

NEX MACHINA

Also Nosleeps, Memetic Bogeymen (incorrect appellation), Glitch Killers.

Relevant Schools: Technomancy.

Appearance: Vary wildly. Occurs alongside visual 'glitches' in the real world, or be cast in a light that looks like it is from a large screen with static on it.

Background: The background noise of internet and online communication allows for the natural emergence of accidental rituals. Repetition, default or common responses and collective imagination allow for a kind of false worship to take place. Much as the first gods emerged, crude and loose in form as each telling and culture that outlined them varied, the digital avatar is a force akin to a god that arises from the spirit world, often linked to a phenomenon and then crystallized by the public consciousness. As figures of a more spiritual and divine stripe, what one often sees is often the tip of the iceberg for a larger effect.

Lesser gods spawned by a public consciousness, Nex Machina stem from the digital, not from dreams, other worlds, or reality. They carry this with them, and their presence in an area is often preceded by flickering, real-world glitches, and strangeness in behaviors.

They tend to arise from or be linked to online urban legends or particular websites that have ceased to be managed. It may be as simple as 'if you visit this website then you'll die', or be linked to a particular rumor or pattern, like 'on this site, if you get in trouble, a moderator will message you. It'll be a different moderator each time, and if you get in trouble enough times without being banned, you'll get a DM with no name, subject line, or content'. In other cases, a fake urban legend passes from the hands of its creator - a website is created with hidden shock images- a link hidden in a pixel, that if clicked, 'shows you a glimpse of hell' - only for the domain to exchange hands enough times that the current holder or the line of succession can't be traced... and the image actually shows something seemingly impossible for a computer to display.

Either way, one typically has to *try* to get the attention of a Nex Machina, and given the random noise of the internet, this does happen with some regularity.

Behavior: Nex Machina, once someone performs the necessary ritual, will appear and act by a programmed, set logic and routine. They seek to envelop targets, and those with less connections or with all connections in a contained area are more vulnerable. More like an amoeba than an individual killer, they will surround, envelop, cut off, and then absorb, with a manifested avatar acting like an appendage.

Because the avatar is only an extension of the cloud or enveloping effect, it can appear and reappear seemingly with no need to move from point A to point B. It may have its own abilities, linked to the enveloping effect.

In practice, this methodology means that an individual will call or invoke the Nex Machina and then gradually be pulled into a spirit-driven alternate world. Communication will be cut off, reality glitches will creep over the surroundings, and efforts to reach others will be made more difficult. Establishing sufficient connections and breaking away by making it impossible to be 'enveloped' will counter the effect, and leave an individual spooked and unsure about what occurred. The violent flickering and periodic images on a computer as the enveloping started will be dismissed as a virus, with more extreme effects shrugged off as a hacker getting into the building's system.

When an individual or tight group is isolated, however, they must escape to an area with people or successfully form connections. Victims will tend to be those who have difficulty doing this - agoraphobes (hikikomori), people in a foreign country where they don't know the rules, children without parents around, or scientists visiting an isolated facility to figure out why development stopped may be ideal prey.

As things reach the point where an enveloping is complete or nearly complete, the Nex Machina will begin to distort reality and appear 'in person', manifesting its avatar. The area becomes something akin to a demesnes, but entirely hostile. Corridors may loop back on one another, traps may be in evidence, or the area may simply be a stalking ground for the avatar itself. The Avatar will close the deal, a seemingly unstoppable madman or monster that can disappear whenever it is out of sight, only to reappear and attack from another angle. It will enact and develop the urban legend that gave it existence, then close the deal, the enveloping effect closing around the target as they are then killed or pulled into the inner workings of the Nex Machina.

Following the incident, the victim's electronics will return to life if they were shut down or disrupted in the Nex Machina's attempt at cutting off attempts at communication, and may serve as hubs for the Nex Machina to act- posting to newsgroups, commenting on videos, and trying to create puzzles akin to that of an ARG, that will bait in the inquisitive. This will last until the crime scene is discovered.

Given modern law enforcement techniques, a salvaged computer may be mined for information, which will allow the Nex Machina to attempt to reach out to law enforcement (often of the oddball or obsessive type), and depending on the case, the victim's computer may be cloned to virtual machines, which simply gives the Nex Machina more hubs to work with and more reach. Phones or computers taken from the victim will act in much the same way. For this reason, councils will make prompt identification & action for these scenes a priority.

Strengths: The Nex Machina is a spirit, not a physical entity, and exists as a scattered, ephemeral thing across the digital landscape. It is an advantage to the Nex Machina that it is not a thing that many are equipped to deal with because it is new to the lists of Others, and it is too 'big', in a sense, to easily encircle and bind. In this, it is similar to a

great spirit or deity. They are capable of immense environmental manipulation, are intelligent in an alien way, and the avatars they manifest are as dangerous as any bogeyman, while being impossible to pin down and extremely difficult to stop or bind.

Their environmental manipulation depends a great deal on what inspired them. Things may seem dreamlike, or victims may (often helped by insomnia) feel like they are dissociating from reality. Aphasic phrases or text, changing images, a change in color or a loss of detail, and a general 'static', like one is looking through a thin film of television snow or through a more old fashioned monitor will often take steady hold. Spaces may appear to be larger than they were, such as a living room that's messier and larger than one thought, while that person is too mentally preoccupied to absorb how strange it is. Pathways to new places may open, with these places being snares - a hole in the back of the closet leads to a neighboring apartment, where papers are scattered and the avatar of the Nex Machina doesn't seem to be as active (so they stay and wait). Rooms may double back on one another or corridors may lead back to where they started, and electronics may flicker or turn on regularly.

Nex Machina can 'infect' technological media, usually by killing someone and taking possession of their computer or phone. This media may gain more properties or functionality. They are also adept at traversing environments that naturally ward off more typical Others. Where the city of electric wires and water running through pipes will discourage goblins and the advancement of mankind may leave Others struggling to keep up, the Nex Machina can ride the tide and not only keep up, but get out ahead of certain advancements (see Variants, below).

Weaknesses: As stated above, the Nex Machina is an entity that is not very effective at combating mundane connections. There are escape routes, and it is forced to counteract these, either by way of long-term influence, disabling services or options, and murdering said connections. In some ways, the Nex Machina has the same vulnerabilities as a god and spirit both. They are reliant on 'worship' and through no fault of their own can fade from relevance, and as a worshiped entity, the well of power they draw on works much as any prayer or divine system does, with power gained or fostered and then spent in hopes of an investment paying off.

As spirits, they are abstract and can be combated by a variety of token resistances and barriers - much as one could easily intuit or guess that a fire spirit could be countered by water, one could make and enact a founded guess and counteract a fiery Nex Machina in this way. Doing so makes every action on the Nex Machina's part more difficult, if it doesn't ward them off. This may be enough to banish them, ward them off long enough for connections to be established, or lower the 'walls' that are coming up.

In much this way, superstitions can be effective. Much as belief and worship brought them to life, superstition and the fostering of certain ideas or rumors about what to do about them can create weaknesses where there are none. For this reason, they may seek to disseminate misinformation.

For example, in [Topic:The Curled Up Woman My Schizo GF Saw], the avatar is a woman obscured by visual artifacts in a silent video, shared to a forum thread by a friend of the alleged first victim- she's impossible to make out as an actual person, and debate rages on about whether it's real, the woman uncurling and extending impossibly long arms, or if it's just a visual effect. Her 'legend' is that a man's mentally ill girlfriend stopped taking her meds, and started to see a woman around the house, curled up tight into a ball, hair hiding her face, hiding in impossible places like the tops of cabinets or inside locked rooms. Not believed, she records it, and after she leaves him, frustrated and scared, he watches the video all the way through. The final post in the thread is from the victim's friend, who shared the surveillance video he took, where a woman obscured by visual artifacts appears to uncurl to a standing position, and without stepping away from her location, appears to extend her arms across the room where he sleeps in the bed. This video, shared by way of a link in another thread [I couldn't watch this all the way through and you won't be able to either!] is how she connects to victims.

She may achieve moderate initial success, but after a few people drop away from the site and people report disappearances, imagination takes hold- she gets a spike of even more successes, but also more failures. Reports that she can be stopped by straight lines and diagrams put down in tape start to spread, along with photos.

This could easily be a counter, at which point she fades from relevance with no successes, as her victims use this as a resource. It could also be a trap. For a person relying on these measures, a message (posted by the curled up woman by way of an online persona) stating that it was a lie that people fell for could be just as lethal or dangerous as the blade of a guillotine falling. So long as she manages and creates the superstition, she can take away its power- but she needs power, means, and contrivance (such as the right timing) to get ahead of it in this way.

Binding: Much like a God, cannot be bound. Can be contained, however, with attention and steps taken in advance. Technomancers have the tools necessary to limit the reach of a Nex Machina with any presence.

Taking possession of any node or system that the Nex Machina has 'infected' can weaken it by limiting its capabilities, can be turned against it, and can be used as a vector for strategically releasing or managing it.

Summoning: The act of strategically releasing a Nex Machina requires a ritual that a target unintentionally participates in, as another active party. Typically this requires that one have a node and then the means of transcribing or conveying a message central to the Nex Machina. Even fleeting phrases conveyed to televisions or projected onto walls can be enough, if power is expended to push them forth from a node.

A Nex Machina summoned in this way is a hazard to the summoner, so care must be taken. It may have multiple 'lives', where if rebuffed or defeated it fades away, returning

to the summoner, who must then expend more energy than the last time to release them again. While summoned however, they are dangerous killers with no need to stay rooted to one position. If the summoner can't pay the price in power to keep resummoning the Nex Machina, then it will turn on them, usually with an unhealthy (to the practitioner) acceleration of the enveloping effect and a fair bit of resistance to the techniques and powers that bound them before.

They can be used for divine power, but the Nex Machina is so mercurial and inconsistent in power level, prone to the vagaries and the rise and fall of the internet's interest, that the act of building up the favor to spend on a greater act is often too risky. If successful, the Nex Machina may be invited to appear, swiftly enveloping an area with the power offered. *Oftentimes* this is just faster than summoning, but with a steep and precarious price paid in advance (by way of the favor garnered). However, there is one act that can be of use...

The Nex Machina can be invited to be a familiar. This often requires earning favor and propagating the message and device of the Nex Machina, and then inviting the Nex Machina to a scene that has been prepared for them - often an organized collection of bodies of those violently murdered in a likeness of the Nex Machina's methods. When the Nex Machina arrives, it may (or may not!) accept the entreaty, at which point the practitioner would be able to ask for a major act, and they ask for it to serve them as a partner instead.

Because the Nex Machina are so hard to predict and so mercurial, this is typically the province of madmen and the desperate. There is *never* a guarantee that they agree to be a familiar or to do a favor.

As familiars, they may be similar to an internet friend, communicating by way of one or multiple handles, texting, or emailing. They may appear to be human to others, but if they do, they will steadily cut off their master's connections to others, simply as the effect of their nature. While detrimental from a mental health perspective, may make pursuit or investigation of the master harder. The master will gain technological ability and a perpetual 'handler', with the ability to unleash an attack dog on their enemies.

Whatever the result of the attempted summoning or establishment of a familiar, when the Master's tenure is over, they will tend to be made out to be the perpetrator of the Familiar's crimes.

Variants: There are a few variants of the Nex Machina.

God in the Machine: The machine is worshipped, not the avatar/legend. Groundbreaking tech, experimental ideas, and advanced computer programs with sleep deprived and disconnected staff working on them may provide the vehicle for a God in the Machine to come into being. It has a vulnerable heart and isn't as mobile, but more scope within its area of influence. Will perform its

deed and then go quiet, surrounded by dead bodies. Massive power sources for the first technomancer to get their hands on it, with a standing gentleman's agreement that they clean up the mess.

Ghost in the Machine: The Avatar is based around an echo, a ghost of a real person who died in a way that let the Avatar manifest, close enough to technology to connect to it. Will manifest far more through technology itself and may simply be an obnoxious or frustrating force to be dealt with.

Memetic Dancer: As with all things Technomancer, there are dated versions of the current phenomena. The Memetic Dancer is a type of Nex Machina that came about when music boxes, self-playing pianos, Gramophones and other automatic music players came into common use. Centered around music, they are Avatars tied to haunting songs or pieces of music that one has never heard before. They stick with the listener and urge resolution - often playing a piece until it can be replicated, dancing to it, or searching out the history behind a thing. Either way, the music runs through a victim's mind until it's audible, they lose all connections to others as they slip into obsession or venture far from home in the search, and then manifest an avatar. In some cases the 'dancer' is gentle, taking a ravaged or haunted victim into a warm embrace before killing or absorbing them. In other cases the dancer is violent. Other dated versions include Wrong Numbers and Voices in the Static.