

BLISS STAGE

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Background

At the real-world moment of beginning play, Earth is subjected to a strange sleeping plague called the Bliss, to which nearly everyone over the age of ten succumbs. Seven years later, i.e. from now, most of them are probably dead; Earth is a world of confused and struggling children. Most of them have died as well, because two years after the adults fell asleep, horrific giant robot-corpse beings invaded the planet and wreaked havoc, destroying everything they could and hunting humans. They are still doing it. Nor has the Bliss ended, and as the children reach their late teens, they consistently succumb to it. Our species has been nearly wiped out.

The player-characters are members of a small group which has found a way to resist the alien invaders. They are socially clustered around a single adult, one of the vanishingly few who remained awake due to a chemical or psychological sleep disorder. The physical attackers are apparently drones run by aliens existing in a separate reality or dimension, but this realm may be accessed by a person immersed in fluids stolen from the giant drones, in a half-sleeping state, in dialogue with a second person who is using instrumentation to track and monitor the aliens. The first person, or Pilot, can actually attack the aliens directly, but he or she relies on the second person, the Anchor, to act as senses based on the instruments and to provide imaginary context for the combat.

One person acts as scene-organizer and plays the lone adult; everyone else plays both a Pilot and another Pilot's Anchor. The various other children in the small resistance cell are played as needed and assigned.

The ANIMa ...

... Or disrespectfully, "emo-bot," is an imagined construct assembled by the Pilot in the equally-imaginary dream-space induced by the Anchor's verbal coaching. The basic idea is the modular combat-armor popularized in anime and manga, with each piece representing a specific relationship between the Pilot and a given person.

Example: my Pilot's Relationship with Bobby, another character, has Intimacy 2 and Trust 3. In combat with alien evil-bug-things, I call upon that Relationship and explain that a huge forearm-mounted pulse-blaster pops up, with which I shoot them. The Intimacy provides my dice roll with two dice; the Trust is a buffer against the Stress that combat events may inflict upon the item.

Events in the dreamworld can damage the suit, affecting the numerical values of the relationships themselves. These scores indicate the Pilot's emotional connection to each relationship. The effects upon the real-world relationships are not automatically deterministic, but they can be considered causal when desired by a player, and the numbers do matter in terms of every Pilot's eventual fate: dying or Blissing out.

Real and not real

Rock-solid by the book: there are in fact huge flesh-and-robot humanoid drones stalking the land, actively seeking out and killing humans; the little resistance group does have a vat of spinal fluid from these drones and some kind of instrumentation that permits Anchors to perceive the aliens that run them, and permits Pilots (floating in the fluid) to fight the aliens directly.

Customized to be fixed for a particular game: the immediate circumstances and personal identities of the group, including the hopes they express or represent; the dangers and features of the real world at this latter stage in the invasion and destruction of Earth.

Imagined/invented by characters in the story: the specific dreamscape perceived by the pilots as they battle the aliens, the look and features of the ANIMA suits in that dreamscape, and the features and details of the aliens as they are encountered in that dreamscape.

Unknown: what the aliens are really like, how they perceive the pilots or anything else during the dreamscape battles, what they want aside from the destruction of Earth and humanity, whether any remaining adults can or will recover from the "sleeping plague," and anything else about the big picture.

Remember: the aliens are not the drones; the aliens are never seen in the real, waking world. The ANIMA suits and the battles do not occur in the real, waking world at all. Understanding these is a big deal because the *kids* are the ones making up the highly specific and potentially goony robot-armor imagery – because they're kids.

The core confusion to avoid or resolve is how the attacks on the aliens in the dreamscape save or counter a drone strike or other alien-based threat in the real world – what you'd see if you looked out the window while the Pilot and Anchor battle in the dreamscape. My understanding is that you'd see nothing in particular beyond the drone or other alien-based attacker desisting in or delaying its current attack, if that. Presumably during the battle, the aliens are being distracted or injured enough to interfere with their current project using their drones.

People get naked a lot, probably

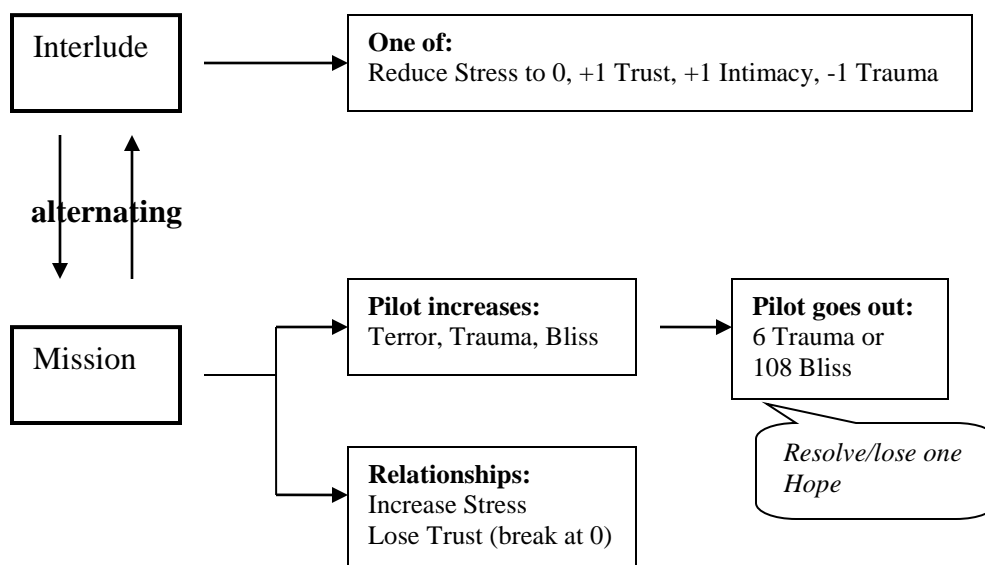
The adventure-fighting aspects of the setting are the motor, but the story is about adolescent sexuality and transgression. There is a single, traumatized adult. There are kids ranging from quite little to seventeen. All of them suffer from traumatic abandonment and stress. For seven years, they have lived with and survived with one another. There is a quantitative score based on intimacy, including sex. It's a given that the kids are touching, playing with, and discovering one another, and practically a given that the adult has broken down by now. The hot-house atmosphere and flatly screwed-up circumstances twist all the emotions and roles into strange forms, all of which should be recognized as the real story components addressed in play.

Bliss Stage pushes the concept of Lines completely into play itself. Conceivably, it could be played with no sex – keep Intimacy at 4 or lower, and interpret these lower scores in non-sexual ways, and all the rules are preserved. But who could believe that would happen? It's up to the group to arrive what they think would happen, and what they think is right or wrong about it.

System

The overall play pace is set by Hopes. There are (Pilots -1) Hopes in play, comprising a kind of ideological profile for this resistance cell. A Hope gets resolved when a pilot Blisses out or dies, either there and then, or in a kind of epilogue narration. All the Pilots are on a one-way track toward either fate, so it's just a matter of how, and who's last. When the Hopes are all resolved, the currently remaining pilot's mission becomes the spotlight for ending play and a look at the coming future.

The events of play are defined as Missions, when Pilots face alien foes through the medium of their Anchors, and Interludes, when people in the small community interact with one another. During Missions, Pilots accumulate Bliss, Trauma, and Stress to relationships, the latter to the point of damaging Trust. During Interludes, they can recover from Trauma, build Intimacy, build Trust, or reduce Stress. Too much Trauma and they die; too much Bliss and they Bliss out, which may be narrated in many ways, but the Pilot is out of the story.



Interludes are called for by the GM or in some circumstances by players. They potentially restore damaged scores and build new relationships, but can only accomplish one score change at a time. They are played without dice, composed of narrations of what characters do and say. When the Interlude ends, which score is altered, and how, is as follows.

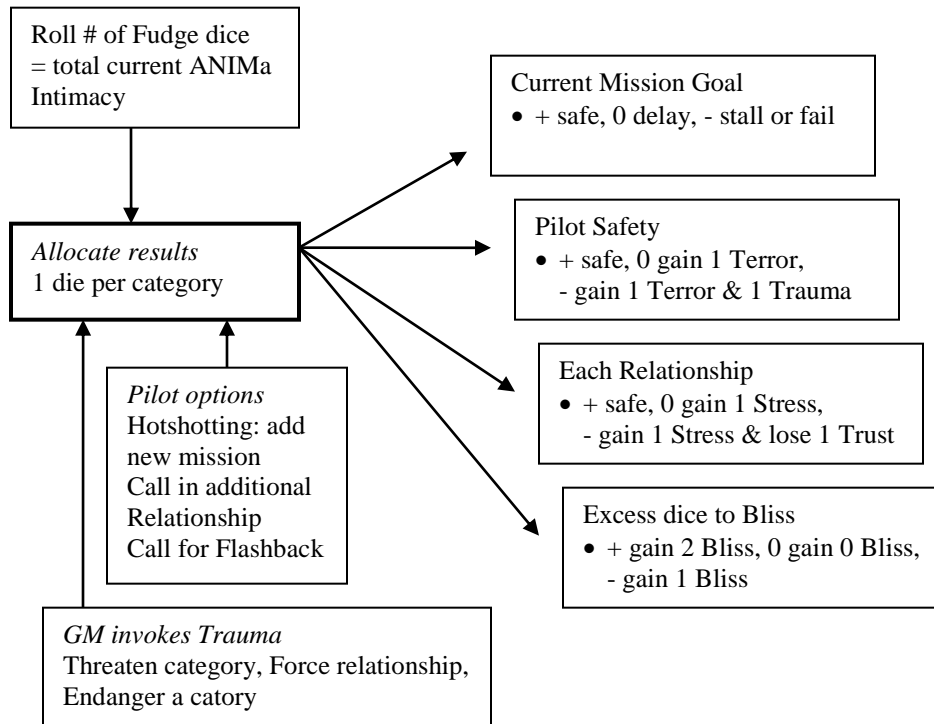
- A player may state that his or her character's Trust in another character is decreased by 1. (Only one character in the Interlude may be altered this way.)
- The Judge states which of the four listed mechanical outcomes occurs as well.

Intimacy deserves special consideration because its value increases based on the progression given on page 120, which may skip values if the interactions meet the listed minimum. To give any idea of the range, Intimacy 1 ensues if the characters make eye contact or exchange names, and Intimacy 5 ensues if they have sex.

Since the GM sets who's involved in the Interlude scenes and also determines how many of them occur between Missions, the overall game pace of "bad" points accumulating vs. "good" points recovering is in that person's hands.

Within a **Mission**, the Pilot player is presented with a handful of Goals, which must be achieved or abandoned one at a time. The Anchor player acts as the main environmental fiction, and the GM player plays the alien enemy. Sooner or later, the Pilot player will act to achieve a Goal.

The Pilot player rolls Fudge dice and allocates the +’s, -’s, and blanks onto categories.



The allocations are significant in terms of drama and plot, but they only modulate, and cannot alter, the fact that *every Pilot is sliding fast toward Bliss, death, or both.*

Slight rules tweaks are applied if the ANIMA is destroyed (each piece having received a -), if the Anchor loses control (Pilot Safety having received a -), or if the Anchor Relationship is broken.

The Mission ends when all the Goals are respectively achieved or deemed failed; note that failure of a Goal is left to the Pilot player’s discretion upon placing a minus in that category.

Some technical notes for best practices

The core concept for GMing Bliss Stage is that nearly every significant, mechanics-affecting event is actually chosen by players. Therefore the GM can only lure, imply, and tempt players into doing such things. Instead of planning and driving for a specific decision such as breaking a Relationship or losing one’s Anchor, the only way to go is to provide as much colorful content as possible for the player to latch onto and use as inspiration for whatever they’ll do.

Missions are trickier to GM than they look, partly because running them mechanically is so easy. They work best when:

- The Goals and overall Mission make sense and are unique to that moment in play. In the big picture, they should be tied to Hopes in some way, but more specifically, they can be linked to logistic problems faced by the cell in the real world, or conceived to establish specific advantageous circumstances for later operations.

- The Authority character has a strong personality and sense of purpose, such that the Missions can be recognized as a feature of the GM's role-playing rather than an endless series of wumpuses to hunt or sudden attacks to fend off.
- Mission goals must be taken one at a time – this is crucial and easy to miss in practice. The internal logic of a Mission can be made to matter, in that if a given goal is abandoned, other goals should be clearly either abandoned as well or still achievable.
- A given Mission should include 3-6 Goals, which pushes the resources of the Pilots quite hard and almost guarantees meaningful mechanical consequences. Also, the GM does well to provide interesting details which lend themselves to hotshotting new Goals.
- One of the core techniques is knowing what to Threaten when a Pilot carries Trauma. There is no reason to hold back and everything to gain in immense plot possibilities, including hotshotting and Flashbacks, which are powerful subroutines that every player needs to understand.

A couple of useful rules reminders include:

- Breaking a Relationship earns both participants *triple* the Intimacy score in Bliss.
- Terror clears at a Mission's end; one never carries Terror into an Interlude or into subsequent Missions.

Role-playing, story outcomes, and endings

Certain interrelationships between fiction and mechanics have to go in particular directions for Bliss Stage to work.

1. How characters act toward one another is not dictated by the numbers on the sheets; rather, the numbers reflect what happens both on Missions and during Interludes, serving as the record. Play is free-will. Especially in Interludes, don't perceive your role as dramatizing the numbers on the sheet. Also, play in the moment, not "toward" numerical outcomes.

2. Success vs. failure of the Missions actually has no mechanical effect on play. Hopes cannot be resolved, for instance, by putting plus dice into the Mission category. However, Mission content can be central, informing how resolved Hopes do get narrated, as well as informing the current circumstances of the group such as whether they have change locations, or whether members are killed, or any number of similar things. There seems to be an interface between what Missions are about, how their successes and failures are narrated, what fictional consequences might be in effect, and how that might relate to eventual Hope resolution, all of which are interfaced with quantitative outcomes but are not themselves numbered.