

Session Report: Darkest Night and Naming

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | June 20, 2015



Session Report is a monthly series that explores the intersection of narrative and broader themes of game design by focusing on a specific tabletop game each month. This month's game is:

Darkest Night by Jeremy Lennert

Victory Point Games, 2012

[Victory Point Games](#) / [Amazon](#)

*Note well: I tend to publish these Session Reports on an invisible monthly deadline, scheduling them to go up on the last Saturday of each month. I have a compelling reason to break with tradition and push this one out one week early: from June 19-22, Victory Point Games, the small publisher who manufactures *Darkest Night* in house, is hosting a "[Jeremy June](#)" sale, issuing a blanket 20% on this and all other games from designer Jeremy Lennert (For the Crown, Frontier Stations, and Gem Rush), as well as their expansions. If this review speaks to you, you know what to do.*

*Note this note well as well: Although I incorporated characters from all three of *Darkest Night*'s current expansions, as well as Map cards from the second expansion, *On Shifting Winds*, I played otherwise by the basic rules presented in *Darkest Night*'s core rulebook. While the *Quests and Darkness* cards introduced in the *With an Inner Light* and *From the Abyss* expansions add variety to the gameplay, for reasons that will become apparent, I wanted to present *Darkest Night* in its purest form.*

The story *Darkest Night* tells is an old one. It's the classic struggle of good versus evil that underpins so many myths and mass market fantasy novels, with one exception: evil has already won. The good people of the kingdom were powerless to stop the Necromancer from spreading his unholy corruption across the land, and now his undead minions roam freely in the towns, castles and countryside. There is just one place still free from his grasp: the monastery, warded by a holy aura, in which four unlikely heroes huddle, pray, and prepare. They are the kingdom's last, best hope for redemption.



The heroes cower in the safety of the Monastery.

The heroes change from play to play, this variety being one of the game's biggest strengths. The core game comes with nine of them, exactly four of whom appear in each game. (Whether you're playing solitaire or in a group of

3, you will always share control of 4 heroes to preserve the ideal balance of difficulty. Variants allow you to add a fifth hero and/or have another player control the Necromancer, but the core experience pits 4 heroes against the game itself.) Each expansion adds four additional heroes for a current total of 23, including the two promotional characters. And, somewhat incredibly, each of these potential heroes approaches the game in a distinctive way, their actions, bonuses and battle tactics determined by a deck of 10 Power cards unique to that hero.

In this particular version of the story, the holy sanctuary was shared by a Monk, a nimble fighter attuned to the secret flows of chi, or life energy; a Channeler, standing on the divide between the physical and astral planes; a keen-eyed and soft-footed Scout; and the most unlikely ally of all, an Acolyte of the Necromancer himself. As they plotted within the safety of the Monastery's consecrated walls, outside, the Necromancer spread his many Blights across the kingdom. Somewhere in the central Village, he had erected a Gate that would allow him instantaneous travel across the lands. Meanwhile, a curse of Decay emanated from the eastern Swamp, rendering the relics and treasures of the kingdom useless. And within the Ruins, the Necromancer himself crouched among ephemeral Webs and corporeal Oblivion.



The Necromancer lurks in darkness.

There's a lot in a name, and one of the first things you notice about *Darkest Night* is how few things actually have one. The kingdom you are fighting to protect, for example, and its landmarks are described in only the most generic of terms: the Mountains, the Castle. The foul Necromancer is likewise nameless, and the Blights he spreads are simply unembellished descriptions of their effects—Skeletons, Confusion, Dark Fog—rather than flashy incantations like X'qartil's Planar Badger of Disillusionment. Even the heroes themselves remain anonymous, referenced only by their professions (or classes, in RPG terms): the Knight, the Wizard, the Scholar.

Which is not to say that the heroes are without distinction. Although drawn from familiar character types, *Darkest Night's* heroes break from fantasy convention in many commendable ways, subtle though they are. The Knight—in *Dungeons & Dragons* and most derivative RPGs, a hero class that typically plays the role of "tank," fighting at the front line and drawing enemies away from weaker allies—is defined here by her Oaths, voluntary quests she can undertake that provide lasting benefits but severe penalties if broken, aligning her much more closely with the knights of Arthurian legend than with the gamer's *D&D*-defined preconceptions of what a Knight should be. (She is also depicted as a woman in full, practical armor, not a chainmail bikini or [sternum-crushing "boob plate"](#).) The Prince (whose closest *D&D* parallel would be the inspirational Marshal class) is a figurehead for the rebellion rather than a direct participant, fomenting unrest, shepherded through secret passages and safe houses by his loyal

subjects...pretty much what a deposed monarch trapped in occupied territory might actually do.



Like the Scout and Knight, most of *Darkest Night's* female characters are refreshingly unsexualized.

The anonymity mentioned above is not symptomatic of lazy design, though; rather, it deliberately and effectively underscores the Campbellian universality of the story being told. That's why the Necromancer—following Tolkien's lead, no doubt—is such a perfect choice of villain. Because of death's finality and mystery, aided no doubt by the stench and disease attendant upon decomposing bodies, nearly all cultures' conceptions of "evil" are rooted in death—and also, in many cases, their conception of the divine. Mythologies across the world contain tales of evil men and women who defy, control and contort death, stripping it of its divinity. The necromancer is the übervillain of monomyth.

Darkest Night's familiar archnarrative, freed from specificities, functions on the level of religious allegory. Regardless of your worldview, it's difficult not to get invested in the battle between grace and corruption, the redemption of a humanity blackened by sin.



The lay of the land.

While the others traveled south to the Forest, the Acolyte, confident that the Necromancer did not yet suspect his disloyalty, traveled west to the occupied Village. There, he eluded a small horde of the Necromancer's undead minions, then launched an attack against the Gate facilitating the Necromancer's movement across the land. The attack failed, but the Acolyte quickly threw a Dark Veil over his actions, avoiding the repercussions his actions would otherwise have brought—a redoubling of the growing Darkness.

In the southern Forest, the Scout found herself illuminated by an Aurora, touched by grace, although she knew the divine light telegraphed her position to the Necromancer. In its glow, she consulted her Treasure Maps, sharing their information with her companions, then dug up a cache of chests, unopenable due to the blight of Decay to the east.

The Monk had a Close Call with a patrolling troop; he would have lost his light were it not for divine grace. Achieving spiritual Clarity, he channeled the flow of chi around him into a Chi Burst. In an Epiphany, he was shown a sacred hand-to-hand fighting technique called Quivering Palm.



Most of the Monk's powers have two levels: a minor passive bonus, and a powerful Chi effect activated using a card like Chi Burst (facedown here, as it had recently been exhausted).

Finally, the Channeler felt the Necromancer's Dark Scrying eye upon her. Augmenting her search by Diffracting the light through an astral lens, she also discovered a hidden, unopenable chest. The Necromancer, in the meantime, traveled to the Village, raising a battalion of Zombies there.

Even more interesting are the things the *do* get named. From *Magic* to *Arkham Horror*, almost every American-style board game—by which I mean, typically, games with a spec fiction theme in which the players control individual characters engaging in frequent combat with one another or mindless enemies spawned by the game—depicts an individual's life in numerical terms. Whether they're called Hit Points, Health, Life Points, Wounds, or Stamina, the result is the same: a number, dial or pile of counters that, once it hits zero, spells a character's doom. This isn't too surprising: where there's fighting, there's usually death, but the instantaneity and finality of death in the real world doesn't translate well to games, where you typically want to give your players a few "chances," maybe the opportunity to heal up before diving back into the fray.

A bit more mysterious is the prevalence of an additional resource, of varied name and function. *Arkham Horror* has Sanity, *Descent* has Fatigue, *Robinson Crusoe* has Determination, and many fantasy settings have Magic Points or Mana. Typically, this second resource is depicted as a kind of energy that can be spent to perform rare feats. Whatever you call it and whatever it does, there's something inevitable about pairing one's corporeal wellbeing against something less substantial, something akin to the soul, spirit, or chi.



The Dark Scrying event card reads: "Spend 1 Grace or Lose 2 Secrecy."

Darkest Night is no different. It, too, measures each hero's physical and spiritual liveliness with a pair of numerical tracks. The only difference is what it calls them. In *Darkest Night*, the heroes don't have Health or Hit Points; they have Grace. A "wound," generally the result of failed combat, is represented by a skull and crossed bones. Wounds in *Darkest Night* are always fatal; such is the defilement of the Necromancer and his minions. A hero can only survive one by an act of divine intervention, and sooner or later, even that luck will run out. That's what Grace represents: "The mysterious power that allows heroes to survive in situations where normal men would perish."

Contact with certain Blights and other unholy events can diminish a hero's Grace, and typically only Prayer—a special action that can only be attempted at the Monastery—will replenish it. If a hero receives a wound when his or her Grace has run out, that character dies instantly.

In practice, there is no difference between Grace and Prayer and the more conventional construction of Health and Healing. In both cases, when you run out, you're dead. (There is one minor distinction, in that there are some things that would cause you to lose Grace but will not kill you if it is already at zero.) Despite their functional similarity, though, Grace and Hit Points are *conceptually* very different. One evokes a feeling of safety and protection within a somewhat cartoonish version of reality in which being trampled by a hill troll won't kill you, but being trampled by a hill troll and *then* having your shoulder grazed by a goblin's arrow will. The other evokes something much closer to historical reality, before modern medicine, when even an arrow to the knee could be the genesis of a fatal infection. It fits, also, with the themes of monomyth and religious parable explored above, bringing to mind archetypal heroes like Odysseus, much-enduring, loved of Zeus, man of many resources.

Turns in *Darkest Night* are simple. Every hero gets one, in any order the players choose. At the start of a hero's turn, unless they are in the shelter of the Monastery, an Event happens—usually one of the Necromancer's servants up to no good. Then, the hero gets one single action. There are a few basic ones: Travel to a new location in the kingdom; Attack one of the Necromancer's Blights, with a chance to remove it from play; or Search the current location for a useful item—hopefully either a Treasure Chest, which unlocks another card from the hero's deck of powers and abilities, or one of the three Keys needed to retrieve a Holy Relic, without which the Necromancer cannot be defeated. After each hero has had a turn, the Necromancer has his own turn, attempting to sniff out the heroes and move to their locations, then spawning a new Blight wherever he ends up. The Necromancer also increases the Darkness each round, growing gradually stronger as it creeps from 0 to 30.



The heroes must often spread out to search and combat Blights effectively, then come together at the end in support of the one who wields the Holy Relic.

There are three ways a game can end. Each location on the map can hold a maximum of four Blights at a time. If the Necromancer would spawn a fifth Blight in that location, it appears in the Monastery instead, and once the Monastery holds four blights, it is overrun and the players immediately lose. (Increasing the Darkness beyond 30 also spawns Blights in the Monastery.) The heroes can win only by defeating the Necromancer in combat, and it's not easy: to defeat the Necromancer, a hero carrying a Holy Relic must roll a 7

on a 6-sided die (the Relic adds +1 to the roll, but it's one of the only such modifiers in the game). But that's not enough: the location must also be free of Blights (if there's a Blight when the Necromancer loses combat, he sacrifices the Blight to save his own hide, the impure complement to the heroes' Grace). Heroes can also win by unearthing three Holy Relics and bringing them to the Monastery to perform the Holy Ritual, but I've never actually seen that happen—finding a single Relic is work enough.

Ironically, because each turn is just a single action, usually taking a few seconds to execute, each decision in the game feels momentous. There are only seven locations on the board, including the Monastery, but moving to a new one costs your entire turn, and crossing to the opposite end of the map costs two. Hero-specific actions are usually immensely powerful, but that's a turn that could have been spent searching for Keys, the primary action necessary to win the game, or banishing Blights, the primary action necessary to not lose. It becomes even more complicated when certain abilities must be exhausted (flipped facedown) to be used; to refresh these powers, or turn them faceup so that they can be used again, the hero has to devote an entire future turn to Hiding or Praying, actions that provide only marginal benefit on their own. Meanwhile, some Blights will attack you every round as long as you remain in their location, and others restrict access to the very ability you needed *right now*. And, of course, the Darkness creeps ever forward.



This is a problem.

The image above shows the dilemma I faced about five rounds into the game. Most Blights have a localized effect—they can't hurt you unless you're in their location. The red-bordered Blights are universal, and all are bad. At this point, most of the heroes had dug up a treasure chest, allowing them to draw additional powers from their specialized decks. However, the Decay Blight makes all items unusable as long as it is in play in any location. It also has a Might of 5, which means that a hero Attacking this Blight needs to roll a 5 or higher on a Fight roll to succeed. (All rolls are on a single 6-sided die, but some abilities let you roll additional dice when attempting a Fight, Elude or Search, taking the highest result.) Since the Monk was the only one who had any combat skills, I'd brought the heroes together at the Swamp in an attempt to brute force Attacks until someone got lucky.

However, grouping a bunch of heroes together has its downsides, as you can see here—the Necromancer will tend to be drawn to that location and stay there, spawning Blights faster than the heroes can disable them. In short order, he had spawned a Desecration, the nastiest Blight in the game, and Confusion, the worst Blight to deal with when you've got two high-urgency targets to attack. The Desecration increases the Darkness by an additional point each round, doubling the Necromancer's progress toward total domination. And the Confusion disables Tactics in its location—these are typically the cards that give you a bonus in combat. So I had to decide: should I try to take out the Confusion so that the Monk could use Quivering

Palm on the Desecration? Should I go for Decay first, hoping that one of the heroes would draw a power that could help? Or should I spread my heroes out, hoping to draw the Necromancer away—remember, the next time he spawns a Blight here, if I haven't managed to take any out, it will go into the Monastery.

There was no good answer. I blame my loss, 14 rounds later, on this moment.

Grace's complement is Secrecy. This, at least, has no ready functional parallel in other games, although there is an obvious thematic parallel with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and its many iterations on the tabletop. In Reiner Knizia's precedent-setting cooperative game, *Lord of the Rings*, the four "activities" (really resources) that drive the game forward are Fighting, Friendship, Traveling, and Hiding, and a Corruption Track represents both the Hobbits' ability to resist the pull of the Ring and their visibility to the Dark Lord Sauron (another Necromancer); the *Lord of the Rings* card game by Fantasy Flight depicts the same thing using a Threat Dial.

Secrecy in *Darkest Night* is used to determine the severity of Events (lower Secrecy values mean more brutal minions) and how likely a hero is to draw the attention of the Necromancer. At the end of each round, the Necromancer tries to root out the heroes interfering in his plans. If he detects one by rolling higher than the hero's Secrecy, he will move toward the closest hero thus detected; otherwise, he moves randomly. Having the Necromancer breathing down your neck is bad news, since he's spawning pesky Blights right on top of you. You also lose more Secrecy simply by being near him, and if your Secrecy hits zero while the Necromancer is in your location, you have to fight him instead of drawing a regular Event. As mentioned above, the only way to win combat against the Necromancer is to roll a 7 on a 6-sided die, although you can try to Elude him with a mere 6.

Like Grace, Secrecy emphasizes the heroes' vulnerability in the face of the all-powerful Necromancer. This isn't *Arkham Horror*, where you're blasting evil in the face with a shotgun. This is, as described in the rulebook, a guerrilla war. The most important action is not fighting but searching. The actions that increase Secrecy—chiefly travelling and hiding—and those that decrease it—attacking a Blight or holding a Holy Relic—construct a clear mental image of the heroes, not strolling through the streets in gleaming armor, but darting furtively from town to town, waiting in the shadows for the Necromancer's patrols to pass by so that they can search the ruins of the library for anything that might tip the odds in their favor. It paints a picture much like the one on the box cover: the heroes like tiny, terrified mice around the immense figure of darkness triumphant.



The Guarded Trove is a typical combat event: you can attempt to Fight or Elude the guard, your choice reflected in the consequences of success or failure.

As hinted above, I did not win this game. In hindsight, aided by the pictures and extensive notes I took (and then ignored when writing this), I can see that the odds were against me from the start. Having a Decay blight at the farthest point on the map in the first round is a huge handicap. It means that the heroes can't learn new abilities until they get rid of it, and if none of the heroes' starting Powers help with Fight rolls, that might take a while. Only the Monk ever became decent at fighting—these are four Secrecy-oriented characters to begin with.



The Acolyte is one of my favorite characters, implicitly trusted by the Necromancer and his minions and able to manipulate them like nobody else.

Which means that I can also attribute my loss to a strategic error. The Acolyte is a poor fighter, but he is great at keeping the Necromancer out of everyone's faces with abilities like Blinding Black (prevent the Necromancer from detecting any heroes, regardless of their Secrecy) and False Orders (move any number of Blights from your location to an adjacent one). The Scout, Channeler and Monk all started with Search-boosting Powers, and the Scout later picked up Patrol Routes, which lets her deactivate all Blights in her location for a single round. I spent about half the game trying to pick off the nasty blights, and several futile turns near the end trying to get the non-combat-oriented heroes to clear out Blights that had been boosted to a Might of 6 by the Darkness track so that the Monk could deliver the killing blow.

On the other hand, if I had focused on searching from the start, using Powers to ignore the Blights instead of trying to eliminate them, I might have been able to achieve that fabled Holy Ritual ending.

Which sums up exactly what I love about this game. After each session, I can look back and reconsider how my heroes' Powers might have been put to better use, which Blights I could have ignored and which I should have taken out sooner. But the next time I play, I'll have an entirely different combination of heroes with a fundamentally different approach to the game. Sometimes, sneaking and searching are what you need, and other times, the game calls for more direct intervention, tactical strikes against the Necromancer and his Blights. Every hero has a few Powers that make you think, "This is so incredibly useful, how could I win the game without this?" But they're all useful, if you can figure out how to apply them. And still, the *#!@*% Necromancer usually wins.



The Necromancer has just spawned his first Blight within the Monastery. In a few rounds, he will have won.