

The Cave

A Solo Journaling Game

By Shawn
Graham



WRETCHED & ALONE

This work is based on The Wretched (found at <http://loottheroom.itch.io/wretched>), product of Chris Bissette and Loot The Room, and licensed for our use under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

THE WRETCHED™ is a trademark of Chris Bissette. The Wretched and Alone logo is © Chris Bissette, and is used with permission.

of Roman origin (Fig. 79).

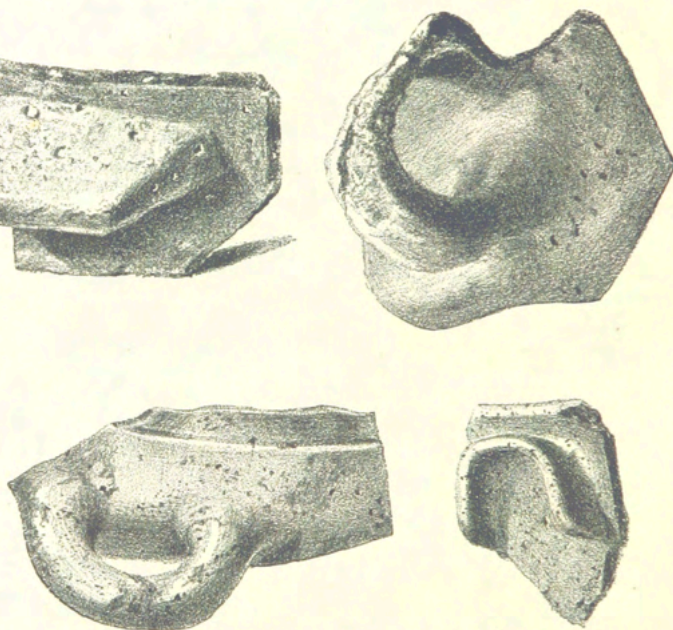


Fig. 77.—FRAGMENTS OF HAND-MADE POTTERY, KIČIN.

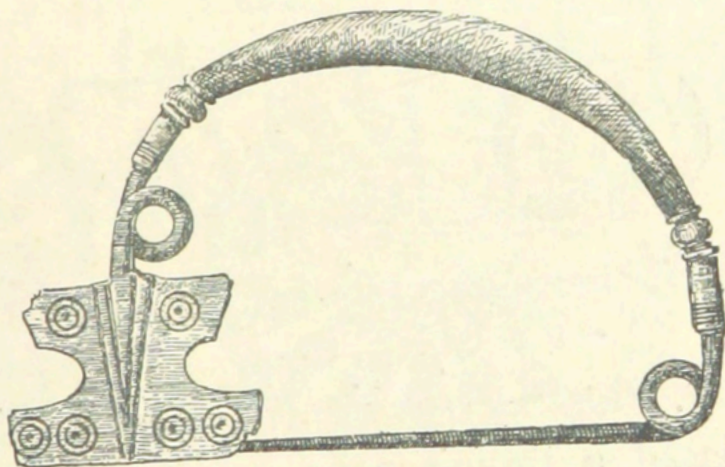
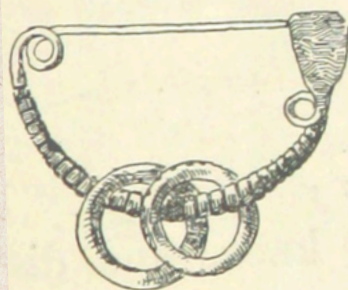
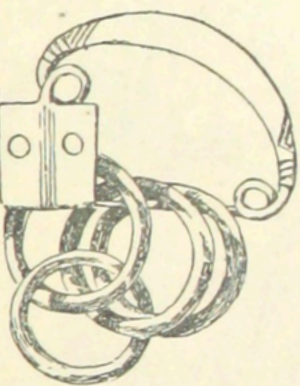
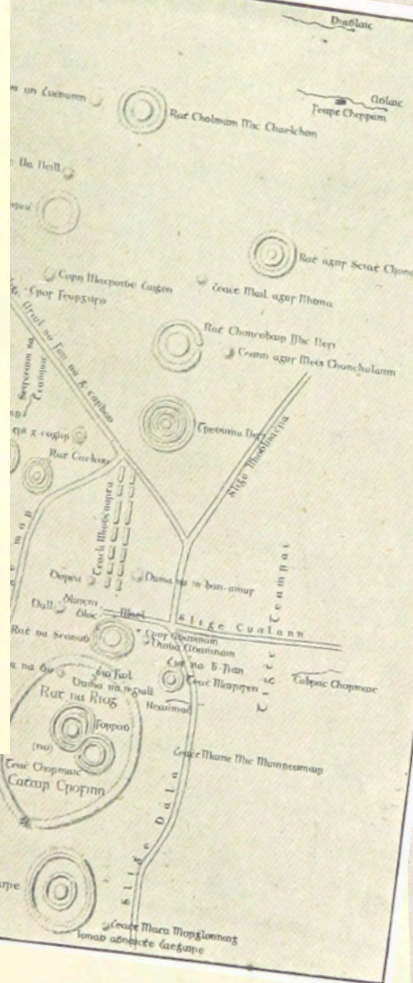
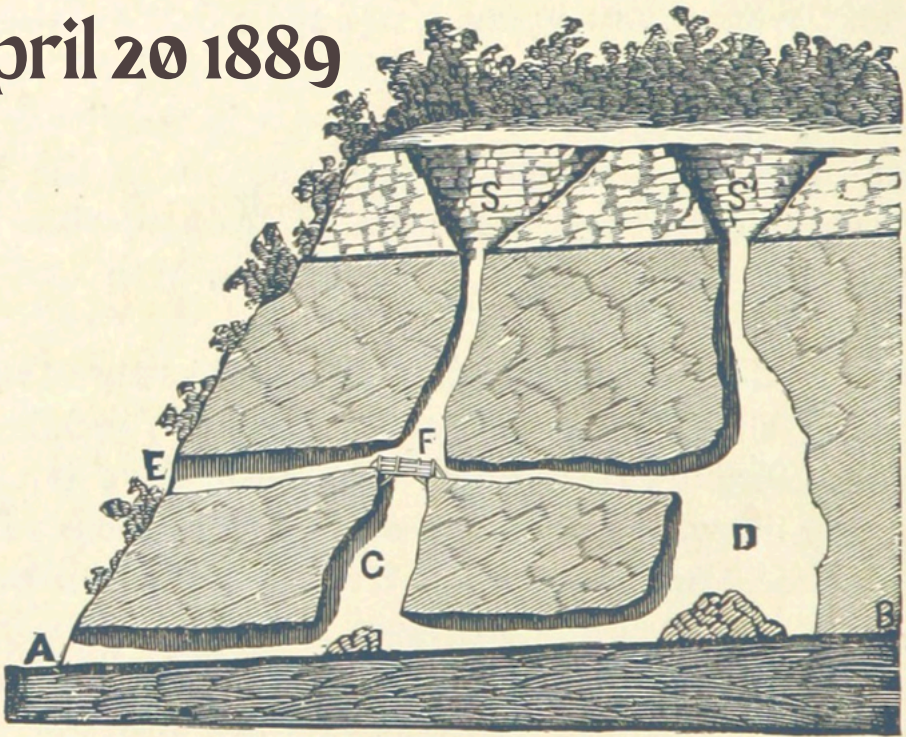


Fig. 45.—BRONZE FIBULÆ WITH TWO SEPARATE TWISTS ($\frac{2}{3}$).



April 20 1889



VERTICAL SECTION.

The cave mouth gapes before you, dark and ancient. Your predecessors' careful methods seem laughably inadequate now. Something dwells in these layers of earth and bone - something that whispers through the artifacts, that moves in the shadows beyond your lamp's reach.

You are Dr. Elisabeth Blackwood, and you will document what lies beneath... no matter the cost to your reputation or sanity.

But the locals whisper of older things. And the bones... the bones tell a different story than the one in your scholarly papers.

You are Dr. Elisabeth Blackwood, a Victorian archaeologist excavating a mysterious cave system in 1876. Record your findings, maintain scientific credibility, and wrestle with increasingly disturbing discoveries that challenge everything you believe about history and humanity. Your journal must survive, even if you do not.

The truth lies buried... but some things should stay that way.

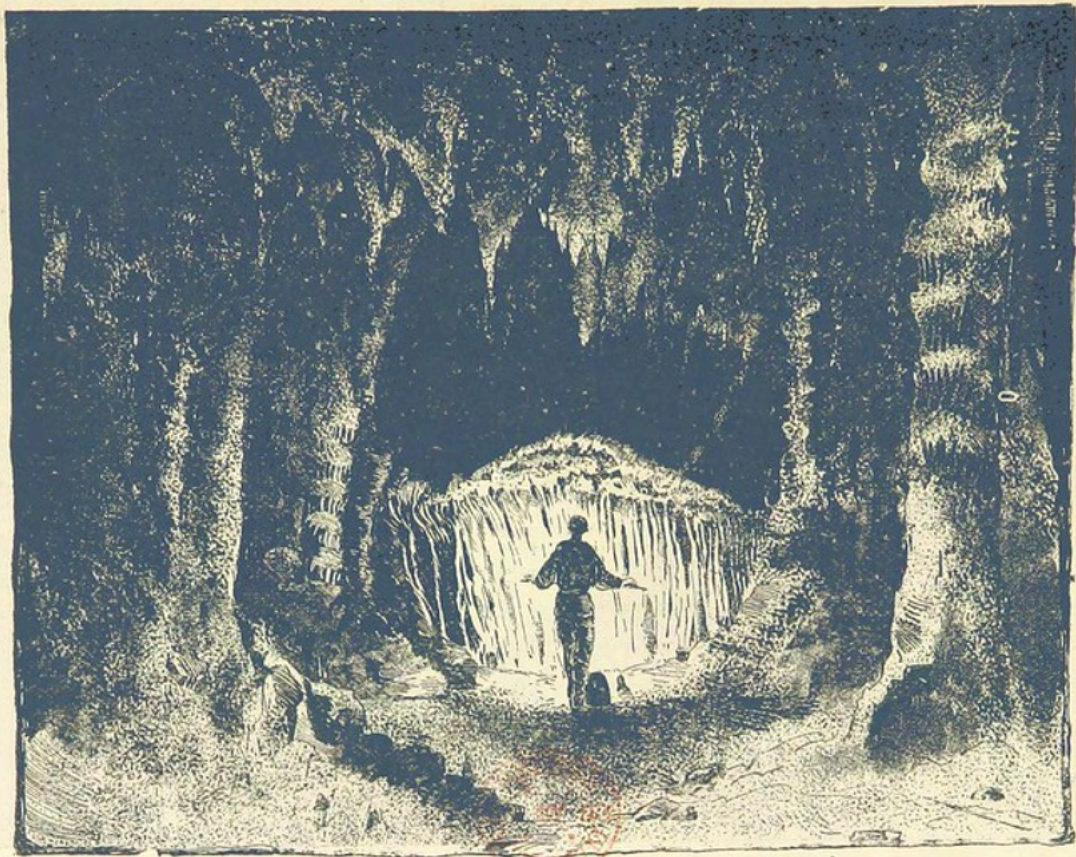
Keep your site diary safe. It will vindicate your name.

'The Cave' is a solo role-playing game. You use cards and dice to generate prompts that describe the events you are reacting to, the situations you are in.

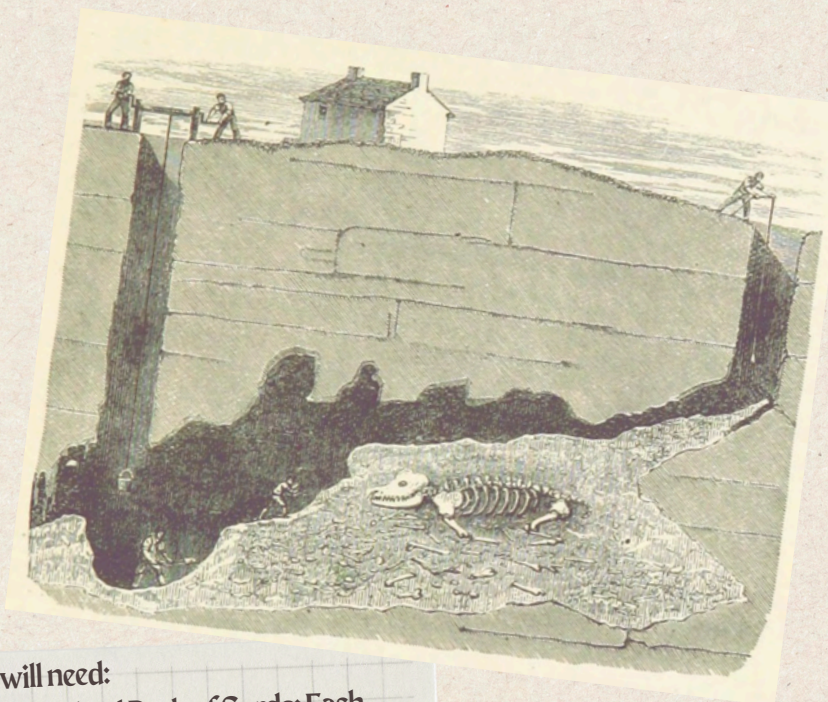
You chronicle your response; your responses influence what happens at the next die roll, the next pull of the cards.

How would Blackwood react?

How will you react?



Provisions



You will need:

- -Standard Deck of Cards: Each suit represents different challenges in your excavation
- Block Tower: Represents your academic credibility and grip on conventional reality
- Tokens: These represent your archaeological evidence and will be collected throughout
- Two six-sided dice: Used for analyzing finds and interactions with locals
- A journal to record your findings
- Victorian atmosphere (music, a cozy parlour, possibly a tea room. Or maybe a windswept moor)

Your First Entry

Begin by recording your first entry after discovering the cave. What brought you here? What do your academic rivals say about your theories? What did the old farmer tell you about the cave's history?

Shuffle the deck and build the tower. Roll 1d6 and draw that many cards - these represent your first day's discoveries. Follow the instructions on the cards and record your findings.

Then dig deeper, one layer at a time, toward the truth... or madness.

If the tower falls, you have lost all academic credibility and your findings are dismissed as the ravings of a hysteric. If you run out of tokens, you lack sufficient evidence to support your theories.

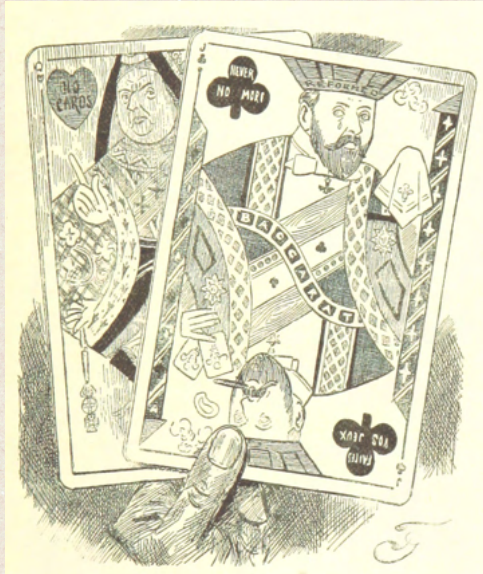
Events

Spades: The Cave's Secrets

"Some layers were never meant to be disturbed." -- From the journal of Dr. Elisabeth Blackwood

Diamonds: Resources and Methodology

"Proper technique vs. the need to know." - From the journal of Dr. Elisabeth Blackwood*



Hearts: Academic Relations

"They call you mad, but they haven't seen what you've seen." - From the journal of Dr. Elisabeth Blackwood

Clubs: Mental Strain

"Are we uncovering the past, or is it uncovering us?" - From the journal of Dr. Elisabeth Blackwood*

Certain card draws might trigger a die roll to determine positive or negative valence of possible actions. Sometimes, the die roll acts as a coin flip. Sometimes, a pair of dice might be suggested along with how to interpret the successful roll.

When rolling, consider the context of the interaction or observation being made. The roll result should lead to immediate in-game consequences and influence the narrative, either stabilizing your mental state or exacerbating fears and tensions.

Use one die to determine the outcome of certain actions:

NEGATIVE: Roll 1-3: The outcome skews from less to a more negative, distrustful or fearful outcome, reflective of cultural biases. This symbolizes a regression or negative response.

POSITIVE Outcomes: Roll 4-6: The outcome skews from less to a more positive, insightful or accepting outcome. This outcome represents hope, progress or enlightenment.

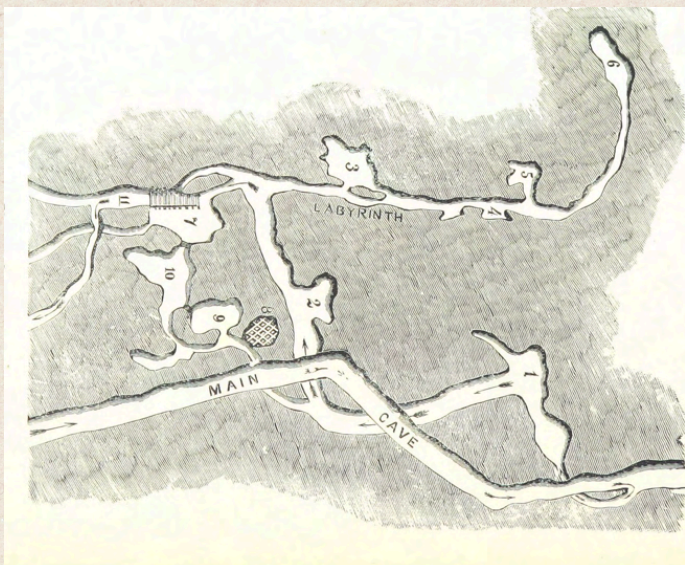
When analyzing finds (signalled by the command "Interpret") Roll 2d6:

2-5: Disturbing/Unexplainable

6-8: Ambiguous/Debatable

9-12: Scientifically significant

Try to interpret in context with what else you know.



Spades: The Cave's Secrets

Ace: A massive chamber discovered. Add two tokens.

King: Strange markings on the walls seem to shift in the lamplight. Roll dice to interpret their meaning.

Queen: The artifacts don't match any known civilization. Roll die. Roll dice to interpret the artifacts in the context of what you already know.

Jack: A worker disappears in a side tunnel. Roll die to determine their fate.

10: A new chamber reveals peculiar stratification unlike anything in your geological training. Interpret.

- Positive: Document methodically (add 1 token)
- Negative: Collect samples immediately in your excitement (lose 2 tokens to unstable conditions, pull 1 block)
- Or attempt detailed sketches (roll 2d6, 8+ gain 2 tokens)

9: The cave floor suddenly drops away, revealing older excavation attempts. Roll.

- Positive: Clamber down immediately (lose 1 token to accident with the evidence)
- Negative: Hide the evidence of this prior research (pull 1 block)
- Or lower yourself down after taking suitable precautions (roll 2d6, 10+ find predecessor's notes in the rubble, gain 2 tokens; otherwise suffer injury and discover nothing)

8: Workers uncover a burial unlike any known Victorian classification system. Interpret.

- Positive: Follow standard procedures (lose 2 tokens to mistakes)
- Negative: Rush documentation (pull 2 blocks)
- Or attempt new classification/study (roll 2d6, 7+ gain academic insight, gain 2 tokens)

Spades: The Cave's Secrets

7: Strange acoustic properties in a new passage make measurements impossible.

- Positive: Continue despite interference (lose 1 token because of your trembling hands)
- Negative: Abandon survey of the passage in fear (pull 1 block)

6: Stalagmite formations contain inexplicable organic material.

- Roll 1 - 3: Sample extensively in excitement and haste (roll 2d6, 4 or less lose 2 tokens)
- Roll 4 - 6: Ignore anomaly (pull 1 block)

5: Workers discover tools that match no known culture or period. Interpret.

- Positive: Document conventionally (pull 2 blocks because of colleague's disbelief)
- Negative: Create new typology (lose 2 tokens to speculation and error)
- Or hide the evidence (roll 2d6, 8+ for success; failure - pull 1 block)

4: Cave paintings emerge when exposed to light from a guttering torch - but fade in light from a lantern. Interpret.

- Positive: Attempt photography (lose 2 tokens to equipment failure)
- Negative: Question your observations (pull 1 block)
- Or sketch quickly (roll 2d6, 7+ preserve evidence)

3: A perfect cube of unknown stone material embedded in the wall. Interpret.

- Leave in situ (lose 1 token but maintain context)
- Negative: Extract carefully-ish (it's exciting!) (pull 1 block)
- Or document position (roll 2d6, 9+ significant discovery, gain 1 token)

2: Temperature drops dramatically in new chamber despite no ventilation. Interpret.

- Positive: Withdraw temporarily (pull 1 block)
- Negative: Continue work (lose 1 token to illness)
- Or set up measuring devices (roll 2d6, 6+ gather data, gain 1 token)

Hearts: Academic Relations

Ace: An Invitation Letter from the Royal Society! Set aside. At day's end, roll d6. On 6, add a token. With 20 tokens, attempt THE FINAL PAPER (See THE ENDING OF THINGS below).

King: Visiting scholar questions your methods. Roll the die to maintain composure and the nature of your response.

Queen: Your assistant begins documenting strange dreams and insists something in the cave is speaking to them. How do you respond? Roll the die.

Jack: Serious conflict erupts over interpretation of finds.

10: Royal Society demands explanation for unconventional dating methods.

- Positive: Defend methodology (pull 2 blocks)
- Negative: Revise findings (lose 2 tokens)
- Or provide new evidence (roll 2d6, 10+ gain 2 tokens)

9: Local theosophical society requests site visit.

- Positive: Deny access, but a member sneaks in anyway (lose 1 token)
- Negative: Allow inspection (roll 2d6, 4 or less lose credibility with the Royal Society pull 1 block)

8: Colleague's letter questions your stratigraphic interpretations.

- Positive: Stand firm (pull 1 block)
- Negative: Revise findings (pull 1 block to compromise)
- Or provide detailed defense (roll 2d6, 7+ strengthen position gain 1 token)

7: Famous older male colleague (Sir Reginald Watterly) requests specimens for comparative analysis.

- Positive: Refuse (pull 2 blocks)
- Negative: Send samples (lose 2 tokens)
- Or invite collaboration (roll 2d6, 12 gain 4 tokens)

Hearts: Academic Relations

6: Anonymous letter critiquing your previous work appears in The Archaeological Journal of Cave Archaeology.

- Positive: Ignore (pull 1 block)
- Negative: Publish rebuttal (pull 1 block for not knowing your place)
- Or gather supporting evidence (roll 2d6, 10+ vindication, gain 2 tokens; failure pull 2 blocks for public humiliation)

5: Former mentor expresses concern about your methods.

- Positive: Dismiss concerns as baseless; mentor embarrassed (pull 2 blocks)
- Negative: Accept guidance; mentor preens (lose 1 token to delay)
- Or defend innovations (roll 2d6, 7+ gain 2 tokens)

4: Local museum questions your artifact classifications.

- Positive: Maintain position (pull 1 block)
- Negative: Revise categories (lose 2 tokens)

3: Geological Society disputes your cave formation theory.

- Positive: Challenge critics (pull 2 blocks)
- Negative: Modify claims (lose 1 token)
- Or present new evidence (roll 2d6, 8+ support theory, 2 tokens; failure: public shame, pull 2 blocks)

2: Rival archaeologist arrives unannounced at dig site.

- Positive: Restrict access (pull 1 block)
- Negative: Share findings (roll 2d6, 5 or less lose credit for your more spectacular finds)
- Or choose to collaborate cautiously (lose 1 token but gain ally)



Diamonds: Resources and Methodology

Ace: Supplies running low. A worker suggests "local methods" of exploration. Pull one block.

King: Discovery of an ancient burial. Do you follow proper procedure or push for quick results? Roll the die.

Queen: Standard tools failing at deeper levels. Unorthodox alternatives present themselves. Pull one block.

Jack: Found previous explorer's notes... and their warnings. Add one token. Pull one block.

10: Standard measuring tools provide inconsistent readings. Interpret.

- Positive: Trust instruments (pull 1 block)

- Negative: Abandon measurements (lose 2 tokens)

- Or devise new method (roll 2d6, 7+ innovation gives you 1 token; otherwise new method fails)

9: Workers discover new passage requiring immediate documentation.

- Positive: Follow procedure

- Negative: Rush exploration (lose 1 token to mistakes)

8: Unusual specimens resist standard preservation techniques. Interpret

- Positive: Use traditional methods (lose 1 token)

- Negative: Risk new approach (roll 2d6, 4 or less gain 2 tokens; fail lose 2 tokens)

7: Local folk method proves more effective than academic approach.

- Positive: Reject technique by affirming status quo

- Negative: Adopt fully (pull 1 block)

- Or integrate carefully (roll 2d6, 11+ methodology breakthrough; fail pull 1 block and lose 1 token)

Diamonds: Resources and Methodology

6: Camera equipment malfunctions near certain artifacts. Interpret.

- Positive: Rely on sketches
- Negative: Attempt repairs (lose 2 tokens to delays)

5: Excavation reveals potentially unstable chamber.

- Positive: Follow safety protocols
- Negative: Risk quick study in the chamber; send the workmen in (lose 1 token to danger and pull 1 block for worker's death!)

4: Standard classification systems prove inadequate.

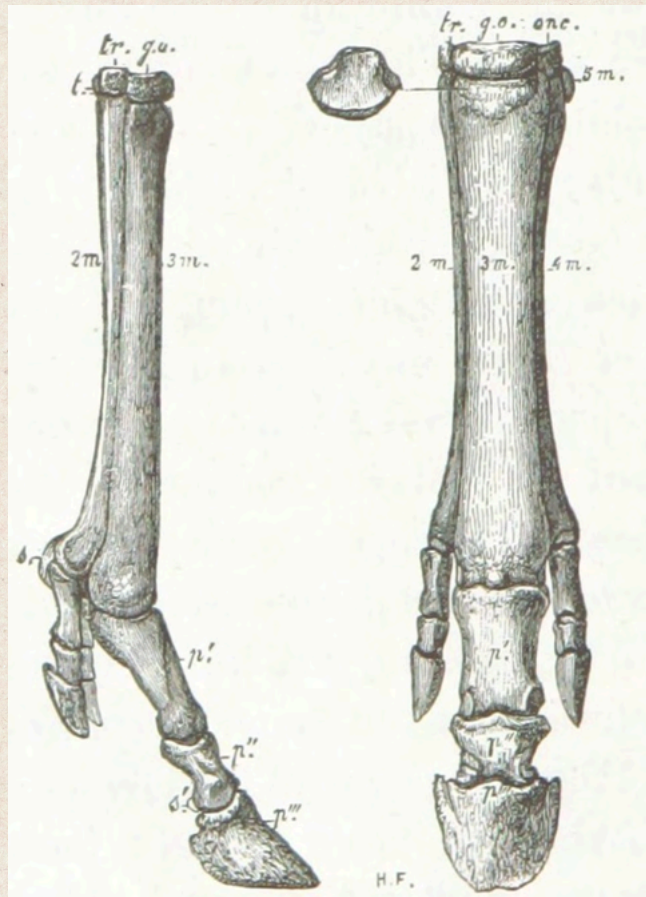
- Positive: Create new system (lose 2 tokens to confusion)
- Negative: Force categorization (pull 1 block)

3: Artifacts change appearance after removal from site. Interpret.

- Positive: Document changes (gain 1 token)
- Negative: Question observations (pull 1 block)

2: Workers refuse to enter certain chamber.

Why? Roll die.



Clubs: Mental Strain

Ace: The bones seem to whisper. Pull two blocks.

King: You catch yourself writing in unknown scripts. Pull one block.

Queen: Memory of your university days provides comfort... or heightens your doubts?

Jack: A worker goes mad, claiming the artifacts speak to them.

10: Find yourself writing field notes in unknown script. Why? Roll die.

9: Measurements of time become unreliable within the cave. Why? Roll die.

8: Dreams of artifacts prove prophetic of actual finds.

- Positive: Ignore correlation

- Negative: Study pattern (roll 2d6, 9+ insight gains 2 tokens; failure - word leaks out, humiliation! Pull 1 block)

7: Find inexplicable gaps in your field journal.

- Positive: Your assistant questions your memory (pull 1 block)

- Negative: Fill gaps 'theoretically' (lose 2 tokens)

6: Artifacts seem to rearrange themselves in storage. Interpret.

- Positive: Document changes (gain 1 token pull 1 block)

- Negative: Doubt observations (pull 2 blocks)

Clubs: Mental Strain

: Workers report hearing voices from sealed chambers.

- Positive: Take the reports seriously and investigate the sounds

- Negative: Dismiss reports (but workers start abandoning the site over the coming days)

4: Find yourself humming unknown melodies near certain finds. Interpret.

3: Your sketches include details not visible to others. Interpret.

- Positive: Trust vision (lose 2 tokens to doubt)

- Negative: Your assistant questions your perception (pull 1 block)

2: Previous day's

measurements contradict
today's reality.

- Negative: Trust latest data
(pull 2 blocks)

- Positive: Accept both
(lose 1 token to confusion)

- Or seek guidance from the
Theosophical Society
(roll 2d6, 8+ gain 2 tokens,
pull 2 blocks)



Mammoth Cave — In "the Devil's Arm-Chair."

The Ending of Things

The Tower Falls

If the tower falls, your academic reputation is ruined. You can retreat in shame to a cottage in the far country, where you spend your day cataloguing moss in an attempt to retrieve some sort of standing. Or you can attempt to rehabilitate your reputation by becoming Sir Reginald Watterly's unpaid assistant.

Flip a coin: heads, retreat in shame and write a justification in your diary; tails, swallow your pride and write a letter to Sir Reginald asking if you can labour in obscurity for him.

The Evidence is Destroyed (You have lost all the tokens)

If you run out of tokens... you have managed to destroy the archaeological evidence. The cave has lost something of its mystery; it will never tell us about the past. You develop a reputation for carelessness that you cannot shake. Embittered, you take up a schoolmistress position in the local village. Your last entry for your journal of the excavation tries to justify what happened.



The Ending of Things

The Final Paper

If you've collected 20 tokens on the Ace of Hearts, you've gathered enough evidence to publish. The excavation is finished! Write of your elation and your hopes for your nascent career for this surely will be the work that makes your name.

However, finishing the field work is not the last step. Many careers end here; many archaeologists fail the final ordeal: publication. You must publish your work. Make one last pull.

- If your credibility survives the publication process, your work revolutionizes archaeology; write the opening for your public lecture at The Society's annual meeting.
- But if the tower falls...

'What a barrel of tripe', thought Sir Reginald Watterly as he edited the latest edition of *The Spelunkologist, Being The Proceedings of the Royal Society for Cave Archaeology*. He deposited the paper in the wastebasket, making a black mark beside the name 'Elisabeth Blackwood' on the membership roll, finishing her chances for good. He smiled with satisfaction.

You never dig again. You don't even retire to the cottage. Instead, you move in with your aunt and nurse her until the day she dies. You make a little extra coin conducting spiritual readings for the locals, performing in the local music hall. Write the handbill advertising your services.



Afterword

Archaeology at the cusp of the twentieth century was a mixture of a developing professionalism and a dabbling with the occult, especially in upper middle class circles in Britain. See Jeb Card, *Spooky Archaeology: Myth and Science of the Past*. University of New Mexico Press, 2019 for a deep dive into these intersections. These trends continue; see also David S. Anderson, 'Crafting a Mysterious Ancient World: The Effects of Theosophy and Esotericism on Public Perceptions of Archaeology' *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (MAY 2019), pp. 13-26 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26770449>

This game is meant to be a playful exploration of the tension between scientific rationality and 'inexplicable' discoveries, set against that backdrop of Victorian archaeology's professionalization. It asks questions about what we choose to know, what we choose to believe, and how we reconcile evidence with acceptable truth. The truth-value of archaeology is not always self-evident, even today.

The kind of archaeology that you recount here is up to you, but the game pushes back, and has its own (vaguely 19th century, vaguely theosophical, vaguely Lovecraftian, sense of what archaeology is or should be. In that, it holds a mirror up to the player's own sensibilities. Will the player resist, push back, or subvert the oracular nature of the game? The ultimate resistance would be to take this game and re-cast its rules, its prompts, towards the player's vision of what a better archaeology would be.

The game has its genesis in a cursory skate through the earliest archaeological reports held by the Archaeology Data Service, and in particular, a read of Adam Corrie's report "On a Cave containing Bones and Objects of Human Workmanship, at Borness, Kirkcudbrightshire." <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/details.xhtml?recordId=3183934&recordType=Journal>