The Coyotes of Chicago
A Tale from the Far Horizons of the Unknown
(Public Playtest Document)

Author's Note

This is the second adventure released for the *Far Horizons of the Unknown* playtest. If you've already read *The Shadows of the Trees*, the rules are all mostly the same. The only differences you should check out are the list of Key Traits on pages 2-3, the section called "Setting" on page 6, and the Hero and Adventure sheets at the end.

(If you *haven't* read *The Shadows of the Trees*, you can check it out here:

http://semielgames.wordpress.com/2012/07/06/the-shadows-of-the-trees-playtest-document/

It's a sword-and-sorcery game, meant to emulate stories like the ones featuring Conan the Barbarian or Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.)

Far Horizons of the Unknown is a system meant to produce stories about competent heroes facing a mysterious and overwhelming world. Like *Fiasco* or *Geiger Counter*, the setting can vary wildly, but the basic structure of the story will stay the same. If all goes well, eventually it will be published with a bunch of different adventures, rules support for creating your own adventures, rules support for ongoing play, and a variety of other cool things.

In the meantime, I give you *The Coyotes of Chicago*, which is a complete and fully playable one-shot game, concerning the paranormal experiences of an urban coyote researcher named Alex. This is a playtest version, which means that I am actively looking for people willing to play it and tell me what they think. If you decide it's interesting enough to play, or even just to read, please let me know! Send me your thoughts at semielgames@gmail.com. (Even better, if you want to give me some free advertising, post your thoughts in public somewhere and send me the link!)

Thanks, and enjoy the game.

Introduction

To play, you will need:

-3 to 5 players, including yourself.
-About three hours, give or take.
-15 of something to use as tokens. Poker chips, coins, and funny-shaped dice all work well.
-6 or so normal, 6-sided dice.
-A copy of the Hero Sheet, and each of the four Adventure Sheets, provided at the end of this document.

In this game, you and your friends will work together to tell the story of a badass scientist named Alex Stokes, and her experiences with the paranormal. One of you will be in charge of portraying Alex-- deciding what she says and does, and how she reacts to the dangerous and mysterious world she encounters. The rest of you get to portray that dangerous and mysterious world.

To help, I've given you some starting material, and some simple rules for figuring out what to say throughout the story. That's what the rest of this document is about.

Alex Stokes

As I said, one of you will play the hero of the story, Dr. Alex Stokes.

Your hero must be brave, interesting, and adventurous. She's working as a scientist (more details in the section labeled "setting"), but a scientist more like Indiana Jones or Dana Scully than your average chemistry teacher.

Alex can be of any gender, but in the text I'll stick to feminine pronouns, for simplicity's sake.

The first thing you need to do is choose Alex's three *Key Traits*. Key Traits are central descriptions of your character, which influence everything she does.

Key Traits also reward you, by giving you tokens when you bring them into the story. These tokens will help you during times of danger. But more on that later.

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You get one Key Trait automatically:

- Alex is *a scientist*, who puts the pursuit of knowledge over basic bodily safety. Take a token the first time your curiosity leads you directly into danger.

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Next, take one of the following:

Alex is *a third-degree black belt*. Take a token the first time you solve a problem with the judicious application of roundhouse kicks and knifehand strikes.

Alex is *sharp-witted and sharper-tongued*. Take a token the first time you use your (real or feigned) knowledge and authority to get your way, over someone's feeble protests.

Alex is *patient and observant*. Take a token the first time you avoid a problem entirely by finding a cleverer way.

Alex is *a trained athlete*. Take a token the first time your athletic prowess and amazing reactions keep a potential problem from becoming actual.

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And lastly, take one of these:

Alex is *dedicated to animal welfare*. Take a token the first time you expose yourself to danger in order to protect an animal or its environment.

Alex is *desperate to publish*. Take a token the first time you expose yourself to danger in order to get publishable data.

Alex is *a thrill-seeker*. Take a token the first time you expose yourself to danger because it's danger and that's awesome.

Alex is *a conspiracy theorist*. Take a token the first time you expose yourself to danger to finally find the proof you've been seeking.

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Once you have chosen your Key Traits, write them down on the Hero Sheet at the end of this document. Then, when you're ready to begin the game, choose one of the plot hooks on that sheet and follow its instructions.

The Adventure

The rest of you are called the "*world players*". You are responsible, collectively, for everything else that happens in the story. You can usually just say whatever you think should happen, but to help you out you will all get *Adventure Sheets*. There are four of these Adventure Sheets, which get divided based on the number of players:

-Two world players each get two sheets.
-Three world players each get one sheet, and share the fourth between them.
-Four world players each get one sheet.

Your sheets are secret! You'll be sharing their contents through play, but it's more fun if the other players don't know what's coming.

The first thing on your sheet will be a **Motif**. Much like in your high school English class, this motif is some sort of image or theme that you will bring back throughout the story. In this game, though, all of the motifs are also elements of the world that are mysterious, wonderous or dangerous.

These motifs come with a bunch of **Key Moments**. These are brief situations where the hero is confronted with your motif in some way. You'll use them to add some mystery, wonder, or danger to Alex's life. They can happen in any order, though it's usually best to start subtle and work your way up to the big confrontations.

You'll want to try to find ways to introduce at least some of your Key Moments, because they come with a special rule:

When you introduce a Key Moment, you get a token.

You don't have to get anyone's permission, just take a token when you feel you've earned it. However, this comes with two caveats: First, you can only earn one token from each Key Moment. Second, there is a limit on the number of tokens you can earn in a game, based on the number of players. Here's how that works:

-Two world players can earn six tokens each.
-Three world players can earn four tokens each.
-Four world players can earn three tokens each.

You'll use these tokens when you want to mess with Alex a little more, by calling for a *Danger Roll*. More on that in the next section.

The last two things on your sheet will be a **Location** and a **Character** (Or possibly a group of **Characters**). These are precisely what they sound like: interesting places where the action can happen, and interesting people that Alex can interact with. I give you a name and enough description to get you started, but it falls to you to bring them to life. If you think a character should also have a dark past and a false leg, even though that's not on the sheet, that's totally up to you.

Unless they're part of one of Alex's plot hooks, you're never required to make use of a particular location, character, or Key Moment. Use them when they seem useful, and don't worry about it if they fall by the wayside. (You'll want to hit enough Key Moments to get your tokens, of course!)

An important part of being a world player is to *always have a theory*. The events will be weird and hard to explain, and your fellow world players will make them even weirder. You should always be considering what could possibly be going on, and trying to make your contributions to the game line up with your own personal theories. But don't get too attached! The other players will throw in plenty of wrenches, and you should be willing to change your theories to fit new information.

Danger Rolls

I said that you can usually just say what you think should happen. Here's why that's just "usually". There's an important exception:

The World Players cannot cause Alex or her immediate plans to come to harm, unless they spend a token and call for a Danger Roll.

If you want Alex to get hurt by a coyote, or get trapped in a well, or fail to protect her friend, spend a token and call for a roll.

Once you've spent your token, a Danger Roll has four steps:

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1. Ask Alex's player what her current **goal** is. Is she trying to get to the top of the building? Protect the child from the rabid dog? Get a picture of the top-secret data?

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2. Define a **danger**. This is something that could go wrong for Alex in the current situation. Maybe Alex might be injured, or lose a valuable piece of equipment, or wake up the sleeping security guard. This cannot be anything directly opposed to the goal, it has to be something *else* that could go wrong.

So if Alex is primarily trying to protect the kid from harm, your danger cannot be that the kid gets hurt. Instead, maybe Alex and the kid are separated, or she loses her backpack, or she has to put someone else in danger.

Also, at this point, you or anyone else can spend another token to add yet another danger to the roll, the same way you just did. If more than one token is spent on a roll, you'll probably want to write them down to make sure you keep them all straight.

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3. Ask Alex's player if they would like to spend a token to introduce a **bonus**. This is something extra Alex might get out of the deal. Again, it can't be directly opposed to the goal or any of the dangers, it has to be a separate thing that might go well for her. Maybe she impresses the people watching, or finds a useful tool, or gets rid of an annoying hanger-on.

And again, if there is more than one token spent on a roll, write it down!

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4. Have Alex's player roll a number of dice equal to *three plus the number of tokens spent.*

So, on a simple roll with one danger and no bonuses, you'll roll four dice. Any extra dangers or bonuses add another die.

Any die that comes up as a 4 or higher is a *hit*, while a 3 or lower is a *miss.* Next, assign the dice as follows:

-Assign one die to the **Goal**. On a hit, Alex achieves her goal. On a miss, she fails.

-Assign one die to each **Danger.** On a hit, Alex avoids the danger. On a miss, the danger comes to pass.

-If there is a **Bonus** defined, assign it one die. On a hit, Alex gets the bonus. On a miss, she doesn't. (If there is no Bonus defined, just skip this one.)

-Finally, assign one die to ***learning something about the mystery***. On a hit, Alex finds out

something meaningful about what's going on. This needs to be a solid clue or connection, not just even more weirdness. On a miss, there's just even more weirdness.

It may take a bit of negotiation to come up with goals, dangers, and bonuses that everyone is comfortable with. Your goals should not fix everything immediately, and your dangers shouldn't be the end of the world. You're not trying to find the most extreme thing that could possibly happen, but just something interesting that would drive the story forward. In general, rolls near the beginning of the game should have smaller stakes, which get more and more serious as the story reaches its climax.

Since tokens are a limited resource, there are only so many rolls that can happen. Once you are out of tokens, Alex is out of danger (whether through brilliant success or terrified flight), and the story is essentially over. If you like, take a few minutes to wrap things up and show the aftermath, and then you're done.

Setting

Dr. Alex Stokes is a recently minted Ph.D. in Wildlife Ecology, and a new research assistant for Dr. Robert Behrt, the world's leading expert on urban coyotes. The other research assistant is a grad student named Thomas Meyer, with whom you're on good terms. (You'll meet them later.) According to your research, there are over 2,000 coyotes in the Chicagoland area. You use video cameras, radio collars, and good old-fashioned leg work to study how they live in such an unusual environment.

Your home base is the University of Chicago, on the south side of the city, near the lake. Your research takes you all over the city, however.

Here's a list of names, to help you flesh out people you might meet:

Male first names:	Female first names:	Last names:
1. James	1. Mary	1. Johnson
2. Christopher	2. Patricia	2. Wilson
3. Donald	3. Maria	3. Taylor
4. Peter	4. Karen	4. Young
5. Carl	5. Jessica	5. Hill
6. Arthur	6. Amy	6. Morgan
7. Carlos	7. Carolyn	7. Richardson
8. Clarence	8. Jean	8. Washington
9. Johnny	9. Katherine	9. Gonzales
10. Sean	10. Irene	10. Reynolds
11. Earl	11. Jacqueline	11. Freeman
12. Melvin	12. Florence	12. Hunt

Warning! Past this point are the Hero Sheet and the four Adventure Sheets. The Hero Sheet may be safely perused, but the Adventure Sheets are best left unknown. Once you've reached this point, just pass out the sheets, have the hero player choose a plot hook, and start playing!

Hero Sheet

Key Traits

Alex is *a scientist*.

Alex is _____.

Alex is _____.

Plot Hooks

-Are you meeting with Thomas the grad student, to go over some weird data? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #1 so, and ask them to introduce their location and character for the first scene.

-Are you talking to the Chicago Police, who have questions about a crime you may have witnessed? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #2 so, and ask them to introduce their location and characters for the first scene.

-Are you headed north with Dr. Behrt to fix a vandalized camera? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #3 so, and ask them to introduce their location and character for the first scene.

-Are you yelling at some kids who are messing with a coyote den? Tell the player with Adventure Sheet #4 so, and ask them to introduce their location and characters for the first scene.

Adventure Sheet #1

Motif: Mysterious lights, which entice people to follow them. Often called "will-o-the-wisps" or "jack-o-lanterns", many cultures have reported mysterious lights out in the wilderness, leading travelers astray. Now they seem to have migrated to the wilderness of Chicago.

Key Moments:

- One of the video cameras has recorded some strange footage: a group of eight or nine coyotes (more than would usually be seen together), standing strangely still, watching something behind the camera. Eventually, they all begin moving and walk slowly past the camera.

- A bunch of overlapping pawprints, of a variety of sorts, all following the same path. If Alex follows it, it ends abruptly in a place that's nowhere special.

- While out at night, Alex sees a light in the distance, and is strangely drawn to try to follow it.

- A person, walking as if asleep, following a ball of light.

- One morning, Thomas has vanished.

Character: Thomas Meyer, grad student. Thomas is a good-natured and hard-working researcher, who is on pretty good terms with Alex. He's friendly and willing to talk, even about the weird stuff that's been going on. He'd make a good ally, although he's not likely to take seriously any warnings about "danger". He's been doing this for years, after all.

Location: Thomas's neighborhood. He and his partner live on the west side, in an area populated by students, coffee shops, and organic clothing stores. His place is an apartment above a second-hand record store, with a dark, sketchy alley out the back door.

Adventure Sheet #2

Motif: Strangely aggressive coyotes. Coyotes have prospered and spread largely due to their unique ability to stay out of the way of humans. Unless a coyote is rabid or some other strange circumstance, coyotes will normally run away from humans. This seems to be changing.

Key Moments:

- A coyote is spotted on Michigan Avenue, during the day. He growls at tourists and stops traffic, but doesn't attack anyone. Dr. Behrt is asked for his expert opinion by television reporters.

- A coyote follows Alex, only a few dozen feet behind.

- Two coyotes, in broad daylight, fighting to the death.

- While out tagging coyotes, Dr. Behrt is bit for the first time in his career. He requires a few stitches.

- The coyotes attack Alex or someone close to her, with the intent to kill.

Characters: The Chicago Police Department, and agencies higher up the food chain. The cops seem to be taking an inordinate amount of interest in things around here. They seem to know more than they are saying. Lieutenant Carlo Vincenzi is the main guy they'll run into, until federal agent Linda Matilla shows up.

Location: The biology building at the University of Chicago. Newly built, its sleek modernist architecture is an interesting contrast with the faux-Gothic buildings surrounding it. Dr. Behrt's team has a small lab on the third floor where they analyze video footage, casts of tracks, teeth marks in plasticine clay eggs, etc.

Adventure Sheet #3

Motif: People with a strange connection to coyotes. There are legends of people who can change their shape, becoming wolves or other animals at will or perhaps at certain times of the month. It could be an illusion, and it's something else that is actually going on, but it certainly *looks* like the legends are true.

Key Moments:

- In the distance: what appears to be a small pack of coyotes running alongside two clearly human shapes. It doesn't look like a chase, it looks like they're all out for a nice evening run together.

- One of the plasticine clay eggs they use to get coyote tooth impressions, with what are clearly primate tooth-marks.

- A tall, skinny man grabs Alex's backpack and takes off running. When she rounds the corner, all she sees is a coyote running off, and her open backpack spilled across the ground.

- While in a deserted area, Alex runs into an exceptionally hairy man who growls at her.

- Behrt transforms into a coyote in front of Alex's eyes.

Character: Dr. Robert Behrt, world's leading expert on urban coyotes. He's been on this project for decades, and has seen many assistants come and go. He's certainly not a bad guy, but he's not going to take Alex's concerns very seriously, especially if they interfere with her work. Also he appears to be a were-coyote. I wonder what's up with that?

Location: A Red Line subway car. A bit old and graffiti-covered, but fast enough. One of the seats has some suspicious-looking liquid spilled on it, and the couple in the back are arguing about something.

Mystery Sheet 4:

Motif: Coincidence. Bad luck. That's all it is, right?

Key Moments:

- The train is late! Everyone expects the buses to be late, but the trains are usually on time.

- A door that shouldn't have any reason to be locked is locked.

- An important document or piece of data has gone missing.

- A older woman accosts Alex on the street, accusing her of stealing from her store, and refusing to take no for an answer.

- A window unit air conditioner falls from a building, nearly braining Alex.

Characters: The Society of Paranormal Investigators, aka SPI (pronounced "spy").

They exist mostly on the internet, but get together for monthly meetings at a local library. These guys should be played like the Lone Gunmen from the X-Files. Overly paranoid and credulous, with a lot of weird ideas about what is going on, but with some legitimate knowledge and information as well. Their de facto leader is a college kid by the name of Jez.

Location: Asa Keuper park. A large park in a north suburb, where a large male coyote makes his den. A picnic area on the west side is surrounded on three sides by a small area of woods. Across the street is a small beach, where a flock of Canada Geese live (and provide eggs for the coyote to eat).

Credits

Written by Peter Borah.

Many thanks to Alla Hoffman, Randall Fossi, Alex Cottrill, and Anna Jones, for wonderfully fun and useful playtesting.

The earliest version of this system appeared in a game I wrote for the 2012 Game Chef competition, organized by Jonathan Walton. (http://gamechef.wordpress.com/about/) Many thanks to him for organizing such an inspiring event. This game may never have seen the light of day if Game Chef hadn't given me a much-needed kick in the pants. Many thanks as well to Orion Canning, Keith Stetson, Pedro Ziviani, trashmeetssteel, Jonathan Lavallee, and Dan Maruschak, for their motivating and helpful reviews.

Ludography

The influences on this game are many and varied. Some are obvious, and others less so. These are some of the most immediate:

Dirty Secrets by Seth Ben-Ezra.
Apocalypse World, *In A Wicked Age*, and *Otherkind* by Vincent Baker.
Psi*Run by Meguey Baker.
Polaris and *The Drifter's Escape* by Ben Lehman.
Fiasco by Jason Morningstar.
Annalise by Nathan D. Paoletta.
Sorcerer & Sword by Ron Edwards.
Lady Blackbird and *Ghost/Echo* by John Harper
The Shadow of Yesterday by Clinton R. Nixon

Thank you for reading, and please send me your thoughts!

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