

COSMOS

by Owen Anderson

The Question

- Cosmos – 1. The world or universe as an ordered and harmonious system
 b. An ordered and harmonious system
2. Order, harmony: the opposite of *chaos*.

-The Oxford English Dictionary

For eons, humans have asked the eternal question: is there a meaning to life? Is there something more than the mere repetition of a million billion lives? Is there really nothing more to the universe than the random collisions of infinitesimal particles?

Ever have they searched for patterns, tried to find order in the chaos of the world around them. And sometime, they succeeded. From nothing, they built rules and laws. They solved equations and calculated sums. With theories and law and formulas they held back the randomness that threatened to overwhelm their thoughts.

From the chaos, they built the cosmos.

The Seekers

But some were not content, and some still are not. While most are content to hide behind the safety of the order they have constructed, a few are drawn to it by some inexplicable belief that somewhere out there, even in the midst of the chaos, there is order. For them, there is no chaos, only a cosmos so deep and intricate that it has yet to be unraveled.

They are the crazy ones, the madmen, the philosophers, the sages. They seek answer in chaos, madness, infinity. Mathematicians, theologians, physicists, and philosophers, they seek, and sometimes, they find. But these breakthroughs come at a terrible cost.

No mind can embrace the true madness of chaos, and those who would venture to walk that path risk their own sanity, and the terrible pain of knowing.

The Answer

The seekers search for an answer to the chaos from which the rest of the world hides. They delve into the unspeakable to find the unknowable. But what is it?

Beneath all the madness, all the chaos, lies the true cosmos, the greater cosmos, which underlies both the artificial cosmos of humanity and the terrible chaos without. It is searing bright, the unknowable and the unthinkable.

It is knowledge, light, and understanding.
It is madness, pain, and death.

Characters

Every character in Cosmos is a seeker. As such, Character creation in Cosmos is very simple: a character is composed of a background, a psychological tic, and a sanity count.

Backgrounds

Every character must have a background. This consists of a profession, a world-outlook, and any other information that would be considered relevant to the character's search for the answer.

Example: *Max Cohen is a number theorist. He was a child math prodigy, first published at 16, earning a PhD at 20. For all of his life, he has been obsessed with finding patterns in the world around him. These days he employs his home-built super-computer, EUCLID, to perform complex analyses of patterns in the stock market.*

Psychological Tics

The act of searching for the answer slowly drains a character of his Sanity. As their grasp on reality weakens, some image embedded in their subconscious begins to leak through into their view of reality. The madder they become, the more prevalent this image becomes, eventually permeating their dreams and even their hallucinations.

Example: *Max has suffered from migraines since childhoods. In recent years, however, they have become gradually worse, until now he is practically incapacitated for an entire day when he has an attack. While agonizing under the pain in his head, Max swears he can see a brain, bathed in blood, pulsing quickly to the beat of his own heart. As he reaches out and touches it, a searing pain shoots through his head, and he collapses.*

Sanity

All seekers eventually go insane, though some sooner than others. Every character has a starting Sanity score of 10. This should be recorded in some publically visible manner, such as 10-sided dice, or a pile of beads.

Playing the Game

Preparation

In terms of materials, every player should have one copy of the Meme list from the end of this document, some means of representing their Sanity score, a pencil, and some scrap paper. One extra copy of the Meme list is required, and should be cut so that every Meme is on a separate sheet of paper.

To begin with, every player should design a character as described on the previous page. Once this is completed, they should all present a brief overview of their character to everyone present.

Dealing

To deal, gather the Meme cards found at the end of this document. The exact number of Meme cards required depends on the number of players involved, but 20 is the recommended default. If more are needed, it is relatively easy to add more Memes, so long as every player has a complete list of all Memes in use. Also, adding more Memes to a low player-count game will result in a longer game.

Then, three Memes should be selected at random and placed in a hidden location such that at no point during the dealing process do any of the players see the hidden Memes. These three Memes now represent The Answer.

Finally, two Memes should be dealt to every player, again making sure that only the recipient of the Meme is able to view it. Players should record their Memes on their overall Meme list, and keep the list secret from other players.

Rounds

Once dealing has been completed, play can begin. Play proceeds in rounds, with the default assumption that every round represents a week of in-game time, though this could be modified by player consensus.

During each round, the players may converse freely and plan their characters' actions. No rules govern this interaction, except that there should be no exchange of information regarding Memes during the discussion.

At the end of the round, each player must announce what action his character has taken over the course of the last week: breakthrough, collaboration, or pause.

Breakthrough

When a character has a breakthrough, the player may draw an additional Meme from the pile of available Memes. However, this gain comes at a cost: the character loses Sanity. The player must, as part of announcing his character's action, narrate a nightmare, hallucination, or other touch of madness that results from his character's brush with chaos. These narrations are left to the player's whim, but they should be increasingly painful as the character's Sanity drops ever lower, and they should revolve more around the character's psychological tic.

The Sanity lost to a breakthrough increases with each subsequent breakthrough. Every time a character has a breakthrough, he loses an amount of Sanity equal to the number of breakthroughs he has now had.

Collaboration

Two players may decide that their characters collaborate during a round. As part of announcing this decision, the two players must cooperatively narrate how each others' (partially very different) approaches to The Answer help them advance in their own research. Then, the players may exchange knowledge of one or more Memes.

Pause

Taking a break from research is one of the few things that can delay the onset of madness, but most seekers are loath to do it, since it means others will further their work while they rest.

Choosing to take a pause means that the character does no research during the turn, but instead engages in some possibly tangential activity that gives him better perspective. As a result, the character gains 1 Sanity, and the player must narrate what his character does during his respite.

Endgame

When a character has believes he has amassed enough information to know what three Memes comprise The Answer, he must announce this to the other players. Then, he may look at The Answer, and confirm that he has the correct answer.

If incorrect, the character's Sanity drops immediately to 0, and the player must narrate his character's end, whether physical or psychological, without revealing anything about The Answer.

If correct, he must also narrate his character's end, but this time must reveal his character's interpretation of the disparate Memes of The Answer.

Sample Memes

Death	God	42
216	Waves	Spiral
Particles	π	Life
Existential	Absurd	Apocalypse
Transcendence	Surrealism	Nihilism
Higher-Order Beings	Fate	Syllogism
Darkness	Transfiguration	Void
Metaphysics	Dreams	Enlightenment