

THE **YELLOW**
OKING

ROLEPLAYING GAME

By Robin D. Laws

PREVIEW DRAFT



Shattered Realities, Exploded Selves

In *The Yellow King Roleplaying Game*, players take on the roles of young artists studying abroad in Paris in 1895, as the publication of a mysterious verse drama begins to overwrite their adopted city with the supernatural reality of an alien world called Carcosa.

And they play European soldiers fighting in the murky War of Reclamation, who come to realize that their endless, inexplicable struggle occurs at the behest of Carcosa's Yellow King.

And they play former resistance fighters in the present day, after the overthrow of the tyrannical Castaigne regime, which has held America in its icy grip since the 1920s.

And finally they also play contemporary people in the world as we mostly know it--but what is that strange masked creature lurking behind that dumpster over there?

Something links these characters across time and alternate realities--a grim destiny that may enable them to unravel the schemes of Carcosa, returning the world to what it was, for good or ill, meant to be.

The Yellow King Roleplaying Game (or YKRPG when only an acronym will do) can be played using this overarching, interwoven structure, or in a simpler, episodic mode featuring shorter incidents of subjective reality horror in any one of its four settings.

To play the game, you need this book, which includes both the rules and the central Belle Époque Paris setting.

Each of the other settings appears in its own volume: *The Wars*, featuring Europe's 1947 War of Reclamation; *Aftermath*, the contemporary post-Castaigne world; and *This Is Normal Now*, our world with supernatural corruption seeping in from the corners.

The Game

This game of uses Pelgrane Press' GUMSHOE system, a set of roleplaying rules focused on gathering information and solving mysteries. GUMSHOE bases itself on the idea that failing to get information is never interesting. When your character uses a relevant ability in a situation where the scenario says there are clues to be found, you always get them. This simple premise allows us to present rich, layered mysteries in which the object is not to randomly stumble across a few key bits of information, but to piece together the truth hidden within a larger web of clues.

As with all of our GUMSHOE games, the rules have been specifically tuned to a particular setting and style of play—in this case, the subjective reality horror of Robert W. Chambers' King in Yellow Mythos.

Rules Basics

When characters seek information where it might be available, they always gain it, provided they have an **investigative ability** that fits the situation.

In situations when interesting story possibilities arise from either success or failure, characters make a **test**. They spend a number of points associated with a relevant **general**

ability, roll a single six-sided die, and add both numbers to get a result. This is then compared with a **Difficulty Number**. If the result meets or beats the Difficulty, the character succeeds.

When battling, chasing, or running away from adversaries, characters simultaneously test their Fighting abilities. The degree of success or failure depends on how many characters make their tests.

When characters suffer physical harm, they take Injury cards. Shock cards represent mental traumas. Text on these cards describes their game effects and tells you how to discard (get rid of) them. Where not otherwise specified, you discard all Shock and Injury cards at the end of every scenario. When you accumulate three Injury cards the character dies. Three Shock cards means that the recipient has suffered a severed breakdown and can no longer continue as a player character.

A Howling from Carcosa

Four short stories by American author Robert W. Chambers (1895-1933) serve as central inspiration for this game. Published in the collection *The King in Yellow*, they are: “The Mask,” “The Court of the Dragon” and “The Repairer of Reputations.”

Chambers wrote other horror stories and some pulpy supernatural adventures. Aside from a handful of ghost stories that turn on the same simple ironies as those of his contemporary and inspiration, Ambrose Bierce, they are universally and correctly regarded as terrible. This would be true even if they didn’t traffic in blatant racism. Yes, we have on our hands another key early horror writer whose reactionary social intentions we must acknowledge, excise and subvert as we adapt his work.

Bierce also writes of a place called Carcosa, in his short story “An Inhabitant of Carcosa.” Chambers clearly mined it for references, but here Carcosa is an ancient city, and Hali the name of a philosopher the narrator contemplates. It also mentions Aldebaran and the Hyades, as stars the narrator sees overhead after leaping forward in time to an era long after his city’s reduction to ruins.

Characters

In the Paris portion of your series, the players portray students of various arts learning their craft and soaking in the sights and delights of the City of Lights. They begin play blissfully unaware of the alien and supernatural dangers they are about to encounter, but each possessed of a personality trait that will drive them further toward them. In the course of the first scenario, they become aware of the recent covert publication of a disturbing closet drama, *The King in Yellow*. They also realize that it is they who must somehow deal with its reality-bending ripple effect.

The default version of the series assumes that the characters are all, or at least primarily, Americans from wealthy families now living the artificially and temporarily impoverished lives of students abroad. This follows the pattern established by Chambers in his story “The Mask.” It makes the characters outsiders who have acquired some familiarity with Paris and its ways—a convenient conceit allowing you to easily present information to the players.

Although it doesn’t evoke the Chambers stories as closely, you could equally well have the characters hail from elsewhere. The players might better relate to characters from England, Canada, Australia, or elsewhere on the continent.

One or two players may ask to play Parisians. This choice works particularly well in the case of the Muse character (see below) who becomes an insider and their guide to the city.

If you are your players are all French, you may find it odd to play Americans and prefer to recast the art students as locals. Maybe they’re provincials living in the great city for the first time.

Kits

Characters are created by combining one item apiece from two sets of **kits**.

Investigative Kits

The first kit, the **investigative kit**, determines the characters' fields of study and their investigative abilities, which they use to gather information. The kits are:

Architecture Student

Investigative Abilities

Architecture
Art History
Officialdom
Technology

Landscape Painter

Investigative Abilities

Art History
Natural History
Negotiation
Painting

Belle-Lettrist

Investigative Abilities

Belle-Lettres
History
Reassurance
Research

Muse

Investigative Abilities

Bonhomie
Culture
Inspiration
Miscellany

Poet**Investigative Abilities***Demimonde**Intuition**Occultism**Poetry***Portrait Painter****Investigative Abilities***Assess Honesty**Fashion*

Painting

Photography

Society

Sculptor**Investigative Abilities**

Art History

Military History

Sculpture

Steel

The fields of study are all more or less explanatory, except perhaps for belle-lettrist and muse. Explain that the first term refers to a writer for journals, magazines and newspapers specializing in essays, editorials, the occasional bit of fact-finding reporting, and perhaps the odd didactic fictional vignette. In today's terms, the belle-lettrist is a journalist who primarily writes think pieces.

The muse is a member of the arts scene who does not create anything him or herself, but rather provides inspiration, impetus and maybe organizational work to either a single creator, or the members of an entire artistic scene. Though we most often think of a muse as a woman, either romantically linked to one or more artists, or their object of unrequited infatuation, that isn't the only way to play the character. A male muse could be a man who functions as an impresario or critical ringleader. A woman could do the same, maintaining an utterly chase and entirely respectable relationship with the male characters. And a man could have, of be the object of, romantic feelings for another member of the group—reciprocated or not.

Investigative abilities listed in *italics* are **interpersonal abilities**. These allow characters to get information out of people. The others are **academic abilities**, permitting the characters to draw on their learning and general knowledge to spot important clues.

Allow the players to sort out between them who takes which kit. In the unlikely event of more than one player insistent on the same kit, have them roll dice, rerolling any ties. The player rolling the highest total gets the preferred kit.

Should you have more than seven players (an already unwieldy number for an investigative game), the additional players are gadabouts. The gadabout may pretend to be studying something, especially in letters back home cadging money from dear old dad. In reality he is frittering away the family money while pursuing a life of aimless adventure in Paris.

The gadabout takes 4 investigative abilities also held by other characters. Except for Art History, he can't choose more than 1 ability from any one identity kit.

General Kits

Players then select a general kit. It reflects the most notable qualities allowing them to take actions in the game world aside from information gathering.

<p><i>Athlete</i></p> <p>A master of many sports and an impressive physical specimen.</p> <p>Athletics 7</p> <p>Composure 3</p> <p>Fighting 6</p> <p>First Aid 2</p> <p>Health 4</p> <p>Mechanics 0</p> <p>Riding 2</p> <p>Sense Trouble 3</p> <p>Sneaking 3</p> <p>Preparedness 3</p>	<p><i>Former Cadet</i></p> <p>Recipient of military training, either informally or as an ROTC student.</p> <p>Athletics 6</p> <p>Composure 3</p> <p>Fighting 7</p> <p>First Aid 2</p> <p>Health 3</p> <p>Mechanics 0</p> <p>Riding 3</p> <p>Sense Trouble 4</p> <p>Sneaking 2</p> <p>Preparedness 3</p>
<p><i>Cool Customer</i></p> <p>A confident character, hard to shake.</p> <p>Athletics 6</p> <p>Composure 6</p> <p>Fighting 4</p> <p>First Aid 0</p> <p>Health 3</p> <p>Mechanics 2</p> <p>Riding 2</p> <p>Sense Trouble 4</p> <p>Sneaking 2</p> <p>Preparedness 4</p>	<p><i>Scrounger</i></p> <p>Your knack for always having the item you and your friends need may occasionally require you to skirt traditional notions of property rights.</p> <p>Athletics 3</p> <p>Composure 5</p> <p>Fighting 4</p> <p>First Aid 0</p> <p>Health 3</p> <p>Mechanics 0</p> <p>Riding 2</p> <p>Sense Trouble 4</p> <p>Sneaking 5</p> <p>Preparedness 7</p>
<p><i>Former Med Student</i></p> <p>Either formally or by watching and learning from a family member, you know how to bandage wounds and even sew up a puncture</p>	<p><i>Tinkerer</i></p> <p>You know a thing or two about devices, newfangled and otherwise.</p> <p>Athletics 3</p>

wound.		Composure	4
Athletics	3	Fighting	4
Composure	4	First Aid	0
Fighting	4	Health	3
First Aid	6	Mechanics	6
Health	3	Riding	1
Mechanics	0	Sense Trouble	3
Riding	2	Sneaking	4
Sense Trouble	4	Preparedness	5
Sneaking	4		
Preparedness	3		

Any player preferring to build a general ability list from scratch may do so, allocating 32 points between the 10 general abilities. A group of experienced GUMSHOE hands almost undoubtedly prefers to skip the kits entirely and move right on to scratch building.

Players may also modify their kits, moving around any number of points, so long as the total remains 32. Warn them that they might regret it if the whole group lacks a crucial ability, like First Aid or Preparedness.

Gadabouts can either custom build their ability lists from 32 points, unless another player decides to go that route, leaving a general kit left over for the gadabout to pick up.

Gender and Background

Players can choose any gender, sexual orientation, heritage or background for their characters.

As the world tumbles into the 20th century, rapidly industrializing and with colonialism at its apex, it has never been a better time to be rich, male, Christian and white. It is not just accepted but considered right and moral that everyone else knows their place in the social pyramid and acts accordingly.

You can handle the impact of this in play in one of two ways:

1. illuminating these attitudes by depicting them as they really were, even if it occasionally reduces freedom of choice for characters who would not enjoy full agency in this world
2. adopting a more aspirational portrayal, where racism, sexism, bigotry and intolerance might exist somewhere in the background but never come to the fore to confront players who don't want to deal with them in this context

Offer your players these two choices. If even one player prefers 2, go with 2. You might argue that 2 either sweeps historical injustice under the rug, or breaks suspension of disbelief. But

neither of these factors justifies a setup where some members of the group are called upon to sacrifice their gaming fun to the aesthetic or political preferences of the others.

Name

Players next choose names for their characters.

Sample names for upper-crust American characters appear in the appendices, starting on p. **Error! Bookmark not defined..** For those playing locals, a list of appropriate French names can be found on p. **Error! Bookmark not defined..**

Drive

Ask each player in turn, starting with the one sitting in the right-most position and moving around the room from right to left, to define why their characters act like protagonists in a tale of horror and investigation. What is it that draws them toward danger when ordinary people would turn and run? What leads them to trust only themselves to solve problems, when the typical citizen would seek the aid of authorities?

Work with the players to turn their answers into brief, memorable phrases. This becomes the character's Drive. During play you will use this to remind players that their characters are the leads in the story you're making together, and must make decisions that keep them at the center of the proceedings, taking action to move it forward.

You might find that a player creates the perfect Drive that has never been used before. Typically, though, they'll invent motivations that can be encapsulated more or less as one of the following bullet points does it:

Adventure: "By gum, this is like a story by Verne or Doyle—and my chance to be Phileas Fogg or Sherlock Holmes! What devilish fun!"

Arrogance: "An ordinary person would let others solve this. I am far from ordinary."

Can-Do Attitude: "If you simply apply yourself, you can do anything. No need to bring the police into it."

Comradeship: "I have no idea why my friends are risking their hides like this. But if they're charging in, so will I."

Curiosity: "When I smell a mystery, I must solve it. No one must get between me and the truth."

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ROLEPLAYING GAME

PARIS

INCLUDES RULES FOR
GUMSHOE

Robin D. Laws


Pelgrane Press

Book One: Belle Époque Paris

“None will ever be a true Parisian who has not learned to wear a mask of gaiety over his sorrows and one of sadness, boredom or indifference over his inward joy.”

—Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*

The first section of a full YKRP series unfolds in 1895 Paris. As already mentioned, the best setup for most groups portrays most if not all of them as students from elsewhere who have been established here for a year or so. They have somewhat familiarized themselves with their temporary home and know the basics of the setting, as conveyed in this chapter. If you are using another approach—using an all-French main cast, for example—you’ll want to mentally adjust the perspective given here.

City of Lights

In 1895 Paris beckons as Europe’s foremost center of arts, learning, technology, and luxury. The world’s biggest star, the actress Sarah Bernhardt, treads its stages. The architectural wonder called Eiffel Tower went up just seven years ago.

The Impressionists, still controversial here but increasingly embraced in America, work and exhibit here. Though opposed to their new way of painting, the École des Beaux-Arts remains the world’s most prestigious school of art and architecture. The novelist Émile Zola stands atop the city’s literary heap, despite the scandalous realism of his works. A fresh generation rebels against his focus on the social and the tangible by dealing with fantastic, dark and outré subject matter. Some consider themselves Symbolists; others, Decadent. Their influence goes past literature to infuse painting and music with an interest in the weird and mythic. The monumental operas of Jules Massenet elicit gasps with their spectacular staging, as young composers Debussy and Ravel pursue subtler, stranger harmonies.

While the intelligentsia may fuss and argue over the progress of the arts, most visitors crave its brilliant and seductive—well, nightlife is the wrong term, as the excitement of Paris goes on day or night. The moneyed eat the storied cuisine of pioneering chef Auguste Escoffier, wear the clothing of fashion titan Charles Frederick Worth, and meet out of towners at the Ritz Hotel, founded by namesake César Ritz.

When the sun shines, the cream of Paris dons its finery and flocks to its cafes. They strut and socialize down its main boulevards, flirting, gossiping, and being seen. When the characters seek a witness or contact immersed in the social whirl, they need merely prowl its fashionable districts until they run into the person they seek, or a friend who knows where to point them.

At night attention shifts to clubs and cabarets, from the avant-garde Chat Noir to the circus-like, libertineish Moulin Rouge.

The Green Fairy

Absinthe, popularized at mid-century as a blight wreaked havoc on French vineyards,

remains the totemic drink of Parisian excess. Of the herbs used in this anise-flavored spirit, the flowers and leaves of the wormwood plant take the blame for its fabled hallucinogenic properties. Parisians personify its mind-blurring effect as “the green fairy.” In fact, the real danger of absinthe comes from its devastatingly high alcohol content, paired with the tendency of drinkers to slug it back as quickly as they would wine.

A beguiling ritual attends its consumption. Bitter on its own, it sweetened during presentation by a sugar cube placed on an ornate slotted spoon, which is then melted by water, which drips into the green spirit. The herbal elements in the drink interact with the sugar, turning the clear green liquid cloudy. Experienced and/or pretentious drinkers call this the *louche*. Disappointingly, we do not call creepy or disreputable people *louche* because of this phenomenon.

You will see no flaming sugar cubes in a Belle Époque cafe. They’re anachronistic in this time period.

Your characters may invite turn-of-the-century well-actuallying by calling absinthe a liqueur. At this point some impertinent pedant will surely interject that one properly classes it as a spirit, because its sugar is added after the fact.

Absinthe drinkers described in this book include Jarry (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), Proust (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), and Verlaine (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), whose consumption will lead to his death a few months from now.

Already a hazard to mind and body, the green fairy must surely accelerate the mental dissolution caused by exposure to *The King in Yellow*.

Americans in Paris

Americans see the Continent in general as a place of dangerous sophistication. No place embodies that more than Paris.

As seen in the novels of Mark Twain and Henry James, Americans, including the rich ones, regard themselves as innocents and Europe and the French as wily debauchees and seducers. Naturally this both attracts and repels the wary, naifish American traveler.

The characters presumably feel the allure more than the fear. Their families likely regard their decision to come to Paris as either enhancing their social cachet or endangering their morality and good sense. Should this come up during a storyline, invite the player to specify which. A character’s family might be divided on the subject, of course.

A realistically drawn rich American family would never dream of sending a young adult daughter to live in Paris alone. They may fear that she might become, like the American artist Mary Cassatt, who resides here, an embodiment of the “New Woman.” Address this only if the player of such a character wants to. One player might enjoy running around the city eluding her stuffy chaperone, while another would consider any strictures annoying in the extreme. In my playtest run, young portraitist Ida Phillipson was much more concerned about Paris corrupting her mother than the other way around.

Used to living in a city that attracts the wealthy, ambitious and creatively interesting from all

around the world, Parisians see Americans as quaintly charming and refreshingly direct. Upper class Parisians allow rich, intelligent or charming Americans leeway in minor breaches of decorum or etiquette they'd never extend to their own young relatives. The bourgeoisie may fear the temptations handsome, fickle Americans might place in the path of their respectable daughters. Tradesmen like them as long as they pay their bills, resenting them otherwise. A round of drinks goes a long way with the poor, including artists and writers eking out their daily bread as they work on their yet-to-be-heralded masterpieces.

In other words, casting the player characters as outsiders to Paris lets them fraternize with all levels of society—sometimes in the same day. This provides them an investigative edge over locals—official ones most of all.

American expatriates the cast may gravitate to include Cassatt (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), Loie Fuller (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), and James McNeil Whistler (p. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**)

The Century So Far

Before coming here, the characters may have been told that the French care more about their past than Americans.

When they arrived, they discovered a city with its eyes only on the whirling present.

Maybe they went along with that, following the usual American disinterest in the past, especially the complicated histories of other lands. They absorbed all the art history they could take in, perhaps.

They might just as well have sensed that something was up and made an effort to peer past the facade of gaiety, to a century of upheaval and blood the city wants urgently to forget. This attempt may have taught the dangers of talking politics here. An offhand comment or question from an ignorant American can result in anything ranging from a deft yet sudden changing of the topic to a bitter harangue.

As they need to, however, the characters can piece together the full history of their temporary home. This is the quick and dirty summary they might glean from an educated layman.

80 years ago: the Napoléonic era ends. His opponents, chiefly England and Prussia, defeat him and send him into exile. (He briefly returns a year later, only to be exiled to a worse island.) In France alone his wars have left two million dead, including 4 out of 10 men of conscription age at the conflict's outset.

To get the full Kickstarter preview of the Yellow King Roleplaying Game, become a backer at <http://kck.st/2sX4HkA>