, antagonists, mysteries, and complications to engage them as they journey across the face of a fantastic realm, getting into trouble, thwarting evil, and acquiring cool loot.

In **Necromancy**, none of the maps are halfway accurate any more, the lights are out, the fantastic realm is full of things that want to lay carnivorous eggs in your skull, the only certainty is that things over yonder hill are probably even worse than they are right here, and there's a very real possibility that if you meet a stranger in your travels, they might try to eat you in your sleep because meals are sometimes *that* hard to come by. So we do things a bit differently.

Play in **Necromancy** revolves around a *biome*—a part of the world that you pick out at the beginning of the game to act as the conceptual boundaries of your story. You're not telling the tale of a particular band of plucky adventurers; you're telling the tale of a little corner of a dying world, and how its fate is decided by the appearance of a small group of powerful, deathly figures. Biomes are places like the Plain of Ashes, the Rotting Shore, the Ruins of Anacrethe, the Low Fires, the Brass City, the Empty Sea, the Bright Mountain, or the Bleak Woods.

They're all doing about as well as their names suggest.

Biomes don't just dictate what the scenery looks like and what kind of monsters are likely to try to eat you. They also provide an overarching goal to your game, to be pursued over many sessions, primarily through the act of hunting powerful and terrifying monsters. This meta-structure can be found in the biome's *campaign book*. I *strongly* suggest that only the MC should

read the campaign books; they're full of spoilers, and exploration and discovery are big parts of what makes **Necromancy** fun.

All that said, there are two basic approaches to setting up to play **Necromancy**: the storygaming method, and traditional play.

Storygaming

Storygaming is a fancy term that many internet flame wars have failed to really define to everyone's satisfaction, but for our purposes, we're using the term to describe an approach that gives players an unusual amount of agency (and responsibility) in defining the setting, and which also demands that the MC be able to quickly improvise on the spot, with little to no prep time.

Using this approach, every game begins by saying this:

The world is dead, but you're not. This is a story about people who are still alive. Where do they live? Choose one:

- A small settlement by a river on the Plain of Ashes.
- The stump of a tower in the ruins of Anacrethe.
- A fishing village on the rotting shore of a haunted sea.

The players don't get to ask about these choices, though they can discuss them. They have to take the world as they find it—what those who came before them left of that world, anyway. You choose, and *then* you discover.

Once the players have picked a biome, the MC turns to that campaign book while players select their playbooks. If the campaign book has any special changes to character creation, she informs the players. Then, you go through the questions and options listed in the campaign book to define your settlement, and start playing.

Traditional Play

Traditional play doesn't involve the players in defining the settlement, and doesn't withhold as much information about the play options. It's for MCs who like having more control to define the setting, who like having prep time, or who look at the sheer level of improv demanded by the storygaming approach and immediately go *oh hell no, fuck that*. (I favor traditional play for that last reason, myself; your mileage may vary.)

Under the traditional play approach, the MC might select a biome she's interested in running ahead of time and then invite people to play in it; or she might poll players ahead of the game's first session. If you're a player and you think you might play under the storygaming approach, skip to the **Playbooks** header. If you're the MC and you're giving your players a choice, tell them this (or, you know, copy-paste it into a text message, whatever) and then let them choose a biome:

The Plain of Ashes

This used to be somewhere, but now, like most of what's left of the world, it's the middle of nowhere. There's a little bit of land here that still has enough life to push up sickly, struggling crops. There's a river that still gurgles sluggishly through its dusty trench. For miles and miles around, the land rolls and undulates outwards, covered in a fine layer of dust and ash—the remnants of all the living things that once flourished here. There are other, strange things out in

the ashlands—remnants of the world that was, broken-down spells, crumbling towers, gaping cellars. And monsters, of course, prowling and hungry.

Above, the sky is an unbroken dark sheet. Somewhere far off in the distance, there's the Bright Mountain—a high peak with a weak light shining at its tip, casting the only illumination this place ever knows. They say it's where the sun landed when it fell from the sky, but no one has ever traveled far enough to really be sure. Rumors—no one knows where they started—have it that somewhere far to the west, there's a great dark forest. Maybe that's where the monsters of the waste come from.

Sometimes there are travelers across the plains, drawn by the lights of your settlement. Sometimes they arrive on the river. That's how you know there are still other people out there.

The Plain of Ashes campaign is about gathering the power and resources to make this a place where people can really live, rather than sliding slowly into oblivion.

The Ruins of Anacrethe

Once upon a time, this was among the lowest and rudest of mankind's cities. It was unwholesome, and crimes nobody could bother to address flourished in Anacrethe. After the sun fell and the magic died, it became the great bastion of the Dark Arts. Necromancers moved into the towers where the sorcerer-nobility of old once dwelled. The dead labored on behalf of the living. Anacrethe was a city powered by animate meat and enslaved souls, but its walls held back the dark and it could still hold its head high.

Anacrethe fell years ago. The numbers of the necromancers dwindled. The dead ran amok. Sensing weakness, blood, and meat, the monsters came, and the city found itself without the power to resist them. Now the lamps are dark, the streets are empty, and the buildings are fallen in on themselves. The necromancers have scattered into the never-ending night.

But the city learned from its final masters. Its shattered corpse still holds treasures, mysteries, possibilities. Power. Monsters and the hungry dead lurk in the ruins, but so do the final great works of mankind. Your enclave has fortified a broken tower near the edge of Anacrethe. You grow mushrooms on its upper terraces, and there's a well in the basement that nothing has yet befouled. There are a dozen lanterns in the tower that never go out. If only you had the strength to grasp for more.

The Ruins of Anacrethe campaign is about reclaiming control of the city.

The Rotting Shore

This is where the ruined earth meets the despoiled sea, a vast strip of boulder-strewn mud lapped endlessly by greasy waves. A little village, crusted in brine and barnacles, tucks itself up into the lee of a high rock wall, scraping out an existence from seaweed and oysters and hideous fish. These people have always been here, and will remain here as long as salt and shore remain: it's in their blood. They'll tell you it's not safe to venture down the shoreline, and they'll speak true. Things come down from the hills or out of the sea to scour for sustenance or prey among the mud flats. It's not safe to venture out to sea either, where too many of the things still alive in the sea have learned to hunt fishermen. But to live here, you have to do one or the other; there's no other way to survive.

It's always night, but there's light to see by, at least. The sea itself has a rotten, emerald glow to it, and not too far away a slimy stone causeway leads up to a weather-beaten lighthouse of

gleaming black stone whose cold blue light tirelessly sweeps the area. The people fear both these lights. The tower is a work of necromancy, and for generations the village has sacrificed to keep its light burning, grimly accepting its terrible price. But the sea is worse.

The sea has grown hungry of late. Some folk dream of voices beneath the waves, and some see beautiful, terrible shapes almost discernible in its dreamy glow. Ultimately it is the dead that the sea claims for its own. No matter where or how the people die, their souls are now drawn into the sea, and no one knows what awaits them in the eternal midnight of the depths.

The Rotting Shore campaign is about revealing and thwarting the mysterious curse of the haunted sea.

You can also, of course, mix and match elements of the two styles of play until you and your group come up with something you're happy with. I'm not a cop, I'm not going to try to stop you.

Unstructured Play?

That's all well and good, you might be saying, but I'm not really interested in structured play. I'd rather do the wandering murderhobos thing, especially since this game has some of the murderiest hobos ever seen in gaming.

Fair enough! While this isn't as rigorously supported as biome-based structured play, it *is* still something you can do. Notes on unstructured play can be found in the MC's section of this book, starting on page XX.

Playbooks

While the MC is busy getting the setting and campaign ready, it's down to the players to figure out *who their characters are*. In **Necromancy**, this is accomplished by selecting one of the game's *playbooks*. They're a lot like what would be called classes or jobs or archetypes or splats in other roleplaying games.

Your playbook does a few things: it explains what this particular playbook is about, what its place is in the setting, and it guides you through character creation. All playbooks are available for all biomes.

Each player must select a different playbook. If you pick The Death Knight, it doesn't necessarily mean you're the only death knight in the world, or even necessarily the only death knight in *this story* (though you probably will be), but you're definitely going to be the only death knight this story hinges around. Notably, there are two Necromancer playbooks. They work a little bit differently from one another, and they *can* both be played together in the same game. Their name's in the game title, after all.

These, in short, are the available playbooks:

- **The Assassin:** None has known lady death more intimately than you.

The Assassin is a swift and stealthy professional murderer in a world that has very few clients or targets remaining.

- **The Death Knight:** You are sworn by blood and shadow and steel.

The Death Knight is a cursed warrior who deals tremendous damage with spellforged weapon and armor.

- **The Ghoul:** So long as there is blood and flesh, you will go on.

The Ghoul is a monster that still cleaves to its humanity, hungry and feral and powerful.

- **The Infected:** You are doomed, but in these days, there is power in doom.

The Infected isn't going to make it out of the story alive, but that certainty of doom liberates you to act recklessly.

- **The Monster Hunter:** Someone has to be the hero.

The Monster Hunter is an ordinary person taking extraordinary risks; try it out if you like to be versatile and flexible.

- **The Necromancer (The Resurrectionist):** Every death is another arrow in your quiver.

The Resurrectionist mostly solves problems by throwing lots of zombies at them.

- **The Necromancer (The Soulbinder):** It takes deft and clever hands to catch a soul.

The Soulbinder is more spellcasting-oriented than the Resurrectionist, but it also gets a powerful ghost to command.

- **The Paladin:** Last of your kind, the world has moved on but you cannot.

The Paladin is the last member of the Holy Order of Librarian Knights; it's a sword-and-board mummy that cannot die.

- **The Surgeon:** You are an artist, and meat is your canvas.

The Surgeon is the creepiest playbook, and the only one with any healing utility to speak of.

- **The Thing:** Flesh and sutures and words of power opened your eyes, but is the thing behind those eyes life?

The Thing is an angsty, off-putting Frankenstein's homunculus that hits like a tank and soaks up damage like one too.

The Cycle of Play

Play in **Necromancy** follows a fairly simple loop, broken down into two categories.

- **Settlement Play:** During settlement play, you interact with the characters in your settlement, address their problems, propose or ram through initiatives you've come up with, manage issues that may have come up, and maybe dig up the local graveyard on the sly. You know. For resources. Or dinner, depending.

It's important to tend to your settlement, because as unsettling as you are, if you're never home then, well... problems arise. It's not *home*, for one thing, and then what are you even fighting for? For another, as bad as it is to have creepy characters like The Ghoul or The Dark Knight around, it's *worse* to feel like you've been abandoned in the dark, and that's when the panic clock starts creeping up. Finally, the settlement is where you rest up, lick your wounds, make cool stuff out of monster bones, and prepare for the endless night's next ordeal.

• **The Hunt:** The hunt is the part of the game where you set out from your settlement into the dangerous territory beyond, intent on seeking out and killing a deadly monster (or group of monsters). This might be as simple as following a bloody trail, or exploring a ruined building until the thing that lairs there tries to kill you. It also might be a long, strenuous exercise in tracking a stealthy predator that's probably also hunting you. It might be a matter of poking around labyrinthine caverns looking for a hidden lair. It might be a situation where you get lost, encounter a lingering curse of the bygone world, and get jumped by something quite unexpected, all while you were just out looking for supplies or salvage. It *might* even be that you encounter some people out there in the dark that aren't cracked, don't try to eat you, and perhaps even have something useful to contribute to your hunt or to your settlement, but don't count on that.

In short, the hunt is what happens in the time from when you leave your settlement until you return: probably a big showdown with a horrible monster, and definitely all the roleplaying that happens along the way.

Oh, and fighting a monster that has attacked your settlement while you're in residence also counts as a hunt.

Once the hunt is over, you return to your settlement to celebrate, lick your wounds, and see what's been going on in your absence. Eventually, you'll want or need to leave again to seek supplies or cull encroaching horrors. Then it's back to the hunt: rinse, repeat, resurrect.

Experience and Advances

As in most roleplaying games, your characters get stronger as the campaign goes on. On your playbook's record sheet, you'll find a little line of boxes marked *Experience*. That's where you track your getting-stronger progress.

Experience comes from completing a successful hunt. Whenever you return from the hunt having successfully killed a monster or group of monsters, mark off one box of experience. You also mark off experience if you kill a monster or group of monsters attacking your settlement.

Note the use of the word *kill*, because it's deliberate. Not *drive off*, not *banish*, not *beat senseless and then make a deal with*, and in the case of groups, not *kill a few and run the rest off*. If a monster attacks your settlement and you drive it off, well, that's *good*, that's a lot better than having it eating people until it gets bored, but you need to hunt it down and kill it to get experience for it.

Note also *when you return from the hunt*, because experience is handed out per-successful-fatal-hunt, not per-monster. If you embark on the hunt and have the colossal misfortune of having to kill two monsters in a row before dragging yourself back to safety, you still only mark one experience. Experience is about growing as the deathly protectors of your chosen home, not going off into the hinterlands for months to grind manticores.

Finally, experience is group-wide. Everyone who took part in the hunt marks it, even if they spent most of the big monster fight bleeding face-down on the ground

When you earn a certain amount of experience, it entitles you to take an *advance*. An advance, in short, is a moment when you grow stronger by adding something to your record sheet: upgrading a bonus, maybe, or gaining a new move.

Your playbook lists what experience totals grant you advances, and what that specific advance is. Often, you may get a choice between two options when taking an advance. Most of them are fairly self-explanatory, but two options bear a bit of explaining: Free Advances, and the Final Advance.

Free Advances

When you take a Free Advance, you define a thing that you've gotten better at, and you take +1 on rolls falling under that description. Free Advances should be short, one or two words, or they might simply encompass a single move that has appeared in the game. Beyond that, they can be pretty much whatever you like, with the following limitations: Free Advances *can't* be applicable only or primarily to combat (thus, taking a free advance in *attacking*, *defense*, or *bows* is a no-go), and they can't enhance a playbook feature (like the Assassin's Shadowclad, or every playbook's Mysticism).

You *can* take the same Free Advance multiple times to stack up its bonus. Here are some examples of Free Advances: *Sneaking around*; *bald-faced lies*; *seduction*; *Read Their Eyes*; *Feat of Strength*; *disguise*; *tracking*; *danger sense*; *intimidation*; *forgery*; *climbing*.

The Final Advance

Your record sheet only has 20 boxes to mark experience in. Once you've filled them all up, the next time you ought to mark experience, *one player* unlocks the Final Advance. If only one player has 20 full boxes, it's easy to decide who. If several players have 20 experience, then the players as a group decide who gets their Final Advance first; other players will mark their Final Advances after subsequent hunts, one by one, until everyone's Final Advance has been handled. **Necromancy** handles the Final Advance this way because it's more satisfactory to see the characters either come to the end of their arc (or dwindle off into the darkness) one by one rather than all at once, and unless there have been deaths (or missed sessions) along the way, groups tend to all hit the 20 experience milestone together.

For the Final Advance, you get to choose one of the options below:

- **Retirement:** The MC will soon introduce a resolution to whatever long-standing quest, dream, narrative tension, or other deeply personal unfinished business your character has going, at which point they retire from play. Perhaps they leave the settlement, or perhaps they become an important fixture, tending to matters which prevent them from participating in the hunt. Either way, make a new character, and draw inspiration from their example: the new character begins with five experience marked off. This new character *may* be of the same playbook as the retired character, if the MC and the other players are cool with that (perhaps your necromancer trained a protégé?), although this will take a pretty wild explanation if you were playing The Paladin.
- **No Rest for the Wicked:** You take one final combat move advance appropriate to your playbook (Dark Arts, Deathblow, Spell, etc), and continue to play the character, going on hunts and participating in settlement life. Your character grows no stronger, but you don't have to retire someone you enjoy playing and that you spent a long time growing into a monster-stomping super-badass.
- **Rebirth:** *If* the MC okays it, and it makes some kind of sense, you can adopt a new playbook with the same character. Perhaps The Assassin dies and comes back as The Ghoul. Perhaps your Monster Hunter finally unlocks the secrets of the Dark Arts and becomes The Necromancer. Or, less pleasantly, maybe The Monster Hunter becomes The Infected. You can keep two of your old

combat Moves, one old Free Advance, and maybe one playbook feature that makes sense to persist beyond your rebirth (Shadowclad is probably okay; the Resurrectionist's zombie swarm definitely isn't), and you and the MC can discuss if it makes more sense to adopt your new playbook's weapons or to keep the one you've always used. Finally, if your old playbook's Mysticism was higher than the new one's, keep the old bonus. Otherwise, you lose all your old playbook traits and start over.

If you are playing The Infected, you cannot take any of the above Final Advance options. Only the following Final Advance is open to The Infected:

- **Doomed:** You finally succumb to whatever has been slowly destroying you by inches and degrees all this time. Perhaps this kills you. Perhaps it *unmakes* you. Perhaps it transforms you into something predatory that cannot remember ever being human, or simply doesn't care. You know that the end is nigh, and your only options before it arrives are to, perhaps, flee into the night, or to ask your allies to end your life with dignity, before the last slack threads of humanity untwist within you.

Or maybe you're so far gone now that you don't care, and you achieve your horrid apotheosis in the midst of the settlement. Perhaps the final hunt of the campaign is against *you*.

Sorry. I warned you when you picked this playbook that it wasn't going to end well. Pick a new playbook and make a new character. You *can't* pick The Infected twice: that arc is just too damn bleak to repeat in the scope of a single story.

Ending the Game

Your **Necromancy** campaign ends when you decide the fate of your settlement. If that hasn't happened yet, then the game goes on. This does mean that, unlike many other roleplaying games, even if the entire group of characters gets wiped out during a hunt, the game doesn't end. You make new characters, cringe at what a mass-wipeout like that does to the panic clock, and you keep going.

So, the game ends with the settlement arriving at its final fate. This can be a good thing or a bad thing. Your campaign book defines possible positive outcomes for your settlement (yes, there are some outcomes that aren't completely bleak and awful; that's something worth struggling on to see, isn't it?), and the MC will guide you toward discovering what those are, but in general assume that if you're actively hunting monsters, you're on the right track. The one *bad ending* every settlement runs the risk of is completely filling the panic clock, as described on page XX. There are a few endings that fall outside that continuum, of course—this is a roleplaying game and no story ever colors entirely within the lines in those. In general, if something happens to permanently hash out the settlement's destiny, that's the end of the game. Generally, these are going to be bad things like *a monster ate everyone* or *for some reason we decided this is Dwarf Fortress and we drowned our settlement in lava*, or *we sold out the settlement to devils in exchange for safe passage to the Brass City*, but it might be something like *we gave up this settlement as a bad job and convinced everyone to pull up stakes and follow us on a journey toward the Bright Mountain*. In the latter case... you have an ambiguous ending, because the end of the settlement is the end of the game. The heroes and their followers trek off into the night: The End. That might seem unsettling and unsatisfying, but it might also be preferable to watching the last few notches on the Panic Clock fill up when you *know* things are so far in the shit you have no hope of pulling out of the tailspin.

You may not get to decide *when* your game and your story end, but you *will*, by your actions, decide *how* it ends. The world is dying, some even say already dead, but you're not. You still have that much agency, at least.