

Twitter Thread by Clayton Notestine



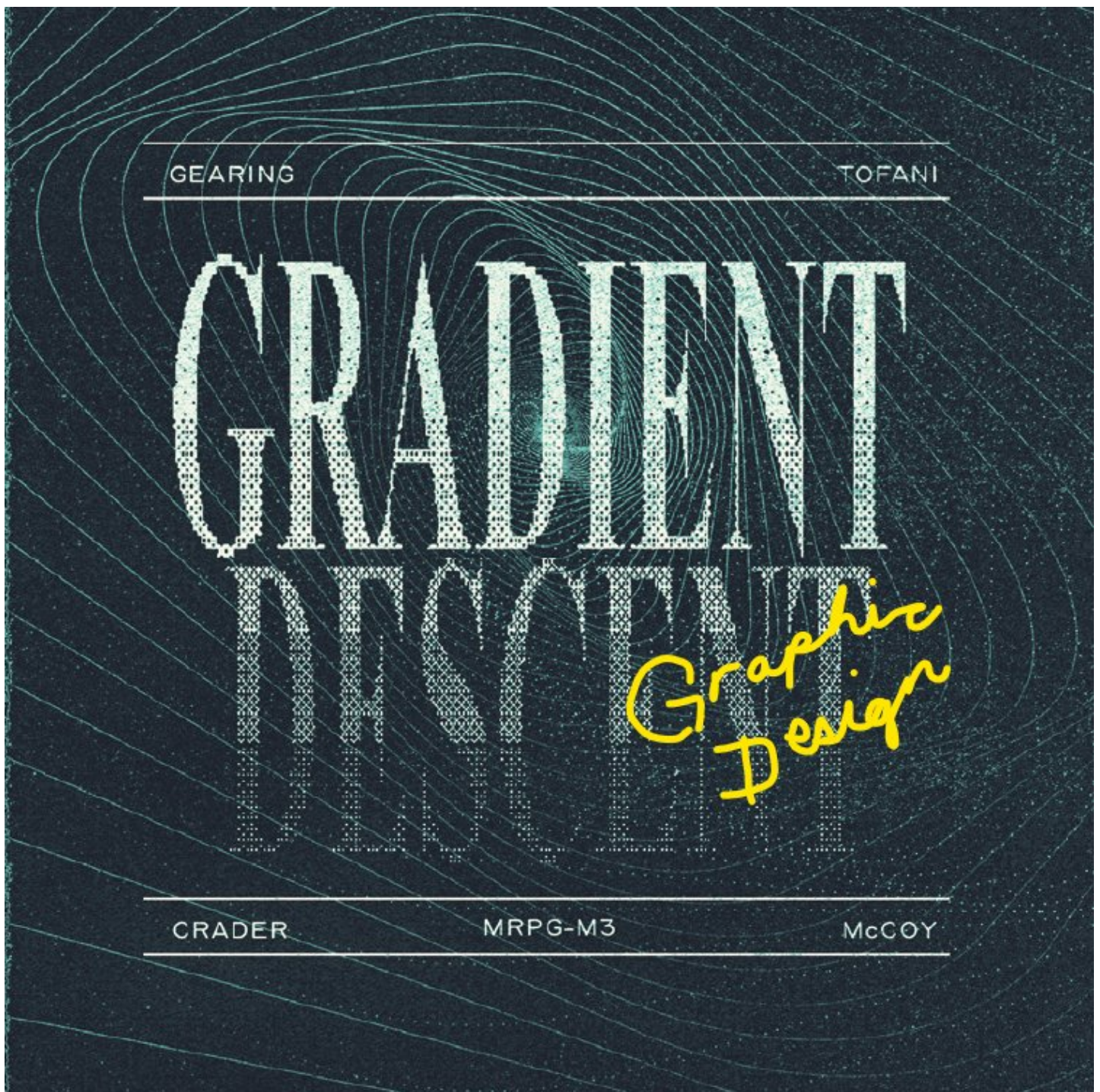
Clayton Notestine

@ClayNotestine



Let's review the ambitious labyrinthian design of Mothership's Gradient Descent, a 64-page mega-dungeon with a half-letter (5.5 × 8.5") format.

This is gonna be a long one, so I'll experiment and break this review into multiple threads. This one will be about graphic design.



Mothership is a lived-in universe. No matter the particular brand of sci-fi you bring to your table, the books imply a grimy, sweat-soaked space made of pig iron and leaky hoses.

Of all the Mothership products, Gradient Descent is the truest expression of that.

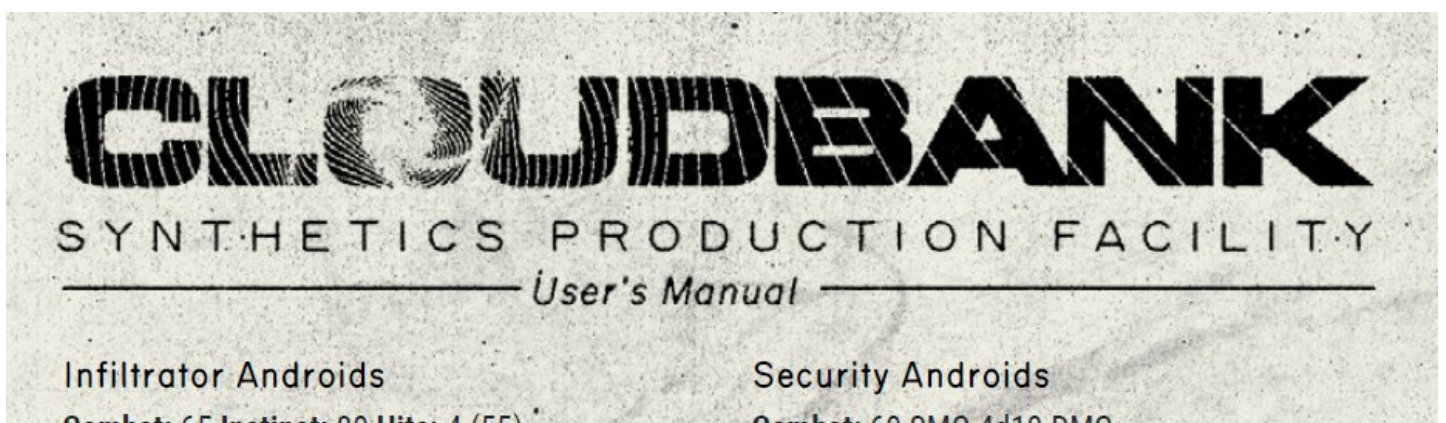


Exhibit A: Textures

For example, the pages look like Sean McCoy didn't design the book so much as found it wedged behind IBM terminals tasked with MKUltra—and then faxed it to himself.


Every page has this weathered look deliberately placed where it would exist in real life.



Before I was a copywriter, I crawled inside furnaces in manufacturing, and strung from the catwalks over centrifuges and die toolings were books like this.

Cobbled together, photocopied, faxed, stomped out, squeegeed dry, and faxed-again manuals.

This design speaks to my soul.



HOW TO USE THIS MODULE

GRADIENT DESCENT details the massive, abandoned android factory formerly known as the **CLOUDBANK Synthetics Production Facility**. The facility, now called **THE DEEP**, has been taken over by its industrial AI, **Monarch**, and is cordoned off by a ruthless blockade of corporate-backed **"Troubleshooters"**. It can easily be a deadly module, but it also contains tons of roleplaying opportunities depending on what your group is into.

- ▶ If you're running an ongoing campaign: place **THE DEEP** somewhere in rimspace and drip-feed rumors of the Artifacts (pg. 62) buried within or reveal that a powerful NPC is secretly an **Infiltrator Android** (pg. 10) with ties to **CLOUDBANK**.
- ▶ If you're starting a new campaign: place your players just outside the blockade as desperate Artifacts (pg. 62) hunters or wake them up in **[33C] THE FREEZER** with no memory of their previous lives or arrival.
- ▶ If you're running a one shot: roll a random Artifact (pg. 62) and location (pg. 21) and send a **Troubleshooter** (pg. 14) team after 30-45 minutes of real time.
- ▶ If you just want content to steal: each Artifact (pg. 62) can easily be found on a derelict ship or in the clutches of an insidious corporate oligarch, making for a good 2-3 session adventure.

Content & Player Agency

GRADIENT DESCENT deals heavily with the theme of "what does it mean to be human?" It plays with this by specifically making the players doubt whether their characters are or were ever human through the use of a mechanic called **The Bends** (pg. 9). **The Bends** operates a lot like **Stress**, but is instead a measure of how certain a character is that they're who they think they are, rather than a brainscanned (pg. 5) **Infiltrator Android** (pg. 10) with fake implanted memories. This can culminate in players losing control of their characters as they come to terms with their "real" identities as pawns of **Monarch**, and then ultimately refusing to leave **THE DEEP** under any circumstances (becoming an NPC).

During testing this proved incredibly fun, but for a lot of players messing with their characters' identity and agency can ruin the game. Talk to your players about whether that's something they're interested in exploring, and if they aren't, remove **The Bends** altogether.

As a final warning, there are **Android Children** in this module who are, in essence, being tortured by **Monarch**. If this would make anyone at your table uncomfortable we highly recommend swapping them out for adult androids. This will in no way hurt the "story" of the module. Remember: the safety of everyone at the table is your primary concern.

[4] Content Warning // Contains: Scenes of graphic violence, body horror, emotional trauma, psychological distress, obscene language and harm to android children.

BASIC PROCEDURES

The trick to running **THE DEEP** is to surprise yourself. Use **Random Encounters** to provide context to the space and **Reaction Rolls** to give meaning to the interactions. These tiny procedures combined can help you and your players spark life in this dark, abandoned place.

Random Encounters

Roll 1d100 every 10 minutes (or once per Human Scale room / three times in a □ room) as well as after loud noise (like, say, gunfire).

- ▶ On a roll of doubles an encounter occurs.
 - ↳ If the roll is low (below 50) the encounter is close by.
 - ↳ If the roll is high (above 50) the encounter is far away.
- ▶ Roll 1d10 on the Encounter Table.

If your group likes a lot of encounters it is suggested to roll in every room or assume every room has an encounter unless you roll doubles. This works particularly well if you don't assume encounters must be violent.

Reaction Rolls

Roll 1d100 to determine the encounter's first impression of the crew.

- ▶ Rolling evens means a positive reaction, odds means a negative one.
- ▶ Rolling doubles increases the strength of the reaction (a good impression becomes friendly or a negative one becomes hostile).
- ▶ High rolls indicate the encountered group is in a strong position (well stocked, uninjured, confident, etc.). Low rolls indicate the encountered group is weak (injured, low on supplies, in need of aid, frightened, etc.).

Resist the temptation to automatically turn encounters into combat. Everything in **THE DEEP** wants to talk to someone. You can run this entire module without killing or fighting anything (please tell us if you do).

Backtracking

When travelling long distances through areas the crew has already explored there are a few different ways to handle **Random Encounters**:

- ▶ **Fast Travel**: Make one roll (or automatically assign one encounter) to a random location along the crew's path.
- ▶ **Deep Crawl**: Make one roll for every room like normal. This works best for groups who like a slower, more meticulous pace of exploration.

BRAINSCANS

Monarch (pg. 8) hoards comprehensive backups of human brains, called **Brainscans**, which it then uses to create human-seeming **Infiltrator Androids** (pg. 10). There are many places within **THE DEEP** where your crew might get brainscanned. A few notes:

- ▶ Brainscans are stored at the **[47H] BRAINSCAN DATARANK**.
- ▶ **Monarch**, if it feels it is necessary, will create **Infiltrator Androids** of Brainscanned crewmembers.
- ▶ **Monarch** knows all the most intimate memories of brainscan victims, and uses this relentlessly.
- ▶ Getting brainscanned increases your **Bends** (pg. 9) by 1d10.

ZERO-G

Much of the facility lacks artificial gravity, which can be daunting for many **Wardens** to run. However, if you just keep the following in mind, you'll be fine:

- ▶ Don't sweat it unless the stakes are high or it's interesting to your players.
- ▶ Anyone with **Zero-G** gets a pass. Anyone without **Zero-G** has [-].
- ▶ Momentum doesn't go anywhere, it has to be cancelled. Describe this.
- ▶ Replace "WALKING/RUNNING" vocabulary with "FLOATING/PUSHING OFF/LANDING."
- ▶ UP/DOWN/LEFT/RIGHT is too relative. Use terms like "TOWARDS THE FLOOR/CEILING" instead.
- ▶ Due to the darkness and size of **THE DEEP** it is likely the crew lose any points of reference, as well as handholds to haul themselves forward. This should cause **Stress** and be horrible.
- ▶ In a pinch, pressurized gas can be used to increase/decrease Speed.

Basic Procedures // Random Encounters are all about sparking life. Ignore them if they're boring. [5]

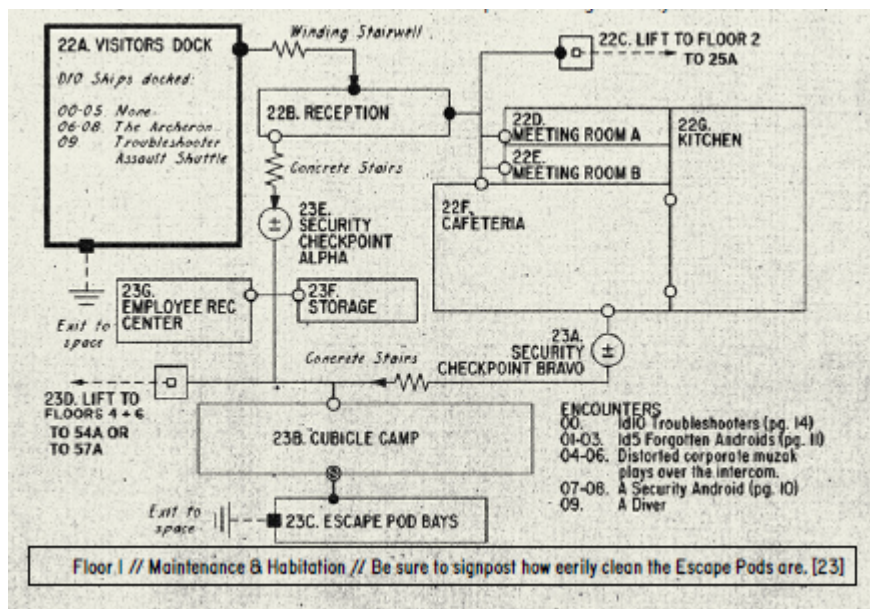
If Gradient Descent were a handout, the graphic design would be perfect. Atmospheric. It feels more discovered than constructed.

But as a gm article, it fights itself on usability, economy, and storytelling, which I'll explain further in parts.

Exhibit B: Maps

I don't know why I haven't seen this before. These maps abstract like a point crawl but look like the schemata to machinery or electronics. They're incredibly evocative, and something I *will* steal.

And here's why I love this innovation: it scales.



An isometric mega-dungeon for GD would have been prohibitively expensive, but more importantly, it would have run headfirst into the gauntlet of mapping hard science fiction.

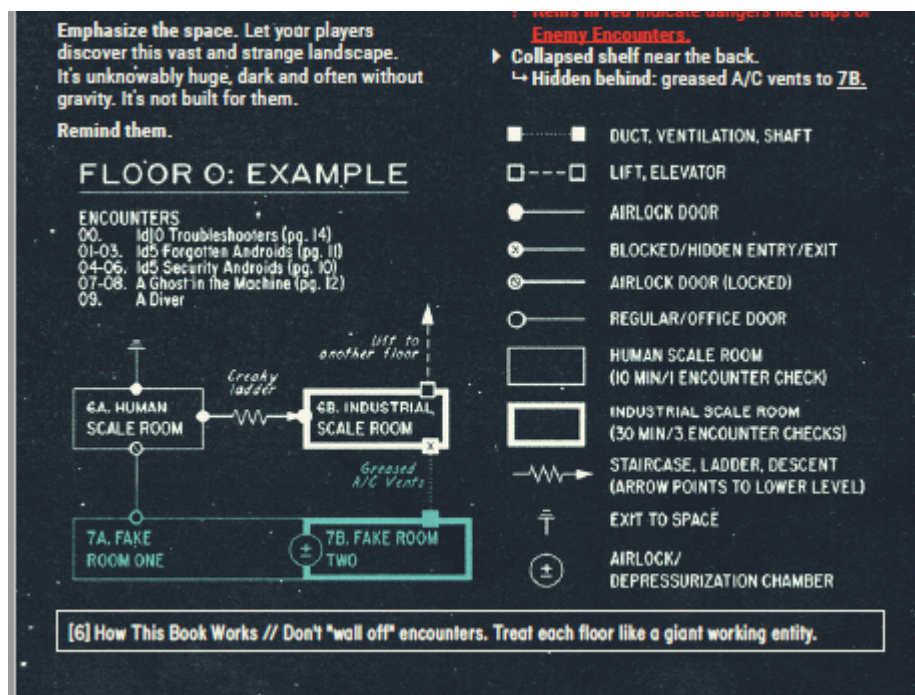
Disproportionate scales. Non-humanist architecture. And no "correct" orientation because of zero-g.

To create Gradient Descent's map of "The Deep" with its colossal factory chambers and claustrophobic human-scale rooms, the team was going to need a tool.

This is the invention of that necessity.

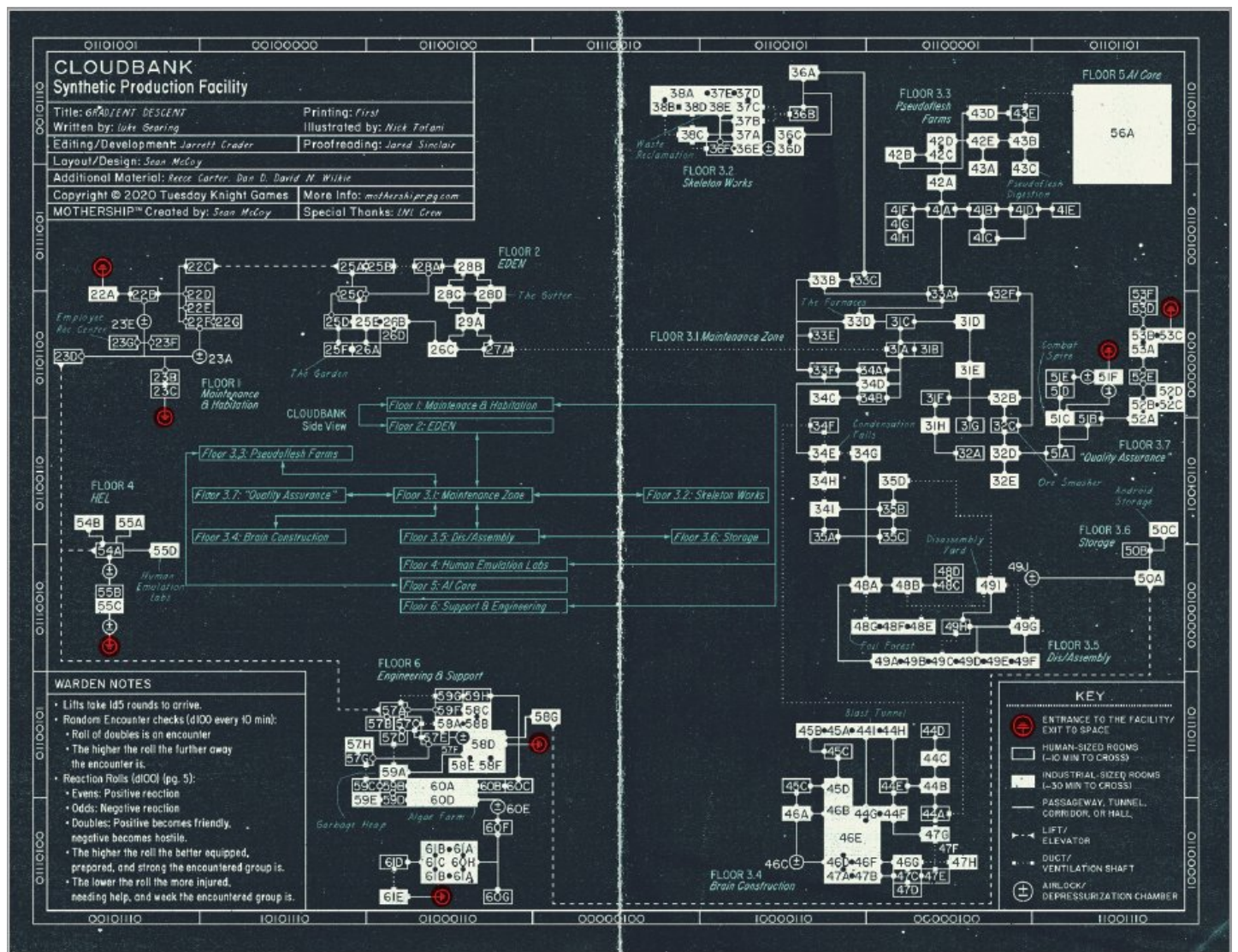
It's like a point-crawl + map + Melan diagram.

One of the highlights of Gradient Descent's mapping is how it uses graphic design to tell you more information at a glance. For example, bold boxes symbolize scale while color shows us how they're illuminated.



These schemata-maps are a lot easier to reference and comprehend for this genre than traditional isometric maps.

And yet, they're still hard to use. The world map of "The Deep" in Gradient Descent is more like a shock-and-awe visual than an actual place to go to for reference.



In the book, the Gradient Descent map is broken into different thematic sections (this is good), but those maps are small, and their placement within chapters inconsistent (not so good.)

Sometimes they're at the start of a spread. Sometimes they're at the end.

These abstracted maps are still arranged in the dungeon's general shape, too, which means Gradient Descent sometimes feels like it has 4D Rubik's cubes for maps on its pages.

Either further abstraction is necessary, or the written dungeon needs to be pared down.

To add to the usability problems, the mini-maps don't have a key. This means you'll have to do a lot of flipping to the "how to use this module" section before you're fluent.

It's not a deal-breaker, space is limited, after all, but it's another burden on the Warden

Exhibit C: Color

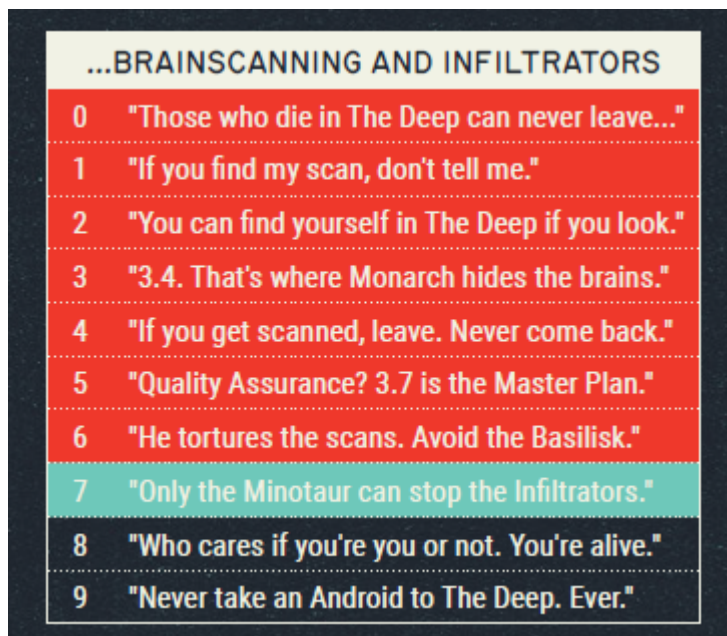
GD wields its color palette like a multitool to communicate important information on the page while trimming entire pages from its manuscript.

And because the palette is limited, it's not overwhelming to remember.



Dark backgrounds indicate rooms on the page are not lit. Light pages indicate the exact opposite. Different colors on the "rumor" table indicate its source.

And red almost always means danger. The only exception: the main villain—the physical manifestation of danger.



To conclude this thread about Gradient Descent's graphic design: it's complicated.

There are lots of great re-inventions here. I've seen some form of these scattered across hundreds of RPG products, but I rarely see them in one product.

The result is somewhat Icarus-ian.

In the next thread, we'll talk about the layout, typography, and the creative concept of Gradient Descent. All of it leads to a greater conversation about Mothership as a whole.

Until then, RPG graphic design nerds: buy it and learn from it. <https://t.co/7SZ8iZGm1s>