

Flavors of Fear



13 Weird Fantasy Setting Sketches for *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*

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Author's Preface

This project grew out of perusing the Suggested Reading section in the *Grindhouse Edition* of James Raggi's *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*. A reading list is nothing new when it comes to role-playing games; after all, that grand grimoire known as the *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide* contains the justly well-loved Appendix N. That said, the Suggested Reading section found in *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* is a bit different from what you may have come to expect: instead of just listing the authors and titles of seminal works, Raggi and his fellow writers give an overview of both what you should be reading and why you should be reading it to inspire a properly Weird Fantasy atmosphere in your own game sessions.

The only problem was this: after reading it, I wanted more. You see, I've always been a fiend for Weird stories. From a young age I was fascinated in equal measures by horror films, 1970s comics with titles like *The Witching Hour* and *The House of Mystery*, ghost stories, and Gothic novels. I've been lucky enough to make studying Weird fiction my life's pursuit, so when I got to the end of the Suggested Reading section I lamented its brevity and mourned for all that was left out. Where was Arthur Machen and Ann Radcliffe? Hell, why restrict the pool of potential inspirations to just the written word? Where were the film suggestions, the gaming suggestions, and the bits of odd lore to be looked over and spun into the stuff of Weird adventure?

Consider this brief supplement my attempt to fill in that gap. As I pondered what had been left out of the *Grindhouse Edition* by necessity, I realized that the neglected titles and authors could be grouped together by the type of setting, thematic, and narrative conventions they employ. While it has the power to surprise us, Weird Fantasy is nothing if not conventional. Inside this e-book you will find 13 “sketches” of variant campaign settings that you might use to evoke the classic conventions and eerie atmospheres found in the Weird fiction of the past and present.

Of course, the goal here isn't to bludgeon the players into conforming to a pre-determined fictional schema; rather, my hope is that these sketches will give you a few basic tools and ideas so you can create a strange, uncanny setting of your own for your players to explore and react to in their own inimitable ways.

While this supplement was written with *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* in mind, there's nothing stopping you from exploring these setting sketches with your favorite fantasy RPG. Break out *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *HarnMaster*, etc. I've even given one of these settings a test drive with *RISUS*. Use what you like, just make it Weird.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that I had some help along the way. I wish to thank the commentators on my threads about this project on RPG.net and TheRPGSite for their valuable suggestions and input. Also, I likely wouldn't have seen this project through to its conclusion without their encouragement.

Happy Gaming!

Jack Shear

1. The Cold Northern Wind

“In the foggy embraces of maternal woods, where wolves and red riding hoods are lost and found, where strange becomings take place, at night, you can here howls, growls, and grunts. Inarticulate words create gothic soundscapes of abject horror and ritualistic transgression.”

– Aspasia Stephanou, “Playing Wolves and Red Riding Hoods in Black Metal”

George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* isn't a Weird tale, but the sections of the novel set at the Wall—an enormous barrier of ice that separates the Seven Kingdoms from the savage, unknown North—show all the signs of being rooted in the Weird tradition. The Wall is patrolled by the rangers of the Night's Watch. Theirs is a grim duty: they withstand the howling, bitter winds of the icy North, struggle against barbarian raiders and wild beasts, and act as wardens against an evil race of mysterious beings known only as the Others. Life at the Wall is a mundane grind of military discipline and preparations for the coming winter, but behind the banal trials and tribulations of the everyday lurks something ominous and supernatural that threatens to break through. This particular constellation of conventions is a specific kind of Weird tale; it is a tale of bleakness, of the mad chaos of natural sublimity and natural savagery, of roaring wind and deadly frost, and of bloody red against a field of snowy white. It is a tale of the **Cold Northern Wind**.

The Setting:

An isolated northern outpost at the border between the civilized world and the unknowable wilderness. The outpost can be a garrison, a keep and its surrounding fiefdom, a trade town, or a rough, ramshackle refuge for wanted criminals. The outpost is encircled by natural vistas that are both beautiful and threatening: dense, primordial forests and rugged, towering mountain ranges. Every journey from the outpost has the potential for danger; the wild beasts who live in the forests and mountains are ferocious and have a taste for human flesh. Beyond the outpost, the northlands become a blighted tundra that is both unmapped and home to a grave, unknown menace.

The Themes:

The natural world is harsh and unforgiving—use the setting itself as an adversary against the characters. Emphasize the biting winds and the way the chilling frost can be felt in the characters' bones. Steal all warmth and comfort from them.

Civilization versus the Wild—make the outpost a place that the characters have a vested interest in defending. Make it clear that the outpost is civilization's first and best line of defense against something monstrous that could spell doom for all humanity. Imperil their community; make them scramble to protect the life they know.

Grim fatalism—death is inevitable in the Weird north; it is something to be faced with a stoic mien and a hardened heart. Put the characters in the position of making tough, if not impossible choices. Final stands against the darkness are a must.

The Foes:

The Frozen Dead—those who succumb to frostbite in the wilderness rise again as tireless enemies of mankind. Their beards covered in hoar and the axes rimed with frost, they will ceaselessly pursue the living through forest and mountain.

Giants—not the dunderheaded giants usually found in fantasy, these are the vicious giants of northern legend. They are more than mortal, they are the corrupted remnants of once-godlike nature spirits who wish to cleanse the land itself from the taint of man's civilizing influence.

Wolves—in all their forms: dire wolves, werewolves, wolves who speak of blood in the voices of men, wolves who prowl the streets during the nightside eclipse. Never a single wolf; always an uncountable multitude of wolves, a wolfing, an endless pack of tooth and claw.

Wendigo—sometimes the howling of the winter wind is not just the howling of the winter wind, sometimes it is the ominous call of the wendigo. The wendigo has a voice like the bottomless depths, can lift a man from the earth with an unseen hand, burn him with cold, and drive him mad by showing him things no mortal was meant to see.

The Soundtrack:

The Cold Northern Wind requires a soundtrack that is both pummeling and funereal.

Xasthur, *Portal of Sorrow*—indulge in the melancholia of mystical, suicidal black metal.

Blood of the Black Owl, *A Feral Spirit*—introspective doom metal; a ritual invocation of sublime wildness.

Wolves in the Throne Room, *Two Hunters*—a black metal explication of man's alienation from the natural world.

Neurosis, *Enemy of the Sun*—crushing, churning existential doom.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Antonia Bird's *Ravenous*, Algernon Blackwood's "The Wendigo," John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves," August Derleth's "Ithaqua," Cristophe Gans's *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, John Linqvist's *Let the Right One In*; Steve Niles, *30 Days of Night*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (particularly the frame narrative), Snorri Sturlson's *Prose Edda*.

Gaming Inspirations:

Death Frost Doom and *Weird New World* (for *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*), *Hellfrost* (for *Savage Worlds*), *Keep on the Borderlands* (for *D&D*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Alferd Packer and cannibalism, blood eagle, the Dyatlov Pass Incident, the Yeti.

2. Dark Medieval Times

“Nay, said Balin, for this sword will I keep, but it be taken from me with force. Well, said the damosel, ye are not wise to keep the sword from me, for ye shall slay with the sword the best friend that ye have, and the man that ye most love in the world, and the sword shall be your destruction. I shall take the adventure, said Balin, that God will ordain me, but the sword ye shall not have at this time, by the faith of my body.”

– Thomas Mallory, *Le Mort d'Arthur*

Many gamers associate *D&D* and the like with the Middle Ages, but they couldn't be further off the mark—historically speaking. The typical fantasy kingdom is place devoid of grit; there might be a class division between peasant and lord, but it doesn't tend to amount to much: peasant boys leave home and return as knights in service to their liege, the common people toil happily under the protection of kindly kings, and monsters are a known quantity instead of mysterious, folkloric beings who defy rational understanding. All of that might be the stuff of typical fantasy, but it certainly isn't fit for a Weird campaign. In this case, the solution isn't to introduce more layers of the fantastic; rather, a fantasy campaign has much to gain in darkness, blood, and strangeness if it incorporates real (or even faux) medievalisms into the fabric of its setting.

In the second introduction to his faux-medieval Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole claims that the purpose of his narrative was to explore how ordinary characters in a medieval setting would react to the sudden introduction of the supernatural. That is the essence of **Dark Medieval Times**; crush the characters with the mundanity of their existence, then plunge them headlong into the Weird.

The Setting:

A petty fiefdom far from the centers of power. The fiefdom is regulated by a steward, sheriff, or minor nobleman who has sworn fealty to the king. Most of the fiefdom is farmland tended by peasants who live hand-to-mouth; their lot in life is one of backbreaking labor, squalid conditions, and early death, punctuated only by the brief joys of festival days. The steward's lot is nothing to envy, but to the peasants it seems luxurious; of course, the steward's household only mixes with the peasantry when custom demands it. There is a small church in town where a minor curate tends to the spiritual discipline of the community. One end of the fief is bordered by a deep, nearly-impenetrable forest; some peasants, fed up with their toil, have fled their farms to take up banditry in the woods. The other end of the fief is connected to the trade road, but few come or go—the fiefdom exists in isolation.

The Themes:

Death is everywhere—life is brutal and short. Adjust in-game healing times and the availability of healing magic to make it explicitly apparent how dangerous the world is. Play up the high mortality rate; simple accidents will likely lead to fatal infections, the plague is feared by all, and combat results in mangled bodies and shattered skulls.

Everyone is assigned a place by birth—emphasize the rigid social stratification of the setting. You're born a peasant and you die a peasant, no exceptions. Everyone in the setting knows their place and knows who is their social better.

The world beyond the fief is strange and mysterious—the vast majority of the fiefdom's residents will never leave the place where they were born. Keep the action of your campaign isolated to the fief; even the characters should feel like they have no hope of ever seeing the greater world, even if they hear of marvelous things in lands they will never know.

The Foes:

The Fair Folk—there are no silly sprites or cavorting leprechauns here. Instead, the Fair Folk are unknowable and alien; their motives are utterly unguessable. They have the power to beguile, ensnare, and lead astray. They have no souls and may be the remnants of the Old Gods. Some say they shoot men down in the fields with unseen arrows just for sport.

The Fell Pilgrims—wanderers and penitents who are not what they seem. They arrive hooded and cloaked, tolling bells, and chanting the psalms, but what are they really after? Do they bring disease or are they harbingers of the End Times?

The Usurped Specter—the land on which the fief stands has known many masters. Perhaps the current steward gained the fief by wresting it from the rightful owner; the true lord of the land may have died mad and imprisoned. His shade now walks the earth seeking vengeance for his betrayal.

The Great Worm—a horrible beast allied with the Devil is said to sleep beneath the standing stones within the woods to the east of the fiefdom. All manner of malevolence is ascribed to the slumbering monster: when the crops fail, it is surely the work of the Worm; when a woman's child dies in infancy, it is surely the work of the Worm; when a man is possessed by demons, it is surely the work of the Worm.

The Soundtrack:

Dark Medieval Times requires a soundtrack that is medieval-esque, without sounding like a Ren Faire.

Dead Can Dance, *Aion* and *Within the Realm of a Dying Sun*—by turns mystical and haunting.

The Soil Bleeds Black, *Alchemie* and *The Knightly Years*—neo-medieval compositions centered on occultism and fatalistic valor.

Arcana, *The Dark Age of Reason*—music from a Dark Age that never existed.

Unto Ashes, *Moon Oppose Moon* and *Saturn Return*—witchy medievalism that is dark and otherworldly.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

The anonymous *Beowulf*, the anonymous “Dream of the Rood,” the anonymous *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, Richard Carpenter's *Robin of Sherwood*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, the *lais* of Marie de France, Thomas Malory's *Le Mort d'Arthur*, Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Leslie Megahey's *The Advocate*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Christopher Smith's *Black Death*, Clark Ashton Smith's *Averoigne* stories, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Gaming Inspirations:

Ars Magica, *Conspiracy of Shadows*, *Cthulhu Dark Ages* (for *Call of Cthulhu*), *Harn*, *Middle Ages* and *Robin Hood* (for *GURPS*), *Pendragon*, Kenneth Hite's “Travelin' Man: Sir John Mandeville,” “Stalking the Wild Manticore,” “There's More to Faeries Than Their Glamour,” “Into the Woods with Robin Hood,” and “The Maiden and the Monster: Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais” (*Suppressed Transmissions*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Arthurian myth, the Black Death, the dancing sickness and St. Vitus's Dance, Frances and Joseph Gies's *Life in a Medieval Town*, Gilles de Rais, the Grail mythos, Hildegard von Bingen, illuminated manuscripts and grimoires, the Knights Templar, Joan of Arc, leprosy, Marjorie Rowling's *Life in Medieval Times*, medieval alchemy, medieval heresies and demonology, Robin Hood.

3. Southern Gothic

“She remembered how it was here that she had seen a side of her mother that had frightened her, a scary, frenzied, secret self that normally hid behind soft bleached aprons and stoic silence. And it wasn’t just her momma who changed. The services would transform familiar, ordinary people, people she saw every day, into creatures as fascinating and horrifying as the beautifully patterned scales of the serpents they caressed.”

– Linda Chandler Munson, *Moonblind*

War leaves lingering scars on both bodies and minds. The conventions of the **Southern Gothic** use those scars to draw out the deeper tensions that exist in an antebellum society that has grown fallow after a great war. The **Southern Gothic** depicts the world in grotesque terms; physical deformities and exaggerated bodily characteristics always sympathetically correspond to mental, emotional, and psychological aberrations: the big-nosed woman in the house next door is invariably a gossip and a busybody, the lame-legged preacher possesses a soul crippled by guilt, and the twisted old man who presides over the town council is gripped by equally twisted desires.

Of course, not every scar is apparent on the surface. In the **Southern Gothic**, things generally look peaceful, placid, and genteel, but dig a little deeper and you find a culture whose heart beats to a sickening rhythm. There is always a sharp divide between a town's old, landed aristocracy and those who work with their hands for a living. Though the days of the plantation were over after the war, the social chasm between the haves and the have-nots is a simmering cauldron of resentments apt to spill over into outright violence. The tipping point is likely to be the inherent hypocrisy of the town's “moral” guardians; whether family patrician, pious man of God, or respectable debutante, the town's upstanding citizens all harbor dark secrets.

The Setting:

A cheerily-named town of white-washed fences, grand plantation houses, and rough habitations on the wrong side of the tracks. There is a town meeting hall where the various old families endlessly maneuver for pride of place and political power. There is a well-attended church where a preacher delivers hellfire and brimstone sermons to his ever-sinners congregation. (They may even handle poisonous snakes and speak in tongues to demonstrate their religious fervor.) There is a bawdy tavern that everyone knows about, but no one ever mentions at the outskirts of town. It's said that the drinks, women, and music there are all fast, fiery, and loose.

The Themes:

Evil wears the mask of propriety—the town is rotting from the inside out. There is no real outside threat to the town's existence; rather, it is the evil that men hold in their hearts that endangers the good people of the town. This danger hides itself behind a facade of cultured manners and Southern charm, making it insidious and difficult to detect.

Class warfare—the town is home to barely-repressed social resentments. The poor and the rich hate each other instinctively, the old money has a vested interest in keeping the middle and working classes from gaining too large a share of cultural capital, the disenfranchised minority is kept at the menial, abject fringes of society. If your group has the stomach for it, you might even work racial tensions into this heady brew of contention.

The grotesque conflates revulsion with empathy—although the grotesque characters of the Southern Gothic tradition are engineered to illicit disgust, their very human fallibility also marks a point where they evoke our sympathies. For every horrible secret that is revealed about a society matron's past, we should also learn a fact that puts his actions into perspective. For every revolting detail that comes out about the secret life led by the pastor's son, there should also be some note of sympathy. Though their actions can never be forgiven, there must be something about them that makes us wonder if we would have done any differently given the momentous choices they had at hand.

The Foes:

The antagonists in the **Southern Gothic** are rarely explicitly supernatural or monstrous; instead, they illustrate that man is the worst monster of all.

The Town Father—he brings wealth and stability to the town, but what secret does he guard about his family's past? What accursed deals has he struck to insure the town's prosperity?

The Preacher—a traveling man of the cloth who has set up a tent in the town's poorest district. He claims that he wants to save the bodies and souls of the needy, but what if he were indoctrinating the indignant as his own personal army?

The Belle—she's the beautiful young woman that all the unmarried men come to court. She's the picture of proper behavior, grace, and unblemished reputation...until the sun sets. Perhaps she might be found down by the river, introducing her suitors to strange, unwholesome rites.

The Soundtrack:

The **Southern Gothic** requires a soundtrack that mixes gentility with gritty desperation.

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Papa Won't Leave You*, *Henry* and *Murder Ballads*—filthy, murderous, outlaw music.

Various Artists, *People Take Warning!*—authentic recordings of Americana songs about death, catastrophe, and disaster rescued from the scrap heap of history.

Marissa Nadler, *Ballads of Living and Dying*—the sweetest of voices, cutting right to the bone.

The Scarring Party, *Losing Teeth*—uncanny and nasty, like a hex lurking at the bottom of a dry well.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*, Nick Cave's *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and “A Rose for Emily,” Daniel Knauf's *Carnivale*, Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Linda Chandler Munson's *Moonblind*, Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Wise Blood*, Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, Eudora Welty's “Clytie,” Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly*, *Last Summer*.

Gaming Inspirations: *Hangman's Noose* (for D&D).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Jim Crow laws, Pentecostalism, Tent revivals.

4. Behind the Facade of the Seaside Town

“During the winter of 1627-28 officials of the Federal government made a strange and secret investigation of certain conditions in the ancient Massachusetts seaport of Innsmouth. The public first learned of it in February, when a vast series of raids and arrests occurred, followed by the deliberate burning and dynamiting—under suitable precautions—of an enormous number of crumbling, worm-eaten, and supposedly empty houses along the abandoned waterfront.”

– H.P. Lovecraft, *“The Shadow Over Innsmouth”*

There will come a time in your campaign when the player characters will be tired of roughing it through the dangerous wilderness and weary of slumming through urban decay. What better time for a trip to a quaint, scenic seaside town for a little rest and relaxation? Of course, what at first appears to be a relaxing interlude between ventures into the unknown simply must turn out to be the characters' worst nightmare. Behind the facade of the seaside town lurks something ancient and sinister; the town's gleaming white cottages, picturesque wharf, and overly-friendly inhabitants masks a corruption that resides within the very lifeblood of the community.

The Setting:

A small, but charming, seaside town. The town itself is mostly comprised of quaint cottages, fishing boats moored at the dock, a bustling cannery, and a series of attractive little shops along the high street. However, there are some areas of the town that most people don't know about. There are secret tunnels that lead from the caves near the beach to the crypts of the ancient burial grounds; these tunnels were formerly used by smugglers bringing their wares in under the cover of night, but they now serve to convey a far more disturbing traffic in human beings. There is a surprisingly well-stocked library that counts a number of powerful eldritch tomes among its shelves. There is an artist's colony in the town that produces strange, disquieting paintings. There is a castle not more than a day's journey from the town that is home to a mad inventor; will the inventor prove to be friend or foe? There are twin lighthouses on an island off the coast. What might the lighthouse keepers know about the doings in town?

The Themes:

Outsiders are different from Family—while the people who reside in the town will be warm and welcoming at first, it should quickly become apparent that they keep outsiders at arm's length. Characters will catch groups of townspeople eying them with suspicion before going about their business; there will be parts of town—perhaps the local temple—where they are barred entry.

Corruption is blood-deep—whatever is wrong in the seaside town is connected to the lineage of the town's inhabitants. Are they descended from settlers who bear an ancestral curse? Are they the product of centuries of interbreeding between man and something horrific from the depths of the sea? Are they transplants from the Old World who have brought a blood malady—perhaps a blood-thirst—from the forsaken places of a forgotten country?

The sea demands sacrifice—the people of the seaside town depend on the ocean for their survival. Without a plentiful catch of fish, the town would dry up and blow away. To what lengths would the town's populace go to insure that the sea continues to provide for their needs?

The Foes:

The Townspeople—sure, they're all smiles when the characters first encounter them, but then the characters will start noticing that there is something not quite right about them. Perhaps it's the wide-set eyes, the disappearing chins, or the abrupt slope of the forehead, but the more time the characters spend in the town the more noticeable it becomes that the townspeople are less (or more) than human.

The Beasts of the Sea—a trip out to sea is dangerous for anyone who doesn't belong to the Family of the seaside town. Sea serpents, giant squid, or other primordial beasts might rise from the depths to prevent the escape of visitors to the town.

Deep Ones—the people of the town have an ongoing, illicit trade in the flesh of outsiders. They bring captives through the tunnels and down to the beach, where they are met by inhuman, amphibious men from the ocean.

The Dark Gods of the Waves—the Deep Ones are the servants of something indescribably horrible and otherworldly that sleeps in a sunken kingdom off the coast. While these “gods” slumber, they dream—and their dreams impart omens and maledictions to those who sleep within the town's borders.

The Soundtrack:

The soundtrack for **Behind the Facade of the Seaside Town** is split evenly between dark shanties and churning ambient music.

Reverend Glasseye and His Wooden Legs, *Black River Falls*—murder, madness, and despair in a New England mood.

The Unquiet Void, *Poisoned Dreams* and *The Shadow-Haunted Outside*—Lovecraftian ambient music, a soundtrack for the damned.

The Tiger Lillies, *The Sea*—down-and-out at the dockside with the criminal castrati cabaret.

Lustmord, *Where the Black Stars Hang* and *Heresy*—more growling, abyssal ambient from outside of the veil of time and place.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Clive Barker's *Galilee* and “The Madonna,” Dan Curtis's *Dark Shadows*, Sebastian Gutierrez's *She Creature*, H.P. Lovecraft's “The Shadows Over Innsmouth,” “The Call of Cthulhu,” “Dagon,” “Pickman's Model,” and “The Dunwich Horror,” Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Gaming Inspirations:

Kingsport and *Arkham Now* (for *Call of Cthulhu*), *Freeport*, *Shrine of the Kuo-Toa* (for *D&D*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

The Bloop, David Cordingly's *Under the Black Flag*, Hammond Castle, the Loch Ness Monster, J.P. O'Neill's *The Great New England Sea Serpent*, the Salem Witch Trials, the Vermont Eugenics Survey.

5. Pilgrims in a Strange Land

“More than two thousand raging savages broke from the forest at the signal, and threw themselves across the fatal plain with instinctive alacrity. We shall not dwell on the revolting horrors that succeeded.— Death was every where, and in his most terrific and disgusting aspects. Resistance only served to inflame the murderers, who inflicted their furious blows long after their victims were beyond the power of resentment. The flow of blood might be likened to the outbreking of a torrent; and as the natives became heated and maddened by the sight, many among them even kneeled to the earth, and drank freely, exultingly, hellishly, of the crimson tide.”

- James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans

This flavor of Weird Fantasy assumes that the characters belong to a political or religious minority that was persecuted in their native land. To escape oppression their community has traveled across the sea to establish a colony where they can practice their beliefs in freedom. Although they may have set off with the idea of establishing a utopia or a shining city on a hill, these pilgrims in a strange land will find their very survival imperiled by forces both within and without. Upon their arrival on foreign soil the colonists discovered that the land is already inhabited by savages that resent the intrusion and will wage bloody war to drive the newcomers from their rightful territory. Worse yet, what if the colonists have brought something dark with them—some horror they harbor within their midst—to the new world?

The Setting:

A fortified colony on the shores of a strange land. The heart of the colony is its only church; the church is the finest building in all the colony and acts as the last place of refuge in times of strife. The colony itself is a flickering light of civilization carved out of the vast, dark wilderness. The surrounding forest teems with savages, strange creatures, and unholy temptations. Those who spend too much time in the woods are liable to be thought tainted by the bestial powers that call it home; in the minds of the colonists, the forest's influence is something to be resisted and conquered. The world beyond the forest is a complete mystery to the colonists—they possess no maps of knowledge of the new world beyond the borders of the colony itself.

The Themes:

Discipline is survival—the only way to persevere against the savagery of the new world is to remain stoic and disciplined in the face of chaos. Rigid adherence to law and order requires that the colonists forge their souls from cold iron to weather the misfortunes of this strange land.

The beacon of civilization is surrounded by barbarism—the colony's survival is a fragile thing. Natural dangers, bloodthirsty braves, and supernatural threats encircle the colony and any venture into the forest is a likely suicide mission. While the subjugation of the wilderness will necessarily entail some loss of life, the greatest threat is that the colonists will abandon their civilized ways and fight savagery with savagery.

The devil cannot be outrun—whatever persecution the colonists have fled from will catch up with them eventually. There is always a viper in wait, and the most damning sins are carried by pious hearts.

The Foes:

Savages—the natives of this strange land are terrifying Others bereft of the moral outlook that civilization brings. They are an incomprehensible people who love battle, spare none from the ax, indulge in cannibalism and wild lusts, and howl their prayers to primordial demons. (No, this use of “savages” is not particularly politically-correct, but it certainly is representative of the genre.)

The Beasts Who Walk as Men—even the local savages are frightened of the beings whose bodies incorporate the worst impulses of man and beast. These skinchangers are protean evils who fight with tooth, claw, and forged weapons, but their real power is in their ability to steal the face and form of another to infiltrate the colony.

The Lost Colonists—of course, the current crop of colonists were not the first stranger to attempt to establish themselves on this foreign country. The previous colonists disappeared without a trace. Will they return as the undead, as new-born barbarians who have “gone native” or as empty vessel filled with the monstrous souls of ancient evils?

The Devil in the Woods—despite their self-exile to the colony, the demonic force behind the colonists' persecution has followed them to the new world. Does it walk among them in a familiar guise? Any colonist who spends too much time in the woods—perhaps rallying the savages to a united warband or raising the bodies of the lost colonists—is a potential servant of the devil himself.

The Soundtrack:

Pilgrims in a Strange Land requires a soundtrack that is folksy, yet puritanical.

16 Horsepower, *Sackcloth 'n' Ashes* and *Folklore*—foreboding Americana with a touch of hellfire and brimstone.

Munly & the Lee Lewis Harlots, *s/t*—Gothic Americana perfect for chaotic forays against the savage tide.

Rasputina, *Frustration Plantation* and *Oh, Perilous World*—both are schizophrenic takes on alternate American history.

Zoe Keating, *Into the Woods*—experimental, ambient cello loops that speak to the mystery and terrifying sublime of the forest.

Literary and Cinematic Influences:

Aphra Behn's *Ooronoko*, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables* and “Young Goodman Brown,” Robert E. Howard's Solomon Kane stories, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Isaac Mitchell's *The Asylum*, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Gaming Inspirations:

Colonial Gothic, “Croatoan or Bust: Finding the Lost Colony” (from Kenneth Hite's *Suppressed Transmissions*), *Solomon Kane* (for *Savage Worlds*), *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play*'s beastmen and dark elves.

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Bigfoot, Cotton Mather, Deer Woman, Indian captivity narratives, Molly Pitcher and the Marblehead magician, the Salem Witch Trials, the Roanoke Colony, Sir Walter Raleigh, Stick Indians.

6. The Urban Weird

“This latter is one of the principle thoroughfares of the city, and had been very much crowded during the whole day. But, as the darkness came on, the throng momentarily increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door.”

- Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd”

Man is most alone when he is surrounded by the teeming masses of mankind. Typical urban adventures tend to be described with the adjectives “gritty,” “dark,” and “sprawling”; on their own, these adjectives can make for an exciting adventure, but with a little work we can tip each over fully into the realm of the Weird.

The Setting:

A massive city crowded with businesses, homes, brothels, seats of governance, drug dens, dockyards, open markets, slums, and warehouses. Bring out the grit by making a sharp delineation between the law and order that rules a city by day and the criminal element that controls it by night. Walking the cityscape during the day should pose no real danger—until you're ready to turn the tables on the players, of course—but nightfall should bring with it double-dealings, random gang violence, and an almost carnivalesque level of lawlessness.

Emphasize the city's darkness by drawing on the convention of another “dark” genre that is centered on the urban experience: film noir. The basic film noir set up is perfect for gaming: someone has a problem and is willing to pay the characters to solve it, someone needs something investigated and is willing to pay the characters to snoop around on their behalf, someone needs a mysterious package delivered—no questions asked—and is willing to pay the characters to make sure it gets done. Besides the basic set up, there is much to borrow from film noir; amp up the shadows, double-dealings, and moral ambiguity at every turn.

Fantasy cities are usually plenty big, but to make them uncanny push back the boundaries even further. Make the city an inescapably huge landscape in its own right. Not only is the city a sprawling mass of labyrinthine streets, back alleys, and plazas, it's also essentially unknowable; no matter how long you spend in the city it will always have new areas to explore and new ways to horrify.

The Themes:

Alienation is all—the city is far too large for anyone to feel connected to their fellow man. Worse yet because the city is a place of back-alley deals and rampant crime, no one feels like they can trust anyone else. Play up the feeling of urban paranoia by limiting the characters' contacts, having the other denizens of the city eye them with suspicion and hostility, and by showing the casual brutality that comes with urban life.

The city is a place of wonders—while day to day life in the city is a struggle for survival, the metropolis is a place that seems to collect life's wonderments. Most markets and bazaars will be selling base goods, but tucked away at a small stall might be a beautiful (but accursed) puzzlebox that brings both woe and weal. A dusty bookshop might have a notorious grimoire among its offerings. The city itself might possess a life of its own; what if its well-known streets began to warp and rearrange themselves according to some occult pattern?

Life is cheap—a knife in the back comes when you expect it and when you least expect it. Make the city a dangerous place to be and design your adventures there to draw the character's down its worst alleys and most violent neighborhoods. Never hesitate to show them what happens to the unwary.

The Foes:

The Rivals—if the adventurers are the usual suspects—that is, a group of ne'er-do-wells out for gold—one way to challenge them in a city environment is to establish a similar group of swords-for-hire who compete with them for gainful employ. Make their rival group just as competent, if not more heartless. Skew the rivals toward the Weird by giving them a strange benefactor who possess arcane powers or a supernatural lineage. Perhaps the rivals are even doppelgangers; anonymity is both a blessing and a curse in a city environment. Make identity-theft part of a vast conspiracy that the characters unravel one thread at a time.

Sewer-dwellers—what happens on the streets is bad enough, but why not make the characters plunge into the abject by having them investigate what happens beneath the city streets? Confuse and confound the players about the nature of the menace; you're spoiled for choice when it comes to the final reveal: beastmen, sentient shambling mounds, skaven, a cult sworn to the service of a plague demon, etc.

The Serial Killer—something is stalking the streets of the city with murderous intent by night, why not have it come after the characters or someone the characters care about? Perhaps the killer plays a deadly game of cat-and-mouse with the players by sending them clues hidden in ciphers within blood-stained notes. The killer, of course, always manages to slip away into the fog and shadows before being apprehended; what are the killer's motives and is there a supernatural element to its uncanny ability to evade detection?

The Soundtrack:

HUMANWINE, *Fighting Naked*—this is what it sounds like when you rage against urban alienation.

PJ Harvey, *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*—bright, flash, but with a dark, unsettling undercurrent, just the vibe your city should be giving off.

Sxip Shirey, *Sonic New York*—chaotic bursts of song that replicate the mad tumble through city streets.

World/Inferno Friendship Society, *Addicted to Bad Ideas*—an anarchistic album with a Weimar Berlin feel; Peter Lorre references abound.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Honore de Balzac's *Pere Goriot*, Clive Barker's "The Forbidden" and "Midnight Meat Train," Jules Dassin's *Night and the City*, Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep*, John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*, J.-K. Huysmans's *La-Bas*, Fritz Lang's *M*, Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd and Gray Mouser* stories, Thomas Ligotti's short fiction, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Horror at Red Hook," Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, George du Maurier's *Trilby*, China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station*, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, Alex Proyas's *Dark City*, Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte*, Takeshi Shimizu's *Marebito*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Gaming Inspirations:

The City State of the Invincible Overlord (for older editions of *D&D*), "Jacks Wild: Six Stabs at Jack the Ripper" (by Kenneth Hite in *Suppressed Transmissions*), *Lankhmar* (for older editions of *D&D* or *RuneQuest*), *Sharn: City of Towers* (for 3.5 *D&D*), *Vornheim* (for *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, the Black Dahlia murder, H.H. Holmes, Jack the Ripper, mole people, absinthe houses, Parisian catacombs, Spring-Heeled Jack, Victorian London's East End opium houses, Anthony Vidler's *Warped Spaces* and *Uncanny Architecture*, Weimar Berlin, the Zodiac Killer.

7. Pagan Outskirts

"I think I could turn and live with animals. They are so placid and self-contained. They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins. They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God. Not one of them kneels to another or to his own kind that lived thousands of years ago. Not one of them is respectable or unhappy, all over the earth."

- The Wicker Man

This flavor of Weird Fantasy assumes that your setting has an established religion that holds sway throughout the realm and that the characters were born and raised under the auspices of that religious institution. Of course, the trick here is to thrust the characters into the outskirts of civilization where the established church offers no protection or sanctuary; what the characters will soon discover is that not all the people of the realm hold the same beliefs or hew to the same faith that they are familiar with. In the **Pagan Outskirts**, the old ways still command loyalty and the ancient ways of worship—blood sacrifice, pacts with demonic forces, and pledges to the fierce, primordial spirits of nature—still hold power over the hearts and minds of a secretive rural populace.

The Setting:

An isolated village or town far from the reach of the established church hierarchy. The village is self-sufficient and self-contained; local farming, animal husbandry, traditional artisan handicrafts, and bee-keeping provide for the people's material well-being. Indeed, their self-reliance is such that they largely govern themselves; religious and secular authority wields nominal power, at best. The people's spiritual well-being is provided for under a darker cast; these villagers or townspeople cleave to the ancient pagan ways that dominated the land prior to the spread of the normative, modern religion.

The Themes:

The modern is endangered by the ancient—make sure the characters have every modern innovation that seems to guarantee their survival. They should be equipped with modern tools of warfare (such as well-forged swords, crossbows, and perhaps even early firearms) and the tools of modern faith (holy water and the shield of true belief). However, make a point to show them that while the old ways—pagan magic and primordial beasts—might currently slumber, they are still strong. Perhaps even stronger than steel and sacrament.

Corruption is a worse fate than death—the pagan people will be welcoming. Too welcoming. They do not wish to oppose outsiders with force of arms, they wish to convert outsiders back to the old ways through seduction and the arousal of primal lusts.

The New Age is upon us—play up the cyclical nature of the threat that faces the characters. While the pagan ways may have lain dormant for ages, make the characters privy to their movements as they stir and awaken. Perhaps a prophecy comes to pass, perhaps occult rites are nearing completion, perhaps the stars are aligning...in any case, the primordial beings once worshiped by fearful men arise anew and the characters number among those chosen to witness the rebirth of the pagan order.

The Foes:

The Pagans—at first, the pagans will seem like cheerful, fulfilled people. Indeed, as the characters witness their simple lives of observing nature's cycle and obeying their natural inclinations, they may begin to envy the freedom of their lifestyle. But this will change when the characters learn of the means these smiling, friendly folk use to appease the dark gods they serve.

The Scarecrows—the fields and farmsteads of the pagan outskirts are protected from thieving birds by pumpkin-headed effigies filled with straw. Or at least that is all they seem to be until they are called upon to ravage those who threaten the villagers or their way of life.

The White People—where did the villagers learn the ways of pagan magic in the first place? Why, from the white people, of course. The white people are a race of cave-dwelling degenerates forgotten by time. Unevolved and uncivilized, they are brutal, ignorant, but possessed of uncanny senses and an innate connection to the blood-magic used by the pagan people of the village.

Nature's Hunger—something ancient and primeval stirs in the wilderness, awakened from its slumber by the sacrificial blood-rites practiced by the pagans. Perhaps the characters arrive too late and the hungry maw is already lost in the wild, or perhaps the characters have been lured to the pagan outskirts as the final sacrifice.

The Soundtrack:

Pagan Outskirts requires a soundtrack that takes folk back to its bloody pagan roots.

Current 93, Swastikas for Noddy—apocalyptic folk music replete with folkloric touchstones, invocations, and maledictions.

Espers, II and III—folk psychedelia that frequently spirals off into otherworldly sounds.

Fern Knight, Castings—self-described “music for witches and alchemists,” tarot symbolism abounds here.

Sol Invictus, The Blade—the grim, unflinching determination of nature is the order of the day.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Clive Barker's “Rawhead Rex” and “In the Hills, the Cities,” Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*, Piers Haggard's *Blood on Satan's Claw*, Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man*, M.R. James's “Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad,” Stephen King's “Children of the Corn,” Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*, “The Shining Pyramid,” and “The White People,” Vernon Lee's “Dionea,” Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General*, Ken Russell's *The Lair of the White Worm*, Christopher Smith's *Black Death*, Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm* (the film and the novel are quite different from each other), Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*.

Gaming Inspirations:

100 Bushels of Rye (for *HarnMaster*), *Green and Pleasant Land* (for *Call of Cthulhu*), *Through the Drakwald* (for *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Playing 2e*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Celtic druids, Benjamin Christensen's *Haxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages*, Sir James Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, human sacrifice, Margaret Alice Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, the pagan rival of the 1890s, standing stones, Montague Summers's translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

8. High Gothicism

“And since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them.”

- Ann Radcliffe, The Mysteries of Udolfo

I've already touched on ways to bring in influences gleaned from Gothic literature in **Dark Medieval Times**, but in this section I'm going to focus on how to change the conventions of the second-wave of Gothic fictions—the novels that marked the high point of the Gothic's literary popularity in the late 18th century—into grist for the Weird Fantasy mill. The main focus of the Gothic's second-wave of novels is an implicit contrast between the norms and mores of the rational, Enlightened British Isles and the “Gothic barbarism” of Europe's continental powers. **High Gothicism** generally implies a Renaissance level of culture and technology; indeed, the British authors who wrote Gothic fiction during its most influential years tended to set their tales in fanciful re-imaginings of France, Spain, and Italy. However, while those settings have elements that appear modern and advanced, they are also always haunted by a barbaric past in the form of feudal aristocrats, a “medieval” church that had yet to be reformed, and peasants who were still ignorant and superstitious. Such settings were recognizably European, but the differences from their native Britain were strong enough to color their stories with hints of exoticism. Furthermore, the world of **High Gothicism** eschews the usual fantasy pantheon antics for a single, powerful monotheistic church. British authors of Gothic texts used their southern settings as a pretext to explore their cultural distrust of Catholicism; so too might you use a setting based on **High Gothicism** to explore a church gone rotten with corruption and extravagance.

The Setting:

A moderately-sized town in a pseudo-European locale. The townspeople are an ignorant, superstitious lot; they cling to their religion and their superstitions, and they see the work of the supernatural everywhere—even where a rational answer seems more plausible. The town has two significant landmarks nearby: a old castle and a monastery or nunnery. The castle is the family seat of an old line of blue-blooded aristocrats. This family believes that their rarefied blood sets them apart from the common man; they prefer to keep to themselves and disdain intrusion upon their secrets. The monastery or nunnery is thought to be a place of religious contemplation, but in truth its master is a cruel, calculating villain who uses the guise of spirituality to mask a variety of misdeeds. The town is also near a deep woods and towering, majestic mountains. These sublime natural features are both awesomely beautiful and home to cunning bandits.

(In Gothic tales, natural beauty tends to fortify the protagonists; to emulate this in your game perhaps any character who pauses to observe the natural sublime and rhapsodize on its solemn splendor regains a few Hit Points. On the flip-side, protagonists in Gothic tales tend to be attacked when they traverse the woods and mountains, so perhaps such a pause for dramatic soliloquy would also be cause for a random encounter check.)

The Themes:

Reason vs. the Supernatural—**High Gothicism** pits Enlightenment rationality against the superstitions and supernaturalism of the benighted past. One way to emphasize this theme is to take away any supernatural powers the characters might normally have; make arcane and divine magic, enchanted items, and extraordinary powers solely the province of the villains. Make the players rely on ordered, rational plans instead of mystic MacGuffins.

The church is a corrupt institution—there are only two types of believer: those who blindly follow the church's doctrine because they are afraid of what awaits in the next life and those who use the mask of piety to hide a multitude of sins. As with the previous theme, it is entirely appropriate to eliminate clerical spells and holy powers when playing in **High Gothicism** mode. Similarly, it is appropriate to give religious characters and places a horrible hidden secret: perhaps the goodly monk is tormented by carnal desires; perhaps the nunnery gives sanctuary to an unrepentant assassin, or perhaps the local abbess has made a pact with the very devil she claims to rebuke.

Emotions runneth over—if ever there was a time to indulge your thesby inclinations, now is it. Characters in **High Gothicism** should display the revolt of emotions kept too long in check; sorrow, melancholia, terror, horror, and mania should be writ largely upon the important characters that the players interact with. In this case, it's encouraged to ham up the performance and create personalities that are overwrought and unhinged; melodrama is your friend here.

The Foes:

The Bandits—run-of-the-mill foes to be sure, unless...they are at the beck and call of someone or something far more sinister. In fact, discovering who these miscreants serve is half the battle.

The Monk—oh how the mighty fall! Once a pious ecclesiastic, now mired in a spiritual darkness. What preys upon the cleric's soul? Is it bodily lust? Lust for arcane power that can only be had through a Faustian bargain? Political gain? Whatever it is, make sure the characters are directly obstructing the monk from his goal.

The Cavalier and his Retinue—the eldest son of the castle's aristocratic family is a knightly man who will immediately take a disliking to the characters' low-born status. Or, if they be nobles themselves, he will set himself to prove his obvious virtue against theirs.

The Crypt-Thing—the land below the local nunnery or monastery is riddled with hidden crypts known to few. The characters will discover just how labyrinthine those crypts are when one of the villains outlined above steals away a young maiden and secrets her within a forgotten vault. Of course, what the villain doesn't know is that the crypts are far from uninhabited. What kind of misshapen beast crawls along the catacombs, feasting on the flesh and bones of the long-dead?

The Soundtrack:

High Gothicism requires a soundtrack that is inspired by Romanticism and darkness.

Black Tape for a Blue Girl, As One Aflame Laid Bare by Desire and Remnants of a Deeper Purity—the sound of passion consuming faith and reason.

Lycia, Tripping Back into the Broken Days—“tripping back into the broken days” is the mantra of **High Gothicism**; this album is fragile, stripped down, and bare to the bones.

Mors Syphilitica, Feather and Fate—the lush Gothicism of a soaring, heavenly voice.

Sopor Aeternus & the Ensemble of Shadows, Dead Lovers Sarabande (Face One and Face Two)—melancholic airs from out of time; possibly the most funereal music project in existence.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Roy Ward Baker's *The Vampire Lovers*, Mario Bava's *Black Sunday*, Isaac Crookenden's "The Vindictive Monk or The Fatal Ring," Richard Cumberland's "The Poisoner of Montremos," Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, Thomas Hardy's "Barbara of the House of Grebe," Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and "A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family," Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Eliza Parsons's *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Pit and the Pendulum," Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolfo* and *The Italian*, the Marquis de Sade's *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, Percy Shelley's *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, Robert Louis Stevenson's "Olalla," Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Gaming Influences:

The Darkest Night (for *Lady Blackbird*), *GURPS Screampunk*, *Ravenloft* (for *AD&D* or later editions of *D&D*), *My Life With Master*, Phillpe Tromeur's *Wuthering Heights*.

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the Codex Gigas, Gothic architecture, the Grand Guignol theater, the Hand of Glory, Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, Romanticism.

9. Two Variations

First Contact

Pilgrims in a Strange Land assumes that the game set in the colony begins in media res, but this doesn't necessarily have to be the case. What if the characters are the first people of their culture to explore the strange, new land? They might be sent to establish a colony to insure their own freedoms, they might be missionaries sent to convert the godless natives, or they might be conquistadors in search of wealth (or the fabled Fountain of Youth).

If you'd rather play-out a Weird version of colonial incursion, let these sources be your inspiration:

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

John Buchan's *Prester John*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and H. Rider Haggard's *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*, and Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* and *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and "The Mark of the Beast," William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Gaming Inspirations:

GURPS Aztecs, *Maztica* (for *AD&D*), *The Isle of Dread* (for *D&D*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

The Aztecs, the Boer Wars, British colonization of India, the cannibals and head-hunters of Borneo, The Fountain of Youth, Jaguar warriors, the Mayans, Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, Prester John, Robert Louis Stevenson's travel writings.

The Cursed Bayou

Another way to remix **Pilgrims in a Strange Land** is to set your game in a bayou plantation that uses enslaved native labor to work the land. Perhaps the characters have been transported to the plantation as a punishment for past mistakes; they might not agree with the politics of the way the plantation system works—especially the cruel beatings given to the slaves—so this might put them in an interesting moral quandary: do they do as they are told in hopes of doing their time and eventually regaining their freedom or do they subversively work to undermine the plantation master?

Both sides should be dangerous. The plantation master has a bokor (an evil native sorcerer) in his pay that can raise corpses as the walking dead. The walking dead are used as both tireless labor and as deadly enforcers. Escaped slaves who hide in the wilds of the bayou drum wildly by night, raising bog mummies and shambling mounds from the depths of the swamp to raid the plantation house.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*, Alan Parker's *Angel Heart*, Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie*.

Gaming Inspirations:

All Flesh Must be Eaten, *Night of the Walking Dead* (for *AD&D*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Francoise Duvalier, Haiti, the Loa, Marie Leveau, Tommy Johnson, Voodoo, the White Witch of Rose Hall, zombie powder.

10. The Weird West

“All right, I’m coming out. Any man I see out there, I’m gonna shoot him. Any sumbitch takes a shot at me, I’m not only gonna kill him, but I’m gonna kill his wife, all his friends, and burn his damn house down.”

– *The Unforgiven*

Of course, if one wants a full-blown Wild West campaign there are several games on the market that offer a full immersion in the tropes of that fictional mode, but for our Weird purposes I’m going to focus on how you can inject a bit of the Ol’ West into a fantasy campaign to amp-up the strangeness.

The technique to use here is imaginative substitution: change out the too-blatant “Western” conventions for similar figurations that keep the symbolic meaning intact. If your campaign world doesn’t have firearms, there certainly won’t be any shoot-outs at high noon. However, you can replace the quick-draw gun fight with crossed swords in the town square. That’s how they do it on the frontier—questions of honor are answered by who has the fastest draw, the steeliest eye, and the most vicious cut. (See just about any samurai movie for inspiration here; after all, samurai movies borrowed from the Westerns, so it’s only fair to re-appropriate!)

The Setting:

A rough, ramshackle border town on the western frontier. While the town does have a sheriff and his deputies as the nominal law, they’re too few and too weak to hold back the tide of lawlessness. Prospectors have struck silver and gold in the nearby hills, causes a rush to establish mines and land contracts before the wells run dry. Of course, where there’s gold, there’s greed. And where there’s greed, there’s murder and the scent of death on the wind.

The Themes:

Justice is where you take it—the powers that be, such as they are, aren’t able to provide satisfaction. If you want justice or to uphold a notion of the law, you’d best do it yourself and be able to enforce it with the strength of steel.

Be quick or be dead—the Weird West should favor quick action instead of calm, measured plan-making. Put the characters in situations where their lives hang in the balance of a single, foolhardy decision that must be made now.

The stakes are high among outlaws—the **Weird West** is a setting where outlaws, wanted men, and wolf’s heads go to evade the due process of the world back east. Such men have nothing to lose; they jump at the opportunity to snatch at wealth, no matter how dangerous the circumstances. Stagecoach robberies, bank heists, and mine raids are among the brazen crimes the characters should be witness to—regardless of what side of the law they fall on.

The Foes:

The Ghost-Dancers—of course, the frontier was not an uninhabited place before the arrival of gold-crazed prospectors and explorers. The native population will resent the intrusion on their land, especially once pogroms for their removal get underway. While the Ghost-Dancer tribe’s bloody raids are fearsome enough, their shamans have the power to summon and direct ectoplasmic horrors from beyond the grave; they’re not too squeamish to use the screaming souls of the characters’ loved ones against them.

Derro—dwarves love gold, but these aren't your usual Tolkienian warriors or your typical crafty Norse artificers. Rather, the derro are a race of dusky-skinned, white-eyed calibans who are drawn to gold as a moth is drawn to a flame. They will take gold and silver through both cunning and atrocity alike; they need the precious metals to appease He Who Roils in the Darkness.

The Revenant—if they're in the **Weird West**, the characters likely have some ghosts in their past. What if those ghosts were to borrow the rotting corpse of some hanged fool to seek revenge?

Dust Devils—whirling tempests that scour the flesh off the bones of the living. Dust Devils are particularly active at night in the wastelands, but have been known to descend on border towns without warning.

The Soundtrack:

The Weird West requires a soundtrack that is grotty, sweaty, and full of piss and vinegar.

Black Jake & the Carnies, Where the Heather Don't Grow—punk bluegrass that spits fire and casts a deadly spell.

The Builders and the Butchers, Salvation is a Deep Dark Well and Dead Reckoning—the sound of a country apocalypse.

Johnny Cash, American I-IV—there's a reason why he's called the Man in Black.

The Legendary Shack Shakers, Pandelirium and Swampblood—raucous, untamed psychobilly; perfect for saloon brawls, shoot-outs, and last rides.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, William S. Burroughs's *Cities of the Red Night*, *The Place of Dead Roads*, and *The Western Lands*, Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, George Hickenlooper's *The Killing Box*, John Hillcoat's *The Proposition*, Alejandro Jodorowski's *El Topo*, Stephen King's *Dark Tower* novels, Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*, Eugene Manlove Rhode's *West is West* and *Copper Streak Trail*, John Vernon's *The Last Canyon*.

Gaming Inspirations:

Boot Hill, *Deadlands* (either the original game or the *Savage Worlds* edition), *Weird West*.

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

The Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, Doc Holliday, the Ghost Dance, the Gold Rush, the Hatfield-McCoy feud, Old West gunfighters, manifest destiny, the Sun Dance, the Trail of Tears.

11. Inside the Black House

*"No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality."
- Shirley Jackson, The Haunting of Hill House*

In his essay on the *unheimlich*, Sigmund Freud theorizes that things that resemble objects, people, and places that are familiar to us, yet have noticeable and nagging differences, hold the power to unsettle and terrify. Uncanny things are the opposite of the homely—that is, the opposite of the welcoming and reassuring home and hearth. Since the heart of Weird Fantasy is turning the familiar, *heimlich* world on its head, let's steal a page from Freud and make the old familial seat a place of horror.

The Setting:

The characters are drawn into an old, dark house next to a still lake. Perhaps one of the characters has inherited the house as part of a bequest; perhaps the characters simply awoke inside the house with no memory of how they got there. Once they are in, however, the front door refuses to open and the windows remain closed no matter what the characters do; they can't be broken down by force, magic, or divine will. The only way out is to solve the house's mystery.

The house is unthinkable vast and full of twisting hallways, random staircases, hidden passages, and confusing rooms—it appears to have been designed at the request of a madman. The house cannot be fully explored in a day or in a week; it is a landscape unto itself and of a size far larger than it has any logical right to be. Above all, though, the house is not quiet; stairs creek, floorboards groan. And sometimes the house screams. Sometimes it speaks with a whispering voice. Words and messages will appear scrawled on mirrors. This is a house with a tale to tell.

The house's tale is wrapped up in its history. Perhaps it was formerly the home of a powerful black magician who unleashed powers that still permeate the house's walls. Or could it be that a madwoman was prematurely buried in the familial crypt and her spirit still haunts the premises? Bit by bit, piece by piece, the characters will need to assemble that history from disparate fragments; their very lives will depend on sifting the past and realizing what the house wants of them.

The Themes:

Claustrophobia—enclose, entrap, and bury the characters. Put them in narrow corridors where the use of their most powerful weapons—axes, sword, bows, etc.—is impossible. Make them squeeze through tiny portals to escape hordes of hungry, gnawing rats. Make sure that they fear their environment as much as any foe.

The Past Never Dies—something horrific happened with the walls of the house and it is up to the characters to set things right. Use portents, prophecies, scraps of discovered information in old tomes, and supernatural manifestations to make them seek resolution with urgency.

Not Every House is a Home—play with the characters' pasts by presenting distorted and uncanny versions of the objects and people that make them recall their lives before they entered the house. For example, if one of the characters has a wife, perhaps one of the servants in the house could be her twin—save for one difference that turns the woman into an *unheimlich* reminder of the world he is now estranged from.

The Foes:

The Residents—the house is home to a strange, reclusive family of an ancient bloodline. The characters will only catch glimpses of the family as they scurry away to disappear into secret passageways. The nature of the residents should remain a mystery until the ultimate scene of the adventure or campaign; of course, this doesn't preclude the residents from harrying the characters along the way.

The Unquiet Dead—the house is haunted by specters who demand satisfaction from beyond the grave. These ghosts might alternate between raging against the characters with undead fury and pleading with them to locate their bones to lay them to rest. The stronger spirits may even be able to possess the characters to use their bodies as vehicles of revenge.

The Servants—while the residents of the house might remain mysterious for a time, the character surely will encounter their servants, a race of hunch-backed, deformed butlers, maids, and cooks that live to carry out their master's orders. The cruelest of the servants will have been given the jobs of jailer, torturer, or executioner.

The Thing in the Lake—once the characters free themselves from the house, they may have to resolve the plot they've uncovered at the lake. What will rise up from the depths to meet them? Will it be the corpses of the men and women sacrificed to the residents' dark gods or a long-necked serpent summoned by their eldritch rites?

The Soundtrack:

Inside the Black House demands a soundtrack that is spectral, tragic, and manic.

Attrition, *All Mine Enemys Whispers*—spectral ambient music based on the real-life crimes of Mary Ann Cotton, a Victorian woman who poisoned her children and husbands with arsenic.

Coil, *Love's Secret Domain*—experimental industrial that manages to be both warm and unsettling.

Devil Doll, *The Girl Who Was...Death*—epic dark prog rock blood opera.

Sopor Aeternus & the Ensemble of Shadows, *La Chambre d'Echo*—the sounds of a haunted sanitarium.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others*, Brad Anderson's *Session 9*, Poppy Z. Brite's *Drawing Blood* and "Entertaining Mr. Orton," Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice*, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and "The Ghost in the Bride's Chamber," Thomas Hardy's *Turn of the Screw*, William Hope Hodgson's *The Casebook of Carnaki the Ghost-Finder*, Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, M.R. James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, Caitlin R. Kiernan's *Silk*, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, Tanith Lee's *Dark Dance*, Paul Leni's *The Cat and the Canary*, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch House," Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan*, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Bram Stoker's "The Judge's House," Lars von Trier's *The Kingdom*, Sarah Waters's *Affinity*, and James Whale's *The Old Dark House*, Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost."

Gaming Inspirations:

Castle Drachenfels (for *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play*), *Castle Amber* (for *D&D*).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Aleister Crowley, Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny*, the Loch Ness Monster, Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny*, the Winchester House.

12. The Pit Stop in Hell

“Who will survive, and what will be left of them?”

— *tagline from the Texas Chain Saw Massacre posters*

The Pit Stop in Hell isn't meant to be a campaign setting in itself; rather, it is a micro-setting to be used in-between the characters traveling from point A to point B. Along the way, something happens to sidetrack them from their destination—perhaps their horses are suddenly lamed by caltrops scattered across the road or perhaps their wagon is mysteriously sabotaged at night. Of course, just then it begins to piss down rain. But there's a lantern lit at a house off the beaten path. The characters can seek help and shelter there, right?

Draw them in and let the butchery begin.

The Setting:

A ramshackle house in the middle of nowhere. The house itself is full of secret passages, hidden rooms, and perilous traps. The basement of the house is little more than a prison for whoever falls into the Family's clutches. The house is essentially a dungeon that a family lives in. There are untended fields of grain behind the house, perfect for a chase scene in which the characters hide from and attempt to dodge a pursuing madmen armed with an ax. If they characters run far enough they will reach a plundered cemetery where the Family takes all their meals—here they will discover the final fate of the Family's captives.

The Themes:

Gore is God—if you've ever wanted a chance to indulge in lurid, splatterpunk descriptions, this is the place. Feel free to get as gross as you like; the closer you come to verbally outdoing a Cannibal Corpse album the better.

Out-savaging the savage—the only way for the characters to survive their trek into **The Pit Stop in Hell** is to become as vile and bloodthirsty as their opponents. There is no running away; there is only descending into madness and bloodlust. How far will they compromise their beliefs to survive?

The Foes:

The Family—inbred backwoods psychos, one and all. They love to murder, they're cannibals, they possess a variety of disease-ridden blades and bludgeons, and they seem impervious to pain. Make sure to differentiate them. Here's some common types: the Patriarch (or Matriarch), the decrepit head of the family who calls the shots; the Thinker, the planner and setter of traps; the Hulking Brute, large and physically powerful; the Feral Woman, she oozes animal sexuality, but like the black widow spider she kills after she mates; the Madman, even the rest of the Family is afraid of him. It goes without saying that the Family doesn't necessarily have to be fully human; they could be ghouls, mutants, or worse.

The Broken Ones—the family loves to experiment on their hardest victims, performing crude operations that stitch them together into new, uncanny forms. Of course, the process of becoming a medical monstrosity drives the Broken Ones insane. The Family keeps them as pets, watchdogs, and bloodhounds to hunt down anyone who escapes them.

Traps—while the family lives in squalor, they are adept at creating sophisticated traps. Traps such as pits, guillotines, and exploding shrapnel grenades are secreted throughout their house and across their property. The world of **The Pit Stop in Hell** is one big, mechanized slaughterhouse.

The Family's Pets—no dire wolves or mastiffs will suffice here. Give the Family something unusual they can use to hunt down any getaways. Mutant crocodiles, if the Family lives on the bayou. Trained bloodhawks, if they live in the woods. Disease-mouthed komodo dragons, if they dwell in the desert. Thrice-headed bears, if they are a mountain people.

The Soundtrack:

The Pit Stop in Hell requires a soundtrack that is brutal, loud, and gut-churning.

Grinderman, *s/t* and *Grinderman II*—psychotronic and psychosexual; the sound of a million exploitation films all playing at once.

The Misfits, *Collection I* and *Collection II*—grinning, b-movie horror punk.

Murder by Death, *Red of Tooth and Claw*—murderous parables about the cheapness of human life.

O'Death, *Broken Hymns*, *Limbs and Skin*—roughshod alternative country; primitive hootin' and holerin'.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Alexandre Aja's *Haute Tension*, John Boorman's *Deliverance*, Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game," Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes*, Xavier Gens's *Frontier(s)*, Jean-Luc Goddard's *Week End*, Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*, Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Eaten Alive*, David Moreau and Xavier Palud's *Them*, H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Fabrice du Welz's *Calvaire*, *The X-Files* episode "Home," Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects*.

Gaming Inspirations:

GURPS Horror and Kenneth Hite's *Nightmares of Mine*.

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Ed Gein, home invasions, Sawney Bean.

13. Through the Looking Glass

“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more.”

– *The Wizard of Oz*

In the third act of Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses* an exquisite change occurs in the tone and narrative direction of the movie. The preceding two reels are a standard, if inventive and compelling, example of the **Pit Stop in Hell**. However, as soon as Denise and Jerry are lowered into the underground lair beneath the cemetery they are truly through the looking glass—a fact slyly signaled by the Alice in Wonderland costume that the Firefly clan has dressed Denise in. The rest of the movie makes good on that phantasmagoric descent; gone are the more overt aping of grindhouse and exploitation cinema clichés, and in their places the viewer gets an eyeful of surreal, disjointed nightmare imagery. The fictive laws that govern the first two-thirds are suspended—the law of the Weird now holds court.

Through the Looking Glass aims to capture the power of that sudden and unexpected tonal shift. As such, it isn't a great place to start a campaign. After all, if the players don't have a familiar, comforting backdrop to yank away, then there isn't going to be much reaction to the change of mode. Rather, think of **Through the Looking Glass** as a kind of capstone for a campaign that has begun to grow stale. Perhaps the characters have put paid to the evils that lurk **Behind the Facade of the Seaside Town** and kept the **Cold Northern Winds** at bay. They've claimed a few victories and made the world a less Weird place. What better way to re-invigorate their sense of wonder by stealing the characters away from the world they've become accustomed to and plunging them into a mirror image of it that is exotic, alien, and altogether Weird? Whereas it is generally advised to mix the Weird with the mundane in your setting, **Through the Looking Glass** encourages you to go full-on Weird. There's no going back from this and you can never go home again.

The Setting:

Pick a locale that your players are comfortable with, then run it through a funhouse mirror. Add or take things away at random. Make areas that were well-trodden and known newly byzantine and complicated. Take the characters the players interacted with and make them into twisted, barely recognizable caricatures of their old selves. Whatever the “laws of physics” governing your game were, throw them out. Borrow elements from surreal fiction and films and exoticized “Oriental” fantasy to emphasize the return of the Weird. Oh, and wherever your game is set now has a labyrinth. Everyone knows about the labyrinth; rumors about its nature abound, but no one agrees on who built it, why it exists, or what lies at its heart.

The Themes:

Everything you once knew is gone—unsettle the players by radically altering the game world they've come to expect. Subvert their expectations and throw them from their comfort zone.

The rule of law is absurd—steal a page of Kafka and expose the new workings of your world as ambiguous, bureaucratic, and arbitrary. Those in power should have no right to it and less sense of what to do with it.

Nothing seems real—make the world a gauzy, dream-like, hallucinogenic place. Don't be afraid to flout the precepts of realism; this is a bad trip, not a subtle stroll through the uncanny.

The Foes:

Rakshasa—man-eating spirits confined in the flesh of aristocratic cat-men. The rakshasa and their ultimate goals should be inscrutable; forget getting a straight answer from them, as they are the servants of the Prince of Lies. Also, you can forget about keeping your plans secret from the rakshasa; the hordes of stray cats that prowl the streets act as their eyes and ears.

Mugwumps—vile insect men whose secretions act as a powerful hallucinogen that is traded openly on the gray market. Mugwumps are muses gone sour; they hold the power to inspire great works of literature and art, but the price they exact is paid in shattered souls.

The Howlers in the Wilderness—the supernatural predators that haunt the wilderness are heard, but seldom seen. Their baleful howls warn of their approach, but what are they? Are they ghuls who eternally hunger for human flesh or are they djinn who wish to capture and enslave men as chattel?

Larva Mages—mystical sages comprised of crawling insects in the shape of men. They are wise and learned in the magical arts, but for what purpose do they walk amongst mankind? It is said that for a price they can shape a man's flesh to make him pleasing to the eye.

The Soundtrack:

Through the Looking Glass requires a soundtrack that is lost in spires of incense and otherness.

Arcana, Le Serpent Rouge—Arabian-inspired exotic delights; decadent and unearthly.

Dead Can Dance, Into the Labyrinth and *Spirit Chaser*—Eastern and world music influenced sonic journeys into the fantastical.

Jaggery, Polyhymnia—prog-touched, many-hued splendor.

Visa, Maktub—a madcap musical passport to the Middle East.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

The anonymous *One Thousand and One Nights*, Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*, Clive Barker's *Weaveworld*, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, William Beckford's *Vathek*, William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*, Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* and *Neverwhere*, Nathan H. Juran's *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and "In the Penal Colony," Tanith Lee's *Night's Master*, *Death's Master*, and *Delusion's Master*, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Nameless City," "The Cats of Ulthar," and "The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath," David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*, and *Twin Peaks*, Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Clark Ashton Smith's *Zothique*, Jan Svankmejer's *Alice*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Gaming Inspirations:

Al-Qadim (for AD&D), *Dungeonland* (for AD&D), *Everway*, *GURPS Arabian Nights*, *JAGS Wonderland*, *Lacuna*, "City in Dust: Many-Columned Irem" (in Kenneth Hite's *Suppressed Transmissions*), *Over the Edge*, *Talisanta*, *The Zorcerer of Zo*

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Astral projection, The City of Brass, djinn, dream interpretations, ghuls, the Greek myth of the Cretan Minotaur, time travel.

Appendix 1: Kickstart Tables

These tables are intended to both give you some ideas for the kind of adventures you could build in the previous settings and provide a basic game outline for those times when you're suffering from a creative block. I've only written tables for the first five settings; hopefully this will give you enough of an indication of what you might do with the others. Of course, with a little twisted and re-purposing, any of these basic plot seeds could fit within whatever flavor of Weird Fantasy you're using.

The Cold Northern Wind Kickstart Table (d4)

1. *Something* has been prowling outside the outpost's gate under the cover of darkness for a week. The adventurers are tasked with venturing outside the outpost's walls, doing recognizance to figure out what that *something* is, and getting back inside to help form a plan of attack for dealing with it.
2. The monthly supply caravan is late with a crucial shipment of food. There have been reports of avalanches along the Trade Road, so perhaps the caravan has been buried under fallen rock and snow. The characters have been tasked with journeying up the Trade Road to discover what happened to the caravan and, if possible, retrieve the much-needed supplies.
3. A child has gone missing. She was last seen picking berries at the edge of the forest. Over the last month strange piping sounds have been heard emanating from deep in the woods. The characters have been tasked with finding the child and returning her to her parents' care.
4. A famous explorer arrives at the outpost with a charter from the Queen authorizing him to form a party to map the unknown regions in the howling northlands. He offers good pay and the adventure of a lifetime, but perhaps he harbors ulterior motives for bringing a company of mortals into the frost-bitten north.

Dark Medieval Times Kickstart Table (d4)

1. Signs point to a witch in the midst of the fief. The characters are tasked with rooting him or her out and putting them to swift justice. But is the supernatural afoot, or is someone being framed for a slight real or imagined?
2. The fief has paid its yearly tribute to the lord of the land, but the collectors have gone missing. They were last seen at the outskirts of the fief; the characters have been tasked with discovering the errant tribute, else the fief face a crippling repayment to the lord.
3. The peasant farmers have been struck with a strange malady that causes them to sing, whirl, and dance until they die. The characters have been tasked with discovering either the cause of this disease or its cure.
4. A dishonored knight has sought shelter within the border of the fiefdom. Why has he come to this particular land? Who pursues him? What has he carried back with him from the Holy Land?

Southern Gothic Kickstart Table (d4)

1. The patriarch of a powerful, wealthy family has died. The characters have been tasked with taking his remains to a familial crypt on the outskirts of town. They must be on their guard as a faction of town elders would like to make sure the corpse never reaches its final resting place—why?
2. The characters have been asked to escort the daughters of a old-blood family to a masked ball. To decline the pleasure would be seen as an affront to the family's honor. However, one of the daughters is not what she seems.
3. The town's pastor has asked the characters to infiltrate and investigate the doings of the traveling preacher who has set up a tent revival in the town square. What does the pastor really want of them and what is the preacher's real reason for setting himself up in the heart of the town?
4. A worker from a local plantation has contacted the characters and wishes to meet with them. The note he sent claims that he has something of terrifying importance to tell them, but before the characters can meet with him he turns up dead—drowned in the fountain in front of the mayor's home. What mystery is being concealed here? Can the characters uncover it before a secret from the town's past erupts to trouble the present?

Behind the Facade of the Seaside Town Kickstart Table (d4)

1. The characters have been tasked by a wealthy art collector with locating a painter from the seaside town who has recently gone missing. While investigating his disappearance, they will discover that his paintings have also gone missing; what horrible truths were disclosed by those canvasses?
2. The characters have been tasked by a merchant-prince with uncovering why all of the ships that have recently docked at the seaside town were never heard from again. Is this the work of a wrecking crew or is something supernatural afoot?
3. The characters have been tasked by a scholar with taking notes on a rare tome owned by the seaside town's library. While copying out the required section of the book, one character discovers something unnerving about their family history that points to the possible location of a lost inheritance that could be sought out and reclaimed.
4. The characters have been tasked by a smuggler to bring in barrels of rum through the “secret” tunnels that link the beach-caves to the ancient cemetery. Of course, the tunnels are already in use...but by whom and for what purpose?

Pilgrims in a Strange Land Kickstart Table (d4)

1. Winter is coming and the colony's food stores are perilously low. It is rumored that the lost colony had plentiful reserves of food housed in underground vaults. The players have been tasked with exploring that blighted and abandoned village. What will they find their besides sustenance?
2. Word has reached the colony that a nearby settlement is under siege. Fellow pilgrims have sent a plea for help, but they are curiously silent about the nature of their attackers.
3. Goodwife Martinette had made a habit of going into the woods alone, now she stands accused of witchcraft and adultery. Is she really a servant of the Devil or is she a scapegoat drawing attention away from the real evil afflicting the colony? The characters have been tasked with determining her guilt.
4. Ominous drums coming from the forest break the silence of the night. Something is amassing in the woods, and by the sounds of the drums it is moving ever closer to the colony. The characters have been tasked with scouting out this threat to the colony's survival.

Appendix 2: Bestiary

I'm generally in agreement with James Raggi's belief that monsters should be mysterious and that a standard list of monsters can be memorized by players and thus neutered of that vital fear of the unknown. That said, I've seen enough people begging for more sample creature for use in *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* that including a brief example monster from each of the setting sketches in this supplement seemed like a worthy idea. That said, I don't intend these examples to stand as the definitive stats for the core idea of each monster: this is how I would stat these monsters today; next week, I'd probably approach them in an entirely different manner.

The Frozen Dead

A once honorable warrior turned into a ceaseless undead marauder

Hit Dice: 4 (18 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +5

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d8 (fist slam or hand weapon)

Movement: 60'

Special: *Breath of the North*—once per day a Frozen Dead can exhale a 30' cone of biting frost that does 3d6 points of damage (half on a successful saving throw). The Frozen Dead are immune to poison, disease, and fire (any fire that comes into contact with a Frozen Dead is immediately extinguished).

Fell Pilgrim

A cultist dedicated to spreading the diseases of the plague lord

Hit Dice: 2 (9 hp)

Armor Class: 12

Attack Bonus: +3

No. of Attacks: 2

Damage: 1d4 (rune-etched ritual daggers)

Movement: 120'

Special: *Blessing from the Plague Lord*—any character hit by a Fell Pilgrim's ritual dagger must make a save vs. disease or lose 1d3 points from both their Constitution and Dexterity scores.

The Belle

A beautiful debutante by day, a ravaging femme fatale by night

Hit Dice: 7 (35 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +8

No. of attacks: 2

Damage: 1d4 (rending claws)

Movement: 120'

Special: *The Seduction of Dark Magic*—the Belle can use each of the following spells once per day: Charm Person, Change Self, Invisibility, Confusion, Shadow Monsters, Magic Jar.

Deep One

Some call them sea-devils...

Hit Dice: 2 (9 hp)

Armor Class: 16

Attack Bonus: +3

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d8 (claw)

Movement: 80' on land; 120' in water

Special: *Ichor of the Sea*—Deep Ones are covered in thick, sticky secretions; anyone attacking them with a weapon has a 25% chance of getting their weapon stuck in the Deep One's goo. The chance to free a weapon from the mess is equal to the character's Open Doors ability.

Beasts Who Walk as Men

Primordial nature spirits who take the form of bipedal beastmen

Hit Dice: 8 (40 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +9

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 2d6 (bite)

Movement: 160'

Special: *Everchanging Tooth & Claw*—Beasts Who Walk as Men can use Polymorph Self three times per day. *Come to the Wild*—anyone bitten by a Beast must make a saving throw or be infected with a disease that lowers the victims Charisma score by 1d3 points per day; if the character reaches 0 Charisma, they become a slaving maniac who retreats into the wilderness to live an utterly bestial life.

Sewer-Dweller

Hideous mutants who keep to the shadows and strike when least expected

Hit Dice: 4 (20 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +5

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d8 (hand weapon)

Movement: 120'

Special: *Born to the Shadows*—Sewer-Dwellers are so adept at stealth that they increase a character's chance of being surprised by two.

Scarecrow

Animate scarecrows who enforce the will of pagan sorcerers

Hit Dice: 6 (30 hp)

Armor Class: 12

Attack Bonus: +7

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d8 (hand weapon) or 1d4 (slam)

Movement: 100'

Special: *Deathly Stillness*—any character hit by the Scarecrow's slam attack must make a saving throw or suffer the effects of a Hold Person spell.

Crypt-Thing

An undead monstrosity that patrols forgotten catacombs

Hit Dice: 4 (20 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +5

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d6 (claw)

Movement: 120'

Special: *Forfeit thy Soul*—any character hit by a Crypt-Thing also loses one level due to energy drain.

Headhunting Cannibal Islander

Or any other barbaric savage, really

Hit Dice: 1

Armor Class: 12

Attack Bonus: +1

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d8 (weapon)

Movement: 120' (not slowed by movement in thick jungle areas)

Special: *Bloodlust Revenge*—for each hit a Headhunting Cannibal Islander scores against a character, its Attack Bonus increases by +1.

Midnight Solomon

An evil bokor with the power to enslave the dead

Hit Dice: 11 (11th level Magic-User; 31 hp)

Armor Class: 12

Attack Bonus: +1

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d8 (machete)

Movement: 120'

Special: Midnight typically memorizes the following spells—Charm Person, Feather Fall, Magic Missile, Shield, Sleep, Invisibility, Phantasmal Force, Ray of Enfeeblement (x2), Gaseous Form, Hold Person, Speak with Dead, Improved Invisibility, Polymorph Others, Shadow Monsters, Animate Dead (x2), Animate Dead Monsters.

Dust Devil

Howling demons comprised of sand, wind, and utter contempt for mankind

Hit Dice: 8 (40 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +9

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 2d10 (slam)

Movement: 180'

Special: *Dance of the Damned*—once every five rounds a Dust Devil can create a deadly sandstorm that fills a 40' area. Any creature in the sandstorm must make a saving throw or be torn apart by the tempest. Those that make their saving throws still take 2d8 points of damage.

The Thing in the Lake

An ancient beast that turns its enemies against each other

Hit Dice: 8 (40 hp)

Armor Class: 16

Attack Bonus: +9

No. of Attacks: 4

Damage: 1d6 (tentacle)

Movement: 40' on land; 200' in water

Special: *Thrall of Evil*—any character hit by The Thing in the Lake must make a saving throw or suffer the effects of Charm Person; the Thing can communicate telepathically with anyone it has charmed, but anyone subject to such unearthly communication loses an additional 1d4 hit points due to the mental anguish of having such an abomination inside their minds.

Broken One

The terrible results of meddling at the crossroads of science and magic

Hit Dice: 3 (15 hp)

Armor Class: 14

Attack Bonus: +4

No. of Attacks: 1

Damage: 1d6 (claw or bite)

Movement: 90'

Special: *They Keep Coming Back!*—Broken Ones regenerate 2 hit points per round. Broken Ones can see unerringly in darkness.

Mugwump

Insectoid beings who secrete hallucinogenic resin

Hit Dice: 6 (30 hit points)

Armor Class: 16

Attack Bonus: +7

No. of Attacks: 2

Damage: 1d4 (claw or mandible)

Movement: 120'

Special: *Psychoholic Mindslam*—any character struck by a Mugwump must make a saving throw or be poisoned by the creature's hallucinogenic resin. Roll 1d12 to determine the effects that the drug has on the character:

1-3 – the character suffers from the effects of Charm Person

3-6 – the character suffers from the effects of Phantasmal Psychedelia

6-8 – the character suffers from the effects of Confusion

9-10 – the character suffers from the effects of Hallucinatory Terrain

11 – the character suffers from the effects of Feeblemind

12 – the character suffers from the effects of Power Word Stun

Appendix 3: 3d6 Weird Monster Generator

Sometimes your players will wander off to some area you haven't really planned out. That's okay. Sometimes you'll need a monster or two to challenge them, but you won't have anything to hand. That's okay too. Grab three six-siders, roll them, line them up and follow the procedure below to come up with a random Weird monster on the fly.¹



Example roll

The numbers facing up determine the basic shape and capabilities of your monster. Compare the numbers, left to right, against the following tables:

Head

- 1 – Deformed humanoid (can communicate in the common language)
- 2 – Fleshless skull (add Cause Fear to creature's abilities)
- 3 – Ravening animal (+1 Attack, 1d6 damage from bite)
- 4 – Fork-tongued reptile (+1 Attack, 1d4 damage + poison)
- 5 – Horned beast (+1 Attack, 1d6 damage + stun on a charge)
- 6 – Insectoid with chattering mandibles (+1 attack, spits venom or acid)

Body

- 1 – Metal plated (+4 Armor Class)
- 2 – Smooth carapace (+3 Armor Class)
- 3 – Rough scales (+2 Armor Class)
- 4 – Shaggy beast (+1 Armor Class)
- 5 – Slimy ooze (immune to two of the following: fire, cold, lightning, acid)
- 6 – Elemental tempest (roll 1d4—1: Molten and steaming [anyone within close combat distance takes 1d4 points of damage] 2: Emanates freezing cold [anyone within close combat distances takes -1 to all rolls] 3: Electric pulse [anyone hitting the monster with a metal weapon takes 1d6 points of damage] 4: acidic [anyone hitting the creature must make a saving throw or have their weapon destroyed by the contact])

Arms/Legs

- 1 – Humanoid with tool-using hands (+1 Attack, damage by weapon)
- 2 – Bestial with claws (+2 Attacks, 1d6 damage)
- 3 – Writhing tentacles (+1d4 attacks, 1d4 damage + save vs. constriction)
- 4 – Simian with powerful grasp (+1 Attack, 1d8 damage from slam, can grapple)
- 5 – Gnarled ending in club-like protrusions (+2 Attacks, 1d8 damage + save vs. stun)
- 6 – Withered limbs ending in long, reaching fingers (+1 Attack, 1d6 damage + save vs. disease)

¹ The basic die rolling method in this appendix was shamelessly stolen from Zak Smith's blog: <http://dndwithpornstars.blogspot.com/2011/07/d6-cluster-table-home-that-villains.html>

So, with our example rolls of 2, 6, and 3 we've got a monster with a fleshless skull for a face, a molten body, and writhing tentacles for arms. Straight off the cover of *Weird Tales*! Better yet, for gaming purposes we've now got a monster with the following stats:

Armor Class: 12 (base 12, no bonuses on the Body chart)

No. of Attacks: 4 (rolled a 4 on 1d4 for tentacles)

Damage: 1d4 + save vs. constriction

Special: Cause Fear (from the Fleshless Skull), anyone within close combat takes 1d4 points of damage (rolled a 1 on the body chart for a Molten body)

Now, you could stop here by deciding how many Hit Dice you want this beastie to have and recording it's Attack Bonus (Hit Dice value +1), but you can also use the roll you just made to assign more abilities to the creature. Look at the numbers facing each other on the sides of the dice and consult the following table to see what other Special Abilities the monster possesses:



Look at the numbers that face each other between the dice; more info to mine from one roll!

Special Abilities

- 1-1 – Creature drains 1 level per hit
- 1-2 – Creature drains 1d4 points of (roll 1d6) 1: Cha 2: Con 3: Dex 4: Int 5: Str 6: Wis
- 1-3 – Blurred (all attacks against it face a -2 penalty)
- 1-4 – Death gaze (any character looking directly at the creature must make a saving throw or be slain)
- 1-5 – Blinding gaze (any character looking directly at the creature must make a saving throw or go blind)
- 1-6 – Creature can see in total darkness with no penalty
- 2-2 – Fear aura (any character beholding the creature must make a saving throw or flee in terror)
- 2-3 – Immune to all magic
- 2-4 – Immune to fire
- 2-5 – Can use Charm Person three times per day
- 2-6 – +2 to Armor Class
- 3-1 – +1d4 Attacks
- 3-2 – Shapeshifter
- 3-3 – Can use Polymorph Other 1d4 times per day
- 3-4 – Poisonous touch
- 3-5 – Can use Invisibility 1d4 times per day
- 3-6 – Regenerates 1d4 Hit Points per round
- 4-4 – Reflects all spells cast on it back on the caster
- 4-5 – Unholy stench (all characters within close combat range suffer 1d4 damage per round)
- 4-6 – Noisome howl (all characters within earshot must make a saving throw or be deafened)
- 5-5 – Paralyzing touch (any character struck by the creature must make a saving throw or be paralyzed)
- 5-6 – Breath weapon (3d6 damage in a 30' cone, save for half damage)
- 6-6 – Natural projectiles (can strike up to 30' away for 1d8 points of damage)

Our example roll has a 1-5 and a 2-5, giving us Blinding gaze and thrice-per-day Charm Person. Pick one of these abilities or take both for your monster—the call is yours.

You can also use the same roll to determine what special vulnerabilities the monster has. Look at the numbers on the dice on the right and left ends of your roll that face outward and compare them against the following table:



The numbers on the ends can also help define our monster

Vulnerabilities

- 1 – Double damage from fire
- 2 – Double damage from holy items
- 3 – Cannot cross water
- 4 – Blinded by bright light
- 5 – Cannot leave the area in which it is encountered
- 6 – Bleeder (loses 1d4 Hit Points per round once it is injured)

This gives us a 2 and a 6 to play with; our monster is especially vulnerable to holy items and is a bleeder. Again, feel free to take one or both of those results as you please.

Adding it all together, our creature looks like this (let's assume it's a 4 Hit Dice monster):

Hit Dice: 4 (20 hp)

Armor Class: 12

Attack Bonus: +5

No. of Attacks: 4

Damage: 1d4 + save vs. constriction

Special: Cause Fear, anyone within close combat range takes 1d4 points of heat damage, Blinding gaze, and Charm Person (three times per day)

Vulnerabilities: Double damage from holy items and loses 1d4 Hit Points per round once injured

Appendix 4: The Weird Ancient World

generously contributed by Jeremy Duncan
(visit his blog: <http://dandy-in-the-underworld.blogspot.com>)

Weird Greece

"A dead weight hung upon us. It hung upon our limbs—upon the household furniture—upon the goblets from which we drank; and all things were depressed, and borne down thereby -all things save only the flames of the seven lamps which illumined our revel. Uprearing themselves in tall slender lines of light, they thus remained burning all pallid and motionless; and in the mirror which their lustre formed upon the round table of ebony at which we sat, each of us there assembled beheld the pallor of his own countenance, and the unquiet glare in the downcast eyes of his companions. Yet we laughed and were merry in our proper way—which was hysterical; and sang the songs of Anacreon—which are madness; and drank deeply—although the purple wine reminded us of blood."

— Edgar Allan Poe, "Shadow: a Parable"

A Mythic Greek setting presents a unique paradox for gaming in a Weird Fantasy idiom. It is supremely suited for the conventions of fantasy roleplaying games—wandering adventurers, a pantheon of gods, savage monsters to be fought and overcome, perilous quests into the underworld, etc. are a more natural fit to a Greek-inspired setting than a medieval one. The gods, men, and monsters of Greek mythology are iconic and familiar. But this very familiarity and accessibility can be a serious obstacle for a Referee wishing to preserve the feeling of "the Weird" that informs LotFP. Throughout this setting sketch, I'll offer tips on how to exploit the unique flavor of a Greek-inspired setting while never losing sight of "the Weird."

The Setting:

The ancient Mediterranean—the last gasp of the Heroic Age, and the beginning of the degenerate Age of the Men of Iron. History is still fluid and murky, and legends may still be made of the deeds of such heroes as are born in these latter days. The gods still meddle in the affairs of mortals, but not so openly as they once did, and their semi-divine progeny are scarcely to be found upon the dark earth.

The known world is divided into petty kingdoms and city-states, ruled by a collection of kings, queens, ruling councils, and tyrants—the sort of upstart adventurers the PCs might aspire to, who have seized control by unorthodox means and now crouch on their troubled thrones, claiming descent from some god or hero. The great-walled city of Troy has fallen, and men will never again attempt to build on such a scale again. Even now, the PCs should encounter monumental, eerily-deserted ruins of the age that has just past, which dwarf in size and grandeur the squalid huts of their home villages. The large cities that remain should be grand, imposing, and in a state of gradual decline.

Everywhere, the signs of the gods' displeasure are evident. Women give birth to horrifying monstrosities in secret, which are kept carefully hidden or run free to despoil and ruin as they will. The roads are unsafe to travel, save in large, well-armed bands, being the haunts of brigands, monsters, and men who, living beyond the flickering light of civilization, have become little more than beasts themselves. The seas are treacherous as well, and mariners find themselves prey to reavers, petty wars between island kingdoms, and terrifying creatures of the deep, who multiply unchecked in waters far from the common trade routes.

The Themes:

Competition and Strife bring out excellence—closely tied to the concept of arete (excellence) is the idea that someone, somewhere, must be the best at a given thing, and that one must constantly strive to be the best and be recognized as such. The Greeks applied this attitude toward all facets of life—athletics, poetry, song, horsemanship, warfare, etc. In a properly Greek setting, there should be constant pressure between characters (PCs and NPCs—even on the same side) to outdo each other in feats of daring, ingenuity, martial prowess, etc. The one who comes in second is to be pitied, but the one who does not compete is only worthy of contempt. On the level of clans, communities, and city-states, this often leads to years of protracted warfare, bitter feuds, populations slaughtered and enslaved and cities burnt to the ground.

Man is mortal, glory is eternal—player characters, particularly in games like this, are rather fragile, especially when starting out. This is to their credit. The immortal gods cannot be valorous, as they can never risk death by their actions. That honor and distinction is left to mortals, like your player characters. The only way for them to achieve immortality is to perform deeds worthy of song. Play up the importance of kleos—the glory spoken of by others. This should serve as a spur to action, and a few obols here and there to the right bards and minstrels will do wonders for their reputation.

The Age of Heroes is passing away, to be replaced by the Age of Iron—while many continue to publicly uphold the ideals of the past age, they do not hold them in their hearts as they once did. Honor and Glory are sacrificed for expediency. Sons rebel against their fathers, wives murder their husbands, strangers are turned away at the door or betrayed by their hosts. Emphasize the growing sense of lawlessness, danger, and decline. Will the player characters stand out as anachronisms—boldly embodying the virtues of the Heroic Age? Or will they make the most of this unscrupulous new era?

The Foes:

The Gods—the gods are superhuman, but not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. Like mortals, they are subject to the Fates. They are by turns benevolent, wrathful, perverse, lustful, petty, and majestic, according to their whims. While the gods may walk the earth from time to time, the PCs (and their players) should never be quite sure whether they have encountered one "in the flesh." Like Nyarlathotep, they assume many guises and masks as they go about their business on earth. Keep the gods offstage for the most part—if they must speak at all, let it be through the cryptic, ecstatic utterances of Sibyls and Oracles. Since the gods are basically the personification of observable forces—thunder and lightning, wine and drunkenness, love, lust and obsession, plague and sickness, the sea, etc., let the gods manifest through unusually strong or freak displays of these forces.

Monsters—as I mentioned before, the iconic status of the monsters of Greek Mythology make tempting antagonists, but their appearances, strengths, and weaknesses are so well known that "The Weird" is compromised through this familiarity. Use monsters like Medusa, the hydra, etc., sparingly if at all. Rather, use them for inspiration to create your own monsters in a similar vein. Many of them were formerly ordinary men and women, cursed by the gods for some real or perceived wrongdoing. When designing a monster in the Greek tradition, first think of a person, and then a transgression for them to commit. Murder? Rape? Incest? Unusual cruelty? Cannibalism? Refusing the advances of a god or goddess? (never mind that the gods themselves are frequent offenders in many of these areas themselves—the laws of proper behavior are for mortals). Then think about the punishment and how this could manifest in the hideous monstrosity they've now become. A malicious gossip might now literally drip poison into the ears of her victims. A blaspheming poet might be given a voice that drives his listeners into a murderous rage. Each such monster should be singular and local to a particular area.

Outlaws, Pirates, and Brigands—these haunt trade routes and mountain passes, a symbol of the growing lawlessness of the world. Particularly memorable brigands will have some horrific trick to how they dispatch their victims. In the legend of Theseus, the hero must contend with Prokrustes, who stretches or amputates his "guests" in order to fit his bed, and Sinis, who tied his victims between two bent pine trees and then let them go, splitting them in half.

Beast-men and Wild Women—encountered in wild places. These have forsaken civilization entirely and live like beasts, often (as in the case of satyrs) taking on the features of the animals whose behavior they have come to typify. Alternately savage and beguiling.

The Underworld—wealth buried in the ground is the de facto property of Hades, and adventurers venturing beneath the earth are not only plundering the dead, but stealing the rightful spoils of a god.

The Soundtrack:

Basil Poledouris, *Conan the Barbarian* and *Conan the Destroyer* soundtracks.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Euripides's *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, and *Hippolytus*, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Tree," E.A. Poe's "Shadow: A Parable," Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Mary Renault's *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*, Robert Graves's *Hercules*, *My Shipmate*, Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze* comic book series, Appolonius of Rhodes's *Argonautika*.

Jason and the Argonauts (1963), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), Jim Henson's *The Storyteller: The Greek Myths* (1990), various Italian sword-and-sandal movies—*Hercules in the Haunted World* (1961) is particularly stylish and useful, as director Mario Bava introduces an element of horror and creepiness), *Iphigenia* (1982), *Troy* (2004) (for the visuals, anyway)

Gaming Inspirations:

GURPS: Greece, Mazes & Minotaurs and *Tomb of the Bull King*, *Caverns of Thracia* (Judges Guild), *Mythic Greece* for *Rolemaster*, *AGON* by John Harper, *Age of Heroes* (AD&D 2nd ed.), "Stealing the Histories" by Michael Curtis (article on using Herodotus as inspiration for sandbox campaigns—*Knockspell* #4), "The Dungeon as a Mythic Underworld" by Philotomy, Jonathan Walton's notes for *Argonauts* (sadly, all that was released before the project fizzled into vaporware—*Daedalus* #1).

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Herodotus's *The Histories*, Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* (heavily influenced by J.G. Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, and packed with an odd blend of scholarly erudition and wild-ass theorizing, but the book's eccentricities only make it that much better for gaming inspiration), the Eleusinian Mysteries, the palace complex at Knossos, the citadels of Mycenae, The Oracle at Delphi, the Labyrinth, Pliny's *Natural History*, the Legend of Theseus, Orpheus and Orphic cults, the Trojan War, Atlantis, Circe, Medea.

Rome: ad limites Imperii

"Inscriptions still visible in the sub-cellar bore such unmistakable letters as "DIV. *. *. OPS*. *. *. MAGNA. MAT*. *. *. " sign of the Magna Mater whose dark worship was once vainly forbidden to Roman citizens. Anchester had been the camp of the third Augustan legion, as many remains attest, and it was said that the temple of Cybele was splendid and thronged with worshipers who performed nameless ceremonies at the bidding of a Phrygian priest."*

– H.P. Lovecraft, *"The Rats in the Walls"*

Here, the players are citizens of a powerful, expanding Empire. While it may appear stable and solid from the outside, fissures appear here and there in the fabric of Empire, growing wider and deeper as it grows in influence and dominion. A Roman or Rome-inspired campaign can easily accommodate themes from **The Cold Northern Wind**, **Pilgrims in a Strange Land**, and **The Urban Weird**, but Imperialism imparts a unique flavor of its own. With some tweaking, the Referee could substitute a later empire for the Roman model presented here—imagine the film *Gunga Din* with Roman legionaries instead of British officers, for example, with the Cult of Cybele replacing that of Kali.

The Setting:

The mid 2nd-century. Rome is at the height of her power, with her borders stretching from the scorching deserts of Arabia to the freezing, forested wastes of northern Britain. All roads lead to Rome and those roads are crowded with folk of every description. Players will encounter merchants and traders on the make, crafty slaves and uncouth freedmen, soldiers in gleaming array, inscrutable Latin-mangling foreigners, bringing their strange customs and stranger gods into the Empire's very heart, aristocratic officers and administrators, burning with family pride, aghast at their own waning fortunes and the success of the upstart, lower-class "new men" who have flourished since the demise of the Republic. Here are prostitutes and actors, swaggering gladiators living in pampered servitude.

But this is all in the open. On the fringes and beneath the surface, outside the rigidly proscribed boundaries of fort walls, Roman roads, and social conventions, strangeness breeds and multiplies, and corruption and decadence take root. The plain, no-nonsense agrarian soul of Rome, the *mos maiores* (customs of the ancestors) that defeated Hannibal and brought the Greek city-states under Roman domination are themselves under constant threat. Women of good family, not content to be obedient daughters and chaste matronae forsake their duty for luxury, admitting the embraces of slaves and freedmen. They abort their lawful and unlawful offspring, the better to enjoy unabated those pleasures to which they have accustomed themselves, and concoct poisons to serve their husbands when the latter become too dull or troublesome. They make a study of charms and curses to ensnare potential lovers and punish rivals and unwilling suitors. Young men, in defiance of their manly forbears, give in to softness and effeminacy, preferring poetry and music, silks and perfumes to the soldier's boot and the sober toga of a citizen. Both seek out strange new gods, imported from far-flung regions of the empire, and attend outlandish and unseemly rites in their honor, in their insatiable desire for novelty and stimulation.

The Themes:

Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis intulit agresti Latio—"Conquered Greece took captive her savage conqueror and brought her arts into rustic Latium," Horace, Book II, epistle i, lines 156-157. Even as the Empire conquers the world without, she is conquered from within. While the Empire's strength is far-reaching and overt, dangerous elements from conquered territories work their way insidiously into the Imperial bloodstream, coursing along the arteries of Rome's roads all the way to the Empire's very heart. This is an inescapable consequence of the Empire's success, as those very qualities that once defined Rome's national character prove vulnerable to the onslaught of foreign influences as she acquires new territories and dominions. While many find Roman ideals desirable (as well as the benefits of citizenship) the attraction goes both ways, as the influx of wealth and novelties (in religion, dress, etc.) prove irresistible to a populace raised on stark, rustic ideals. Play up the "strangeness" and "otherness" of everything "non-Roman" and the constant tension between the rough-and-ready, hard-headed, practical Roman ideal, and the cultured, Greek-speaking, cosmopolitan ideal of the polished urbanite. How much polish can one acquire without a loss of virtue and good sense? Which elements from the cultures of subject peoples can be safely and usefully acquired, and which lead inevitably toward corruption, decadence, and madness?

*Others (I can well believe) will hammer out bronze that breathes
with more delicacy than us, draw out living features
from the marble: plead their causes better; trace with instruments
the movement of the skies, and tell the rising of the constellations:
remember, Roman, it is for you to rule the nations with your power,
(that will be your skill) to crown peace with law,
to spare the conquered, and subdue the proud. - Virgil, Aeneid VI lines 847-853 trans. Kline*

While the PCs themselves may be dutiful servants of Empire or (more likely) a gang of violent misfits—who else goes adventuring for a living?—the Imperial mandate exists as an ever-present stamp on their daily lives. Unusual eloquence, artistic skill, and more arcane arts are often considered somewhat suspect, at best. Slaves, freedmen, women, and religious and ethnic minorities operate, to some extent, outside the mainstream of Roman public life, and adventurers (by their very nature being unusual and extraordinary) often find themselves the victims of injustice, indifference, and suspicion from a society which stresses assimilation, tradition, and conformity. Emphasize the gulf between the PC's expected roles (gender, social status, ethnicity) with the iconoclastic realities of the adventuring life.

Patrons and Clients—the ties that bind. While many bemoan the current state of the patron/client relationship, it's still a powerful force in society. Loyalty to one's patron and (to a regrettably lesser extent) responsibility to one's clients and dependents informs everything from political and family life to religion. Roman religion, after all, is merely an extension of this relationship toward the divine—an arrangement between worshiper and deity in which the former provides honors and sacrifices and the latter provides protection and favor, in turn. When this relationship breaks down in any of these contexts, the forces unleashed are often violent, corrosive, and unpredictable.

Applicable Themes from Other Settings:

Civilization versus the Wild, Class warfare, Discipline is survival, The beacon of civilization is surrounded by barbarism

Many of these themes are already familiar to readers of Weird/Pulp Fiction—particularly in Howard (the corrupting, softening effects of civilization) and Lovecraft (the threats to civilization from barbaric and/or decadent forces), and these concerns are mirrored in Tacitus' "noble savages" portrayal of the Germans and Juvenal's xenophobic portrait of foreigner-infested Rome in the *Satires*. Referees and players must decide how much of this reactionary attitude they wish to stress in their games.

The Foes:

Barbarian Hordes from the North—huge, uncouth, and undisciplined, yet possessed of certain simple virtues that Rome herself has lost. The implacable foe is feared and hated but respected, and the Romanized native accepted to a certain extent, but perhaps viewed with some suspicion and contempt.

Barbarians from the East—cowardly, devious, and deadly. In war, they strike with lies and arrows from fleeing horsemen. In peace, they seduce and corrupt with their decadent ways and strange gods.

Sorcerers and Mountebanks—pretty much foreign by definition. At best, they will merely cheat you. At worst, their powers are real and harmful to all involved.

The Ancient Gods of Conquered Peoples, and their Cults—while Rome has co-opted and conflated many of the gods of the conquered, some are not so easily tamed or assimilated. The ancient Etruscan gods of Rome's deposed kings, worshiped in secret by citizens of certain lineages; The Great Mother Cybele, whose castrated priests are an unnerving sight as they wind their way through the streets in bizarre processions. Certain cultists of Bacchus might fit into this group, as the rites have been at times suppressed in the ostensible interest of public order and decency. What other nameless cults and orders observe their rituals throughout the empire—inimical to Rome and her allies?

Witches and Wicked Women—from withered, disgusting crones collecting the bones of dead children to beautiful adulteresses skilled in poisons, curses, and love-draughts, these represent a total rejection of feminine modesty and decorum, and leave chaos and evil in their wake. Unlike the barbarians, these women are all the more dangerous because their wickedness is masked by an outward show of venerable age or respectability.

The Soundtrack:

Peter Gabriel's *Passion* and *Passion Sources*.

HBO's *Rome* soundtrack.

The Gladiator soundtrack.

Literary and Cinematic Inspirations:

Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (sex, violence, casual cruelty, and witchcraft!), Petronius's *The Satyricon* (featuring, among other things, depraved cultists, tasteless spectacle, thieving and con-artistry, more sex, violence, casual cruelty and witchcraft, and a story about a werewolf), Catullus's *LXIII* (a shift in tone and style from his “Lesbia” poems—this is an exhilarating and terrifying account of the goddess Cybele and her consort Attis, and his ecstatic self-castration), *The Book of Acts*, the satires of Horace and Juvenal, R.E. Howard's "Men of the Shadows", "Worms of the Earth," and "Kings of the Night," misc. novels by John Maddox Roberts, the "Roma sub Rosa" series by Steven Saylor, H.P. Lovecraft's "The Very Old Folk," Richard Tierney's *The Drums of Chaos*, *The Scroll of Thoth: Tales of Simon Magus and the Great Old Ones*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*, Fellini's *Satyricon*, *Centurion*, *The Eagle*, HBO's *Rome*, *I, Claudius* (both the BBC miniseries and the Robert Graves novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*).

Gaming Inspirations:

Cthulhu Invictus for *Call of Cthulhu*, Jason E. Roberts's *FVLMINATA*, Paul Elliot's *Zenobia*, *Requiem for Rome* for *Vampire: The Requiem* (set in the Late Empire, but the long intro by Ken Hite is pure gold), Paul Czege's *Bacchanal*.

Miscellaneous Inspirations:

Lead cursing tablets, the vanished 9th Legion, Lucan's *Pharsalia* 6.588-830 (A Thessalian witch reanimates a dead soldier), *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds* by Daniel Ogden, Phlegon of Tralles's *Book of Marvels* (A 2nd century Charles Fort's account of “prodigies”), Georg Luck's *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Mystery Cults (Mithras, Isis, Cybele), Lucian of Samosata—“Alexander the False Prophet” (a hatchet-job on a 2nd century con-man and founder of the prophetic cult of Glycon—a human-headed snake worshiped today by Alan Moore), Etruscan tomb-mounds and divination with sheep's livers.

Weird Greece Kickstart Table (d4)

1. A local tyrant clings precariously to his throne. His claim to legitimacy rests on his alleged descent from a semi-divine hero of the Trojan War and founder of the tyrant's city. He will offer an exorbitant sum for the retrieval of the hero's armor, which he plans to display prominently in appearances throughout his capitol. The armor itself is huge-- larger by a half than the tallest man living, and is said to lie beneath a nearby cave, rumored to be one of the many entrances to the Underworld.
2. Women in a nearby village have been giving birth to monsters-- strange, pale, silent things with useless, elongated hands and feet, a set of pointed teeth, and the cold, black eyes of birds. What is the reason for the curse that has settled on the village, and how can it be broken?
3. A city is holding its Games when the PCs arrive. The material rewards (not to mention the fame) to be won are considerable, but the contestants are soon dropping dead from a mysterious sickness. Is this a case of poisoning? Sorcery? Some of course, will blame the PCs themselves...
4. The PCs find themselves shipwrecked on a mysterious island. The island's inhabitants (about 20 people in all) have constructed a tawdry replica of Troy out of driftwood, the hulls of other shipwrecks, and what appear to be human bones. They are all quite insane, and play out an endless drama of their own devising, drawing on elements of mythology and their own obsessions. The PCs, of course, will be cast in parts of their own. Do they attempt to play along, hoping to find a means of escape, or do they take their chances in the surrounding forests?

Imperial Rome: Kickstart Table (d4)

1. The PCs are stationed at a distant outpost of the Empire. The province is officially subdued, but can the supposedly Romanized new auxiliaries be trusted? And what of their still-barbarous cousins beyond the fort wall? Will they put aside their squabbling and unite? You can't think about that, now, as the garrison commander has just been found murdered in the settlement's new forum in broad daylight.
2. The PCs must journey to visit an important friend or patron, but the road to his villa lies beyond bandit-infested hills and lonely roadside graveyards. And what of the old Etruscan tomb-mounds that dot the landscape, and the sounds that issue forth at night?
3. The PCs are guests at a lavish party held by a wealthy local freedman. As the night wears on, the entertainments become more bizarre and grotesque, and reality blurs with strange, fevered visions. How to leave, and how to find the way home again through now-unfamiliar streets? What was in that wine?
4. A friend, family member, lover, or important contact of the PCs has disappeared while visiting the provinces. Why are the local authorities so evasive, and what's the meaning of those strange, nightly processions?