

SSK

SCHIZOPHRENIC SERIAL KILLERS VS. THE INSECTS FROM SHAGGAI

A CRIMINALLY INSANE ROLEPLAYING GAME

BY MARK HUGHES

You see them everywhere. Bugs, alien Insects, curled up inside the empty braincases of "humans", on the streets, in offices and boardrooms. Why is it you can see their true nature, when others cannot? You don't know.

Humanity goes about its business, oblivious.

You tried to warn them, but **THEY** were already in control. Only cutting or smashing the Insects out, exposing them to light, will destroy them. This is not murder! Those people were already dead!

The cops didn't believe you, called you a murderer. Your lawyer got you called "crazy", "schizophrenic", "paranoid". They locked you in a padded cell, until drugs and shocks made you say you were wrong, made you passive and stupid.

Now you're out, free at last! You've fled the half-way house, flushed the drugs down the toilet, feeling sharp and tense again. Able to see the Insects again, hearing the voice of Guidance in your head again.

You and the few others who know the truth must carry out your mission in secret. You have taken a name for your cause: Bughunters. Only you can save humanity!

WTF?

SSK is a roleplaying game. In it, you play someone with special powers above and beyond normal people, on a quest to save the world, if only because you live here. You know, the usual fantasy gaming premise found in everything from Deathtraps and Demons to Undead Superheroes: The Something-or-Other. Well, sure, maybe you're crazy. Okay, you're definitely crazy, but you might still be right. Or not. It is up to the Judge to decide, in secret, whether you're unbalanced but heroic figures like Marv in Sin City, or whether you're freaks who think they're doing right but are actually sick bastards like in Se7en. Does it even matter which one is true? Everyone has to live in their own head, and if you think you're a hero, then in your own head, you are.

PARAPHERNALIA

SSK requires a few additional items not included in this book:

- One player to run the game, hereafter called the "Judge".
- One or more additional players to be the Bughunters.
- The ability to differentiate between reality and fantasy. If you lack this ability, stay the hell away from this game.
- Five six-sided ("craps") dice, per player.
- A pencil for each player.
- A character sheet, copied from the one in the back or just written down on a blank piece of paper.

MEDIA

There are a few works which are **SSK** incarnate:

- The Puppet Masters (1951), by Robert A. Heinlein [novel]
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978) [movie]
- The Hidden (1987) [movie]
- They Live (1988) [movie]
- The Arrival (1996) [movie]
- Johnny the Homicidal Maniac (1997), by Jhonen Vasquez [graphic novel]
- Frailty (2001) [movie] "That's how we worship God in Texas!" -Rorick Schultz

ALTERNATIVES

There are other campaign options for this system. At its heart, **SSK** is a fast-paced, low-powered superhero/guns-and-kung-fu game. Any John Woo or John Singleton movie, any cyberpunk book, any violent modern noir graphic novel, they'd all fit just fine here.

SCHIZOPHRENIA

Characters have five Abilities, which cover both natural talent and trained skill. To make a starting character, assign a score from 1-5 to each ability, with a total no higher than 15.

- Badass:** You are a badass mofo. Whether you're a boxer, bodybuilder, trucker, or Kung Fu master, you nail someone with your meathooks and they go down. You can take as good as you dish out, you're an unstoppable goddamn Terminator. You can weight-lift or drag (Badass \times 50) pounds, or move while carrying half that much (handy to know when moving bodies).
- Ninja:** You are silent, stealthy, and lightning-fast. Walls cannot stop you--you just climb right over. Locks cannot stop you--you are a master locksmith. You can use any hand weapon, from knives and swords to shuriken and bows. And naturally, you can ride motorcycles. You can walk (Ninja) yards per round, run (Ninja \times 3) yards per round, jump (Ninja) yards across, or jump (Ninja \div 2, round up) yards up.
- Hitman:** "Put a gun in his hand and he thinks he's Superman! Give him two guns and he thinks he's God!" -Hardboiled
Hitman is nothing more or less than the ability to shoot firearms accurately, usually while performing slo-mo acrobatic maneuvers with a gun in each hand, or while swirling around for a backhand shot, just because it's cool.
- Sherlock:** You have the all-seeing eyes and brain of that junkie Sherlock Holmes. You know a little about medicine, a little about law, a little something about everything eggheadish. Also, you can drive or pilot any vehicle larger than a motorcycle.
- Sleaze:** You have the smooth voice and keen sense for another's weaknesses of a used car salesman or a baby-kissing politician.
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POWERS

The origin of Powers is hotly debated among Bughunters. Some maintain that they are given by one or more "Benefactors", patron spirits that want to protect Humanity. Others believe that the Powers are innate Human abilities, manifested long before Humanity is ready for them, so that Humanity can defend itself. Still others believe that they are given by enemies of the Insects, who are not necessarily allies of Humans, and once the Insects are destroyed will turn on Humanity. No theory has evidence.

Powers are subtle, and in most cases indistinguishable from the capabilities of someone on PCP.

Starting Bughunters have three Powers: True Sight, Guidance, and one other of the player's choice.

- Adrenalin:** Once per day, you can boost your Badass and Ninja abilities by +2 for 1 minute, but they are then reduced by -1 for the next 10 minutes.
- Bulletproof:** You can take 2 additional wounds before falling unconscious.
- Comeback:** When you're trying to make a melee or unarmed attack against a foe, and have at least a Solo 6 but lost to your foe, you still strike back for 1 wound.
- Danger Sense:** You instinctively know when someone's about to attack you. You may wait until everyone else declares their actions before declaring yours, and tied "hands" in combat always fall in your favor, regardless of the highest die.
- Empathy:** You may make a Sleaze task vs. the target's Sleaze once per day per target. If you succeed, you know what emotions the target feels for the next minute.
- Escape Artist:** You have loose, rubbery joints and bones, and slippery skin, allowing you a +2 bonus to Ninja to escape confinement or restraints.
- Extra Life:** When you ought to "die" from injuries, you are instead knocked into a deathlike coma. 24 hours later, if your body has not been chopped into pieces or the like, you recover and wake with only 1 wound. You then lose this Power, but you may purchase it again later.
- Fireproof:** You are resistant to fire and heat, reducing any damage by two wounds per round. Most with this Power are pyromaniacs.
"I set the fires while the city sleeps." -MC 900 Foot Jesus
- Guidance:** Once per day, you can ask a single yes/no question, and the Judge must give at least a 1.5 \times better chance of getting it right than pure chance (so a 50/50 chance would now be 75/25, but a winning lottery ticket is still only 1.5 in 100 million instead of 1 in 100 million).
- Innocent:** You aren't hassled by people or police even when you should be obviously guilty. You could be soaked to the skin in blood, with a satchel full of knives, laughing maniacally, and they'll likely let you go. You get a +2 bonus to all "You're not looking for me"-type Sleaze tasks and a +1 bonus to all Ninja stealth tasks.
- Invisible Armory:** You can carry any number of weapons with you, up to your carrying capacity, and as long as they are sheathed, nobody will perceive them unless you choose to reveal them. You can carry weapons past metal detectors and security.
- Knockback:** When you strike anyone in unarmed combat, they are knocked back 2 yards per wound inflicted.
- Kung-Fu Grip:** You receive a +1 Badass bonus to grappling attacks.
- Limitless Ammo:** You never have to make ammo checks; you will never run out of bullets, arrows, shuriken, etc. as long as you had some to start with.
- Perfect Aim:** You can ignore the long range penalty for firearms, thrown, and missile weapons.
- Pressure Points:** You may make a pressure point attack using Ninja. The victim cannot move for 2 rounds.
- Regeneration:** You heal unnaturally fast, recovering 1 additional wound per day, regardless of activity.
- Shadows:** Whenever you want, within a 3 yard radius, the lights go out, clouds cover the sun or moon, and shadows fill the area, giving everyone except you a -1 penalty to all sight-related Sherlock tasks and to all ranged attacks past point-blank range.
- Signature Weapon:** When using one particular weapon, you gain a +1 Ninja or Hitman bonus to attack. If you lose the weapon, you pine for a week and then replace it with an identical weapon.
"I know Gladys will be cold, colder than the wind, cold and ready and begging for it. Sweet Gladys." -Marv, Sin City by Frank Miller

- Solid:** You are a solid wall of muscle--this Power is only available if you have a Badass of 4 or 5. You reduce any unarmed, melee, or thrown damage by 1 wound.
- Spider Ninja:** You can cling to walls and ceilings at will, scuttling around on them like a spider at half movement speed.
- Super-Hearing:** You can hear 10× as far as normal, with almost perfect sound quality. You get a +2 bonus to all hearing-related Sherlock tasks.
- Super-Leap:** You can jump 5× as far as normal.
- Super-Sight:** You can see 10× as far as normal, and have no penalty to attack with rifles at long range. You get a +2 bonus to all sight-related Sherlock tasks.
- Super-Speed:** You can run up to (Ninja × 5) yards per round.
- Super-Strength:** You can lift 5× as much as normal, and do +1 wound with unarmed attacks.
- True Sight:
(STANDARD)** True Sight is the ability that got you into this. You can identify, with a mere glance at close range, those who have been hollowed out by the Insects. You can see the insects moving behind their eyes, the telltale inhuman facial tics, hear their unnatural whirring noise as they "drive" a human body.
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EQUIPMENT

Bughunters can have whatever equipment they want, within reason--\$1,000 worth of gear and a used (or stolen) vehicle is probably reasonable, given that you're homeless and on the run.

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

After every session, the Judge gives each player 1-3 Fate Points (FP); 1 FP for showing up and contributing to the game, 1 FP for great roleplaying, and 1 FP for great problem-solving or tactical reasoning. 1-2 FP should be fairly common, 3 FP should require hard work.

5 FP may be turned in between sessions to gain a new Power.

FP equal to 5 + the current ability score may be turned in between sessions to raise an ability by 1 point, up to a maximum of 5.

At any time during a game session, 1 FP may be spent to reroll a task roll, or to reduce damage taken by 1 wound (but only 1 wound per hit can be removed).

At any time during a game session, 1 or more FP may be spent to "bribe" the Judge to give your character a contact or lead who knows something useful, to find a bribable cop to let you out of jail, or otherwise alter the world in your favor.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Every session in which you kill or assault someone, break and enter, steal, or otherwise act in an antisocial manner--even for a good cause--the Judge will give you 1-3 Doubt Points, depending on the severity and frequency of the act(s).

When you defeat a major Insect plan, you can roll 1 die and remove that many Doubt Points.

When your Doubt Points reach 10 or more, reduce them by 10 and roll two dice on the Stigma table below. If you have already received the same stigma, reroll.

2 dice Stigma

- 2 Your body will rapidly rot and decay in heat. You take 1 wound every minute you are exposed to 60+° temperatures. If you die from this condition, your remains liquify.
 - 3 Your skin becomes sensitive to light, and you take 1 wound every minute you are exposed to sunlight. If you die from this condition, your remains liquify.
 - 4 Your flesh develops suppurating wounds, and you take 1 wound every day (which can be treated), leaving terrible scars everywhere.
 - 5 Your body exudes an unpleasant odor of rotting meat, which gives you a -2 on all Sleaze tasks in person. Dogs, cats, and vultures are fascinated by you.
 - 6 You develop Tourette's Syndrome, cursing or repeating phrases or repeating nervous twitches constantly and uncontrollably.
 - 7 Your skin becomes very pale indeed.
 - 8 An "imaginary friend" begins talking to you, typically taking the form of a stuffed or plastic toy, a dead body, or a dead animal. Its attitude towards you changes randomly every day: Roll 1 die: 1: Openly Hostile, 2-3: Passively Hostile, 4: Neutral, 5: Passively Friendly, 6: Actively Friendly. The Judge plays the imaginary friend.
 - 9 Your hair turns white or some other unnatural color, or falls out. Both head and body hair are affected.
 - 10 You cannot live on a diet of normal food anymore. Whether you need blood, raw meat, or most hideously, vegetarian food, this will be a major inconvenience.
 - 11 You develop unusual new sexual organs, and can no longer have sex with other Humans. You will at least think long and hard about suicide.
 - 12 You transform into a filthy New York rat, body and mind, and scurry away. Make a new character.
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TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Every activity whose success is uncertain is resolved by making a task roll. Every task will pit one of a character's abilities against either a difficulty from 1-5 assigned by the Judge or one of another character's abilities. Either side may have a bonus or penalty of 1-5, but the final value can never be less than 1 or greater than 5.

Each player rolls a number of dice equal to the value, and tries to make poker dice hands from them. In order from lowest value to highest, the hands are:

1. Solo 6.
2. One Pair.
3. Two Pair.
4. Three of a kind.
5. Full House: Three of a Kind + One Pair.
6. 4 of a kind.
7. 5 of a kind.

If you cannot make even a solo 6 or a pair, you fail at the task. The highest-value hand wins, tied hand types go to the highest die used in the hand, and exact ties are resolved by both players rerolling.

The odds of rolling any result are shown on the table below:

	<u>1 die</u>	<u>2 dice</u>	<u>3 dice</u>	<u>4 dice</u>	<u>5 dice</u>
Nothing	83.33%	55.56%	27.78%	9.26%	1.54%
Solo 6	16.67%	27.78%	27.78%	18.52%	7.72%
One Pair	0.00%	16.67%	41.67%	55.56%	46.30%
Two Pair	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	6.94%	23.15%
Three of a Kind	0.00%	0.00%	2.78%	9.26%	15.43%
Full House	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.86%
Four of a Kind	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.46%	1.93%
Five of a Kind	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.08%

COOPERATION

More than one person can work together to solve a problem, build something together, or chop someone into tiny bits. The character with the best ability will be the leader, and will make the roll. The leader gets a bonus equal to the sum of the helpers' scores in the same ability, divided by 5, rounding up. So, a group of 3 all with Badass 2 can make unarmed attacks as if Badass 2 (leader) + 1 ($4 \div 5 = 3$).

BLOODBATH

Combat is resolved in three-second rounds. Each combatant chooses one action to perform in the round, preferably by secret note. Each combatant then rolls their appropriate ability. Compare the rolls of pairs (or more in a meleeing brawl), and the highest roll succeeds, while the lower rolls get a faceful of pain.

FULL ACTIONS:

Unarmed Attack:

Uses Badass. Does 1 wound if Badass 1-3, 2 wounds if you have Badass 4-5.

Melee Weapon Attack:

Uses Ninja. Does 1 wound for small weapons, 2 wounds for large weapons, and both are +1 wound if you have Badass 4-5.

Thrown, Bow Attack:

Uses Ninja, with no modifier at short range, a -2 penalty at long range. Does 1 wound for small weapons, 2 wounds for large weapons. Thrown weapons have a short range of 5 yards, long range out to 15 yards. Bows have a short range of 30 yards, long range out to 150 yards.

Firearms Attack:

Uses Hitman, with no modifier at short range, a -2 penalty at long range. Does 2 wounds for small pistols, 3 wounds for heavy pistols, shotguns, and rifles. Pistols have a short range of 10 yards, long range out to 40 yards. Shotguns have a short range of 20 yards, long range out to 100 yards. Rifles have a short range of 50 yards, long range out to 800 yards.

Run Away, Give Chase:

Uses Ninja. Gain or lose up to (Ninja \times 3) yards distance from the foe.

Reason With Your Foe:

Uses Sherlock. Only works on foes with a Sherlock of 3 or higher, does not work on Insects. Only usable once per combatant per fight. If successful, the foe will either let you go, or at least give you a good explanation of why you need to die before killing you.

Beg For Mercy:

Uses Sleaze. Does not work on Insects. Only usable once per combatant per fight. If successful, the foe may let you go, or at least let you live for a few more rounds while finishing someone else off first.

FREE ACTIONS:

A character can do one of these actions every round for free; doing a second one counts as the character's "full" action.

Drop an Item, Pick Up an Item.

Draw a Weapon, Sheathe a Weapon.

Change a Clip in a Firearm.

Walk.

Move up to (Ninja) yards.

Speak.

Realistically, you should only be able to say what you can get out in 3 seconds. Depending on how comics-like the Judge and players want the game to be, entire speeches can be made "between panels".

AMMUNITION

Tracking exact ammunition counts is slow and boring, so **SSK** doesn't do that. Every time you fire a gun or bow or throw a weapon, roll one die; if it comes up 1, that was your last shot, and you will need to reload or switch to another weapon. In the case of firearms or bows where you may have a large ammo capacity, you are assumed to be firing multiple shots for every one that has a chance of hitting and injuring a foe.

Characters with multiple clips can change clips easily, with the Change Clip free action.

Optional: If the Judge wants to define some weapons as high-capacity, these weapons roll two dice for every shot, and only run out of ammo if their sum is 2. If the Judge does not want to do this, no weapons are high-capacity.

DAMAGE

Damage is rated in terms of "wounds". A bulletproof vest, chainmail, or other heavy medieval armor will stop the first wound in every attack. Heavy kevlar armor will stop the first two wounds in every attack.

Even a single wound is horrific, and painful, and spurts blood everywhere, but won't actually impair a character. "WHERE THE F--- IS THE BACTINE?"

Characters with two or more wounds are in excruciating agony, and take a -1 penalty to all abilities until they are treated or so drunk or doped up they can't feel it anymore.

Character who take more wounds than their Badass ability, regardless of how much more, fall unconscious, and will die in a number of minutes equal to the roll of one die unless treated first.

One more wound after that will kill the character messily and painfully, with a baseball-bat-to-a-rotten-pumpkin *SPLORCH* noise.

Treatment may restore 1 wound per day to a character, if the doctor or healer succeeds at a Sherlock task vs. (5 + wounds taken - target's Badass); e.g., for a Badass 4 character who has taken 2 wounds, the difficulty would be 3, while for a Badass 1 character who has taken 1 wound, the difficulty would be 5. In addition, all characters recover 1 wound for every day they spend completely resting in bed.

ANTAGONISTS

Insects:

In their natural form, Insects are almost a foot long, vaguely similar to fat, wingless cockroaches with two flexible body segments. They have a pair of complex antennae that branch after a few inches, branch again after half that distance, and repeat on down to a molecular scale, giving them impossibly fine control over objects. At the finest level, they can connect up with a human body's nerves. They can spray a noxious gas from their rear that will often render a person unconscious.

Little is known about the origin of the Insects. The Insects are certainly not native to Earth; they are too large, and in details are considerably different from Earth insects. However, they do not use advanced technology, so they had some other means of arriving here.

The Insects reproduce sexually, mate every year, and lay dozens of eggs at a time, in warm, moist, dark areas (apartments altered into mini-hives are popular). After its second or third mating, an Insect will die. When the young hatch, human hosts are brought to them to infect; typically the first host is a low-status, "disposable" body, and the Insect will then move on to more important hosts later. Young Insects already know everything they need to know; they have some kind of racial memory system that passes on knowledge from parents to children. Every Insect knows every major language of Earth and some minor ones.

Infecting an unconscious or sleeping human host requires 1 minute uninterrupted, as the Insect pries the host's jaws open, slides into the mouth and nasal cavity, drills into the skull, eats and immediately defecates the brain, and then seals up behind itself. The only evidence left behind is a pile of brain matter rapidly dissolving from digestive acids.

The Insects have a communal, hive-oriented social structure. They work in small autonomous groups of 3-10, but gather every few days into larger groups of 80-150 to share information and update their goals. Messengers from these gatherings then go to inform nearby gatherings. While they can and will use phones and email to communicate rapidly, they prefer personal association for making important decisions, and for information security.

While inside a Human host, they can only communicate through the host's vocal cords. Their own language sounds like a series of keening noises mixed with pops and clicks, but Human voices cannot produce it. To keep security, they will typically use an obscure foreign language, and will avoid discussing specifics.

Insects prefer to infect Humans with high social status, and use them to achieve safety. Some Bughunters think that by now, Congress and Wall Street must be completely infected, and working towards alien plans. There is at least some truth to this.

The Insects only use Earth equipment, but their organization is extremely effective, and they have access to vast resources, which will be focused as far as possible on anyone who seems to know about them.

The number of Insects on Earth is unknown; it certainly increases every year that you do not stop them, but whether there are 1,000 or 10,000,000, no Human knows.

An Insect outside of a host body has Badass 1, Ninja 3, Hitman 1 (they can manipulate a gun, but the kick is too much for their size), Sherlock 4-5, Sleaze 1-2. A gas attack uses Ninja, and inflicts 2 temporary wounds on the target; after 5 minutes, remove the wounds.

Insects cannot live outside of a body or similar warm, moist, dark environment for more than a few minutes. Sunlight will instantly kill them, while any other light brighter than a normal flashlight will inflict 1 wound per round on them if the character can make a Sherlock or Hitman (whichever is higher) task to hold it on the target. When an Insect dies, it rapidly dissolves into liquid, leaving no evidence.

Insect-infected Humans can take 1 additional wound before falling unconscious. Otherwise, they have no Powers. Their physical Abilities are typical for Humans, but their Sherlock is always 4 or 5, and their Sleaze is always 1 or 2, as they are cold, distant, and stiff.

If the Human host is killed, the Insect rolls one die: on 1-3, it is killed outright; on 4-6, it survives, and has two options. First, it could remain inside the dead body, where it will still be warm for a few hours, and wait for a safe chance to run, but it will have only Sherlock 1 for purposes of hearing and feeling vibrations, and cannot see. If the host was killed by accident, this is the most likely response. Second, it could crack the skull open and scuttle away ASAP. The danger here is that it must immediately find a comfortable environment, or infect a new host. Infected police will do everything they can to rescue Insects inside a dead host body.

Police:

Cops are a common problem for Bughunters. Those who are infected, of course, will report to their hive and command other Human police to do their dirty work for them, but even well-meaning Human police take exception to typical Bughunter activities like breaking and entering, murder, etc. If caught, characters are likely to be rapidly moved through the court system and back into a sanitarium, this time without any chance of release without help. If an Insect-infected cop gets a chance, they will kill any Bughunter they catch, but their need to keep cover may prevent overt action.

Most cops have Badass 3 or 4, only a few have Badass 5; most have Ninja 2-4; most have Hitman 2-3, though a few have Hitman 4; beat cops have Sherlock 1-2, while detectives have 3-4 (nobody with Sherlock 5 becomes a cop); beat cops have Sleaze 1-3, while detectives have 2-4.

Cops are generally armed with a small pistol, a small billyclub, a radio, a bulletproof vest (roll one die: 1-3: in the trunk of the cruiser, 4-6: worn), and mace (doing 1 damage, but using Hitman to attack). SWAT teams have heavy kevlar armor, automatic rifles, and some cities have APCs for them to travel in.

Gangbangers:

Gangs are mostly uninfected, since they lack the temporal power the Insects prefer, but they'll tend to be hostile to crazy gringos anyway. Crazy people are dangerous and attract cops, and gangs have serious drug and prostitution businesses to run.

Gangbangers usually have high (3-5) Badass, Ninja, and Sleaze abilities, and low (1-3) Hitman and Sherlock abilities; gangs are notoriously bad shots, especially with the popular turned-sideways gun pose. A few in every gang will be armed with light or heavy pistols, everyone else will have only knives and clubs. Gangbangers rarely or never have armor.

Mundanes:

Mundanes are the average, idiotic people all over the world. Going about their lives, oblivious to the threat around them.

Mundanes have abilities from 1-3, possibly with one 4, totalling 10 or less. For a generic Mundane, assume all abilities are 2.