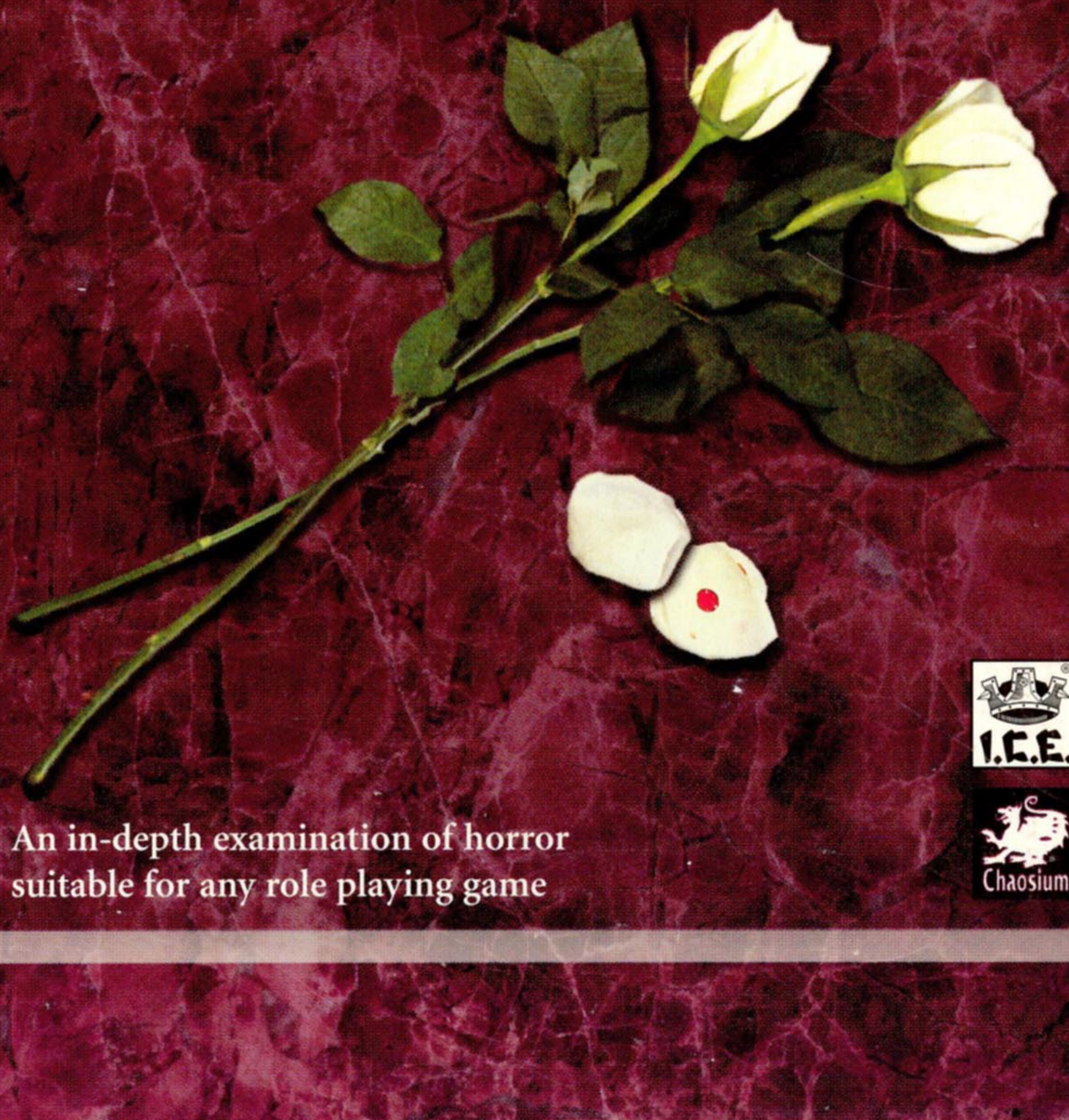
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RPG SOURCEBOOK

NIGHTMARES OF MINE™





An in-depth examination of horror
suitable for any role playing game

NIGHTMARES OF MINE™

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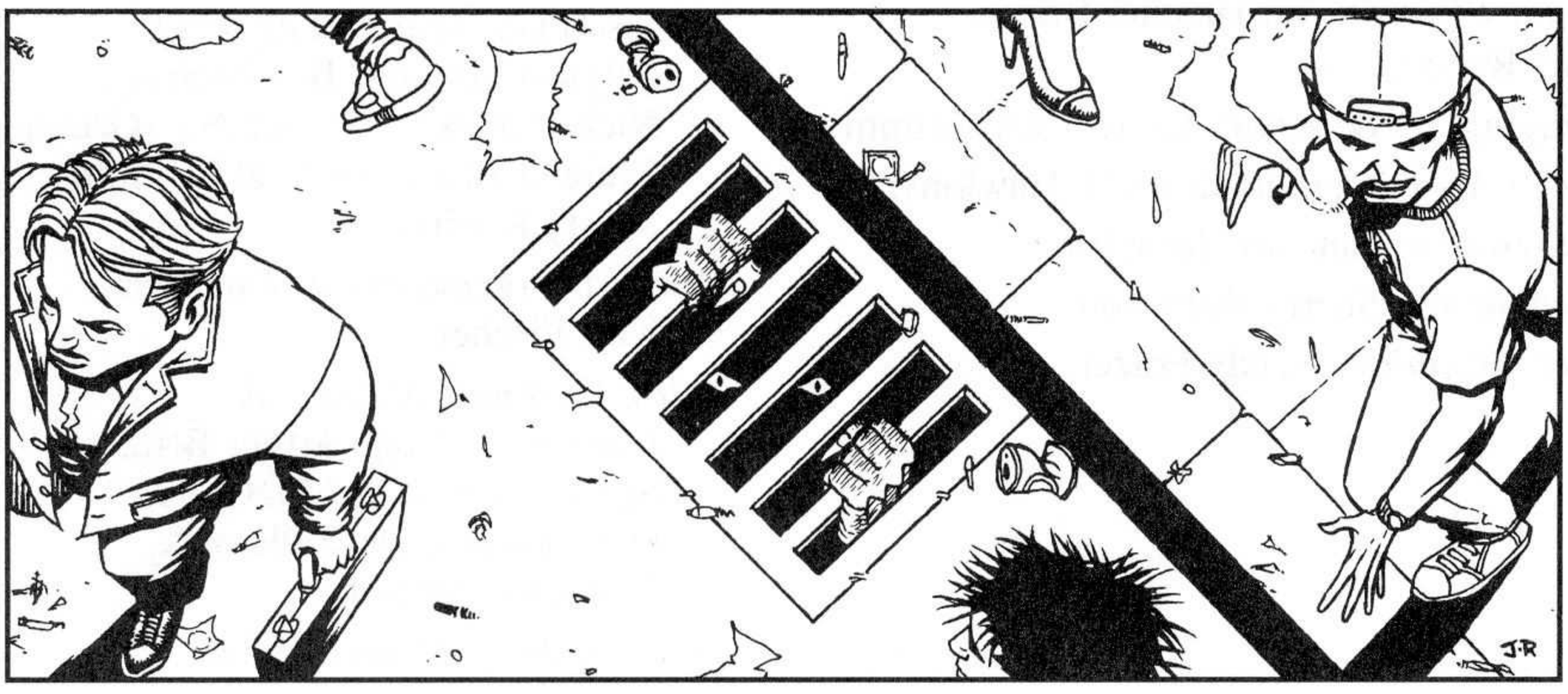
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1.0
INTRODUCTION

"Enter freely and of your own will."
— Count Dracula, to Jonathan Harker, in *Dracula*

Welcome to *Nightmares of Mine!* This book is devoted to the ins and outs of playing, designing, and running horror role playing games. Ever since the release of the first horror role playing game, *Call of Cthulhu*, by Chaosium in 1981, horror games have become increasingly popular. By now, almost a third of all role playing games bought in America are horror games of one kind or another, and all the others can be run as horror games.

This is because horror role playing is not so much a genre as it is a goal. Horror can be found in the Western stories of Joe R. Lansdale and Robert E. Howard, in science fiction movies like *Alien* or *Terminator*, in genres from pulp adventure to high fantasy. Even in a non-horror campaign, individual scenarios can take on a horrific tone. Think of the trip through Mirkwood in *The Hobbit*, or the final confrontation between the elves and the Dark Lord in a more generic fantasy game. Any game can be a horror game, if the gamemaster is trying to scare the players and if the players are willing to be scared. It is this essentially cooperative nature that makes horror gaming so rewarding, and so important a part of the role playing hobby. It's all the scary stuff that you get to play with (vampires, terror, eldritch nightmares, madness, bloody knives) that makes it so much fun.

I have been playing horror games for as long as there have been horror role playing games to play, and writing them professionally

for two years. (*Secret Societies* and *Major Arcana*, both for *Nephilim: Occult Roleplaying* from Chaosium, check 'em out!) For me, horror is the most rewarding, most interesting, and all around best kind of role playing you can be doing. I hope that reading this *Campaign Companion* will let you know why I believe that, and help you avoid some of the mistakes I've made over the last sixteen-plus years.

A NOTE ON GENDER

"He" is the traditional gender-neutral pronoun in the English language. I have used "he" and "his" to refer to players and characters, where their gender is not dictated by the context. I use "she" and "her" to refer to gamemasters, in the same fashion. Unlike most attempts to achieve gender-neutrality at the expense of grammar, I believe this actually may make things easier to understand. Obviously, players and gamemasters may be of any gender or combination thereof that they prefer, and run characters and NPCs who are likewise.

SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks to my Oklahoma City players, who saw me violate every good idea in this book at least once while I learned what I was doing, but for some reason kept showing up; Kevin Nelson, Yancy York, David Haunschild, Jeff Mosburg, Patrick Burke, Aaron Olowin, John Foster, Angela Fisher, Kit Kincaid, Alex Heatherley, and especially to Don Dennis, without whom this book (and very possibly my entire writing career) would literally not exist. Thanks to my Ada players, who watched me make a whole new range of mistakes; Shawn McMahon, Kenneth "the most powerful man in show business" Wallace, Mark Berry, Adam Farlee, Jeff Cowan, Ed Day, Andrew Browning, Joe Linden Blanton, and others. Thanks to my Chicago players, who can be forgiven for wondering by now if all role playing games are horror role playing games; Bill Brickman, Jim Koncz, Joe Franecki, Daniel von Brighoff, Ingrid de Beus, Craig Neumeier, Michael Schiffer, Ron Levy, Gint Valiulis, Ben Brighoff, Wil Flachsbart, Ted Cabeen, Steve Mulholland, Sherman Lewis, Chris Lehrich, Cullen Grace, and Allan Shampine. Thanks also to my professional colleagues in game writing, who have inspired me directly or indirectly; Don Dennis (again), John Tynes, S. John Ross, Greg Stolze, Rich "deadguy" Dansky, Robin Laws, Marcus Rowland, Ross Isaacs, Bruce Baugh and the nighted hordes of talented folk in the Chaosium stable. Thanks to my parents, for keeping that Lovecraft paperback in the garage where I could find it one Saturday afternoon. Ultimate thanks to my wife, Sheila, for everything.



2.0
THE DEEP QUESTIONS

"You wanna see something really scary?"
— The Hitchhiker (Dan Aykroyd), *Twilight Zone: the Movie*

This section presents some basic questions about horror and ways to look at horror that the interested player (whether GM or not) of horror games should ponder at some point. You can have a wildly successful horror game without ever thinking about it, of course, but reproducing that success takes thought and effort. If it turns out that the horror was a main ingredient in the game's success, having a second good horror game will take more than just a good GM and good role players.

2.1
WHY HORROR?

"There is no delight the equal of dread."
— Clive Barker

The oldest stories we have, the Sumerian epics, knew how to keep the audience: scare them. Scorpion-men, the stifling reaches of Hell, mysterious giants, and malevolent gods, all played their part in frightening the audience into coming back for more. Horror has been a part of all of our lives ever since. Five millennia of human ingenuity have gone into terrifying the wits out of people; horror role players are heir to that legacy. Horror is a matter of intent; the story teller (or gamemaster) has to want to scare the audience, and equally importantly, the audience has to want to be scared. This contract, the agreement to build the atmosphere of fear together, is what makes horror role playing more difficult than more conventional role playing, which can (and often does) function without any such agreement. Horror is also a matter of content: there are traditional elements (some of which go right back to those Sumerian epics) which everyone expects to recognize and to be surprised by. Resolving the contradiction between familiarity and shock is what makes horror, as a creative enterprise, more difficult than almost any other genre.

If horror role playing is so involved and so hard to get right, why do it? First of all, it's terrific fun. The richness of the horror genre, the deep and arcane imagery, the great flexibility of setting and story, and the sheer romance of it all make horror a natural genre for role playing larger than life stories set somewhere more interesting than the real world. The potential cast of villains and obstacles is far more interesting and varied than any dungeon full of monsters or com-

pound full of aliens ever could be. Blasting away zombies while shrieking your head off in panic just can't be beat for pure entertainment. Rollercoasters, Halloween, *Quake*, and airport bookstores are all tributes to the fact that "scary is fun." (Why that's the case is probably a question for psychologists or neurochemists, not game designers, so I won't get into it.)

Second, horror role playing is a challenge. Like any challenge, mastering the skill to weave a horrific game is both difficult and rewarding. Running any game well and interestingly is hard enough; creating real fear from it (even for half an hour) is harder yet. The role playing or gamemastering muscles you exercise while working at horror (or playing at it) will serve you well in any other role playing experience. Even if you just get together on weekends for harmless escapism, role playing (like basketball, or video games, or anything else you might do just to blow off steam) becomes more fun if you're good at it.

Finally, fear is almost the only deep, primal emotion that role playing games can access. The expression of strong emotion without direct personal involvement, what Aristotle called catharsis, is a powerful sensation, and one that might even be beneficial. Any role playing game is a better game with emotional depth, and fear is very deep while being very accessible. Fear is like a buried ocean of oil, which we are always pumping to the surface. Love is far too personal for most players (or gamemasters) to tackle, and although it has its own drama, it's not as easily done in groups or captured with dice rolls. Hatred is just plain unpleasant; people who actually enjoy hatred are few and far between, and they don't usually make very good role players. Tragedy is even harder than love to get right. Many games can successfully end on a note of high tragedy, but as a genre it can be pretty frustrating for players. Fear is a group activity; like many other emotions, it can spread and strengthen with other people to echo it. Fear is also dramatic, punctuated with climaxes and signaled by opposition; in other words, ideal game material.

2.2
WHAT IS HORROR?

"Horror, on the other hand, is fascinated dread in the presence of an immaterial cause. The frights of nightmares cannot be dissipated by a round of buckshot; to flee them is to run into them at every turn."

— Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*

If you're going to play a horror game, it is helpful to figure out exactly what you mean by "a horror game." It is also helpful to make sure that what the GM means is roughly the same thing as what the players have in mind. Surprises are all very well when the game is underway, but they can prevent a game from ever starting if the "assumption clash" is too harsh at first.

2.2.1 · HORROR DEFINED BY CONTENT

"Convention is a familiar toad in an imaginary garden."
— C.S. Lewis

Horror can be defined by its content: if a tale or game has certain elements reminiscent of other horror tales or games, then it is horror. Literary critics call these elements conventions, or "tropes." The presence or absence of tropes is the critical test that determines whether a given work is part of a given genre. Each genre is thus defined by its tropes. For science fiction, common tropes are spaceships, computers, technophilia or technophobia, other planets, lasers, time travel, and so forth. For fantasy, some common tropes are dragons, elves, mythical worlds, magic, swords, and nature-worship.

Gamemasters designing horror scenarios or campaigns should strive to combine the familiarity of these tropes with their own twist or idea. Since millennia of human culture have gone into scaring people with the concept of the vampire, for instance, it would be ridiculous to waste that effort by ignoring the archetypal qualities those millennia have built up. Vampires in games should threaten the vitality of the characters or their associates, and should seem parasitical and attractive at the same time. However, the gamemaster shouldn't be held prisoner by the trope; not all vampires have to dress in evening wear, speak with an aristocratic accent, or even drink blood. If a cyberpunk vampire communicates electronically, the characters might never see him at all: he might only announce himself as a flickering of the screen or a commonplace message in an e-mail. The victim might simply remain staring at the beautiful design on the screen for hours, typing meaningless lines as they grow weaker and paler. The only sign that their vital energy is being drained over the fiberoptics might be the slow loss of color in the irises of the victim's eyes. The characters will fear the vampirism (checking their eyes in the mirror, putting protective software on their systems, avoiding the darkened computer lab) without the players losing interest in "another boring old vampire."

A few common horror tropes are given below, with those elements that seem central to their power. Some variations and examples of each are mentioned, as well.

The Bad Place

The Bad Place is the geographic focus of evil, the "home ground" of the horror. Within the confines of the Bad Place, things tend toward abnormality — doors shut for no reason, trees move without wind, mysterious lights and sounds lurk at the corners of the eye. The haunted house is the best known Bad Place, although others include cemeteries at night, the dark woods (in fairy tales and fantasy horror), and even whole countries (Dracula's Transylvania) or planets (the world where the aliens are first encountered in *Alien*). More

than just a setting, the Bad Place somehow partakes of, or at least foreshadows or increases, the horrific behavior of the monster or villain. In some horror stories (*The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, or Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," for example), the Bad Place itself is the monster or villain.

Black Magic

In horror fiction or movies, magic is usually seen as corrupting or malevolent. Black Magic can be a weapon, a symptom, or the evil itself. Spells do not just occur in these worlds of horror, they have a sickly green nimbus, drain the life or sanity from their caster, or are gifts from dark gods or evil powers. Although some horror games allow the characters to use "white magic" such as healing spells or light spells, others make even the most benign Lay Healer spell fraught with peril to body and soul. Evil spell lists are sometimes the only ones available in horror games, emphasizing the "unnatural" (and usually horrifying) source of magic.

The Ghost

The Ghost is the spirit of the dead, chained to the earth rather than moving on to either the afterlife or dissolution. The central theme of the Ghost is that of an immaterial once-human being tied to some place or time, usually by violence or sorcery. The presence of the Ghost can be a warning of horror or the horror itself. The Ghost is often tied to the Bad Place, both thematically and psychically. The dividing line between Ghost and Bad Place blurs in such movies as *Poltergeist* or even *The Haunting*, which both center on genii loci, or the "spirits of a place." The Ghost has no physical presence, although it can be seen (glowing, floating, or otherwise appearing unnatural) or sensed (cold drafts, moans and rattles, flying furniture). Hence, an "astral projection" or "living shadow" can also serve as a Ghost; the immaterial projection of something human.

The Grotesque

Maimings, mutations, deformities, and even birthmarks have played roles in the horror tale from its beginnings. These hallmarks of the Grotesque serve to identify the horror; they are markers or tracks of its presence. From the troll's hunched back to the evil eye of the witch, the Grotesque haunts our fairy tales. (The princess, of course, is always beautiful and flawless.) In more modern horror, the scar on Mina Harker's forehead in *Dracula* is the visible sign of her vampiric contagion. The Grotesque can also show up in twisted trees, stunted animals, or other signs of unnatural decay; the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and Arthur Machen uses this trope to great effect.

The Omen

Horror never comes without a warning; the whippoorwills chirruping in the lake, the raven cawing overhead, the Gypsy prophecy, or the sound of wolves baying at the moon. More than simple "scene-

setting," the Omen serves as the invocation to the horrific events that follow. By taking note of the Omen, the viewer, reader, or player of horror "gives their permission" for the nightmares to follow. The Omen can be simply a single Ominous event, or it can run all the way to prophecies of the Apocalypse (such as those found throughout the movie *The Omen*). Often the Omen may be what causes the character to notice the Bad Place, or it may be the tracks of the Vampire. The important features of the Omen are that it occurs early in the narrative, to alert the characters to the events of the story, and its ability to convey a sense of doom.

The Serial Killer

The most modern of the horror tropes, the Serial Killer kills for no natural reason (not even an "unnatural natural" reason, like the feeding of a Vampire) and he (the Serial Killer is usually a he, both in the real world and in fiction) is seemingly unfindable and unstoppable. Premonitions of the Serial Killer can be found in the randomly homicidal actions of Grendel, the Thing From Beyond from *Beowulf*, but this trope doesn't come into its own until the crimes of Jack the Ripper in 1888. The Serial Killer demands both mobility and anonymity, two conditions of the industrial world, to become fully defined. Other monsters appear inhuman to the eye, but the Serial Killer could be any one of us — his inhumanity is invisible.

The Thing From Beyond

Originally, the Thing From Beyond lived in the dark forests or mountains where our caveman ancestors wouldn't go at night. As we moved out of the caves, the Thing inhabited "foreign, dangerous, unnatural" parts: Thrace for the Achaeans' Chimera, or Asia and Ethiopia for the Crusaders' Manticore. Now that the world has been explored and nature has been tamed, the Thing From Beyond comes from the distant past (*The Creature From the Black Lagoon*) or future (*Terminator*) or from outer space (gray alien UFO abductors) or from other dimensions entirely (Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth). It is always unquantified; the victims do not know the Thing's weakness or even if it has one. It exists only to destroy that which is natural, or (as in Lovecraft's best work) our belief in the very concept of naturalness. The Serial Killer may be one form of a Thing From Beyond, emerging from our no longer familiar or safe urban wildernesses.

The Unseelie

The "hidden race" living among us or near us might be Things From Beyond (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), Werewolves (*The Wolfen*), or simply Grotesques (as in the tales of Arthur Machen). They are a mockery of humanity either in their power and contempt or in their bestiality and (often) stunted size. In conventional fantasy, the other races are calmly accepted and live out in the open (even if they represent exaggerated types of human behavior like Tolkein's

Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits); in horror, they are not and do not. They are subterranean, or invisible, or lurking among us. Often they kidnap human children to raise as their own, an "unnatural" parody of the family. The fact that they are a race, that killing one does not mean killing them all, and that they are humanity's equal (or superior!) is the marker of this trope.

The Vampire

Vampires live by leeching the vitality of others, often through sexual predation. The tragically Gothic or eerily Transylvanian count is only one form of this trope; in addition to all the world's legends of blood-drinking monsters, the Vampire trope encompasses femmes fatales, psychic parasites, mind-controllers, and the rulers of the Conspiracy. Some theorists believe that the Vampire legend began as the embodiment of the fear of diseases, especially those spread by corpses. Certainly, the "vampirism as disease" metaphor is a common one. The Vampire has almost totally absorbed the Wanderer, an older trope of the cursed immortal that still echoes, for example, in Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*.

The Werewolf

The Werewolf is the shapechanging beast. Beneath a veneer of humanity, the naked desire to kill bursts forth in fangs and fur, or at least in unnatural behavior. The change of form and appearance are the usual keys to this trope, although the "split personality" is common to it, as well. A Werewolf need not be wolfish, or even (necessarily) a shapechanger. The Werewolf includes not only Lon Chaney and John Landis movies but the werebears and berserks of Viking legend, the weretigers of India, and even Jekyll and Hyde. The "beast within" aspect of the Werewolf has been borrowed by the Serial Killer, in some cases. Note that the urges of the Werewolf, to hunt and kill, much like the urges of the Vampire, to command and consume, are by no means unnatural urges; it is their expression and the means the monsters use to express them that are unnatural. This "understandable unnaturalness" may explain why the Werewolf and the Vampire are such long-lived and dependable tropes.

The Zombie

Where the Ghost is the spirit of the dead without flesh, the Zombie is the flesh of the dead without spirit, or with a new one. The Zombie does not merely include the many, many legends of the walking dead from Haiti to Cambodia. This trope also merged with the infant SF trope of the robot (and the far less common fantasy trope of the golem) to become Frankenstein's Monster. The mummy is another form of this trope, which also includes ghouls and things that prey on corpses and live in graveyards. This trope is almost inextricably linked with the Vampire; some walking dead drink blood, some vampires keep ghoulish servitors.

Obviously, in horror games, books, and movies, the tropes interact and influence each other. For example, a Thing From Beyond can also be a Vampire, like H.P. Lovecraft's Colour Out of Space, which sucked the life and vitality from the farm where it landed. A Serial Killer can share elements with the Werewolf: Robert Bloch's Norman Bates seems normal by day, but at night he commits foul murders in another form. Mixing and matching the tropes can lend originality to a game while still giving players the shudder of the familiar.

Virtually all these tropes center around the "unnatural." A man hunting a lion and being hunted in turn is natural; it is adventure, not horror. If the lion shows "almost human cunning," we begin to be drawn into horror. If the lion leaves the hunter's guide hanging from a tree, this is the Omen. (If the lion is a white lion, or a black lion, or has a noticeable scar or injury, then it is suddenly a Grotesque). The lion's den, heavy with the scent of predation and festooned with bloody skulls and trophies of past kills becomes a Bad Place. When the lion springs down on the hunter, it is no longer a familiar quarry but a rapacious, murderous Thing From Beyond. From adventure, we have come full circle and entered horror through the gates of the unnatural. Totally unnatural occurrences, with no connection to the everyday world, are nightmares — horror in its purest form.

2.2.2 · HORROR DEFINED BY INTENT

> *"The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule."*
>
> — H.P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror In Literature"

Horror can also be defined by its intent: horror is what is supposed to scare you, the reader (or player). This is the "artistic" definition of horror; the transference of emotion from the creator to the viewer (in film, from the director to the audience; in fiction, from the author to the reader; in role playing, from the gamemaster to the players). In this definition, horror doesn't depend on any specific element except the player's fear (or at least, the player character's fear as role played by the player).

Many writers on (and of) horror divide the genre into types depending upon the effect the writer was trying to acheive, subdividing horror by its intent. These divisions range from H.P. Lovecraft's "supernatural horror" to David Schow's "splatterpunk." These types sometimes seem to depend more upon their tropes, their content, than on their intended effect on the reader. Often this is because some tropes work better for some effects, so an author with a command of a given trope will tend to aim for a given effect. However, even without directly considering tropes, the range of horrific intent can be seen along a spectrum from the most sublime to the most visceral. I have arbitrarily divided this spectrum into three types and labeled them "dread," "terror," and "gore."

Dread

Dread is the purest drug. The essence of dread is the direct transference, from artist to audience, of the emotion of fear with no overlays and no distractions. The most effective horror is that which we conjure up in our own imagination; something so scary that we can't even name it to ourselves. That horror is what the crafters of dread are after. Dread is the reason that monster movies often don't show the monster right away; as long as you can imagine the thing that's stalking our hero (or, more likely, our heroine), you are helping the movie to scare you. Once you see the monster, there's always the risk of anticlimax; in the worst cases, you can see the zipper down his back or the jerkiness of the stop-motion. H.P. Lovecraft wrote that "the oldest and strongest fear is the fear of the unknown." Once it's known, there's a risk that it won't be as horrifying.

Many of the practitioners of dread, therefore, attempt to show the bare minimum of detail needed to create a mind-freezing circuit where nothing remains but the transmission of fear and its giddy reception by the beholder. Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" contains almost nothing whatever in the way of plot, character, or action, but succeeds perfectly in conveying dread. H.P. Lovecraft's insistence on "indescribable" and "unnamable" monsters was another such attempt to force the reader to conspire at his own frightening. Shocking things are hinted, images are blurred, and nothing is safe or certain. The "minimum detail" approach to dread helps to explain why so many of the greatest horror stories are short stories — once you have just enough detail to create dread (what Lovecraft called "cosmic horror"), you stop.

It is possible to have dread with the details, of course. These moments of pure dread are more often found in one scene of a movie or novel than throughout; maintaining that level of fear is tiring for author and audience alike. Detailed dread can be the result of the laborious building-up of hints (as in Machen's stories), a single perfect moment in a larger canvas (almost every reader has at least one such moment while reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or Stephen King's *It*, for example), or even as the climax of a horror movie like Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, or even Carpenter's *Halloween*, where the audience is expecting a satisfying closure and gets something else.

Terror

Terror is the compromise between pure emotion and pure sensation. Terror could be called pure reaction. (Note that horror seldom attempts to engage the intellect; the intellect knows you're just playing a game, and is no fun.) When the music gets tense, we get tense; when the killer jumps out, we scream. Tension and release, in increasing amounts, until adrenaline-soaked exhaustion sets in, are the key to terror. Terror is the intentional activation of the audience's "flight mechanism," the identification of the reader with the hunted victim or unwary babysitter.



Show 'em something awful, give 'em a likely-looking escape route, and then block it off!! Terror is suspense on fast-forward, the continuous looking over your shoulder for stalkers or checking the ocean for sharks. Where dread uses emotion to make its end run around the intellect, terror uses instinct. Quick images of monsters, knives, or severed body parts serve to tantalize without distraction. Where dread might only show you the scratches and dents being put in the door, terror will let you see it smash open before you run down the steps in a panic, afraid to look back.

The Gothic novels, from *The Castle of Otranto* to *Dracula* to *Interview With A Vampire*, all work for terror. An atmosphere is built, a threat is presented, escape is cut off, and the hunt is on. Novelistic terror is not as slam-bang as the movies, but it takes longer than 90 minutes to read a good horror novel — they need time to build.

Gore

Gore is horror at its simplest form; awful looking things, awful sounding things, awful feeling things. If you don't want to look at it, would rather squeeze your eyes shut than visualize the next sentence, it's gore. If dread is being paralyzed by a snake, and terror is being stalked by a wolf, then gore is seeing a really big spider on your leg.

Gore is the heart of horror; without the concept that something is appalling, or repugnant, or unnatural, the entire project would fail. That something, whether it's a fly-covered severed head or a swarm of rabid rats, has the power to frighten. Since these images have that power innately, it takes little effort to get the desired effect from them. Gore, therefore, has become the lazy man's route to horror — just add another chainsaw decapitation; if one is scary, twelve is twelve times as scary, right? Wrong. The problem with gore is that the viewer (or reader, or player) can become desensitized to it; if you've seen forty severed heads, the forty-first doesn't seem very unnatural. However, if the forty-first head starts to sing, then the audience might be surprised into dread. Make no mistake: well-done gore is just as frightening as anything else, and just as rare to see well-done.

It's important to note that the "unwatchable" comes very close to the "indescribable"; gore and dread are not as far apart as they might seem. Is the end of Tod Browning's movie *Freaks* (with the circus freaks slithering through the mud chasing the luckless Cleopatra to her fate worse than death) gore or dread or both?

It should be pointed out that none of these three types is "better" than another. When an artist and an audience connect in dread, it's like a single rifle bullet straight into our lizard brains. Terror is, by analogy, a revolver emptied in our direction, and gore is a shotgun blasting with the choke wide open. You can call one more elegant or another more honest, but the target can be hit, and killed just as dead, by all three.

The lines between these three categories blur, as well. Someone without a great fear of rats may simply find the movie *Willard* (which is full of them) merely gory; for the viewer with a serious phobia of rats, it approaches complete and perfect dread. Hitchcock's shower scene in *Psycho* was pure dread (complete with misdirection and unseen wounds) in 1960; to an audience weaned on the explicit mutilations of *Friday the 13th* it can only hope to achieve terror (there's not nearly enough gore for the third option).

Gamemasters are probably best off trying a mixture of all three elements; pure dread is virtually impossible to maintain, pure terror can easily become simple adventure or a succession of identical chase scenes, and pure gore rapidly loses its ability to shock the players. By keeping all three types of horror in the game, the only thing the players will know about the game is that it will scare them.

2.3 THE TYPE OF CAMPAIGN

"Its haunted room becomes the laboratory of workers of magic, of alchemists, the secret research room of a modern scientist—becomes, in general, the mysterious hidden chamber where the terrifying element is housed."

— Eino Railo, *The Haunted Castle*

The myriad types of role playing campaigns can be easily transformed into horror role playing campaigns, whether initially and overtly, or covertly and on the fly (see Section 7.2.7, Bait and Switch). The tropes and intent of horror, after all, have held together remarkably well for millennia; there's no reason that they can't translate to any given setting or time period.

2.3.1 · THE FANTASY CAMPAIGN

The great strength of the fantasy campaign as a horror campaign is the capacity for design that the gamemaster has. Every element of the fantasy world can, in theory, be built to support the atmosphere of horror and the tropes or themes that the gamemaster wants to highlight. This allows a great unity of theme and effect that will go a long way to building the proper atmosphere.

The great weakness of the fantasy campaign as a horror campaign, on the other hand, is that the world is harder to believe for the players. Horror depends upon emotional involvement for its power; if the players haven't accepted the world or any of its inhabitants as "real" for the purposes of the game, they won't be as frightened of its horrors or as concerned for its inhabitants.

The cure for this weakness is to concentrate on fantasy's strengths. Not only can the gamemaster build the world to her specifications, she can also build it as deep as she needs to involve the players mentally and emotionally. This is part of the reason that character hooks (see Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4) and, more generally, character backgrounds, are so very useful in fantasy role playing games.

Although there are many different flavors of fantasy, they usually fall within one of the types discussed below.

High Fantasy

High fantasy is the type of game that most role players are instinctively familiar with. Dragons, wizards, elves, and the whole arsenal of fantasy tropes from Tolkein and others are often thought of as the defaults for a role playing game. Like any other type of game, high fantasy can be turned to horror.

To retain and use the elements of high fantasy, while still providing fear for the players and genuine challenges for the characters, is not as easy as it sounds, however. Like science fiction horror, the

elements of the genre tend to make characters very powerful; powerful characters are harder to realistically threaten, especially more than once.

The gamemaster should make every effort to craft the horrors, therefore, to emotionally involve the characters whether they physically threaten them or not. One of the conventions of high fantasy is that powerful wizards or mighty warriors end up as kings; a horror that threatens the lowliest peasants in the kingdom indirectly threatens the king.

Many high fantasy games or game worlds (or other sources) have many very powerful monsters, villains, or magics which can be used to threaten the characters in a more conventional sense, of course; the key is to keep them horrific in addition to being merely dangerous. This might be as simple as making the Great Dragon into the Great Skeleton Dragon. By itself, that's a pretty unpleasant image. Now combine the Great Skeleton Dragon with the themes of plague, famine, and pestilence; give the Dragon armies of rats and locusts to command, posionous breath, and undead servitors made of the dried husks of starvation victims. Let the dragon's poisonous breath magically poison wells and cause horrible creatures to emerge from the tainted ground. Say that the dragon lairs in a miasmal swamp, a vast graveyard, or even in the famine-depleted towers of a once-mighty city. Now, you have a set of horrific images that even the hardiest warrior or most devoutly mighty cleric might find daunting.

Any standard fantasy element can be made horrific in this fashion. High fantasy horror demands creativity of execution on the part of the gamemaster, but it is far from impossible to carry out.

Low Fantasy

Low fantasy is, as its name implies, the "low-level" version of standard high fantasy. This type of campaign is often played by gamers looking for more personalized challenges than the high-powered fantasy campaign can offer. These are, of course, exactly the sort of challenges that horror games offer as well. Low fantasy is therefore an admirable match for horror gaming.

The low-fantasy campaign can be set in a high-fantasy world where the characters are far less powerful than the other actors. Scale is kept prosaic, often using a localized campaign structure to keep the characters in the Thieves' Quarter of a mighty city, for instance. Or, the characters can be powerful, but not godlike. Magics cannot lay waste whole cities, or even whole squads of orcs. Even the most puissant warrior is hard pressed by four or five brigands. This "grim and gritty" or "realistic" fantasy makes an excellent match with historical fantasy, as well.

Dreamworlds

Dreamworlds are a fairly odd subset of fantasy. The game world is the shared unconscious of all human dreamers (as in H.P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands stories), or the Place Where Dreams Come From (as in the *Sandman* and *Dreaming* comic books), or even the dreaming mind of one person at a time (as in Graham Masterton's *Night Warriors* series). The form it takes is completely up to the gamemaster (or world builder), and can vary without warning. One minute, the characters can be in a nightmare about high school; the next minute, they're fighting for their life against vampires in a black desert. This mutability plays well with high levels of unreality, and can be the trigger for a lot of horrific effects.

Dreamworlds needn't shift capriciously, of course. Either the gamemaster or her source material (or both) can lay down the "laws of dream" or simply state that the archetypal unconscious doesn't shift much. H.P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands, for instance, don't alter radically, and it is the quality of the imagery and the picaresque elements of the narrative that give them their dreamlike feeling.

The horror gamemaster running a lot of adventures in dreamworlds will have to walk a fine line between conveying the uncanny and surreal atmosphere of a dream while giving the characters enough to "hold on to" that they can advance the action at all. Players, as well, need to be given some reason to involve themselves in an environment that, almost by definition, doesn't play fair or make a lot of sense.

Swords and Sorcery

Swords and sorcery is a specific type of fantasy. It privileges physical prowess (whether Conanlike toughness or Grey Mouser-like skill) over magic and ideology. Cunning is rewarded, but only the villains ever seem to make elaborate plans. Heroes stumble into these treacherous intellectual designs and either chop their way out, cheat their way out, or get out by blind luck. The world is often as brightly-colored as a Hollywood set, and for much the same reason. The twin ends of the swords and sorcery axis are Robert E. Howard's Conan series and Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser series. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that both Howard and Leiber were excellent horror writers.

Swords and sorcery horror campaigns will tend toward the picaresque; one self-contained story or short story arc after another. Most swords and sorcery is low fantasy, although high fantasy variants have been done, such as Glen Cook's *Black Company* series. For the campaign to succeed, the villainous (or occasional monstrous) threats should always have very different flavors to prevent the onset of the Scooby Doo syndrome (see Section 8.7.1). Also, the players should come to like and know their characters and the gamemaster's world so well that they give up some flexibility in options or depth of development for the chance to play in that particular setting.

2.3.2 · THE HISTORICAL CAMPAIGN

"The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror."

— T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"

The historical campaign is usually another type of fantasy campaign, called "historical fantasy." In this type of campaign, the adventures take place on Earth in the historical past, but with the additions of the supernatural and magic. The magic is almost always kept secret, and the actions of the supernatural beings are not openly known to most of the world. Only the players and certain NPCs (their mentors or friends, and the victims of the evil) are aware of the supernatural horror lurking behind the surface. This is also called a "secret history" campaign; historians do not record the magic and supernatural occurrences of these times, or if they do, they explain them away as legend, coincidence, and superstition. Most historical horror novels are secret histories, although some are more closely tied to historical characters and events than others. Secret history is easier to run in a low fantasy environment, and that's how most historical campaigns turn out.

A high fantasy game can be run in a historical setting. The gamemaster will need to explain why nobody seems to notice what's going on, however, since high fantasy is pretty obvious. If the campaign is set sufficiently far back in history, of course, many people of the time can be perfectly aware of what is going on — only modern historians will believe that there was no evil sorceror-Pharaoh or vampire khan. Dreamworld fantasies can be run in any historical era with no problem, of course.

More so, the gamemaster may also decide that the supernatural nature of the world is blatantly obvious; everybody knows that werewolves rule the Holy Roman Empire, or that zombie pirates roam the seven seas. This becomes an "alternate historical fantasy" campaign; books like Brian Stableford's *Empire of Fear* or Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula*, both of which set aristocracies of vampires in power in alternate-historical versions of "the real world," are good examples of this subgenre of horror fiction.

Historical horror is the most diverse subgenre of horror; some examples of historical horror subgenres are discussed below.

Ancient History

Ancient historical horror is the closest to high fantasy; as discussed above, tales of deadly monsters and mighty heroes are staples of all ancient mythologies. Despite this (or because of this), most gamers who want the feel of high horror fantasy simply cut out the middleman and set the campaign in a fantasy world. This is sort of a shame; the more you read about any ancient mythology or history, the more

opportunities for horror will occur to you. The gamemaster does not have to follow the lead of the Victorian anthropologist J.G. Frazer, who traced all Indo-European mythology to a bloody human sacrifice cult, but life in ancient times had a brutality to it that can easily translate to horror.

One particularly ripe period of ancient history is ancient Egypt. Its myths of life after death, dismembered gods, and the unknown beast which the dark god Set used as his mask are all guaranteed to creep the flesh of any modern gamer. Egypt is the origin of our tales of ghouls, mummies, and the curses of the dead. Mesopotamian mythology is similarly gruesome (the myth Frazer traced everything to was the Mesopotamian story of Tammuz and Ishtar), but is less accessible to modern players without a lot of research. The first recorded vampire stories come out of ancient Babylonia, however.

Ancient Greece is another familiar period for gamers; the problem is that the Greek myths were polished for millennia to remove the sordid bloodthirstiness that makes for good horror gaming. Whether the familiarity outweighs the amount of research gamers would have to do to find the horrific meaning behind the mad female worshipers of Dionysos, or the true significance of the mutilation of Kronos, is up to the individual group.

Ancient Rome is also familiar, and it has the advantage, like Egypt, of being associated with particularly gruesome and memorable events. Gladiatorial games, mad Emperors, and vile secretive cults are all excellent fodder for horror. There are Roman legends of ghosts, necromancy, and blood magic that are easily found by any gamemaster who looks.

Medieval History

Medieval Europe and its legends are the very source material of the standard fantasy game; every player will be immediately familiar with at least the basic outlines of medieval society and legendry. In the last couple of years, medieval horror has also been more available in game stores. Players looking for knights and dragons in their horror may, of course, still elect to build a custom-made fantasy world rather than face the daunting task of doing the research to make a medieval horror game come alive.

Assuming the players are willing to make the effort, however, medieval Europe more than repays them. The Vikings and Saxons, with their tales of barrow-wights, ogres, evil dwarves, and prophetic fatalism, almost seem to be born to be backdrops for horror gaming.

Similar use can be made of medieval fairy legends; the Unseelie trope is alive and well in many medieval minds at this time. Players fond of Arthur Machen or similar horror fiction can easily set his tales of corrupt and debased hill folk in the Middle Ages, when the stories he drew on are bad news, not dark memories.

Finally, Arabian Nights horror has been a steady, if minor, stream in horror fiction since the Gothic novel *Vathek*, set in the palace of the lord of the evil djinn. Medieval characters can encounter the djinn, ghuls, and other haunts of the desert while on Crusade (Dracula became a vampire while fighting the Turks slightly later than this period), or the whole campaign can take place in the lands of Islam.

Historical China

Another historical area with a lot of existing gaming material, China makes an intriguing setting for a horror campaign. The amount of research necessary for strict historical accuracy may seem daunting, but as long as the players know less than the gamemaster, she can get by with memories of Jet Li Hong Kong action movies and a well-thumbed book of Chinese ghost stories.

Four millennia of Chinese history can't really be summed up in a paragraph or two; suffice it to say that the Chinese take on ghosts, demons, vampires, and other familiar tropes of the horror genre will keep players in a state of giddy, uncertain dread for months. Any style of horror from epic pulp kung fu terror to subtle psychological dread to Taoist cosmic horror can be run in the vast expanse of Chinese history and legendry.

Swashbuckling Horror

With the coming of gunpowder, most fantasy worlds can no longer compete with one or another version of this world's history. The source material becomes, if anything, more accessible and more complete. Historical novels such as the works of Dumas and Sabatini are also available in great numbers to add flavor and brio. Thus, most swashbuckling campaigns are historical ones.

The swashbuckling era, roughly 1550-1750, contains, in addition to the requisite pirates and musketeers, a number of elements of interest to the horror gamemaster. Most of the actual legends of vampires (including Elizabeth Bathory, the Blood Countess of Hungary) take place during this period. The piratical wars over the Caribbean are rich territory for voodoo campaigns (Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides*, combining voodoo and piracy, is required reading for such a game). Real-life Satanism existed in Louis XIV's Versailles, and the Great Witch Hunt was in full swing. London's aristocratic Hell Fire Club practiced black magic (or at least decadent orgies) suitable for games of conspiracy and high intrigue.

With the opening of the world in the Age of Exploration, the main themes of pulp horror and Things From Beyond come alive in the swashbuckling era. The beginnings of science also date to the swashbuckling period; a science fiction campaign set in the England of Isaac Newton or the Italy of Galileo could have all manner of horrific overtones.

Gothic Horror

The Gothic novel, from which the modern horror genre descends and where many of its tropes were first formalized, has its beginnings at the tail end of the swashbuckling era. Between Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764, and Charles Maturin's 1820 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* an entirely new kind of story was invented, formalized, and endlessly repeated with one or another theme emphasized for a (small) note of variety.

In Gothic horror, the landscape is tempestuous or foreign (or both); a sense of wildness obtrudes on the action. The main setting is the haunted castle; more generally, an antiquated or anachronistic building with some elements of the supernatural at least conjecturally present (such as ruined abbeys or rambling, centuries-old mansions). Those elements themselves are often antiquated or at least exotic (paintings, statues, suits of armor, crypts and grottoes). The villain is a dark, powerful, fascinating man with a mysterious or supernatural past; the source of our modern impression of the vampire, among other things. The hero and heroine are young, innocent lovers (usually blonde or at least "fair"). The evils stem from some ancient family tragedy, usually one tying the villain and the heroine together. Eventually the evils are vanquished and love is rewarded.

The specter, the dream, the mysterious stranger, and the fascination with religious ritual are all elements present in the earliest Gothics. By the turn of the century, they were amplified with elements of the German "terror-tale" such as the magical cure, the femme fatale, the ghostly bride or groom, insanity, and physical metamorphosis. These tropes can be seen in modern horror stories to this very day.

A pure Gothic horror campaign would be an interesting combination of historical anachronism, recurring unreality, prosaic scale (although handled in an epic manner) and dreamlike imagery. Characters would be relatively powerless except when their natural passions (love, purity, faith, etc.) are invoked. An imaginative gamemaster might not even need to restrict it to its natural late-eighteenth century England and Europe for its full effect.

Western Horror

The Western genre is one that every gamer is at least roughly familiar with. To combine the familiar with the uncanny is the very soul of the horror experience; horror and the West go together well as a result. The Western horror game can be as simple as running any other historical horror game. Transplanting vampires, werewolves, or any other horror trope to the Old West is certainly possible and often successful.

However, the epic, almost mythic themes of the Western give the gamemaster an opportunity for something even grander. From the alienation and psychological horror possibilities inherent in the "lone gunslinger" archetype to the cosmic horror and desolation that can come

from examining the intrusion of "civilization" into Lands Where It Does Not Belong, the myths of the Western can easily be seen in darkened, frightful colors. The casual acceptance of deadly violence can itself become a horror theme. Indians can be seen as elements of the Gothic "wildness" (as Hawthorne, among others, saw them) or as the ultimate innocents, crushed by forces they could barely comprehend. The conventional John Ford Western theme of the protection of the innocent and the corruption of violence is almost a Gothic in itself. Finally, the collapse of the Southern slave plantation culture gave rise to both the "Southern Gothic" horror subgenre and many rootless wanderers with psychological scars: ideal character types, in other words.

The Western environment also has unique elements that can easily be turned into specialized Western horror tropes: the traveling medicine show, the abandoned mineshaft, the riverboat and the mournful train whistle, San Francisco's mysterious Chinatown (and a town named Tombstone), and of course the whole concept of the ghost town itself.

Victorian Horror

Many of the classic works of horror literature are set in Victorian England (or its immediate successor, Edwardian England). The works of Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson, William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, M.R. James, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (along with such real-life horrors as Jack the Ripper) have made Victorian England an archetypal horror setting. In truth, it almost seems to have been designed to serve as one. The stark contrasts between the polite society of the rich elites and the Darwinian struggles of the poor can support virtually any kind of horror beneath the surface. The vast British Empire can bring horror home from anywhere in the world. The advances in technology are only outpaced by such beliefs as spiritualism, race memory, and the occultism of the Golden Dawn (all ideal subjects for horror games).

Victorian horror can be played in any style. Splatter-minded gamemasters can explore the killings of Red Jack, pulp horrors (or madness-and-dream hallucinations) can swarm from the opium dens of Limehouse, paranoia can flourish with the beginnings of the military-industrial complex (or Communism, or UFOs, or any number of menaces born in the Victorian world) or the machinations of the Freemasons (or vampires, or theosophical master races, any other suitably pedigreed Secret Masters), and cosmic horror can sit on the hills behind Stonehenge and even older structures.

The amount of source material, both historical and horrific, is overwhelming but has been summarized well and often both in games and elsewhere. Enough modern authors have discovered, emphasized, or created similarities between Victorian England and our own time that almost any modern horror campaign can be set in the 1890s as easily as the 1990s.

Pulp-Era Horror

The era 1918-1939, between the world wars, is the great era of the pulps, and the greatest of them was "The Unique Magazine," *Weird Tales*, the spiritual home of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and H.P. Lovecraft. Other pulps, from *Black Mask* to *Astounding* to *Doc Savage Stories*, also published the occasional horrific tale, but the *Weird Tales* generation defined horror for decades. The carnage of World War I had swept aside much of the taste for genteel or traditional Victorian horror; the jaded 20th century demanded horrors deeper, richer, and more modern. The monsters became more exotic, the mysticism more lurid, and the action more brutal.

The history of the pulp era is also a natural for horror campaigning. Prohibition turned millions of people into criminals overnight and created a criminal syndicate that thrived on murder and violence. The second great era of archaeology was opening, and the far corners of the world were being explored — a natural source for armies of Things From Beyond. Spiritualism and "ghost-hunting" was even more popular in the 1920s than it was in the 1890s as millions tried to communicate with loved ones lost in the War. Weimar Germany provides a decadent backdrop for expressionist horrors of shifting reality, as well as conspiracies and secret societies aplenty (among them, of course, those perfect game villains the Nazis).

The pulp era, of course, is a natural for pulp style horror campaigns. Iron Crown's *Pulp Adventures*, for example, is full of source material for an entire pulp style campaign. It (and other books on and of the period) can also be mined for material for any campaign set in the pulp era. Cosmic horror is the other natural style for pulp era campaigns; the work of Einstein destroyed the 19th century's confidence in natural law, and H.P. Lovecraft exploited those new fears (and others) in his work. Between the "pure pulp" tradition and the Lovecraftian tradition, there is enough material in the 1920s alone for a hundred years of horror campaigning.

World War II Horror

A less-often exploited, but still rich, historical era for horror is World War II itself. It is certainly difficult to find a clearer struggle between Good and Evil for even the pulpiest gamemaster to base her campaign on. The forces of Good, meanwhile, have enough dark sides (from Stalin to Hiroshima) for the most psychologically subtle explorations of human (or inhuman) evil. This vast moral range leads to a vast range of options in horrific themes to explore.

Of course, a World War II horror campaign need not be concerned with deep themes. F. Paul Wilson's *The Keep* and Robert McCammon's *The Wolf's Hour*, for instance, contrast the conventional supernatural against the horrific backdrop of the war but are otherwise "normal" horror stories.

2.3.3 · THE MODERN CAMPAIGN

"For a time we hope there will be an answer in this projection of the formless fears abroad in our world of technological annihilation and savage ideologies, but the terror and dread only pile higher."

— PTA review of *Invaders From Mars*

The modern horror campaign can be seen as either a low-tech version of the science fiction campaign or a disproportionately broad segment of the historical campaign. The advice to gamemasters of both types of horror applies here: avoid letting the characters have more power than the horrors they must fight, and know your background material well.

The modern era can potentially place vast amounts of firepower, equipment, and information at the fingertips of the characters. The gamemaster should make sure that neither of these is any higher than she intends them to be; taking guns and computers away from modern characters is less easy than taking candy from a baby, but it creates much the same reaction. This is not to say that characters in modern horror games should be kept unarmed and ignorant. Much of the special horror of modern gaming comes with the realization that not even all the ammunition and megabytes in the world can stop a really determined modern horror. Much of the enjoyment of modern horror comes in trying.

Knowing the material is easier in a modern horror game; most modern horror novels and virtually all contemporary horror movies are set in the present. The gamemaster can research things like store closing times, travel times, prices, and top car speeds far more easily for modern settings than any others. Even her wild guesses will be closer, since she's extrapolating from her own environment and personal experience. However, errors or unbelievable moments can break the players' suspension of disbelief faster in the modern subgenre. This may only be because the players have a better intuitive grasp on what is plausible in "the real world," even a version of the real world that contains mind-controlling aliens or punk-rock vampires.

Some subsets of modern horror gaming are explicated below. None of these types of games have to be set in modern times, of course, although most of them assume a "modern" default. UFO horror, for example, can be set any time in the last century with no trouble (and any other time or place with rather more work). Neither superheroes nor conspiracies are limited to the present, either; adjusting them is even easier.

Modern Monsters

The standard modern horror game is one that adds supernaturalism to the modern world. In addition to the vast majority of modern horror novels and movies, TV series like *Kolchak: the Night Stalker* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* illustrate some of the possibilities for

such a campaign. Using the "modern monsters" setting can allow the gamemaster to more fully explore the fearsome implications of a horror trope in the modern world; the absolutely familiar is juxtaposed with the uncanny. By making the background "our world," the uncanny elements stand out in greater relief.

This can be both a blessing and a curse. Having a clearer sense of the uncanny makes the moments of horror more unnerving, if they are introduced in such a way that the transition is only clear in retrospect. It also helps the characters to focus on the story and specifically the horror elements within it. This can lend thematic unity, narrative force, and general coherence to a campaign.

On the other hand, having the supernatural elements stand out can detract from the realism of the game world, even if it's our world. Since the supernatural is so obviously apart from the real world, the players can remove those elements from their setting and consider them only as threats to be countered rather than as part of the horrific universe the gamemaster is attempting to evoke.

UFO Horror

Mysterious glowing disks defying natural law and leaving unknown poisons in their wake, are understandable objects of dread. There's more to UFO horror, however, than missing time and threatening messages from the stars. Carl Jung called the UFO the "modern myth of things seen in the skies." Scratch a myth and you'll draw horror, and UFO mythology is no different. The UFO mythology has its own take on the pantheon of horrors: its Unseelie (and Vampires) are the gray aliens who mutilate cattle, abduct the innocent, and live in underground caverns beneath Area 51, its Bad Places are the crop circles and tangled forests where the saucers land, its Black Magic is forbidden and poisonous technology, its Omens are flashing lights and sudden car failures. Once again, it may not be any coincidence that Whitley Strieber, for example, is both a gifted horror novelist (*The Wolfen*) and a well-known exponent of the reality (or at least *one* reality) of UFOs (*Communion*).

UFO horror has most often been intertwined with conspiratorial horror, and is associated with the paranoia-and-secret-war style of horror gaming. It's rich in material for both, of course. However, any gamemaster who investigates the seamy underside of UFO lore will find ample material for any other style of horror role playing; a pulp horror game could center on a government team that battles UFO-spawned evil all over the world, a characters-as-monsters game could cast the characters as good aliens attempting to stop the evil ones while the ignorant human world slumbers, psychological horror or madness-and-dream style horror could concentrate on the harmful effects of UFO contact on delicate human minds, and a cosmic horror style UFO campaign could slowly uncover the truth that the aliens are bringing from Outside.

Conspiratorial Horror

This particular brand of modern horror plays on the fears of alienation and isolation that much modern horror evokes. However, it combines them with fears of observation and stalking that are among the oldest human fears. When further combined with some feared Other (godless Communists, brainwashed assassins, faceless corporations, gray aliens, occult secret societies), conspiratorial horror flowers in all its poisonous glory. Conspiracy literature and mythology flourish in times of great social change when people seek reasons, even frightening ones, for the turmoil in their lives. The modern age is one such time, and most conspiracy horror games are set in the present.

The tropes of horror fit well with the theme of the conspiracy; the Unseelie lurk among us, the power of Black Magic corrupts (as does all power), nobody can tell who the Werewolf is, and the Conspiracy wishes to turn us all into Zombies. The Vampire is a classic conspiratorial villain: a rich foreigner who lives by invisibly draining the lifeblood of decent people everywhere. Other tropes of horror can easily be given a conspiratorial touch by the inspired gamemaster.

Paranoia-and-secret-war would seem to be the natural style for conspiratorial horror role playing games. Although paranoia is an important feature of the conspiratorial horror type campaign, it need not be the only feature, or even the central feature. Pulp style horror, for example, can root out conspiracies with only a tinge of paranoia attached to them (as in the Fu Manchu novels of Sax Rohmer). Conspiratorial horror can be used metaphorically in a psychological horror game, or can be the framework of a madness-and-dream style game. Even cosmic horror melds with conspiracy, if the Secret Masters aren't even human. Indeed, the sole comfort of the conspiracy myth is that someone cares about your fate, even if they are malevolent. In a cosmic horror style conspiracy game, the invisible machinery crushes the characters by accident.

Superheroic Horror

Superheroes, like the mighty warriors and omnipotent wizards of high fantasy, are hard to threaten and even harder to scare. Low-powered superheroes are easier to scare (and are essentially the protagonists of many pulp horror adventures), but they're far from the common superheroic mold. Superheroic horror is a tricky type of campaign to run. An individual scenario in a superheroic campaign might be scary (especially if the heroes have lost their powers or are in their secret identities), but if every single session sees the heroes mysteriously lose their powers only to be trapped in a haunted house then nobody will want to play any more. To successfully run a superheroic horror campaign will require similar techniques for making high fantasy horrific: involve the characters in the horror even if it doesn't threaten them directly, restrain their powers for some plausible reason, or simply make the supervillains really, really scary.

Unconventional horror styles might work better in the superheroic setting than "standard" horror does. A psychological horror game might find superheroes even more vulnerable to doubt and self-loathing than normal people, who don't have the outlet of being able to fly. Superheroes in madness-and-dream games might be made vulnerable more plausibly and scared more effectively than in the normal world. Cosmic horror might simply outpower the heroes, while paranoia-and-secret-war games might pit them against other superheroes or simply leave them unsure of who their targets are.

An odd version of superheroic horror is the characters-as-monsters style game; vampires, werewolves, and ghosts (for example) traditionally have powers on a par with those of many superheroes. Placing them in a world full of other superpowerful beings who are not seen as horrible monsters by everyone around them might point up their plight even more convincingly, and it would certainly give them no shortage of suitably strong opponents.

2.3.4 · THE SCIENCE FICTION CAMPAIGN

"In space, no one can hear you scream."

— publicity poster for the movie *Alien*

It can be very difficult to run a satisfactory horror game in the science fiction environment. As mentioned earlier, many elements of science fiction tend to increase the power and options available to the characters, while horror's interest seemingly lies in limiting them. What the gamemaster must do to keep the sense of speculative dread alive is to use the genre's strengths against the players. Computers can correlate information that draws a very disturbing implication. Psionic powers can simply be yet another way to perceive things that shouldn't be perceived. New planets can be very Bad Places indeed, and we all know that spaceships are very horrifying hunting grounds for malevolent aliens. A spaceship (especially a derelict lost for centuries in a dark nebula) can even be haunted by conventional ghosts. New technologies can create new monsters and new problems. Cloning, braintaping, memory chips, and other advances can be used profitably for paranoid or sophisticated psychological horror games. The simple message of dehumanization in some science fiction is frightening enough to many people that it can profitably become the theme for a horror game. That, after all, was part of the theme of that classic science fiction novel *Frankenstein*.

The complementary tactic for the gamemaster of science fiction horror is to take away the characters' technological crutches. If the ghost-haunted derelict ship also has power and computer outlets incompatible with the characters' equipment, they are suddenly restricted to their wits and guts. There's no reason to think that vampires are any more affected by blasters than they are by bullets, and horrific Entities From Outside Euclidean Space-Time are the very

negation of all that scientific progress stands for. In the end, it comes down to matching the threat to the characters, just like all horror — if the threat has to be escalated, the gamemaster has entire universes to draw upon.

B-Movie Horror

Not quite pure science fiction, but certainly not historical horror, the horror of the B-movies of the 1950s and 1960s is its own little branch of the family tree. Since so much of it sprang from scientific or technological fears, I classify it with the science fiction horrors. The general message of the B-movies was surprisingly nuanced, despite its black-and-white presentation: science creates horrors that only science can put down — but putting them down simply breeds new horrors in their stead. This surprisingly durable theme eventually came to encompass many of the tropes of more "normal" horror; the Unseelie (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), the Zombie (*Invaders From Mars*), the Vampire (*The Thing*), and any number of Things From Beyond.

The natural temptation is to play B-movie horror in a silly style, as pure camp (or at least as pulp horror). While that's certainly workable and fun, it gives short shrift to the subject matter. Paranoia-and-secret-war is another very logical style for B-movie horror, as fears of radiation and fallout invisibly poisoning bodies were easily transferred to fears of invasion by Communists or shapeshifting aliens, or both. Cosmic horror is another natural outgrowth of many B-movies from the ancient survivals like the *Creature From The Black Lagoon* to the malevolent alien races and cosmic scale in such movies as *Five Million Years To Earth*.

Cyberpunk Horror

Although the natural ancestor of the cyberpunk genre of science fiction is the hard-boiled noir thriller, the overlap between cyberpunk and horror is natural. Both present vast powers that are either uncaring or actively malevolent, both deal with the struggle to remain human against sometimes overwhelming odds, and both have sharply conflicted attitudes toward technology. Finally, of course, cyberpunk is not really about any kind of reasonable future; it's a metaphorical look at the present. Using cyberpunk as the basis for a horror game is therefore no harder (and thanks to the exaggerations of the metaphor, it may even be easier) than running a modern horror game, once the gamemaster has found or written a suitable cyberpunk world.

Cyberpunk horror can be played, like modern horror, in any of the various horror styles or in standard "modern monsters" mode. Splatter style horror, for example, shares much of the metaphorical baggage that cyberpunk possesses; so much that some splatter novelists refer to themselves as "splatterpunks." Both cyberpunk and splatter writers argue, for instance, that stylistic excess and a voyeuristic love

of appearances (even, or especially, unpleasant ones) are essential components of "truthful" writing. Pulp style cyberpunk horror is possible, meanwhile, by playing up the linkages that cyberpunk has with pulp style noir fiction: the loner (or group of loners) walking the thin line between the law and the criminal world; in horror, they walk the thin line between the innocent and the monstrous. Psychological horror is a natural for cyberpunk, and the omnipresence of bionic or genetic modification in cyberpunk makes characters-as-monsters a viable cyberpunk style as well. The unreal worlds of virtual reality or cyberspace might serve as the playing field for a madness-and-dream style horror game, and the bleak outlook and message of alienation that cyberpunk carries is only reinforced by the conventions of cosmic horror. Finally, of course, the operating assumptions of the cyberpunk genre are the same as those of many paranoia-and-secret-war style games from the superpowerful military-industrial complex to the omnipresent surveillance equipment.

Post-Holocaust Horror

Stephen King's *The Stand* and Robert McCammon's *Swan Song* are both classics of horror fiction that depend on the destruction of civilization not only for their power but for their backdrop. The post-holocaust story itself depends on the "horrible amidst the familiar" that much "straight" horror tries to invoke. In some horror novels, like Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, the horror caused the end of civilization; in others it merely blossoms among the ruins.

As a setting for horror role playing games, post-holocaust demands less work than most science fiction: only the Big Disaster (or Disasters) need to be worked out in any kind of consistent detail, since the world is (almost always) near-present Earth. Post-holocaust can also be used as a fantasy setting, if the disaster that ended civilization was magical or supernatural. Many styles of horror gaming can function in post-holocaust. Splatter, pulp, psychological horror, characters-as-monsters (whether mutants or more "traditional" ones), madness-and-dream, and silly styles of horror game work just as well in post-holocaust settings as in any other. The only two styles that post-holocaust works against are paranoia-and-secret-war (which usually requires a functioning, even byzantine, society) and cosmic horror (which loses much of its power if the world is *already* destroyed). Even these are not beyond the scope of post-holocaust horror. If the sides in the secret war survived the holocaust (which they might if, for example, they caused it), then it's back to business as usual. An interesting post-holocaust setting might be one in which the cosmic horrors have won, and the characters play the dregs of the Resistance, battling transdimensional evil in its time of power.

Horror In Space

The space-traveling science fiction campaign is simply globe-trotting writ large. The gamemaster's primary job is to build a convincing universe, and populate it with truly alien horrors. These alien horrors will probably conform to the various basic tropes of horror on one level or another, but their manifestations should be (literally) unearthly if the players are to remain immersed in a truly futuristic and interstellar setting. If, for instance, each alien species is simply a different kind of vampire (draining blood, or salt, or water, or mental force, or whatever), the campaign will rapidly turn tiresome. The details that are so important in horror gaming generally become even more important in space-traveling science fiction horror; not only must the gamemaster build a world with every phrase, she must make the characters' surroundings, capabilities, and options even clearer than normal.

Any style of horror can function in a space-traveling campaign, although the traditional space-traveling horrors have been either pulp (C.L. Moore's *Shambleau*, for instance) or psychological-splatter (*Alien*). Cosmic horror is a natural mix with space travel; the larger the gamemaster makes the (believable) universe, the more horrific becomes the discovery that it will be snuffed out by something even larger. If the gamemaster has developed her future society enough for the players to appreciate it (or depend on it), paranoia-and-secret-war becomes a viable far-future horror style. Madness-and-dream doesn't depend fully on its setting, and the conventions of science fiction become more grist for its mill. (The same observation applies to silly horror, of course.) Characters-as-monsters can work in space travel settings, whether the players portray "normal" monsters in space (as in C.S. Friedman's vampire sf novel *The Madness Season*) or monstrous aliens.

Horror In Time

Besides Brian Aldiss' *Frankenstein Unbound* and *Dracula Unbound*, the traditional time-travel story has been little used for horror. However, it makes an excellent mechanism for joining many different aspects of historical horror in the same campaign. A time-travel campaign where the characters battle Egyptian mummies, medieval Unseelie, and Victorian black magicians, each on their own turf, could be a globe-trotting horror campaign on a tremendous scale. Time travel can also serve as the linking mechanism for a long-running paranoia-and-secret-war style game, or be played for purest pulp.

The eon-long scales of cosmic horror can make time travel almost as reliable a source of horrors as psionics are; the mayfly span of human history can be brought home to the players simply by direct personal comparison. At higher levels of unreality, horrors from outside time itself can easily battle characters in any year; if the thing controlling the characters' travel through time is also the hideous evil they are trying to stop, the gamemaster has a lot of potential for horrifying developments.

A variant on time-traveling horror is to have the same group of players take the roles of characters in campaign arcs a century (or more) apart. The players might play characters in antebellum New Orleans in one arc, and those characters' descendants (or reincarnations) in pulp-era Europe in the next. The villain in each arc can be part of the same ancient conspiracy or even (in the case of a vampire or immortal black magician) the same villain.

2.4 CAMPAIGN STYLES

"Then there are Ceremonies, which are all of them important, but some are more delightful than others...."

— Arthur Machen, "The White People"

Regardless of the genre or subgenre, the campaign can be played in any one (or more) of the traditional horror styles. It is usually a good idea to stay with one style primarily, since they (like horror in general) all depend on repetition, conventions, and shared themes to build mood and develop dramatic unity and convincingness. That said, it's often a good idea to briefly change the mood within a campaign to avoid staleness and to allow the players (and gamemaster) to exercise unused creative muscles. Even if the idea of running a pure non-horror scenario doesn't appeal to the gamemaster (see Section 8.8, Palate Cleansers), the players will often appreciate a brief one-shot scenario that lets them see their characters in a different light. Who knows? If the players' interest is flagging, a shift to a whole new style might be in order; a campaign with that kind of "fresh blood" in its veins can gain a whole new lease on unholy life.



Some of the most important styles of horror and their characteristic themes and conventions are given in the following sections. Gamemasters shouldn't feel imprisoned by any given convention, but they should be aware that these common themes function within a style much as the tropes of horror (see

Section 2.2.1, Horror Defined By Content) do for horror itself. It can be very hard to evoke the proper style without at least some nod to the themes that have made it worth evoking in the first place.

2.4.1 · SPLATTER

> *"Everybody is a book of blood. Wherever we are opened, we're red."*
>
> — Clive Barker, *Books Of Blood*

Splatter is horror that elevates gore above dread or terror; horror that glories in the physicality of severed limbs, bright arterial blood, and flyblown corpses. The goal of splatter is to force open the eyes of the players, to make them actually see and feel the results of horror. Often, splatter is combined with a subversive political message implying that the "normal" world is built upon a foundation of horrors and that nothing is truly safe or innocent. (This, interestingly enough, is where splatter and cosmic horror can meet, in their common insistence that normality is just refusal or inability to see the inevitable horror around us.) In less politically-charged contexts, splatter's goal is simply to bring our suppressed fears into the light either for their shock value or as a refining ordeal.

Gamemastering in the splatter style requires at least as much discipline as any other if the recitations of wounds, atrocities, and general unpleasantness is to avoid becoming hackneyed and lose its power. The gamemaster should be able to vary the types of horrors described while keeping each horrific image vividly alive in the players' minds. Keeping the characters alive is of secondary concern. Splatter can be profitably used as a source of information about the campaign. This can be done directly, by conveying important plot developments and clues in the gruesome descriptions (which gives the players an incentive to pay attention rather than blotting out the unpleasantness of the imagery), or indirectly, as a signal that "things are getting worse" (or "are not as they seem"). Indirect uses of splatter as information can turn into the use of splatter as metaphor; this specific use of splatter mixes well with other horror styles such as madness-and-dream, characters-as-monsters, cosmic horror, or psychological horror.

Building an entire campaign around splatter-style horror, where the escalation of grue is the theme of the campaign, is certainly possible, but the gamemaster should make sure that players want to engage in a welter of blood over the long haul. If so, splatter can be used as the horrific element in a near-conventional "hack-and-slash" role playing game or as the dominant image in a subtle exploration of social and personal disintegration; it is capable of supporting either of these goals or anything in between.

2.4.2 · PULP

Running horror in the pulp style means running *it more intensely*, more earnestly, and most of all more thrillingly. If horror role playing is about conveying the emotion of fear, the pulp style is about conveying thrills. The pulps had their origins in the "penny dreadfuls" of Victorian London, and their successors in the paperback originals and cheap horror movies of today's supermalls, but their heyday was the era between the world wars. For this reason, pulp style games are often recent-historical games set in the "pulp era" from 1918 to 1939. However, any era or type of gaming can be played in the pulp style; what separates pulp is its attitude of fast-paced or high-colored excitement rather than the specific accoutrements of the Jazz Age. Hence, pulp style gaming is often called "cinematic" style gaming; concentrating on emotion and effect rather than on realism and detailed story.

The greatest danger in pulp style horror is that the game will cease to be horror and become simply adventure. There's nothing wrong with adventure role playing, of course, but if the gamemaster or the players (or both) are expecting horror and not getting it, disappointment may set in before everyone can adjust to pure adventure gaming. The key to keeping pulp horrifying is to intensify the dark themes and dark colors of the villains. Let the players sense what exactly is meant by "unutterable evil" when the Insect God's minions feed in a kindergarten. Pulp responds well to gore and terror, and pulp style horror gamemasters are advised to concentrate on those standbys. The fast pace and emphasis on emotion that pulp demands makes the intellectual content of dread much harder to convey.

For an excellent treatment of pulp-style role playing for the *Rolemaster Standard System*, gamemasters and players are encouraged to see *Pulp Adventures* from Iron Crown.

2.4.3 · MADNESS-AND-DREAM

> *"For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad I am not — and very surely do I not dream."*
>
> — Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat"

Madness-and-dream style horror role playing is role playing that accepts, embraces, and makes a virtue out of unreality. It emphasizes the uncanniness and frightfulness of a world (or a mind) without constants. Many of the conventionally frightening images are used in madness-and-dream style horror as representations of something even more frightening; the fear of insanity.

Madness-and-dream style horror works well with paranoia-and-secret-war style horror, cosmic horror, and psychological horror, especially, but elements of madness-and-dream can be used in any hor-

ror campaign. The fear of mental decay is almost as strong in most people (and is even stronger in some) than the fear of physical decay that powers the trope of the Grotesque. Madness-and-dream style horror campaigns should aim for a unity of effect or a constancy of theme to offset the changing nature of the setting. Players should be able to detect a method in the madness, in other words, so that they can act meaningfully, even in the context of meaninglessness.

Dreamworld fantasies often depend on a muted or less-radical implementation of the madness-and-dream style, but it should always be lurking beneath the surface in its full glory. Other fantasies can utilize some of the same thematic elements as madness-and-dream, but will need to "signpost" any overtly madness-and-dream scenarios to avoid blurring the line between the "real" fantasy world and its "unreal" parallels.

2.4.4 · CHARACTERS-AS-MONSTERS

"I eat cannibals
It's incredible
You bring out the animal
In me."

— Total Coelo, "I Eat Cannibals"

Characters-as-monsters style games have become very popular in the wake of the success of the World of Darkness games such as *Vampire: the Masquerade*. The central horror of such games does not necessarily rest on the even-more horrific enemies that the characters must face (although the "conventional" methods of horror can be very useful in such situations and scenarios), but on the horror of the characters' monstrous state. Characters-as-monsters style games center on the horrors of isolation and alienation, self-hatred, and angst.

These can be very powerful themes, but care must be used to prevent the campaign from becoming emotionally stale or monotonous. This can be varied by introducing other styles, or by occasionally emphasizing the paradoxical rewards of monstrousness — the beauties of the night, the glories of extra senses, and the feral joy of the hunt. Of course, if the central horror of isolation and alienation is too successfully removed, the campaign will become a more conventional "adventure" game, similar to a "straight" superheroic campaign or pulp adventure game.

In general, characters-as-monsters style campaigning depends on the gamemaster to maintain a sufficiently fearsome and intricate world background. The horrific nature of everything the character perceives thus reinforces the character's own horrific nature; the world as metaphor for the character's soul. By battling the evils of the world (in suitably horrific fashion), the evils within the character's monstrous nature are also kept at bay. This interpretation can also work well with a psychological horror style game.

2.4.5 · PARANOIA-AND-SECRET-WAR

"Possibilities for paranoia become abundant."

— Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

The paranoia-and-secret-war style of horror is most often associated with conspiratorial horror games. It certainly gains much of its power and effectiveness from tropes used in that type of horror; the all-pervading and omniscient conspiracy, the mysterious strangers, the hidden currents and motives affecting even the most commonplace things. However, paranoia can be a style of horror in any type of game. The central key to the paranoia-and-secret-war style is the lack of information.

Even when something is known, it always has more implications than the players realize, or a hidden meaning that reverses what the characters thought about it. Paranoia is the "intellectual" equivalent of the "sensory" madness-and-dream style or the "social" characters-as-monsters style; no knowledge can be trusted. (All three styles can, obviously, be combined to good effect, as in the World of Darkness.) This creates a great deal of doubt and uncertainty in the game world, in the players, and in the horrors created.

The other side of the coin is the secret war. Even if you don't know anything, someone is out to get you; this is the ingredient of many Hitchcock films, for instance. The enemy works in subtle ways, but never forget, there is an enemy. This is the certainty that the paranoid style must have to be a workable game. In less paranoid games, the secret war remains a viable structure for any number of campaigns; the hidden hand can be the unifying theme to a series of story arcs, rapidly throwing a seemingly picaresque campaign into a new (and, hopefully, horrifying) light.

2.4.6 · COSMIC HORROR

> *"The one test of the really weird is simply this —whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim."*
>
> — H.P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror In Literature"

Cosmic horror derives its power from the immensity of its horror; the horrors are bigger than the world, older than the world, and in some sense create and underlie the world. The horrors can't be escaped, evaded, or defeated; the only thing that keeps the tiny pockets of innocence that feeble humans call "normality" in existence is that the horrors have no reason to act directly against it. They will win in millennia; to them, millennia are the same as seconds to us. In cosmic horror, all knowledge is dangerous (much as, in paranoia, all knowledge is doubtful). Everything that seems to explain the world

simply reveals more of its innate horror and madness (the parallels and overlaps with madness-and-dream and splatter style horror are obvious, here).

A cosmic horror style campaign can be greatly rewarding, once the players stop thinking about "winning" and start thinking about sharing the feeling of fear. Even a short-ranged, minor victory becomes a triumph; one person saved from the madness and death of the Things Outside is a success made infinite by its very triviality. Any type of game can be run as cosmic horror, although it does tend to require a more "intellectual" culture than many fantasy worlds possess. Like conspiratorial horror, cosmic horror is more fun if the players recognize the world being horrifically revealed in their characters' eyes.

*L*ovecraftian horror is the classic model for cosmic horror, but there are numerous other possibilities. The keys are to keep human goals, powers, and beliefs very small in the actual scope of the campaign world; and eventually widen the visual scope to reveal this fact. Even high fantasy can become cosmic horror if the potentials of nonhuman, immortal races are played to their fullest. The elves' reticence is no longer shyness, but pure and dispassionate disinterest. Any style of horror carried to the utmost extremes of nihilism can become cosmic horror, if the gamemaster allows it to.

2.4.7 · PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR

"The horror! The horror!"

— last words of Kurtz, *Heart of Darkness*

Psychological horror explores the effects of horrors on the psychologies and personalities of the characters. Much "literary" horror, such as Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, James' *Turn of the Screw*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is explicitly psychological in nature. Much "popular" horror, like the serial-killer novels of Thomas Harris or even Stephen King's *The Shining*, also draws from this well. It is even less "victory-oriented" than cosmic horror, since the theme of the game is the disintegration of the characters' beliefs under unimaginable stress. Characters-as-monsters style horror is a more metaphorical treatment of psychological horror themes, just as madness-and-dream style horror can be. Where madness-and-dream is about the disintegration of the characters' intellect, psychological horror is about the destruction of the characters' soul. Given its dependence on the proper degree of decay in character ability, will, and personality, psychological horror should probably not be attempted with newer role players. Even very experienced role players might not want to explore their character's failure directly.

However, for the player looking for a change from stories of triumph, victory, and personal empowerment, the narrative of psychological disintegration can be a welcome and powerful option. Psychological horror games can be more or less symbolic and metaphorical in substance and style, and elements of psychological hor-

ror can be used even in "standard" horror games. Even in psychological horror, of course, there can (and should) remain the possibility of redemption and rebirth; a game where the characters are doomed to fail can be just as tedious and predictable as one where the characters are destined to succeed.

Psychological horror is similar to the noir genre, in which alienated characters become damaged by the corruption around them. In more conventional horror, of course, isolated characters become damaged by the literal evil around them. The connection can swing between these two narratives, or hew more closely to one over the other. The trick in psychological horror is for the gamemaster and players to realize when some horror really damages the psychology of the character, and when it merely creates a physical scar. Survivor guilt, the corruption of power, callousness toward life, skeptical hatred, and other emotional injuries should have as much of a role in psychological horror as gunshot wounds, claw marks, and half-healed fang bites.

2.4.8 · SILLY

> *"A seven-foot specter of evil appeared in front of the car, so I ran over it. Sounded like a bag of laundry going under. Hope I didn't hurt the tires. Want a Fig Newton?"*
>
> — Sam, "Sam and Max on the Road" by Steve Purcell

The final style of horror to consider is horror played for laughs. Silly horror should alternately frighten the players and break them up. This can be a tough alternation to maintain over a long campaign. Many silly horror games are one-shots, although given a robust enough framing story, a silly horror campaign can continue for a surprisingly long time.

The connection between comedy and death is not as far-fetched as it might seem; failed comics "die on stage," while succesful jokes "kill the crowd." Many of the funniest things around can be made scary with surprisingly little work (as in Gahan Wilson's short masterpiece "The Sea Was Wet As Wet Could Be," a classic horror treatment of a Lewis Carroll poem), and scary things can be made funny even more easily (as in Gahan Wilson's cartoons, or Roger Zelazny's *A Night In The Lonesome October*). This connection can also be used to good effect in madness-and-dream style horror, or as a particularly black joke in a more conventional horror game (see also section 6.3.4).

However, the ultimate purpose of silly horror is to have fun. To that end, the players and gamemaster should all agree that the game is supposed to be silly, and to not sweat the rules or reality, or anything else, too much. Monsters shouldn't be deadly, and neither should characters; both should be in a continually shifting balance where even death is an inconvenience, and the most powerful gun can be stopped up with a convenient carrot. Don't force anyone to play a silly game, especially if they take their role playing seriously. Everybody loves a straight man, but nobody wants to be one, especially in a role playing game where everyone else is goofing off and being, well, silly.

3.0
CAUGHT IN THE TOILS: ROLE PLAYING HORROR

"Rather, there seems to be inside us a constant, ever-present yearning for the fantastic, for the darkly mysterious, for the choked terror of the dark."

— Carlos Clarens, *Horror Movies*

Horror involves a degree of work and understanding from both the gamemaster and the players. Role playing horror, while not as involved and difficult as gamemastering horror, is still not always as easy as it looks. Some especially useful techniques can be used in other role playing genres, as well.

3.1
HOW IS HORROR DIFFERENT?

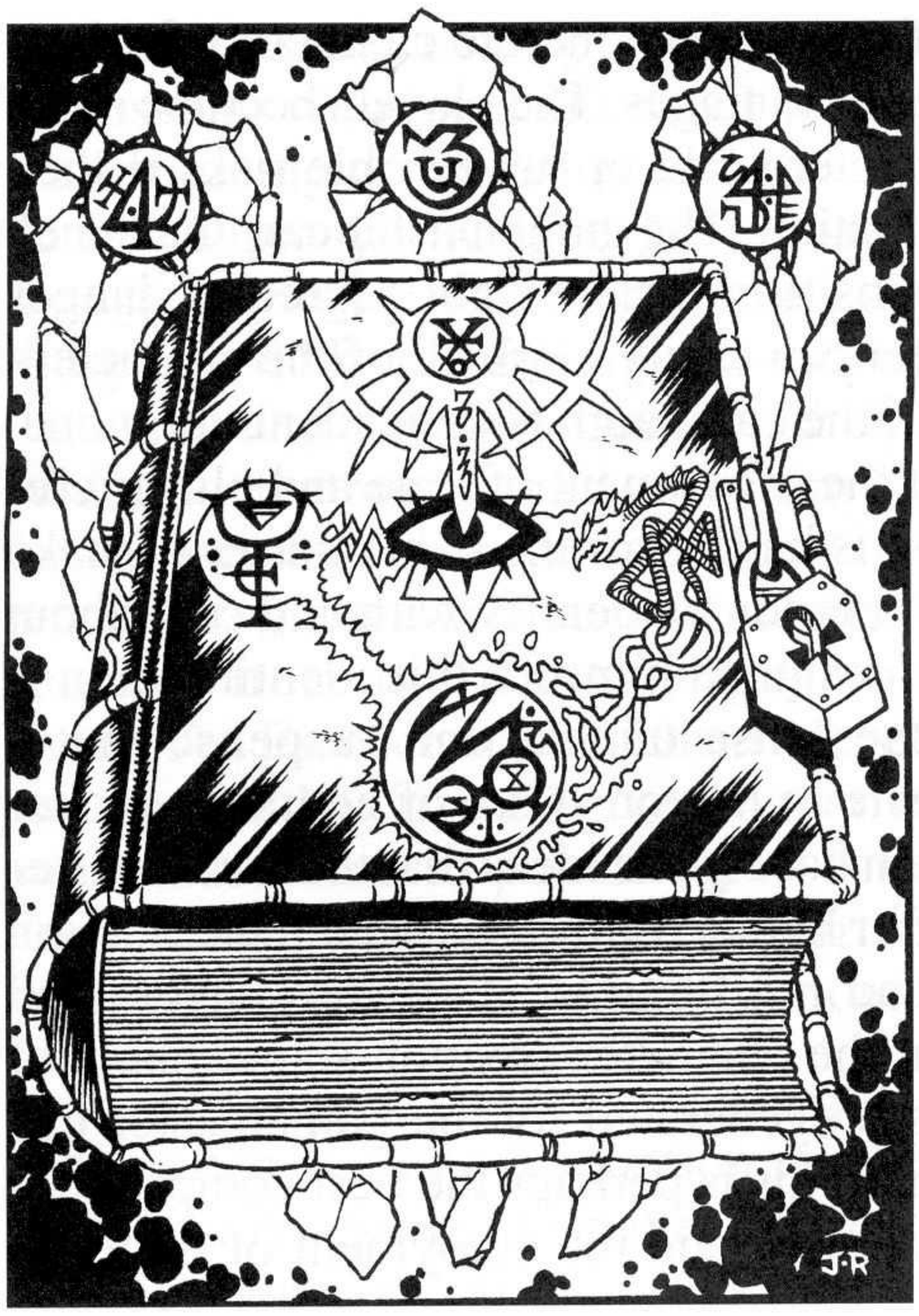
"One criterion for horror fiction is that we are compelled to read it swiftly, with a rising sense of dread, and [with] so total a suspension of ordinary skepticism, [that] we inhabit the material without question and virtually as its protagonist; we can see no way out except to go forward."

— Joyce Carol Oates, "Reflections on the Grotesque"

Horror role playing is different from other kinds of role playing experiences. Not only do the players need to handle all the normal minutia of their character's development, they need to work collaboratively to maintain the atmosphere that the gamemaster is trying to build. In any game, poorly timed jokes or out-of-character comments are rude. In a horror game, they can be fatal to everyone's enjoyment of the adventure.

In addition, many of the details of character creation, development, and play can differ when the goal of the game is not only to gain experience and go up levels but to enjoy the mood of the uncanny that the gamemaster and other players will be building. The character's goals, of course, will still be to survive and thrive — nobody needs to play the girl who always goes to the crypt alone at midnight in her nightgown, unless they really want to.

The point of horror role playing, like all role playing, is for everybody (gamemaster and players alike) to have fun. In horror, that fun comes from building an atmosphere of fear together. In some games, the fun comes when the players compete against the gamemaster and against each other. The gamemaster throws in a trap, the players es-



cape it; the gamemaster throws in a monster, the players kill it; the gamemaster throws in a magic sword, the players fight over it. In horror games, the traps and monsters (and even the magic swords) are still there, but they are just tools with which to build the game. If the gamemaster works at building a horrifying scenario and the players wisecrack through it, kill all the mummies, and loot the haunted castle, nobody won. If the gamemaster slaughters the players with an endless army of vampires, leaving them frustrated while he gloats at their incompetence, nobody won. In horror role playing, whether the players killed the mummies or were swarmed by vampires, everybody only wins if the players were creeped out. This means that players have to cooperate with each other and with the gamemaster, and that the gamemaster has to take her responsibility to tell a scary story seriously and work at doing it right.

3.2
BUILDING A HORROR CHARACTER

"Oh them bones they make them bodies walk
Them bones, them bones
If they could only talk!"

— Oingo Boingo, "Dead or Alive"

Character creation is always a key part of role playing. In horror, this is even more true, as the player's crucial personal investment in the horror will be determined by their character's background. Everyone in a traditional fantasy role playing game wants treasure (if only to give it to the more deserving poor). Not everyone wants to see the Vampire Lord defeated; if a character is evil, he might even want to join him! Therefore, the player should make certain that his character concept will mesh with the gamemaster's vision of the horror campaign.

Some gamemasters go so far as to pregenerate characters for horror games. This has some clear advantages. The players become more willing to sacrifice their character's life or run terrible risks if they didn't invest the time in his creation. The gamemaster can "balance" the characters against the opposition for the right degree of danger and suspense. The gamemaster can easily work all of the characters into the same plot or theme, if the campaign is dependent upon one.

On the other hand, without the investment of time and player creativity in character creation, it is harder for the gamemaster to make the horror "personal." A player tends to identify with and care about a character that he created or designed himself; this identification is a very important pillar in the sense of fear and suspense that a gamemaster will want to create in horror. Also, of course, a player designing a character will often have good ideas that the gamemaster can use, or the player may offer hooks for the character (see Section 3.23) that the gamemaster had not thought of. If the players and gamemaster work together in the character creation stage, many of the advantages of characters pregenerated by the gamemaster can accrue to the player characters. This is perhaps the best compromise between the needs of the campaign and the enjoyment of the individual players.

3.2.1 · THE CHARACTER CONCEPT

Coming up with the character concept is an essential part of any role playing game. Making a concept "work" in the horror genre depends a great deal on cooperation between players and gamemaster, and between the players themselves. The traditional horror game or horror story presupposes that the characters are all "good," or at least that the evil they face is so overwhelming that the assassin and the knight (or the hit man and the FBI agent) will have a powerful common interest in stopping it.

Here are some traditional horror character concepts and the *RMSS* professions or training packages that might go with them. Players are hardly limited to these; Jonathan Harker, the hero of *Dracula*, is a real-estate lawyer!

ARISTOCRAT

All of the possible subgenres of horror can encompass an aristocrat, one bred to the promise of wealth and power: lords of ogre-haunted borderlands, last heirs to cursed estates, or corporate scions. The aristocrat may feel noblesse oblige that causes him to protect his people, or he may be desperately struggling against his own family curse. The noble (and slightly dim) Lord Godalming from *Dracula*, the mysterious magician the Duke de Richlieu from Dennis Wheatley's Black Magic series, and Lovecraft's doomed antiquarian (of cursed lineage) Charles Dexter Ward are examples of the aristocratic character concept in horror fiction.

Aristocrats can take up any profession, although they are drawn to professions with hierarchies and social standing. Particularly aristocratic training packages include the Amateur Mage, Crusading Academic, Diplomat, Knight, Loremaster, and Traveller packages, although they usually have the money and connections to pursue anything they'd like (even Burglary, for instance). The Lawyer and Politician training packages from *Black Ops*, or the Dilettante and Great White Hunter training packages from *Pulp Adventures* also work well for aristocrats. Aristocrats also have the resources (both in time and money) to master Arcane magics, any of the professions or training packages from the *Arcane Companion* could make sense for an aristocrat. The Essence or Mentalism Alchemists from the *Treasure Companion* could work well given that aristocrats often have the money and leisure time to pursue these careers. Runemaster, Herbalist, Corpist, Nomenist, and Somaticist from the *Essence Companion* are similarly good choices, as are Demonologist and Spell Researcher.

Artist

The artist, seeking inspiration in uncanny lore or dream-inducing narcotics, is another character concept just waiting to be snatched into the realms of darkness. Like the aristocrat, the artist meshes well with most horror subgenres, but it works best in horror games with an urban or cosmopolitan settting; artists need audiences. The artist can be a painter or sculptor, an architect, or an actor. The key element here is "artistic sensitivity" that turns into sensitivity to things decidedly undecorative. Henry Wilcox, the dreaming sculptor in "Call of Cthulhu" and washed-up actor Peter Vincent (Roddy McDowall's character in the movie *Fright Night*) are examples of the artist as horror protagonist.

Artists are most likely Rogues, Mystics, or Dabblers; their potential training packages include Amateur Mage, Crafter, Loremaster, Performer, and Wanderer. The Artist training package from *Black Ops* is a natural, as is Student; Entertainer from *Pulp Adventures* is another good artistic training package. If artists use Arcane magic, they are most likely to be Chaotics.

Clergyman

The clergyman dedicated to the service of a good God (or gods) is a natural opponent of the forces of evil wherever they may lurk. Fantasy, historical, and modern horror all have many natural roles for the clergy in horror. Even settings with little or no clerical magic sometimes allow characters with "true faith" to turn vampires with a crucifix, for example. The powers of religion are underemphasized in most science fictional horror, but there is no reason to exclude a clerical character concept from any given future setting. Examples of the concept in horror fiction include Father Damien from *The Exorcist*.

The natural profession of the clergyman is the Cleric, although the Lay Healer, Healer, Warrior Monk and Mystic are all fully consistent with the character concept, as is the Channeling Alchemist from the *Treasure Companion*. Training packages might include Amateur Mage, Cloistered Academic, Doctor, Herbalist, Loremaster, or (for missionaries) Traveller. Clergymen might have the Academic profession and the Theologian training package from *Black Ops*. Finally, *Pulp Adventures* (which also has the Academic profession) offers the Clergy training package. Clergymen might also have any of the Arcane magical professions from the *Arcane Companion*; the Loremaster is the most logical training package for clergy. The *Essence Companion* adds possibilities like Demonologist, Potioner, and Spell Researcher.

Criminal

Against his will, a criminal can find himself enmeshed in matters far blacker than petty theft or even simple murder for hire. Like the rich, the criminal is a character concept for all seasons. It usually hampers the unity which characters need to confront horrors (and the teamwork players need to help build the atmosphere of fear) if the criminal preys on the other characters in the party, however. Criminals who wind up in the middle of a horror story include the thief Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh in *Psycho*) and the murderous Gecko boys (played by Quentin Tarantino and George Clooney in *From Dusk Till Dawn*).

Professions for criminals include most obviously Thief and Rogue, with Magent a strong possibility for relatively high-magic settings. Criminal training packages encompass not only the obvious Assassin, Burglar, Con Man, Cut Purse, and Highwayman, but also Adventurer, Spy, or Weapon Master. The Hacker and Terrorist training packages from *Black Ops* are good for modern or science fiction criminal concepts. Femme Fatale and Gangster from *Pulp Adventures* are two other excellent packages for the more modern criminal. Criminals are seldom likely to use Arcane magic, although a Chaotic profession might make sense in some contexts. Criminals would most likely tend toward the Manipulator training package.

Detective

Rooting out crime and rooting out horrific evil are parallel missions; the detective may easily turn from the one to the other. Historical (especially Victorian and pulp-era) and modern horror seem to be the most fertile ground for the detective character, but there is no reason that a fantasy city or science-fictional starport might not have a crime-solver. Official detectives and private detectives each have their own set of problems and advantages, but they both see the horror as a puzzle to be solved and a challenge to be beaten. Detectives in horror include Manly Wade Wellman's occult detective John Thunstone, small-time P.I. Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke in *Angel Heart*), and FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder in *The X-Files*.

Detective professions can encompass the Fighter, Ranger, or Magent; training packages might include Amateur Mage, Detective, Doctor, Loremaster, or Spy. The Academic profession from *Black Ops* is another possible profession in recent historical, modern, and future horror. *Black Ops* also has the potential detective training packages Agent, Intelligence Analyst, and Undercover Agent. The training packages Cloaked Vigilante, G-man, and Police Officer from *Pulp Adventures* are also natural detective fodder. Detectives, per se, are unlikely users of Arcane magic.

Doctor

Spending one's career battling disease seems to be excellent preparation for battling more supernatural menaces to public health. Between their familiarity with corpses, clinical demeanor, and undeniable utility to hard-pressed parties of monster hunters, doctors have a natural role as investigators of the horrific. Healers also exist in all horror subgenres. Algernon Blackwood's ghost-hunting John Silence, the madhouse director Dr. Seward in *Dracula*, and FBI Special Agent Dana Scully in *The X-Files* are only some of the medical professionals who encounter horror in fiction or film.

Healer or Lay Healer are the most sensible professions for the doctor as character concept. Possible medical training packages (in addition to Doctor, of course) might include Amateur Mage, Cloistered Academic (for example, a forensic pathologist), Herbalist, or Loremaster. The Academic, Scientist, and Technician professions in *Black Ops* are also possible professions for a modern or science-fictional doctor; Combat Medic is another modern training package. Like detectives, doctors are unlikely users of Arcane magics.

Ghost-Hunter

The ghost-hunter is a central horror convention; he knows that supernatural evil exists and has dedicated his life to understanding it and, many times, destroying it. In any setting where the supernatural exists, so will the ghost-hunter (or monster-hunter, or occult detective, or spectrologist). The ghost-hunter may use magic, but unlike the mystic character concept, he uses magic in order to hunt the supernatural more effectively. Dr. Montague in *The Haunting of Hill House*, William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki the Ghost-Breaker, DC Comics' Dr. Thirteen, and the real-life Harry Price are all examples of the ghost-hunter character concept.

As befits such a perfect character template for roleplaying, the ghost-hunter can logically have a number of professions, among them Fighter, Warrior Monk, Magician, Cleric, Mystic, Sorceror, Ranger, or Paladin. Training packages for the ghost-hunter might include Adventurer, Amateur Mage, Crusading Academic, Detective, Explorer, Guardian, Hunter, Knight, Loremaster, Martial Artist, Mercenary, Shaman Priest, Traveller, Wanderer, Weapon Master, or Zealot. The *Black Ops* professions Academic and Scientist, and the training packages Agent,

Bounty Hunter, Field Scientist, Journalist, Terrorist, and Undercover Agent all make excellent backgrounds for the ghost-hunter. The Clergy, Cloaked Vigilante, G-man, and Occultist training packages from *Pulp Adventures* are equally suitable for this character concept. The Magehunter profession from the *Arcane Companion* is the natural ghost-hunter profession; any of the Arcane training packages might make sense, as might the Channeling Alchemist from the *Treasure Companion* or the Spell Researcher from the *Essence Companion*.

Mystic

The mystic is an expert in the supernatural, and in campaigns with any magic at all, may even be a practitioner of the mystic arts. Unlike the ghost-hunter, the mystic usually battles the supernatural to remove the obstacles to mastering magic for himself. Even in "no magic" campaigns (unusual in the horror gaming genre), the mystic will be an expert in whatever horrific occult, psychic or otherwise paranormal occurrences are manifested unless they spring from purely scientific origins. The Liverpool street-magician John Constantine, from *Hellblazer* comics, is an example of a mystic entangled in a horrific world.

Any of the magical professions, not just Mystic, will fit this character concept. Training packages can include Amateur Mage, Cloistered Academic, Crusading Academic, Doctor, Herbalist, Loremaster, Philosopher, Shaman Priest, Traveller, or even Weapon Master. The Academic profession and the Artist, Student, and Theologian training packages from Black Ops are also suitable for modern mystics. The training packages Clergy, Cloaked Vigilante, Dilettante, Femme Fatale, and Occultist from *Pulp Adventures* give still more options. Mystics, of course, can be represented by any of the professions or training packages in the *Arcane Companion* or *Essence Companion*, or by any of the Alchemists from the *Treasure Companion*.

Policeman

Like the detective, the policeman's fight against crime and disorder often leads to horrors beyond the mundane. While the detective is traditionally more of a "lone wolf," the policeman works implicitly as part of a hierarchy. The policeman is a more adaptable character concept; the "town watch" or "aediles" existed for centuries before the active application of logic and observation to crime began. The detective uses brains where the policeman uses guts and organization. A good police force will have both detectives and policemen, and so might a good horror party. Officers Wilson and Neff from *The Wolfen* are classic police characters in a modern horror novel.

The policeman is almost always a Fighter by profession, although he may have City Guard, Detective, Guardian, or Soldier training packages. The Agent, Lawyer, and Undercover Agent from *Black Ops* and the G-man and (of course) Police Officer from *Pulp Adventures* are other excellent training packages for the policeman character in horror. Policemen are even less likely than detectives to dabble in the Arcane.

Reporter

Dedicated to rooting out the truth or to telling sensationalistic stories full of blood and corruption (or both), the reporter is another character concept seemingly fated to stumble across the horror in any supernatural campaign (especially recent-historical or modern ones). Reporters can be freelance, and more similar to the writer character concept (see below) or they can be tied to some mundane publication with no interest above the deadline. The small-time stringer or the reporter for a thrill-seeking tabloid are perhaps the most useful compromises between those options, but any reporter can be drawn into the twilight world of insensate evil if necessary. Carl Kolchak (*The Night Stalker*) is perhaps the paradigmatic journalist in horror.

Depending on the campaign and the sort of journalism the reporter practices, they might have the Rogue, Layman, or Dabbler professions. Useful training packages for reporters include Adventurer, Con Man, Crusading Academic, Loremaster, Performer (for radio, TV, or holovision reporters), and Traveller (foreign correspondents). The Journalist training package from *Black Ops* is an obvious possibility, as well. Entertainer (in much the same way as Performer) and Journalist—Pulp from *Pulp Adventures* are two other useful training packages. Reporters are unlikely to have any Arcane profession or training package, although it is not outside the realm of possibility for one to have the Demonologist, Librarian, or Spell Researcher packages from the *Essence Companion*, especially in a fantasy horror game.

Scholar

In many horror game worlds, every realm of knowledge leads to things man was not meant to know. In these worlds, the scholar is often as quick to find evidence of a horror that must be stopped as the most observant doctor or the most dedicated policeman. Scholars occur in all subgenres of horror as well, albeit often in the guise of clergymen or wizards. Dracula's nemesis Abraham Van Helsing and Lovecraft's magic-using librarian Henry Armitage in "The Dunwich Horror" are classic examples of the scholar as hero in horror literature (although both share common elements with the mystic character concept by the end of their stories).

Common scholarly professions include Layman, Magician, Cleric, Mentalist, Mystic, Sorceror, and Dabbler. Training packages for a scholarly character include everything from the obvious Cloistered Academic, Crusading Academic, Loremaster, and Philosopher to the Amateur Mage, Explorer, Traveller, or even Weapon Master. The Academic, Scientist, or Technician professions from *Black Ops* are useful to the modern or science-fictional scholar character concept, as are the training packages Field Scientist, Intelligence Analyst, Student, and Theologian from the same sourcebook. Other useful scholarly training packages include Clergy, Dilettante, Gadgeteer, Occultist, and Scientist from *Pulp Adventures*. Like mystics, scholars can

plausibly possess any profession or training package from *Arcane Companion* or *Essence Companion* (or any of the Alchemists from *Treasure Companion*) that fits the campaign world.

Soldier

Who better to fight the forces of evil than a warrior? Soldiers are as universal as clergy and criminals, and for much the same reasons. From the noble knight to the battle-scarred and cynical veteran, the soldier is on the front line against the horrors of many a game world. Russell Kirk's devil-busting mercenary Manfred Arcane and Robert E. Howard's two-fisted "Sailor" Steve Costigan, along with the soldiers trapped in the ice with *The Thing*, are military men who encounter the macabre in fiction and film.

Professions suitable to the soldier include the obvious: Fighter, Warrior Monk, Ranger, and Paladin. Training packages are similarly intuitive: Adventurer, Berserker, City Guard, Explorer, Hunter, Knight, Mercenary, Sailor, Scout, Soldier, and Weapon Master. For modern campaigns, the Combat Medic, Marine Pilot, Pilot, Special Forces Operative, and Terrorist training packages from *Black Ops* will be useful. Similarly, for recent-historical or pulp-flavored horror, the Cloaked Vigilante, Daredevil, and Militaria training packages from *Pulp Adventures* will expand the martial repertoire of a martial character. Soldiers are unlikely students of the Arcane, though in a high-magic campaign a Paladin or a Warrior Mage (from the *Essence Companion*) might be appropriate.

Writer

Like less-responsible journalists or less-wary scholars, writers tend to turn up all manner of unpleasant details while researching their latest project. This character concept usually belongs to games set after the 18th century, but ambitious players might try the life of a court poet or travelling playwright in more ancient or fantastic genres. Robert Blake in "The Haunter of the Dark" and Ben Mears in *Salem's Lot* are examples of hapless writers trapped in horrors that they wish were fictional.

Writers can start with many professions but are most likely to begin with Rogue, Layman, Magician, Mystic, Sorceror, or Dabbler. Their potential training packages are similarly diverse, encompassing Adventurer, Cloistered Academic, Con Man, Crusading Academic, Detective, Explorer, Loremaster, Spy, Traveller, and Wanderer. The Academic profession and Artist, Journalist, and Student training packages from *Black Ops* are useful for character scribes. Dilettante, Journalist—Pulp, and Occultist from *Pulp Adventures* are also examples of suitable writerly training packages. It's possible that a writer might uncover the secrets of the Arcane; like artists, they are most likely Chaotics by profession. The Runemaster training package, with its emphasis on the written word and the book, seems to be the most logical for writers, as are the Librarian, Demonologist, and Spell Researcher packages from the *Essence Companion*.

3.2.2 · SHORT BIOGRAPHIES

"What was the worst thing you've ever done?"

— Peter Straub, *Ghost Story*

Writing out a short biography of the character is easy in the *Rolemaster Standard System*, with its detailed character creation. This exercise doesn't just give the character more depth and reality. It also increases player identification with the character, which is an essential component of building horror. Just answering a few seemingly simple questions about the character, from his physical appearance to the names of his parents to his happiest childhood memory, can bring the character into sharp focus and reality. Often this can happen before the first numbers are written onto the character sheet, and many gamemasters work with players to generate characters in just that fashion. Finally, of course, any character biography can be mined for character hooks (see below).

3.2.3 · CHARACTER HOOKS

"I won't tell you that, but I'll tell you the worst thing that ever happened to me..."

— Peter Straub, *Ghost Story*

A character hook is some aspect of the character's personality or history that the gamemaster can use to develop plot lines or scenes in the campaign. When the player puts these "hooks" into his background, he gives the gamemaster a license to use them in the campaign. Since it's a horror campaign, these uses can be pretty unpleasant for the character, of course. Sometimes the gamemaster won't even tell the player what their hook means; if the character doesn't know where his brother disappeared to ten years ago, it's more of an unpleasant surprise when he turns up as the main bodyservant of the Vampire Lord.

So why would any sensible player let the gamemaster do that to their character? First, it helps create the story and gives the player an investment in that story. Remember, horror gaming is even more of a collaborative effort than regular role playing. With a character hook that the gamemaster uses, that collaboration is built in. When blasphemous evil directly affects something in the character's past, it's more meaningful to the character (and player) than if it was just some passerby whose brother has been enslaved by the vampire.

Second, more selfishly, it gives the player some guaranteed "spotlight time" or "story share." Gamemasters should always make sure that all the players have some time in the spotlight of the main action, or some share in helping to solve the mystery, defeat the evil, or remove the curse. By utilizing character hooks, characters who haven't been front and center in the campaign so far can have their turn. (Gamemasters can also assign values to these hooks and treat them as flaws, if they so wish.)

Make sure that any character hook matches the character's power level (see also section 7.2.5), of course. If the character once defeated the master vampire in combat, that won't make any sense in a low-powered campaign. Similarly, make sure that the hook adds to the horror: a character fated to be followed by ravens adds a note of gloominess and foreboding — unless ravens in this campaign world are servants of the Sun God and agents of Good.

Here are some common character hooks, with some hints on using them in a horror game. Note that many of them have the possibility of being tied into the character's family history. This has two great advantages. First, the theme of the family opening the character up to malevolent, supernatural influence is at the heart of the Gothic horror tradition. Think of the torturous lineages in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, the nervous maladies of Poe's "House of Usher," the "tainted blood" in Lovecraft's "Shadows Over Innsmouth," or the Talamasca inheritance in the novels of Anne Rice. Second, any attention given to the character's family deepens the character's reality for the player and gamemaster alike, as well as giving yet more potential for character hooks. Waste not, want not.

Childhood Curse

The childhood curse is a traditional fantasy or fairy tale character hook. The curse can have been placed on the character by a powerful witch or evil fairy jealous of (or wronged by) his parents. The evil



fairy Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, was insulted that she was not invited to Sleeping Beauty's christening. Its effects can be as dramatic as the player and gamemaster feel necessary; as long as the character is still playable, the sky is the limit. The curse can be a "delayed-action" curse: on the character's twenty-first birthday, he will kill his brother, for example. In a fantasy or early historical setting (like ancient Greece or Viking Europe), the character will probably know about the curse and may even be able to quote the specific prophecy. In a more modern game, the character could have been born under a very unlucky astrological conjunction (or during an eclipse of the moon), which opens him up to dark forces. Unless the character's family are occultists (which is its own kind of curse, actually), he might not even know about it.

The curse can also be a family curse; if all of the character's ancestors have died at sea, the news of the haunted ship takes on a whole new significance. The curse might be evaded; if the character is cursed because his family owns the Dreadnight Diamond, he can renounce his family, convince them to sell the diamond, or steal it and sell it himself. The family blood might be tainted; if the character's great-great-grandfather was a werewolf, the character should be very careful under the full moon. In a modern or science fiction game, the curse might be a mutation.

Enemy

An enemy, like a curse, can be unique to the character or part of his tainted past. If he comes from a family with a history of vendetta, a grievance against another, or some ancestral enemy, his enemy can be the enemy of his whole line. This has the advantage that even killing or otherwise neutralizing one enemy doesn't end the drama; kill one and his son or brother will take his place, swearing revenge upon the character and his companions.

The enemy can also be a personal enemy that the character has made in his past; a serial killer he put away, a werewolf lord that he humbled, a black magician he cheated in a slave auction. Even if the enemy is not supernatural himself, he might be recruited by whatever supernatural force that the character opposes. Even a mundane street thief with a grudge, for example, can become a formidable opponent in the service of a vampire.

Evil Ancestor

This hook can be tied into any of the other hooks in this section, either as cause (because of Great-Uncle Jonas' blasphemous experiments, the castle has been cursed for centuries) or effect (Great-Uncle Jonas was only the first and most famous member of the family to fall victim to the disturbing family brain malady), or both (for the player with an urge toward the highly baroque). Even worse, Great-Uncle Jonas might not even be dead....

Haunted Item

Something that the character owns is haunted, cursed, possessed by a ghost or demon, or is in some way an entryway for the malign forces of the supernatural. A ring with a curiously glowing stone, a sword with a thirst for human blood, or simply an eldritch tome bound in the skin of a mighty necromancer will all create more than their share of adventure possibilities. If the item is actually tremendously valuable, useful, or even magical, then both the character and the player may be unwilling to get rid of it despite its unsavory nature. Some items also have an uncanny tendency to return to their former owners, often after a chain of bloody coincidences. The item may even be a place — a demon-plagued barony, a swamp with something from beyond lurking in it, or a full-fledged haunted house.

Haunted property is, of course, often left to the character by his family; the process of exorcising the ghosts or unravelling the curse may involve uncovering horrific truths about the character's past or ancestry. Will a character be as willing to exorcise the ghost of his own ancestor as he would some nameless revenant?

Insanity

If the character has been insane in the past, then a whole realm of possibilities opens up for the gamemaster. In a horror game run in the madness-and-dream style, for example (see Section 2.4.3), it may become horribly obvious that the character is still insane; his memories and observations simply cannot be trusted. If the gamemaster is not willing to go to such surrealistic lengths (which are, of course, not for everybody), she can still justify virtually anything in the character's past from a long-lost son to mass murder. The specific circumstances of the character's descent into madness may still linger as a fear or trauma (see 3.2.4, Talents and Flaws as Character Hooks), to be triggered by some climactic event in the campaign.

Although modern genetics has cast significant doubt on the old superstition of the "bad seed" or the hereditary insanity of a given bloodline (barring congenital illnesses, of course), that doesn't mean that a family history of insanity can't play an important role in a horror campaign. After all, modern genetics is notably skeptical about vampires, werewolves, and cannibal monsters from Pluto. Especially in a pulp-era or Victorian campaign (or earlier historical horror setting), the character's own fear of insanity could end up driving him insane.

Missing Relative

The long-lost brother, sister, parent, or child is a natural target for the machinations of the gamemaster's plot. Whether the missing relative surfaces as a victim, a puppet, or an active agent in the horror plaguing the party, the character is in for some unpleasant decisions. In a science fiction horror game, these decisions might not even end with the relative's sorry demise; clones can always appear to rattle the character's cage. (Doppelgängers, shapeshifters, tulpas, and even ghosts can fulfill much the same role in more traditional horror genres.)

It's an extra dose of unpleasantness if the character has a vanished great-great-grandfather who shows up in the middle of the action when they have no business even being alive. Immortality is seldom a good thing in the horror genre, and a relative from so long ago might have some very unsavory knowledge about the character's past which had been forgotten by his parents.

Missing Time

This hook is most common in tales of UFO paranoia, but a mysterious spell of amnesia in the character background occurs in many other genres as well. This hook is a real blank check to the inventive, or fiendish, gamemaster; anything that can be justified by insanity can just as easily have occurred during the odd "blank spot" in the character's memory.

Missing time in a family is a little harder to construct, but is sometimes worth it; if the courthouse with the family records burns down, then anything could have been true about the character's ancestors. Imagine the shock as the character discovers that his grandparents never existed — no birth certificates, no death certificates, no marriage certificates. Who were they? Come to that, how did his parents get there?

3.2.4 · TALENTS AND FLAWS AS CHARACTER HOOKS

Many of the talents and flaws in the Rolemaster Standard System can make ideal horror-style character hooks. Keep in mind that even a talent can be used as the springboard for something horrible, but to preserve game balance, it should also come in handy for helping the character out of any mess it gets him into.

TALENTS & FLAWS AS CHARACTER HOOKS

Conspiratorial Background (Talent, *RMSR* p. 257)—This is a natural talent for characters in a horror game in the "paranoia-and-secret-war" style (see Section 2.4.5). In other styles, it should be kept muted and subtle to avoid damaging the main thrust of the game.

Criminal Background (Talent, *RMSR* p. 257)—This talent meshes well with a criminal as character concept, although other characters can possess this talent. A non-criminal with this talent will have a potentially very interesting character hook in his background!

Cursed (Flaw, *RMSR* p. 261)—Different from the childhood curse, this RMSS flaw is placed by a deity. In a fantasy horror game, this can be the local deity of evil, plagues, death, or the like. Depending on the personalities of the "good" deities, they might have cursed the character as well; Hera and Poseidon curse many people in Greek mythology. In other subgenres, the gamemaster may well disallow this flaw.

TALENTS & FLAWS AS CHARACTER HOOKS

Dark Pact (Flaw, *RMSR* p. 262)—This flaw will work best in a "characters-as-monsters" style game (see Section 2.4.4) unless the player is willing to make the harrowing of their character a major plot thread in the campaign. It should be made apparent to any player that his character could very well not survive such a flaw in a horror game; no player should be forced to take this flaw against his will in a horror game. The origin of the dark pact should be developed as a full-fledged character hook; kindly gamemasters can introduce an incredibly difficult and unpleasant "escape clause" to the agreement.

Destiny Sense (Talent, *RMSR* p. 257)—The ability to see into the future is not an unalloyed blessing in the horror genre; such visions are often horrific and grotesque. These visions are a wonderful resource for the gamemaster who wants to creep the players out in advance. If a character has a vision of being swarmed by rats, for example, every scratch and skitter in the wainscoting will make the players jump. The origin of the character's prophetic gifts should be explicated, and might also make a useful character hook.

Fear (Flaw, *RMSR* pp. 261-262)—Major or minor fears are likely to develop over the course of the horror game, as well as during character creation. If a character begins with a fear, it should have a useful "origin story" that can tie into both the character's history and the gamemaster's plans for the campaign. Gamemasters should walk a fine line between using the character's fear to create tension and making it a crutch to throw artificial suspense into the game.

Lycanthropy (Either, *RMSR* pp. 260, 263)—It is usual, in a horror game, for the character to be unable to control his transformation. In a "characters-as-monsters" game (see Section 2.4.4), the character will be more likely to have control over the process. How the character became a lycanthrope (attacked while wandering the hills, promised to an evil sorceror, cursed bloodline) can be a major character hook, and should be detailed in the character biography.

Mentor (Talent, *RMSR* p. 257)—A mentor is a perfect character hook. He can send the characters on dangerous quests, inform them of cryptic prophecies of doom, and vanish mysteriously leaving only a handprint in his own blood. The mentor can also have any of the character hooks given above: a character can find himself battling the mentor's enemies, or meeting his mentor's missing (and evil) twin brother.

TALENTS & FLAWS AS CHARACTER HOOKS

Open Door (Flaw, *RMSR* p. 263)—This flaw, like the Dark Pact, can be exciting and dangerous for characters in a horror game. All the notes pertaining to Dark Pact pertain to Open Door as well; a character susceptible to demonic (or ghostly) possession is at a special risk in a horror game.

Orphan (Flaw, *RMSR* p. 261)—A special case of the Missing Relative character hook that can be used in similar, even more personal, ways.

Split Personality (Flaw, *RMSR* p. 263)— This flaw can be an explanation for a Missing Time character hook. With the player's permission, one of the split personalities can be in league with the campaign's forces of evil, although this makes running the character a special challenge.

Trauma (Flaw, *RMSR* pp. 261-263)— Greater, major, or minor traumas can all make splendid character hooks in a horror game. Many of the same caveats apply to traumas as apply to fears, of course.

Visions (Talent, *RMSR* p. 257)—Visions of the past are potentially no more comforting than Destiny Sense's images of the future. This talent is an excellent way for the gamemaster to "fill in" the characters on the history behind a particular cursed item, haunted castle, or whatever. As with Destiny Sense, the origin of the character's talent might make a useful character hook in its own right.

3.2.5 · TEAMWORK IN DESIGN

Players often work together when designing their characters; a balanced party is the goal of many player groups. This makes a great deal of logical sense. With a variety of character types, a larger variety of problems can be solved and the game can deal with a greater range of subjects. Practically, it can be the difference between life and death for all the characters if one of them is a capable healer, scout, or warrior (among other options).

In horror, this kind of player teamwork is useful. Horror games sometimes have an additional level of danger that clever character design can go some way to mitigate. It is even more useful on a dramatic level. If the players design their characters to have overlapping histories or even linked character hooks, it adds depth to the campaign world while giving the players an important reason to work together. Not all gamemasters will want to show their hand this early in the campaign, but it is an unusual gamemaster who doesn't jump at the chance to work the characters' backgrounds together in some way, even if the characters (and the players) don't fully understand it yet.

The only thing to watch out for is a level of coordination that seems almost "too good to be true," especially for a batch of random strangers who just happen to meet in a tavern to fight elemental evils. Damage

to the internal reality of the campaign is damage to its ability to create fear. For example, the novel *Dracula* teams a lawyer (Jonathan Harker) and his wife (Mina Harker) with three suitors of his wife's vampirized girlfriend — a dilettante (Lord Godalming), a ranger (Quincey Morris), and a healer (Dr. Seward) who just happens to know personally the world's leading expert on vampires (van Helsing). It looks unbelievable in this paragraph, but Stoker makes it work in his novel. The gamemaster and players can make similarly jury-rigged player groups seem believable, if they're willing to put enough effort into their mutual "backstory," or campaign background.

3.3 THE CHARACTER IN THE CAMPAIGN

"In the end, of course, we remain puppets and our smiles are still painted ones. But now at least we have moistened them with our own blood."

— Thomas Ligotti, "Professor Nobody's Little Lectures"

Once the character is fully designed, laden with hooks, and part (hopefully) of a well-defined history and setting, it's time for the campaign to begin. Ideally, the character will begin his existence fitting into the world and the campaign. (That's part of what all those character hooks are designed to do.) It is the player's job to make sure that the character still fits as well (or better) throughout the course of the campaign. Remember, the horror game, even more than most role playing games, is a collaborative, cooperative exercise. If the campaign is a "globe-trotting" game, having the character take on some important responsibility that doesn't let him jet off to the Darkest Congo at the drop of a telegram will make it harder for the character to fit the campaign. If the campaign is about paranoia and the secret war, don't let the character turn into a blinkered skeptic.

In the course of the campaign, however, it's important to let your character develop as an individual. The happy-go-lucky thief will not be as jolly after a few brushes with the Ghoul Prince. He may turn sober and thoughtful, planning his actions meticulously. He may take to hedonism and excess, laughing too loud and partying too long, trying to forget his nightmares in the fleshpots and wineshops of the city. He may simply withdraw into a shell, fighting mechanically until his certain doom. It is impossible to tell how any person, real or fictional, will react to the kind of stress and fear that a horror game throws at its characters. The one thing that is for sure is that they will change as a result.

You don't have to plot this out as a player; just let the character's reactions happen and they will seem natural and organic to the character. If the character changes into a character you don't feel like playing any more, talk to the gamemaster about retirement options.

or even a messy but inspirational death. Gamemasters love the "guilt-free kill," which adds a note of horror and personal danger without hard feelings from players. The campaign will have another major plot element, and the character will have died as a person rather than living as a cardboard cutout.

3.3.1 · WALKING INTO THE TRAP (WORKING WITH THE GAMEMASTER)

"I want your permission to do what I think is good this night. It is, I know, much to ask; and when you know what it is I propose to do you will know, and only then, how much."

— Van Helsing to Godalming, Morris, and Seward, *Dracula*

It is important, in horror role playing, for the players to work with the gamemaster, even though they may rightfully suspect the gamemaster of planning something awful. Obstinate refusal to investigate the creepy noises in the cemetery will not result in anyone having a fun time role playing, no matter how much sense it seems to make at the time. For some players, this is the hardest part of their disbelief to suspend. These players know darn well that if the house next door to them was taken over by vampires, they'd be on the next plane out of town. These players should be gently reminded that their characters are both more ignorant and more powerful than they are—the very stuff of heroism. Once they can get over this hump, these players can be the most involved and cooperative players in the game, simply because they so strongly identify with the idea that horror is a bad thing to be avoided. Players should make sure that their characters have a compelling in-game reason to go poking into horrible things, or at least allow the gamemaster to make sure of it (for some reasons, see Section 8.4.1). A well-designed horror character never needs to be prodded into crossing paths with nameless evil; that is what they are theoretically designed to do, after all.

If the player has trouble justifying this, he might simply think of these unpleasant events as destined. Some people are just unlucky; someone has to be the one who gets attacked by the serial killer. The character, ideally, has been designed to be the one who fights back, as well. In the final analysis, the players and the characters should learn (or, better yet, know ahead of time) that avoiding the evil only gives it time to grow stronger. Knowledge is power; refusing to gather knowledge is the same as surrendering.

3.3.2 · WORKING WITH THE OTHER PLAYERS

In many games, the player is competing with the other players. There's only so many gold pieces out there, after all, and somebody has to get them. This can be done even in horror role playing, but it's tactically a much trickier decision. Players who are competing with



each other find it very tempting to use their character to hamper the other characters; if the thief got the magic gloves that the cleric wanted, the cleric might not heal him. In horror, the party's enemies are stronger and more focused on the characters than the monsters or antagonists in most role playing games. In a conventional fantasy game, the orcs usually just stay in their dungeon or fort; in a horror fantasy game, they are stalking the players through the alley shadows and they're in league with a demon. Interparty rivalry can mean a prolonged and messy death for all the characters.

Many groups require that all the characters in a horror game be explicitly on the same side. This can mean making them all of "good" alignment, working for the same eccentric duke, or simply agreed that stopping the evil is more important than their personal concerns. Although this may seem limiting, it accurately reflects virtually all horror fiction and film; it's true to the genre. Tactically it makes sense as well. In-game, the thief is too busy keeping an eye on the shadowy horrors to pick fights with the cleric; the cleric knows full well that if he doesn't heal the thief, nobody watches the party's back. Out of game, the player only has to focus on one challenge; building an atmosphere of fear by getting into the gamemaster's world.

A player shouldn't neglect the other players while building the atmosphere of fear. Group fear feeds on itself; as long as all the players are letting the fear happen, or at least not interfering with its develop-

ment, then the feeling becomes stronger for everyone. Group fear is also easily broken. Especially if the game is becoming tense and scary, there's a natural impulse to break the tension somehow; Coke run, bad jokes, anything. Don't give in to that impulse; you not only cheat yourself out of the thrill of fear, you cheat the other players.

One handy way to keep yourself immersed in the game is to refer to the other players by their character names; keep as much of the dialogue "in character" as possible. Instead of saying "Doug, can your psychic tell if this slab was used for human sacrifice?" say "Armand, can your powers tell if this slab was used for human sacrifice?" It's a small thing, but it sometimes makes a big difference in helping everyone stay in the moment.

3.4 ROLE PLAYING IN DIFFERENT HORROR SUBGENRES

"Seekers after horror haunt strange far places."
—H.P. Lovecraft, "The Picture in the House"

Within the broad framework of "horror" are many, many subgenres. Any "normal" role playing setting can become horror, either through the addition of horror tropes or with the intention on the part of the gamemaster to evoke fear (or, usually, both). Horror can be found in the Western stories of Joe R. Lansdale, the science fiction of *Alien*, the pulp adventure stories of Robert E. Howard, the high fantasy of Dunsany, and on and on. Horror role playing in any of these subgenres has its own set of peculiarities and rewards.

For more details on the different horror subgenres and the various forms that they can take, see Section 2.3.

3.4.1 · FANTASY

The important things in fantasy horror are maintaining tone and keeping the game world real. Many fantasy games, horror or not, give the characters access to extremely powerful magics, or make every sword blow from an experienced fighter deadly to all but the mightiest foes. These conventions can work against both goals; the high levels of power available to characters can make it harder to fear anything (a similar problem obtains in science fiction horror gaming), and the unreality of these conventions can make immersion in the game world difficult. Players should watch out for these pitfalls, and work with the gamemaster and each other to keep the world both internally believable and potentially scary.

3.4.2 · HISTORICAL

It is always useful to know something about the period in which you're playing. Reading history books, historical novels (especially historical horror novels, if there are any appropriate to the period), or songs and poems from that time will give the player a sense of the "mental baggage" that his character carries around. This is part of remaining in character, and will not only deepen the player's enjoyment of the horror, it will also help the gamemaster keep the setting alive for everybody. If the player does not feel like doing that much research, or simply doesn't have the time or resources, then simply following the gamemaster's lead in characterization can be a shortcut; have your character react similarly to the NPCs in the setting (the ones, that is, that you are fairly sure aren't in league with forces of evil).

3.4.3 MODERN

"Even the phone is dead."

— Hjalmar Poelzig (Boris Karloff), *The Black Cat*

Modern horror role playing (and very recent historical horror role playing) is the easiest, at least on the surface. The players are intimately familiar with the world of their characters (or at least have seen it on TV or in the movies), and can follow their instincts without worrying about anachronism or power levels. This means that modern horror can be the most potentially rewarding of any horror subgenre. Be careful; its familiarity and the ease with which players can slip in and out of character can combine to leach the interest or tension out of the modern setting.



3.4.4 · SCIENCE FICTION

It's very tough to successfully play a character in a science fiction horror scenario, much less a science fiction horror campaign. The standard elements of science fiction (technology, psionics, computers) tend to increase the power and options available to the characters; horror gains strength from limiting them. Players in a science fiction horror game should (of course) be familiar with the setting of the campaign, and should keep the human (or alien) element of their character at the forefront of their mind.

4.0
BEFORE NIGHT FALLS: BUILDING A SCENARIO

"And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
And Horror the soul of the plot."

— Edgar Allan Poe, "The Conqueror Worm"

This section addresses the construction of the horror scenario. Any game, even a non-horror game, can run an individual horror scenarios; even pure fantasy usually ends with something like a horror scenario as the elves confront the Dark Lord in his Tower. A scenario is distinct from a session, an evening (or afternoon, or whatever) of gaming in the course of an ongoing campaign. A scenario can take place over a few sessions, or in less than one. The most thematically satisfying scenarios are timed to last one session, but if a scenario requires some detective work, laying the groundwork for a climax can take place in one session with the final (or at least climactic) confrontation between good and evil saved for another.

4.1
HOW IS HORROR DIFFERENT?

"Stories are good traps; they trap you into going into a place ... where otherwise you wouldn't go."

— Clive Barker

A horror scenario is different from most other role playing game scenarios because it must be designed to create or evoke fear in the players. Some scenarios, even in horror games, just exist to get the characters "from here to there" in the course of the game. To get from the hobbit village to the goblin mountains, you pass through the forest and along the valley. In a normal fantasy game, you might have a scenario in the forest (the party meets elves or talking bears, or just wandering random forest encounters) and one in the valley (the party finds the magic key to the goblin mountain fortress, and fights a water spirit). These scenarios can be tremendously fun, challenging, even dangerous.

Even in some horror fantasy games, the party might still just "be passing through" the forest and the valley on their way to the true horror scenario in the goblin mountains, maybe with a spooky encounter with a ghost along the way. The horror gamemaster might add some creepy details to the trip (a shadowy figure follows the party in the forest; ravens are seen picking at the corpses of the last party to come through the valley) without making those scenarios horror scenarios.

For the forest and the valley to become horror scenarios, they have to be designed to horrify in themselves. The characters (and players) must feel fear. Now, the forest is alive with skittering things, poisoned by goblin magic. The talking bears are a debased tribe of the species, rabid and hungry for hobbit flesh. Their den is a charnel pit, and the fight is torturous and takes place in darkened, stifling caves where the next warm draft could be the breath of a killer. Suddenly "the forest session" has become a horror scenario in its own right.

4.2 BUILDING A TERRIFYING SCENARIO

"A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect *to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.... In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design."*

— Edgar Allan Poe, reviewing *Twice-Told Tales*

Although there are as many ways to build horror scenarios as there are horror gamemasters, it is possible to distill a sort of general process. If your campaign or your horror scenario doesn't need all these elements, go ahead and leave them out. Plenty of effective horror scenarios, for example, just set the stage and then jump right into the payoff, or have no NPCs at all. The thing to keep in mind is that everything in the scenario should be (ideally) subordinated to, or directed toward, creeping the players out and building the atmosphere of fear.

4.2.1 · THE UNNATURAL ELEMENT

"What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk with you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror, I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad."

— Arthur Machen, "The White People"

The common element that all horror has in common is that of the uncanny, or unnatural. Even the most mundane serial-killer story draws its power from the unnatural madness of the killer. The unnatural is that which contrasts with the "normality" of the game world. In a fantasy world like Narnia with talking animals, the presence of a talking cat is not uncanny and does not promote horror. In a relentlessly modern scenario, a talking cat might very well create an atmosphere of horror, especially if its power of speech is unexplained.

The uncanny and unnatural therefore depend upon the game world for their nature. They depend upon the players' belief in, and sense of, the game world for their power. Too much unreality or uncanniness and the game world seems nonsensical; nothing has the power to surprise or unnerve. Not enough, and it becomes a straightforward adventure story rather than a horror story.

Elements of the unnatural should be present (or potentially present) at every stage of the horror scenario. The sense of "things not right" is a powerful trigger for nervousness, just one step from fear. The setting should be too old or too dark or too something. The twists should be understandable only in retrospect, or only through a horrific lens. NPCs should seem odd, or dangerous, or both, at least at first. The timing should foreshorten, or collapse, or stretch oddly. The payoff, if possible, can be a giant riotous orgy of the uncanny; sheer gibbering incomprehension makes a dandy springboard for fear.

The gamemaster should make everything just slightly off-kilter in the horror scenario until she gets a better instinct for her world and for her players' reactions to it. Sometimes, in modern horror especially, these instincts and reactions develop rapidly. In fantasy or science fiction horror, they might take some time to grow; everybody needs to learn what's normal in the world of Neveryoung or the year 2550 before they can truly appreciate the abnormal.

4.2.2 · SETTING THE STAGE

"Entering the small playhouse ... for the first time, the spectator is siezed with a vague uneasiness. For it is strange, this theatre, a long narrow chamber, its walls hung with dark material, its paneling severe, with two mysterious doors, always closed...."

— Camillo Antona-Traversi, *History of the Grand Guignol*

The opening of the horror scenario can take place wherever the characters would normally be; the purpose of the scenario is to get them from there to the place where the horror lurks or ravages. Sometimes, that's as simple as having the clock strike midnight; other times a convoluted chain of clues and events must be followed to arrive at the climax of the scenario.

The climax of the horror scenario is usually set in one of two places: the Bad Place or the Invaded House. The Bad Place, one of the oldest tropes of the horror genre, is a natural setting for horror scenarios. Want ghosts? Go to the haunted house. Want vampires? Go to Transylvania, or to Carfax Abbey, or to that rundown mansion on the edge of town. Setting the action in the Bad Place is good for beginning gamemasters or gamemasters writing an essentially stand-alone scenario, as well as for an episode in an ongoing horror campaign.

The Bad Place as horror setting usually has a number of characteristics that help the horror scenarist make the horror work. First, the Bad Place is usually complex or confusing. Setting a horror scenario

on a football field is possible, but once the monster (a spectral football player? a zombie cheerleader?) appears, the flat and open geography turns the scenario into a simple chase or a tactical combat. Thrilling, perhaps, but not very scary. Move the horror into the locker rooms, where the heroes slip on the tile and catch sights of moving forms that turn out to be their reflections in the mirror. Move it into the parking lot, where something could be under (or inside) every car. Move it under the bleachers, where all those posts and columns and hanging steel frameworks just seem to exist solely to brush up against the heroes, and where claustrophobia has full rein. Even a zombie cheerleader would be scary under the bleachers with the rustling of candy wrappers and the heavy thumping of feet overhead.

Second, the Bad Place is hard to escape. The door of the haunted house slamming shut, the only boat on the island drifting away from its cut rope, the blizzard closing in, the sound of the airlock closing; all of these signal the "starting gun" of horror. The characters are now confined somewhere with the horror. The characters can be confined in time as well; if the horror isn't stopped at the Bad Place tonight, the vampires will spawn; Lady Mandrake will go mad forever; the Gods From Beyond will burst through the gates of Euclidean spacetime. If the characters are free to turn around and leave at any time, it's harder to create the atmosphere of suspense. Ideally, of course, the characters' moral fiber will keep them in the Bad Place, but the gamemaster can't always count on that.

The Bad Place is often anachronistic, a relic from the past intruding on the present. It is an unnatural survival, a relict, a Thing That Should Not Be. (In this, it is similar to the ghosts that often haunt it; they too are things of the past intruding where they should not be.) The original Gothic novels were set in ruined castles, abbeys, and other crumbling structures which by their very existence mocked the notion of orderly progress and the laws of history. This theme has continued in Carfax Abbey in *Dracula*, Lovecraft's cyclopean ruined cities in prehuman Antarctica, and the Hotel Pandemonium in Clive Barker's *Damnation Game*. Seldom is the Bad Place anachronistic in the other sense, a futuristic thing intruding on a timeless past (although *The House Next Door* in Anne Rivers Siddons' novel is a modernistic, and evilly alive, new building in an old-money suburb); evil takes its time, apparently. Unless a fantasy world has an extraordinarily well-realized history (for the players, not just the gamemaster or characters), this will be a difficult sense to convey in a fantasy horror game. Intrusive anachronism becomes much easier in historical or modern horror; in science fiction, it might be so easy to find that it loses its effect.

This sense of anachronism, of being unmoored in time and place, is part of the third great theme: the Bad Place as unnatural and malevolent in itself. The Bad Place has an atmosphere of desolation. Not only is the mansion haunted, but the leaves of the trees on the lawn rustle by

themselves without any wind. Doors jam shut or open at inconvenient (or deadly) times; books that never existed sit fatly on the shelves; furniture seems to move by itself when nobody is watching; the eyes on the painting follow you around the room. The poltergeist is an excellent illustration of the melding of the unnatural malevolence of the setting with the lore of the ghost. Even nature itself is unnatural; the lightning crashing around Castle Frankenstein or the blizzard at the Hotel Overlook in *The Shining* are just two examples of another theme that goes back to the oldest Gothic romances. In a game setting, this is best introduced subtly and with restraint; the characters should not be so distracted from the main horror by the effects of the Bad Place that the point of the scenario is lost.



The inverse of the Bad Place is the Invaded House. The Invaded House is a place of safety, security, and normality invaded by some disruptive, intrusive, unnatural entity. Where the story of the Bad Place is the forces of natural order, or "good," invading a domain of the unnatural, or "evil," the story of the Invaded House is that of the Threat From Outside. The Invaded House depends for its power on the comfort level of the place invaded; characters will feel less shock at being attacked in a motel room just off the Interstate than they will in their parents' lovely split-level in the suburbs. The horror becomes more awful by contrast to the normality and comfort that it violates. The invasion can be creeping and subtle, like the slow replacement of Mira Loma's citizens by pod creatures in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, or it can be sudden, relentless, and brutal, as with Michael Myers' homicidal rampage in *Halloween*.

Psychologically, the Invaded House is a metaphor for the body. The violation of personal space inside the character's home walls is analogous to allowing a foreign object inside the character's (or

player's) skin. The William Hope Hodgson novel *The House on the Borderland* makes this obvious, with the basement (where the vile, pallid, piglike beasts may lurk) representing the hero's unconscious; his fanatic attempts to safeguard his upstairs study mirror his steadily disintegrating sanity. Although this can be a difficult concept to clearly communicate in a game setting, the players will be aware of it, if only subconsciously. If the gamemaster plays on it deftly enough, the players may never know why they flinched when the creature burst through the windows and the lights suddenly went out.

The Invaded House is, unfortunately, a one-trick pony; if it is used too often, then the sense of comfort and security that it violates is never present in the first place. Characters (and players) begin to accept that no place is safe from the evil, and that safety is an illusion. This is often a desirable (and useful) state of mind for the gamemaster to encourage, but it does mean that she has to work out some new Bad Places for awhile, or avoid climactic scenarios and settle for tension-reducing investigatory sessions.

One nice touch is when the Invaded House becomes the new Bad Place; the windows are broken, the furniture is upended, there are bullet-holes in all the walls, and something horrible has died in the bedroom after swearing revenge. Suddenly the place of comfort is damaged, warped, and unnatural. The characters might be reluctant to leave their home, even after it has become the center of innumerable blasphemous manifestations, all stemming from the first Invasion. Gamemasters should not necessarily rely on this, since the sense of closure derived from driving the horror out of the sunlight is part of the reward of horror roleplaying. If the Invaded House is to become a full-fledged Bad Place, allow the characters a chance to realize it, leave, and come back loaded for bear in a grand climax.

4.2.3 · BUILDING IN THE TWISTS

The final setting, the Bad Place or Invaded House, may not be the only place that the scenario takes place. There may be a whole series of vile murders that lead the characters to their final confrontation, or there may be a number of interludes for investigations, evading misguided police, or simply deciding whether to bring silver bullets or holy water (or both).

Whether the scenario is limited to one place or meanders through the surrounding countryside, it is helpful to keep the narrative twisted. If the characters have to uncover clues A, B, and C to find the shapeshifting aliens, let them find clue A, then C, then B (or a red herring, depending on the timing). Key witnesses can tell things in flashback. The crucial letter should refer to another, missing, document. The monster's trail might break off — or double back and meet itself at an ideal spot for an ambush. If there's time, throw in the ambush and have it lead to further clues (a dropped medallion, the unique smell of the insects' shells, the direction of the luminous slime track).

One way to experiment with building the twists is not to space out and reorder the clues but to dump many, many clues onto the players in short order. This strategy has a number of possible outcomes for the gamemaster. The attempt to follow any given thread can be treated as a "standard" horror scenario, perhaps with its own twists if time allows. This gives the players a gratifying sense of choice, while still allowing the gamemaster to plot the climax. The confusion of clues can simply be used as a compressed version of the standard twists, with the horrific climax itself being the final clue that sets up the full horror. The mass of knowledge that points to evils can itself be seen as something horrible; in such a scenario (or campaign), it soon appears that any fact or piece of information holds a dark, hateful implication. This "information is dangerous" approach is particularly useful in cosmic horror (see Section 2.4.6) or paranoiac (see Section 2.4.5) campaign styles.

The purpose of building in the twists is to keep the players off-balance, nervous, and looking around. If the narrative doesn't let any twists in, fake them, or shorten the scenario. This uncertainty leads to contemplation of the unknown; while that is going on, the gamemaster has a chance to build the horror or punctuate it with episodic dread or gore.

4.2.4 · PACING THE SCENARIO

The scenario should always be working toward the climax. Even if as a gamemaster you practice total simulationism and leave the characters alone to fumble their way through the world, the tenor and tone of your narrations or the elements of the uncanny in the descriptions should be elevating the level of unnaturalness in the game.

For more conventional gamemasters, it's important to walk the tightrope between twisting the narrative enough to leave the players off balance and making it so murky that they give up or can't find the climax without your obvious (and mood-shattering) intervention. It's not as hard as it sounds (especially if your players are in the mood and being cooperative), but like anything, it takes practice.

The key to pacing is the "tension, conflict, and release" pattern used in virtually every stalker movie made in the last two decades. The babysitter ventures into the kitchen; we see the knife missing from the knife rack. We see shadows behind the fridge: she's being stalked! Will she see the killer? Where is he? This is the tension. Suddenly, the killer jumps out! Stabbing, and flailing, and throwing of burning popcorn! This is the conflict. After the babysitter is chased through the kitchen, there's always a few minutes of cathartic screaming, crying, and panting before she ventures upstairs to be stalked through the bathroom. This is the release. The same mechanism can be seen in roller coasters, another example of people voluntarily scaring themselves; tension on the uphills, panic in the free fall, and release on the long downhill runs. The gamemaster should try to make

the mechanism in her scenario less obvious than a formula slasher flick (and try to make it as scary as a good roller coaster), but it works.

In role playing games, the tension can simply ease away for no reason; the characters can't see the shadow any more, or the red eyes pull back into the tunnel. Conflict is not necessary to move from tension to release, although it makes a natural bridge. In role playing games, combat usually takes longer than it does in slasher flicks, so it tends to break tension more fully than some gamemasters might want.

One way to adjust the pacing is to tinker with the players' time sense. Collapse some common, easily ignored task into a quick description with a modicum of atmosphere. Even combat can be compressed, if it's minor, and players usually don't object to rapid-fire combats that they win. Something like "the wererats suddenly drop from the sewer roof, striking and clawing. Before you can even draw your guns, they've skittered away into the darkness. You all seem unhurt, although there are several fresh scratches on your leathers" can both compress time and spook the players. Or stretch out something like the walk down the hill or the search for the next headless victim: add lots of atmosphere and description. Even things like saying "an hour goes by, and then another" can work to speed things along; similarly, just counting off the minutes can drag out the perceived time of a session. Make time seem to pass slowly for the characters, or rapidly. These tricks can be used to alter the pacing toward tension or toward release, unnerve the players, and generally create the timeless moment of doubt that sets up the next really unpleasant occurrence. Be careful, though. Too much monkeying around with the players' time sense can throw them out of the game; if they can't follow what's going on or when, they may stop trying.

4.2.5 · TIMING: IT'S ALWAYS MIDNIGHT SOMEWHERE

When the gamemaster judges that the players are ready, or when the characters have found the necessary clues, or when it's getting late and everybody needs to get going in an hour, the gamemaster should set up the climax. Remove obstacles, move the Bad Place across the river if need be (but don't contradict the game's continuity), plant one last clue — get the players keyed up and tense again on the threshold of the climax.

This has to be done subtly; ideally, the players shouldn't be able to tell the climax from any of the other increases in tension in the scenario until it emerges, red and ravening, from the depths of the plot. (Some players can still tell; if the game always ends at 10:30, they know the climax will be coming along between 9:30 and 10:00. The job of these players' gamemaster is to keep them so creeped out that they forget to look at their watches.)

One way to get the characters to the climax is to chase them there; the gaunt riders materialize in the sagebrush and begin to herd the characters toward the haunted fort; the werewolves take up their baying cry in the alleys of Whitechapel; the ground around the players begins to liquefy everywhere except around the Crypt of Dreams. This can be done as an increasingly suspenseful building of terror or as a series of gore-punctuated combats (short ones, to avoid breaking atmosphere and tension). This should be done carefully and subtly; the chase should never seem arbitrary or forced. Players often resent being "railroaded" into the next scene; the gamemaster should allow the characters as much freedom as possible while still keeping overall control of the tone and story.

The gamemaster's greatest potential ally in this is the players themselves. They've been hunting the skeleton lich all evening; finally, a solid lead on his walking castle! When players scent blood, they are only too happy to let their characters follow the trail. This is why the "mystery" scenario format works so well in horror: the players are the ones trying to decipher the clues; they are committed to the problem. They've invested time and energy; when a solution presents itself, they'll leap before looking. Ideally, the gamemaster has also allowed the players' imaginations to run wild; they know a horror is coming up, it's a horror scenario, after all! As they think about the horror, even if they're doing it to unravel the mystery, they're opening themselves up to their own fear of the unknown.

4.2.6 · THE PAYOFF

The payoff is the big moment; ultimate evil confronts the characters! This is when all the stops should be pulled out; if you don't scare the players now, you won't for the rest of the session. I find that the closest-to-ideal way to run the payoff is to try for dread all the way up to the very edge of the payoff, and then shoot in a huge serving of gore. (Ideally the "unthinkable" becomes the "unnamable," and dread and gore merge.) Let that moment last as long as it can stand, and then strike for terror. Blood-freezing adrenaline, cold sweat, hoarse shouting, the works. It doesn't always work, and other combinations (or single types alone) can make equally memorable payoffs, but this is my personal "old standby."

Ideally, the payoff should occur as close as possible to the point when the players have deduced the full extent of the horror. The longer they have to understand the horror, the less scary it gets (in most cases, at least). It's no longer the unknown, it's part of the observed world. Returning to our earlier example, the players have clues A and C, plus a creepy and disturbing (but basically cosmetic) red herring. After they've cogitated on those enough, they find clue B (which sits right inside the front door of the Bad Place, perhaps). Ideally, they should instantly realize the truth about sixty seconds before all Hell breaks loose. Since both gamemasters and players are fallible,

this timing breaks down sometimes. That's not fatal as long as the players are invested enough in the scenario that they intuitively accept the unexplained, or as long as the horror is scary enough that even a period of thinking about it causes goosebumps.

4.3 HORROR VILLAINS

"One may smile, and smile, and be a villain."

— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I:v

Just a Bad Place is normally not enough to build a proper climax (although it can certainly be done; the house in the movie *The Haunting* serves as an excellent demonstration of that). Heroes like the characters deserve villains worthy of their steel, or lead, or laser bolts. The players will certainly expect there to be some motive force behind all the random horror their characters have slogged through. If that force is intelligent, a true villain, role playing it gives an excellent opportunity for the gamemaster to shine. The gamemaster can also use a villain's intelligence to step up the horror one more notch.

4.3.1 · MONSTERS VS. VILLAINS

"'It was *the boogeyman, after all.'*
'As a matter of fact, it was.'"

— Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) and
Doctor Loomis (Donald Pleasance), *Halloween*

The basic distinction between monsters and villains is that villains are intelligent. Monsters may stalk the characters by instinct, hunt them with cunning, and attack them with subtlety, but if they do not act intelligently then they are not true villains. For instance, Michael Myers in *Halloween* was a monster; his attacks on the various babysitters were carried out with (only) the cunning and savagery of a predatory animal. Freddy Krueger from *Nightmare On Elm Street* is a villain; he plans to entrap the teenagers who cross him, he is motivated by revenge, he reacts to their defenses with intelligent countermeasures.

This is not to say that monsters must always attack in mindless human waves, or have no reasonable behavior or motivation. They can, of course; both the unstoppable wave (*Day of the Dead*) and the irrational attack (*The Birds*) are trademarks of the horror genre. However, it's reasonable to make a pack of werewolves at least as cunning as a pack of normal wolves, for example; that's more than enough challenge for most parties. They will strike stragglers and the weak, they will pull back to a safe distance for stalking when they meet resistance, and they will try to herd the game onto unsafe ground.

If these werewolves reason out where the party is likely to be (as opposed to just hitting the same "hunting ground" every full moon), take out any observers, prepare traps or snares, strike the strongest character (or the obvious magician) first, or in any other way show that they are reasoning, reacting beings, then these werewolves have become villains. And, somewhat beside the point, the party is probably doomed; the gamemaster can almost always coordinate the attacks of the villains more effectively than the players can coordinate their defenses.

This is one reason why most horror scenarios have only one villain (if any) at a time. The lead werewolf will use her brain and the others will simply follow orders like *Star Wars* stormtroopers. This tends to balance the scenario a little more. Also, using only one villain helps to focus the players' fear and the gamemaster's attention. Unless the players and gamemaster are used to multiple-target games, multiple villains often simply confuse the issue in a single scenario.

4.3.2 · MOTIVES

The villain's motive should always be considered in the design of any scenario, especially a horror scenario. Even if it's just a matter of deciding that the villain is a homicidal alien or a thirst-crazed vampire, some motivation is necessary. This motive will determine what the villain's actions are likely to be during the scenario. If the villain is simply gripped with homicidal mania or feeding frenzy, then she will stop at nothing to slaughter the party; the scenario will be a nonstop harrowing, or a "track the beast to its lair" story straight out of *Beowulf*. If the villain has to open the Gate of Slumber to the Evil Dreamhound, she will seek to secure the location of the Gate; that will probably become the Bad Place at the climax.

The question of motive will also address whether the villain fights to the death or flees to the safety of some Even Worse Place. Most intelligent beings, and almost all animals, do not fight to the death without a tremendously important reason. The gamemaster should know that reason, and perhaps even let the players in on it in the investigatory sessions or early twists that open the scenario. This can even be used (and should, if possible) to build the atmosphere of fear. Dropping the clue that the Queen of the Blood Spiders is willing to do anything to protect her eggs will unnerve any player who stops to think what "anything" could mean.

Some possible villainous motivations, and notes on using them in horror scenarios, are given below. It should be noted that some of these motives are also potential motives for monsters.

Survival

Some villains (and many, many monsters) are motivated by survival to do the awful things they do. Vampires have to drink human blood to survive, for example. This can be a perfectly good engine

for a basic horror scenario: villain slays innocents, characters track villain to lair, battle ensues. If the villain is a recurring villain (intended to power a story arc, or the entire campaign itself), then the villain's motivation for the specific actions in the scenario needs to be determined. For example, a vampire prince may be basically motivated by survival, but needs a magic key to increase his power over the dream realms. This scenario is about the search for, and attempted theft of, the magic key. It is thus about the villain's attempt to gain extra power to ensure his survival.

Self-Defense

Many villains are motivated by self-defense; these pesky characters keep interfering with their plans and trying to kill them! One can hardly blame an intelligent villain for wanting to take the initiative for a change. Villains may also be defending themselves against the actions of NPCs or society at random; the woodcutter has ventured into the evil fairies' sacred grove, so the woodcutter's village (which happens to contain the characters) must be destroyed before the sacred black oak is cut. Monsters are also often motivated by self-defense.

Revenge

A variant on self-defense is revenge; the villain can feel wronged by one of the characters, someone else nearby, or by society at large. A great many psychics, mad scientists, and "intellectual" villains seem to be revenge-driven. Vengeful villains will often not take rational precautions, or may use suicidal techniques — this can make them harder to stop, but easier to track.

Power

Perhaps the most common villainous motivation is power. Something must be gained, or destroyed, or used to increase the villain's power. Some opponent (such as the characters) must be killed to ensure the villain's power. This action need not make a lot of sense on the surface; necromancers or cultist terrorists might actually gain power simply by random killings. The reason that the villain wants this power is another motivation entirely (often greed, political conquest, or another motive from this list); power for power's sake is a particularly sterile motive for a proper villain. Monsters almost never act to increase their power; advance planning and forethought are not monstrous hallmarks.

Dark Religious Mania

The villain worships some powerful god that demands sacrifice. The villain must perform some horrific ritual to open the way for the Antichrist. The villain objects to the good gods (and their worshippers) on theological grounds, and seeks to undermine and destroy their domain. This might be seen as another version of power. Dark

religious mania is a very common motivation for power-driven scenarios, for instance. However, since it is so common (especially in Dennis Wheatley-style black magic stories or Cthulhu mythos scenarios), it gets its own entry. A god capable of inspiring religious mania in monsters would be a very disturbing deity indeed.

Forbidden Knowledge

Ever since Frankenstein (or Faust, or Prometheus), horror villains have been driven by the desire to know too much. This drive can seem similar to insanity (or no motivation) to the uninformed. In the horror genre, sometimes even seeking magical powers carries with it a dangerous cost; magic itself is something that man was not meant to know. This motive has much in common with both power and dark religious mania. Monsters are virtually never motivated by greed for forbidden knowledge.

Twisted Honor

Perfect for pulp style horror, the villain works from some "heroic" code, now turned to the service of evil. Perhaps the villain is a mercenary, hired to serve some more shadowy force, but one who honors her contract to the letter. An immortal villain, like a vampire or a lich (or a conspiracy), might be fighting for some long-forgotten cause like the throne of the Merovingian kings or the crusade against the Albigensians. Even if the villain has another motivation entirely, she may have a personal code that she clings to — she grants dwarves a quick death, she will never violate a temple of the Forgotten God, any enemy has the right to challenge her to single combat. This can add great depth and realism to many otherwise-identical ravening fiends.

Sheer Malevolence

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The villain has become so powerful that mere morality means nothing; killing and torture and the rest of it are merely enjoyable hobbies. This seems to be the motivation for many villains, and is not even terribly unrealistic. Especially in fantasy horror, many monsters simply ravage for the sheer joy of it. The gamemaster should expend extra effort to make sheerly malevolent villains interesting; absolute power also leads to eventual boredom.

No Motivation

Some villains may have no detectable motivation. Sociopathic and psychopathic serial killers seem to have no motivation barring murky Freudian theories about their past. The villain's actions may merely be coincidence; Albuquerque just happens to be in the saucers' flight path. Lovecraftian cosmic horror draws its power from the notion that nothing has any purpose whatsoever, including the actions of the Great Old Ones and the interstellar magical races. Monsters, of course, might also have no motivation besides instinct or random chance.

4.3.3 · MEANS

The specific tools and powers that the villains or monsters have available at the time of the scenario also need to be determined. For monsters, this is usually a fairly simple task; basiliks have their deadly gaze, giant ants have pincers and acid, homicidal maniacs have power tools and kitchen utensils.

Villains, on the other hand, have at least as much potential equipment as the characters do. If the characters have submachine guns, the villain's henchmen might as well. If the characters have magic, the villain may have countermagic or black magic of her own. In modern or science fiction horror games, a billionaire cultist or a mind-controlling alien could have access to anything in the world — or the galaxy.

With this embarrassment of riches, the gamemaster should equip the villain with two ends in mind. First, what will be scariest? Don't use just any getaway car if a hearse (or a black vintage Cadillac) will work better. Don't use a standard-issue laser pistol if a searing blast of hellfire from a Hand of Glory is available. The villain's guards shouldn't be just standard thugs. They should be shambling undead, or lobotomized kidnap victims, or hordes of summoned rats.

Second, what makes sense in the context of the scenario (and, if necessary, the campaign at large)? Remember, if the players' sense of disbelief is shattered, they won't be scared either. Will a subtle and conniving black magician rely on shotgun-wielding cultists or on creatures lovingly crafted from tendrils of shadow? Most likely the shadow tendrils; they probably fit the personality of the villain the characters have been stalking. Will a millennia-old vampire use a car bomb, or a malevolent gray alien use a battleaxe? Of course not.

4.3.4 OPPORTUNITY

The gamemaster needs to consider how the villains will gain the opportunity to blight the characters' existence. In many, many scenarios, the players will take care of that for you; the whole point is to track down and confront the villain. In other scenarios, especially those climaxing in the Invaded House, the opportunity needs to be built in.

Once again, the gamemaster should decide this question based on the two criteria given above: what's the scariest way for it to work, and what makes internally consistent sense?

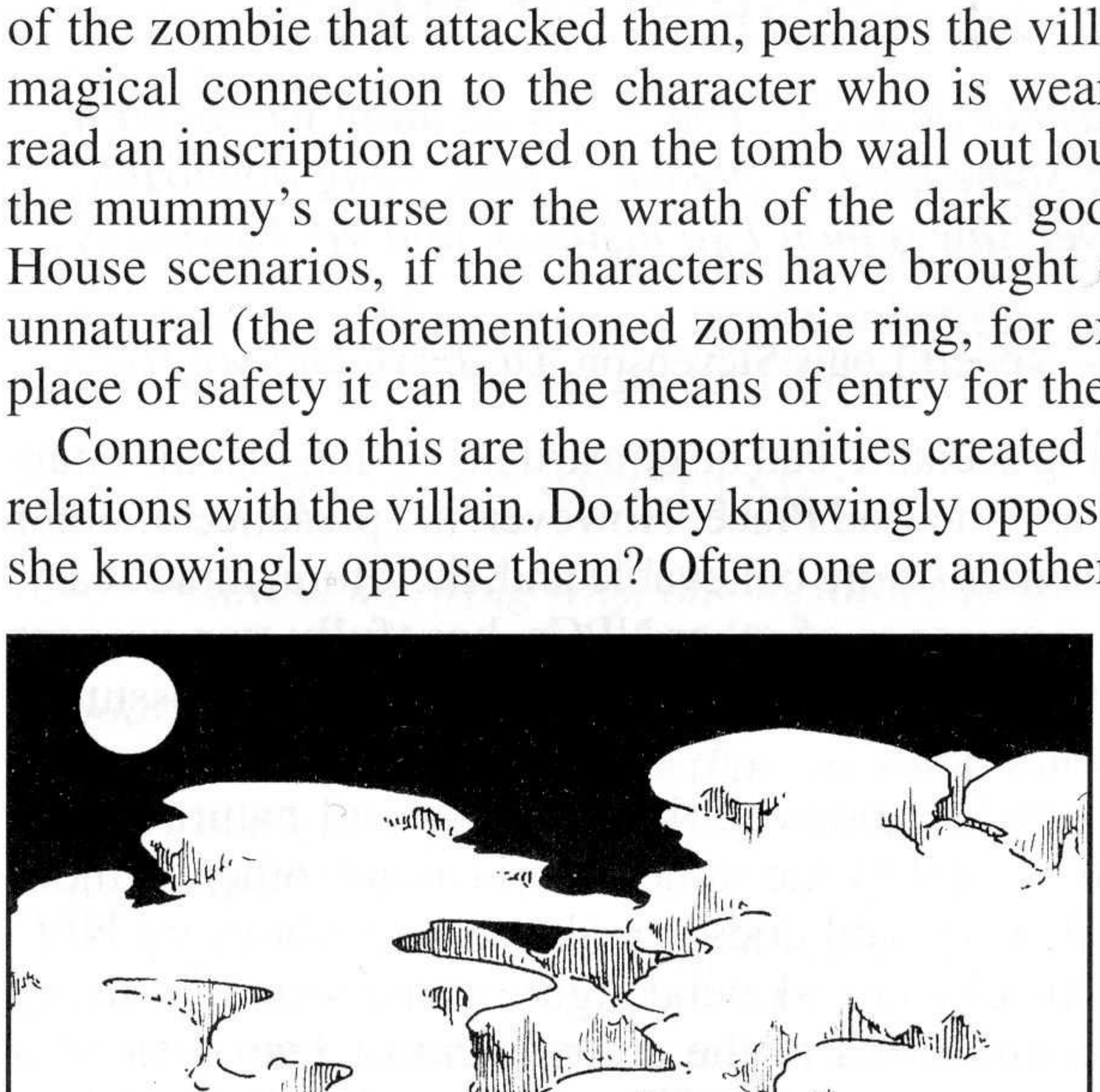
Scary opportunities happen when the characters are constrained in some way. They can be physically restrained, although most players object to "capture" scenarios. They can be constrained in time and attention. If the gamemaster is using the mass of clues as her approach to building in the twists, the already distracted and harassed players can be pelted with omens, stalkings, attacks, and general atmospherics. Time these phenomena so that the players are just about to snap when they reach the climax of the scenario, or move the

payoff to the place in time (and location in the gameworld) where the snap will happen. They can be constrained by the presence of witnesses; heroes can't shoot the demon-child while the cops are watching. They can be constrained by the presence of dependents or innocents; the werewolves will attack while the characters are walking their dates home from the movies.

Sensible opportunities depend on the characters' defenses and the villains' or monsters' means and motives. Characters seldom have perfect defenses in horror games (especially since gamemasters should be reluctant to pass out perfect defenses), but there should be some logical way for the villains to find the flaw. If that logical way is the torture and mutilation of the characters' trusted butler (whose maimed corpse can show up at any time for maximum effect), so much the better. Neither monsters nor villains will normally make suicide attacks. Traditional vampires don't attack at noon on Sunday, it isn't sensible or scary.

A particularly fiendish villainous opportunity is one that the characters themselves have set up. If they've taken a ring from the body of the zombie that attacked them, perhaps the villain can use it as a magical connection to the character who is wearing it. If they've read an inscription carved on the tomb wall out loud, it could trigger the mummy's curse or the wrath of the dark gods. In the Invaded House scenarios, if the characters have brought something evil or unnatural (the aforementioned zombie ring, for example) into their place of safety it can be the means of entry for the horrors outside.

Connected to this are the opportunities created by the characters' relations with the villain. Do they knowingly oppose the villain? Does she knowingly oppose them? Often one or another of the pair won't know of the other's existence. The characters might not know of the cult of the Insect God, although the cult's vile auguries have warned them of the heroes' plans. Or, the cult might not know that this town has its own mystical defenders when they set up shop; the heroes



have the advantage of seeing the evil first. This "first contact" will be vital for the nature of the villainous reaction. If the villain is surprised, she may lash out in surprise and fear, using more force (and earlier) than she had intended. If she knows of the characters, on the other hand, she may try ambushing them, conspiring against them, or even suborning them. She may even befriend one of the characters, acting as a trusted NPC and lulling them into a false state of confidence. Particularly fiendish gamemasters might even introduce such a villain from the beginning of the campaign, perhaps as the characters' mentor! She might simply be using the heroes to clear out all her competition so that she is the only force of the Dark Occult left in the whole province, or they might be part of something even bigger, and darker.... As you can see, the nature of the hero-villain relationship is a fertile source of plots and stratagems. It creates opportunities for villainous action, just as it prevents others.

4.4 OTHER HORROR NPCS

"He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarcely know why."

— Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

A perfectly rousing scenario can be constructed using just the characters, the villains, and the Bad Place. However, the presence of other NPCs can make a scenario more believable and, therefore, more scary. At the very least the presence of other NPCs, hopefully, can prevent the characters from just killing everything that moves on the assumption that it must be a villain.

In any horror scenario, however, the presence and nature of the NPCs has to be determined by the same criteria as any other element of the scenario: is it scary, and does it make sense? Not every NPC has to be a gaunt, black-clad, skeletal figure to be scary. In many cases, the NPC's contribution to the atmosphere of fear is to be a conduit for scary information or as a normal, even decent, backdrop to make the horrors in the foreground look even worse. But the active presence of any NPC must advance the gamemaster's ultimate agenda of horror; as much fun as role playing the lovable town drunk is, if he doesn't advance the plot or serve to point up the horrors lying in wait, he's going to be a distraction from the all-important atmosphere of fear.

4.4.1 · NPCS AS RESOURCE

"Don't step on it — it might be Lon Chaney."

— popular American saying, 1920s

An immediately useful role for the NPC is as a resource. The horror NPC has something, usually information, that the characters need to defeat the horror. This can be eyewitness testimony to the meteor crash last night, the local stories about the "haunted keep," or simply the fact that the trainyards close at midnight. NPCs might be able to provide "offscreen" services: NPC cops might have the authority to close off the blind alley, NPC clerics might be willing to say prayers to combat evil manifestations in the city, or NPC assassins' guilds might be willing to kill the Lich Lord's lesser minions overseas.

Some NPCs might have actual tangible things the characters need; the eccentric gunsmith from "the old country" can have a stash of silver bullets, the elderly maid who looked after the missing wizard can have his unreadable diary, the engineering professor at the community college can have an experimental sonic gun.

Finally, some NPCs have their physical presence and willingness to help. Although the NPC cop or longshoreman who helps the characters look into those wet footprints on the dock may have a life span shorter than a *Star Trek* redshirt, other NPCs may be crucial to surviving the climax. An NPC psychic or sorceror who helps out a low-magic party of FBI agents may be the only thing between them and a new career as slaves of the Insect God.

4.4.2 · NPCS AS SETTING

"Without knowing why, one hesitates to ask directions from the gnarled, solitary figures spied now and then on crumbling doorsteps or on the sloping, rock-strewn meadows. Those figures are so silent and furtive that one feels somehow confronted by forbidden things, with which it would be better to have nothing to do."

— H.P. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror"

In addition to their uses as resources, NPCs can be "part of the scenery" in horror scenarios. This method uses the NPC to represent the nature of wherever the characters currently find themselves. Usually, these NPCs are either there to heighten the sense of unease directly or by contrast.

To directly heighten the sense of unease using NPCs, make sure the NPCs seem abnormal, disturbed, or vaguely menacing. Lovecraft's inbred hill folk, staring at strangers with suspicion from sunken eyes in slack-jawed faces, are a perfect example of NPCs used to heighten unease. The menacing crowds of homeless people in John Carpenter's movie *Prince of Darkness* serve the same function. Although neither

Very little beats a fresh corpse as a scene-setting device, either. With sufficiently evocative descriptions, the gamemaster can simultaneously inform the players of vital information and creep them out. It's not even necessary to have great gouts of blood and mutilated organs. In the right context, the fact that the body of the sailor was found without a mark on it, laid out peacefully as if he had just gone to sleep, can be just as disturbing as pentagrams splashed on the cobblestones in human brain fluid.

An attack on the players (either to set up a twist or to force the climax) can often benefit if some hapless NPC is slaughtered instantly. A rapid-fire description of the dismemberment of the party's hired linkboy can set the stage for a truly dreadful payoff.

Once again, this strategy works better if the characters have had some connection, no matter how tenuous, with the dead NPC in the past. Ideally, this will have happened during a previous session, but earlier in the scenario is a suitable time to introduce the future corpse. Make the doomed NPC seem real; the death of a person will affect the players far more than will the death of a cardboard cutout or collection of statistics.

4.4.4 · USING NPCS SENSIBLY

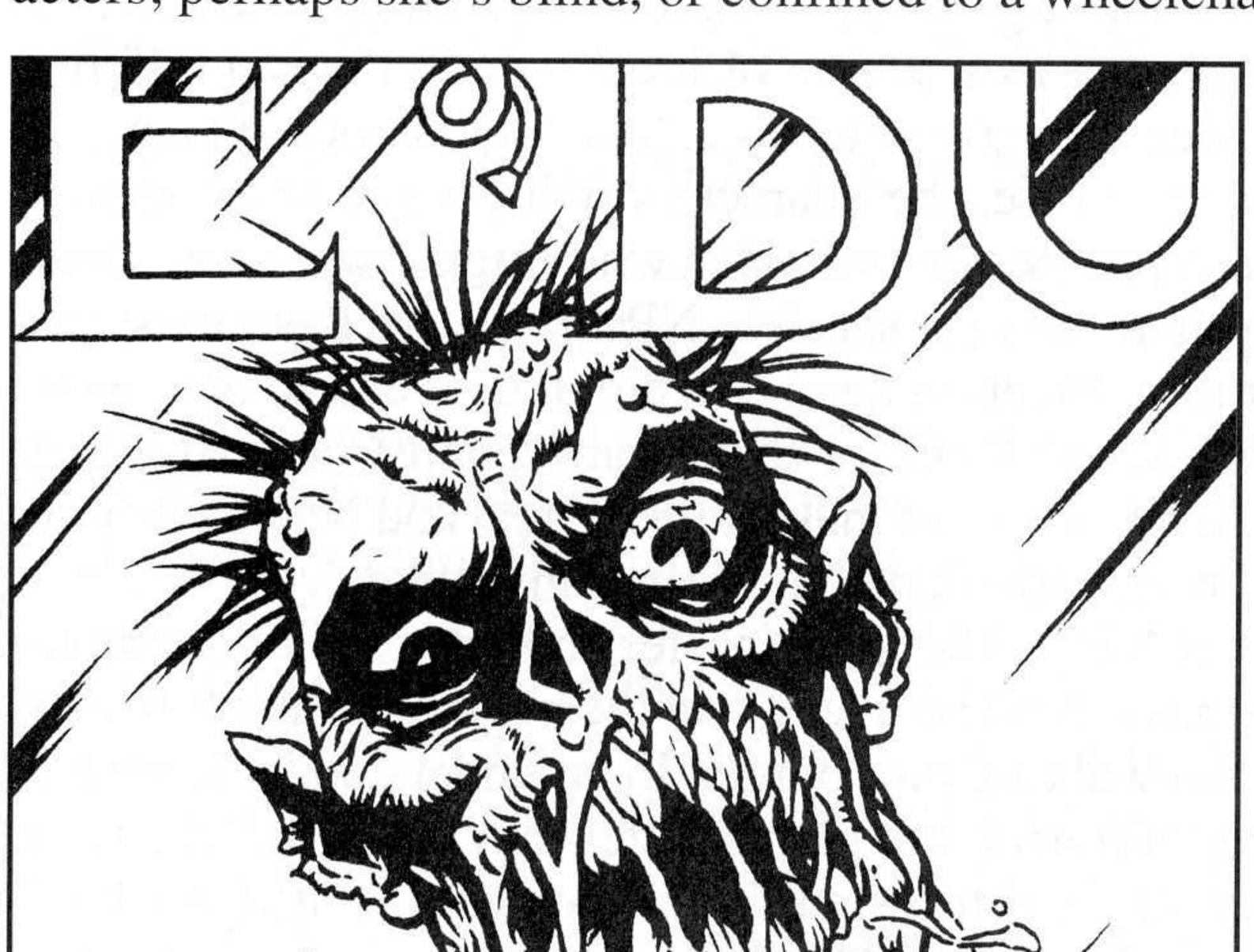
The NPCs should also have some reason for acting as they do. In too many horror scenarios, the NPCs seem like nothing more than vending machines for the characters to get clues from. Make it believable; give the old prospector a reason to know about the lights in the hills and a reason to tell inquisitive strangers about them. Ideally, there should be some reason besides a glowing "Ask Me" sign for the characters to pick the old prospector as a source of local lore. Perhaps a different NPC has mentioned the prospector as a "crazy old coot with acres of stories." Ideally, of course, the characters will go into town specifically to look for a prospector or hunter who might have seen something. Another way to set up a sensible NPC is to give them existence before their star turn. Mention them in a previous scenario or session. Have other NPCs know them, or even warn against believing their tomfool stories. Every effort to make an NPC real and believable pays huge dividends in scenario depth and player investment.

With any use of NPCs, the gamemaster should resist two temptations. One is to make them so trivial that the players think of them as nothing more than walking plot points. In an understandable rush to build that feeling of horror, the gamemaster may think that the teenage movie usher's role is too small to bother with. But if her testimony is to seem real, it has to seem to come from a real person. In a hurry to establish mood, the gamemaster can harm realism. Give even the most minor NPCs names and personalities, even if they're just two-word sketches. "The movie usher's name (you can read it on her nametag) is Stacy, and she nervously tells you about what she saw on the screen." Even better, role play Stacy nervously, if time allows.

Let the players sense Stacy's adolescent confusion, eagerness to do the right thing, and fear of what lives in the theater after dark. Even if there's no time (or plausible way) to tell the players the NPC's name, knowing it yourself will make her seem more real everybody.

The other temptation is to make the NPC into the star of the scenario. This is especially the case with NPCs as resources. In the case of the NPC psychic above, the gamemaster may be tempted to make the characters mere sidekicks to Monique the Magnificent as she levels the wastepaper fortress of the Insect God in a stellar display of psychic energies. This is very possibly the fastest way to destroy not only the atmosphere of horror, but any enjoyment that the players might get from the scenario. Players do not come to gaming for a passive experience; they have every right to expect the story to be about them. Powerful NPCs should have very little, if any, spotlight time in a horror scenario. A cryptic warning, one key hint or piece of equipment, or something similarly brief. Even if the gamemaster is such an accomplished storyteller that the players enjoy hearing her tell tales of gigantic battles that they can but watch in awe, the presence of such a powerful figure will still destroy the sense of danger and fear. Even if she's destroyed before their eyes by the horror, the best that can usually be salvaged is a quick terror-filled retreat.

The characters, in short, should be the center of the story; the horror should be happening to them, and they should be the ones who play the key role in confronting and (ideally) defeating it. Hence, the useful NPC resource should be counterbalanced by some weakness. The gamemaster could make the NPC depend somehow on the characters; perhaps she's blind, or confined to a wheelchair. Weaknesses can also be mental or moral. Perhaps she is a pathetic liar, so that the characters feel a realistic tinge of contempt along with their gratitude.



5.0
SCENARIO FORMATS

"I had to invent plans and strategems, and to look about, and to think of things beforehand, because nobody must dream on anything that I was doing or going to do...."

— Arthur Machen, "The White People"

There are a lot of different scenario formats in role playing games. This section is intended only to give a few of the most common, and some hints about specific techniques to make them appropriately horrifying. Some scenario formats work better (or are more commonly used with) some subgenres of horror or campaign styles. Nothing in this book is meant to be exclusive or complete; that goes double for this section. Many scenarios, of course, combine elements from many formats: the movie *Aliens*, for example, combines the Dungeon Crawl with alternating Chase and Hunting Party elements.

5.1
DUNGEON CRAWL

"Then following along the wall
He went walking, his hands tight on his sword,
His heart still angry. He was hunting another
Dead monster, and took his weapon with him."

— *Beowulf*, lines 1573-1576

The classic dungeon crawl starts out at the entrance to the Bad Place, a hole in the ground. As the characters go deeper, the place gets worse, with the climax occurring at the deepest point of the cavern, tunnel, or abandoned ruin. This is a surprisingly effective model for creating horror, especially if the gamemaster plays up the claustrophobic tunnels, the chance for something to double back behind the characters, the dwindling supplies, and other elements of the desperate descent used at least since *Beowulf*, if not before. Twists are physical rather than narrative, and the only clues to find are usually the spoor of the main opponent or the bones of the last party of adventurers to descend. The final wonderful thing about the dungeon crawl is that the climax can be legitimately placed anywhere from the first cave to the fifteenth subbasement, depending on the players' tension and fear levels, without harming campaign plausibility.

The dungeon crawl is by no means exclusive to fantasy horror. It can be modified for any setting from archaeologists in a haunted tomb, to FBI agents in the coal tunnels and abandoned cellars under Chicago, to astronauts exploring a deserted space station. The dun-

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geon need not be vertical; Scotland Yarders going deeper and deeper into the twisting alleys and back mews of Whitechapel or Limehouse are definitely on a dungeon crawl even if they never go down a single flight of stairs. The key elements of the dungeon crawl are the increasingly claustrophobic isolation of the characters (from assistance and normality) and the omnipresence of the unnaturalness and threat.

5.2 CHASE

The chase is another classic scenario format in horror. In the chase, the characters are the target for the horrors. The tension comes from the attempt to survive. The ferocity of the attacks escalates along with the atmosphere of fear. Pacing is the key to the chase; even more than in other horror scenarios, the characters (and the players) must never be given enough time to calm down or think clearly. Twists come from sudden, unexpected attacks (ambushes, flanking forces, magical or dream projections) or obstacles (dead end alleys, magical barriers, crowds of innocents) in the characters' path. Clues are usually dispensed with; if the characters need information to survive the chase, it's often given in an earlier, purely investigative, session. The chase scenario can be set either in a Bad Place or in an Invaded House context, or used as a means to get the characters to the Bad Place. The payoff comes when the final attack occurs, at the height of the tension. This works well when the characters are well and truly trapped, or when they've been harried onto the home ground of the evil. One reliable chase format payoff is to wait for the characters to admit that they're trapped, screw the tension higher by visibly sealing off any hope of unscathed exit, and then have a new element, something even worse, show up. Despair is not quite the same as dread, but if the new element is particularly disturbing it can have almost the same effect.

Another common twist on the chase format is to have a goal of safety that the characters are trying to reach. This goal can be a place (the cathedral, the police station, the force field controls) or a time (sunrise, or cock-crow, is traditional). This seems to make the chase format more plausible, if only because so many horrific chase stories and movies include that element. Terror seems to be the easiest of the types of horror to maintain in the chase-to-safety version of this format, since the knowledge of potential safety can drain off the sense of dread.

5.3 HUNTING PARTY

The hunting party is the reverse of the chase; the characters are hunting a fleeing (or hidden) force of evil. The dungeon crawl might be seen as a specialized form of the hunting party, with the elements of claustrophobic isolation and hidden danger foregrounded. The keys to

the hunting party are the inevitability of conflict and the single-minded nature of the format. In a hunting party scenario, everything must lead to the quarry or it slows down the climax. Twists have to be seen as necessary obstacles to overcome, not as diversions or delusions for their own sake. Clues have to advance the hunt; the NPC as body count is a traditional clue in hunting party format horror scenarios.

The final conflict between hunters and quarry is the payoff; the fear comes from the setting and from the quarry's potential for malign or dangerous action. In the hunting party, like the mystery, the players are the gamemaster's allies in building the tension. They want to track down the serial killer, sewer goblins, or Specter King. This desire causes the players to elevate the tension of the hunt; the properly-tuned hunting party can have as much agonizing suspense for the players as Christmas Eve has to an eight-year old. But, for this implicit contract to be honored, there should be a payoff; the quarry and the hunters should meet in apocalyptic battle. Players will understand if the villain escapes thanks to their own incompetence, or because the opposition was too strong, but not if her lair is empty when the characters get there.

Many hunting party scenarios end in the quarry's den, lair, secret headquarters, or other Bad Place. Unlike the conventional Bad Place, however, it is often sensible to collapse the end of the hunting party scenario into one horrifying space to avoid delaying the confrontation and risk derailing the tension.

The Judas Goat scenario allows an Invaded House version of hunting party scenarios. In the Judas Goat, the characters stay in their place of safety (or some concealed and protected place) and lay a trap or set tempting bait for the villain (or monster). These scenarios are much harder to set up, and depend almost completely on player initiative. It is possible that an NPC could give the players the idea, if the gamemaster has a great fright to try out that works well with the Judas Goat. Tension and twists are even harder to build in; after too many secondary monster or henchman attacks, the Invaded House doesn't work. Although in real life, sitting still for four hours waiting for vampires to attack would be almost unbearably frightening, spending four hours of game time waiting is almost unbearably tedious. The Judas Goat, therefore, works best as the tag end to an investigative session or the climax of a conventional hunting party scenario.

The arena scenario is a compromise and combination of the chase and the hunting party. In the arena scenario, the characters and the horrors hunt each other across or around the setting. Although it has the potential to double the fear by drawing on the best elements of both, it can be more difficult to pace and time than either. Where and when the final confrontation take place, what clues are needed, and what twists will increase tension without distracting effort all become much harder questions in the arena. If the entire setting of the Arena is the Bad Place, some of these questions become easier; this, of course, is close to the nature of the dungeon crawl.

Many hunting party scenarios have a sudden twist, into either a chase or a pure dungeon crawl. The sudden shift to chase can either come as the penultimate shock in a hunting party scenario or the final twist that sets off a fast-moving climax. (If the reverse comes too early, then the scenario doesn't have time to build the player involvement that makes a hunting party scenario work.) In either case, if the foe is powerful enough (or the characters have underestimated it badly enough) that it can shift to the offensive, the gamemaster has to make sure that this shift (or the evil's greater power) was foreshadowed. Not only is this fairer to the players, the clue that foreshadowed the evil's power suddenly becomes much scarier in its own right, and the players might even start frightening themselves with the other clues in the scenario.

A hunting party scenario can become a dungeon crawl when the hunters enter the Bad Place. If the entry isn't as obvious as going into a cave or tunnel, then the players' sudden realization that the rules have changed can raise the pitch of fear and tension. If, on the other hand, the players feel that the shift was unwarranted, or just thrown in to make things harder, they will resent it, and the mood will be spoiled. If the gamemaster plans such a shift, she should make sure to foreshadow it in the clues or twists earlier in the scenario, or in previous sessions.

5.4 MYSTERY

"Rubbish, Watson, rubbish! What have we to do with walking corpses who can only be held in their grave by stakes driven through their hearts? It's pure lunacy."

— Sherlock Holmes, "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire"

Formally structuring the horror scenario as a mystery is another common approach. The mystery format encourages the slow building of information and player identification with the problem that are so useful in horror. This approach also lets the players know that following clues and piecing together knowledge will have a payoff in the end. In a mystery horror scenario, the tension has to be primarily intellectual or atmospheric. Too much overt horror, and the players are distracted from the problem to be solved. The horror should come from the nature of the clues (see Section 4.4.3, NPCs as Body Count, for example) and from what they reveal about the nature of the setting, villain, or campaign world in general. General intimations of foreboding, or scene-setting descriptions of squalor or atrocity, have their place even in the mystery scenario; the horror must not become too "bloodless" or it loses its ability to frighten on a visceral level.

The twists and pacing of the mystery format are apparent. Clues that seem to point one way but actually point another, secondary clues that point to other clues, or even red herrings (given sufficient time) act as twists. They can be placed in the narrative, or thrown in front of the characters, as pacing demands. The payoff of the mystery horror scenario is the moment of discovery. It is rare that a purely intellectual revelation can create a satisfying climax to a scenario (although when it does happen it can be supremely rewarding for all concerned). Therefore, the moment of discovery should be combined with a physical (or magical, or psychic) confrontation with the evil for maximum effect. This requires a degree of coordination to assure that the final clue, the villain, and the characters are all at the setting for the payoff at the same time. For example, the party has followed the trail of clues to the looming tents behind the carnival midway, and see the trained animals shrink away from the barker. The players realize that the carnival barker is a werewolf, their characters denounce him, and he immediately attacks. If it is impractical to set up such an occurrence in the game (and it often is), the solution of the mystery and the confrontation with the evil should be as close together in time and space as possible.

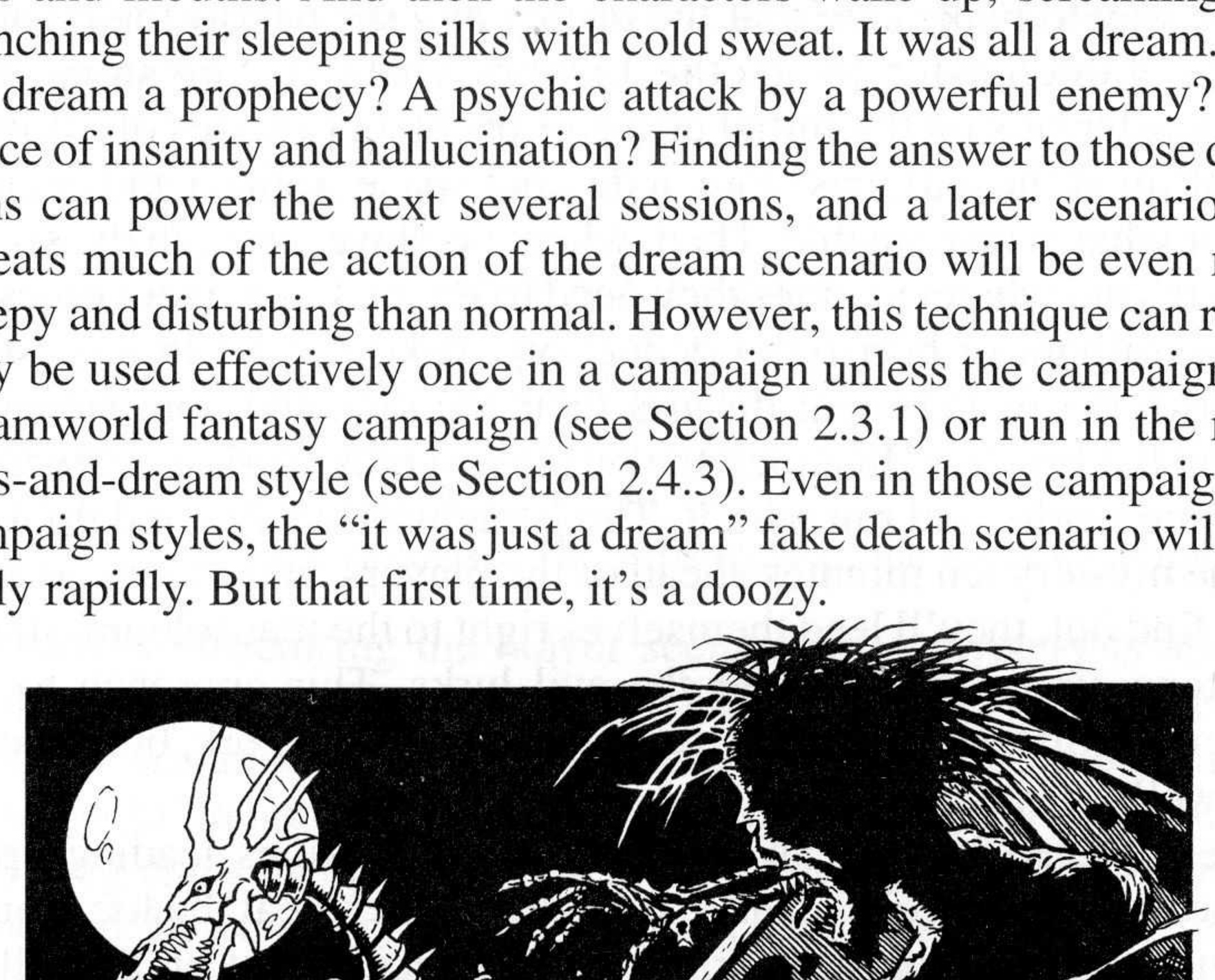
One way to make sure that the pacing and the payoff match up is for the gamemaster to let the players write the mystery. The gamemaster sets up the initial crime or problem (a series of killings, a break-in at the antiques store, a derelict space station) and decides who or what is responsible. Then, when the players search the scene, let them find whatever clues they need to go on. If a player comes up with a brilliant or horrifying deduction, make it true! In a mystery scenario, the players will discuss their theories and approaches to solving the mystery. Just pick the one that seems scariest or truest to the game world, and run with it. The gamemaster will wind up writing the mystery ten minutes ahead of the players, and as long as they don't find out, they'll lead themselves right to the mausoleum, standing stone circle, or wherever the evil lurks. This approach to the mystery format requires proactive, eager players to work, but it works very well.

The mystery format can also be used in sessions leading up to another type of horror scenario. A mystery can reveal the location of the dungeon for a dungeon crawl, for instance, or set up the villain for a hunting party (or the players for a chase). This "investigatory" session can be run as a horror scenario in its own right if the final deduction is sufficiently horrifying in itself. The final deduction can also immediately follow, rather than immediately precede, the confrontation at the climax of the scenario. Once the characters have defeated the monsters or foiled the villain, some clue can be found in the wreckage pointing to the final horrific revelation.

5.5 CLIFFHANGER

The cliffhanger scenario is structured much like the standard horror scenario, save that at the most dangerous part of the climax, the action ceases with the outcome left in doubt until the next session. This deliberate breaking of the mood without closure can lead to greater player curiosity and interest in following sessions, at the cost of losing the chance to have a truly powerful climax. In pulp style campaigns, especially, each session is often structured as a cliffhanger scenario beginning at the climax of the previous scenario. This leads to an interestingly "inverted" model of the session, which has to start at the high pitch of tension immediately, release it, and then begin building toward the next payoff. Building dread in such a scenario is difficult (save as a momentary set-piece experienced on the way to the next payoff), and a constantly varying level of terror is often the default for these scenarios.

One variation on the cliffhanger is to end the confrontation by graphically and malevolently slaughtering the characters. The vampires close in and feast on their quivering veins, the black altar splits open and the armies of Hell pour out, the glowing purple fungus spreads to their eyes and mouths. And then the characters wake up, screaming and drenching their sleeping silks with cold sweat. It was all a dream. Was the dream a prophecy? A psychic attack by a powerful enemy? Evidence of insanity and hallucination? Finding the answer to those questions can power the next several sessions, and a later scenario that repeats much of the action of the dream scenario will be even more creepy and disturbing than normal. However, this technique can really only be used effectively once in a campaign unless the campaign is a dreamworld fantasy campaign (see Section 2.3.1) or run in the madness-and-dream style (see Section 2.4.3). Even in those campaigns or campaign styles, the "it was just a dream" fake death scenario will pall fairly rapidly. But that first time, it's a doozy.



6.0
BEHIND THE SCREEN: RUNNING A SESSION

"Present fears are less than horrible imaginings."

— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I:iii

Running the horror session is a liberating responsibility. It allows the gamemaster to run wild, play with candles and mood music, graphically describe dismemberment and vampirism, hint darkly, plant lies and misdirections in the players' path, and generally go nuts. Anything the gamemaster's fiendish imagination can produce is legit in horror — as long as the players are scared. Without the atmosphere of fear, the session has failed, and it's the gamemaster's fault when push comes to shove.

6.1
HOW IS HORROR DIFFERENT?

"Fear is the basis of existence."

— Whitley Strieber

The horror session is different from the standard role playing session in its mood. Rather than good-natured sparring between equals or hack-and-slash combat, the heart of horror roleplaying is the mood of fear. Sparring between equals should carry unpleasant overtones and potentials of corruption. Hack-and-slash combat should be carried out in desperate fear for the character's soul, sanity, or skin (or all three). All the standard conventions and overtones of normal role playing have to be "one darker" than normal; the point of the game is to build the feeling of fear and to enjoy doing it.

In this light, it is important to keep the notion of the devil's choice in mind. In conventional games, the choices are easy: kill the dragon or run away. In horror games, they can be harder: if you run away, the vampire doesn't just stay there in his dungeon, he starts eating people. You can add another layer of moral complexity with ease: what if killing the vampire means the death of a character? Of an innocent? How far are the players willing to take their characters in the struggle against evil? These questions are most important in psychological horror or characters-as-monsters style games, but they crop up in all but the pulpiest games of any style. What if the sweet little girl can't be cured of her deadly disease, or demonic possession, or lycanthropy? Does she have to die? What if the whole village has to be destroyed in order to save it? Don't push the concept if players

reject it too forcibly; there's plenty of morally unambiguous fright to be had in the battle against horror. But be aware of it; it's a powerful tool for making scenarios or campaigns not just real but meaningful.

Another important concept in horror is the theme of betrayal. "Trust no one" is the code, but it's easier said than done. Players and characters alike tend to let down their guard around the obviously harmless or actively useful NPCs. The gamemaster should occasionally remind them that this is a mistake. Especially in paranoia-and-secret-war style games, but to an extent in any game, any NPC can be a villain. The friendly clown can be a madman, the nice old lady at the sweetshop can be a cannibal, and the characters' own mentor can be using them for her own fiendish purposes (see Section 4.3.4). This concept is easy to overuse, and it can actively prevent the players from investing any emotional energy in the game world if it becomes too common in all but the most conspiratorial games, but it works at the heart of the horrific world: we are all separate from each other, alone against the dark.

6.2 MAKING IT SCARY

"I can't believe I'm encouraging people to 'get in touch with their feelings,' but sappy as it sounds, it works. That really is the best way to scare the hell out of people."

— Greg Stolze, *The New Inquisition*

The key to the horror session is making it scary, building an atmosphere of fear. The players should be nervous, jumpy, whispering for no reason, and starting at imaginary noises. The gamemaster has two roads to this goal. One road is external; the gamemaster acting on the players' environment, perceptions, and personal knowledge or fears. The other road runs through the frightening world that the characters inhabit and with which they interact; player identification with the characters transfers that fear to the player. Ideally, the well-run horror session will involve both approaches to the feeling of fear. Parallels can be seen with an effective horror movie. The audience is frightened externally; the movie is shown in the dark, jarring and nerve-wracking music constantly builds tension, disturbing camera angles and lighting effects create nervousness in the audience. Internally, the audience identifies with the main character and shares his fear of the horrific monster or nightmarish plot with which he has become entangled. The gamemaster should keep these twin dynamics, the external and the internal, in mind while making a horror role playing session scary.

6.2.1 · THE GAMING SETTING

"The common run of ghost needs darkness."

— Edmund Wilson, "On Tales of Horror"

It is almost cliché to say this, but the place that the players gather should help the atmosphere along. At the very least, there should be a minimum of other distractions; TV shows and computer games, even scary ones, won't complement the mood of a good role playing session at all. Shutting the door helps as well, especially if there are other people in the building where the game is being played. Turn off the phone, if you can. Removing unnecessary distractions should be seen as the minimum necessary for a proper horror (or really, for any) gaming environment.

Also, the place should physically encourage role playing. The players should have access to a table or other surface upon which to roll dice, take notes, and spread out maps and books. (In a pinch, the floor can work for this, but gamers sprawling out on the floor can lead to back trouble and sudden, irresistible naps.) The gamemaster should have a surface where her notes can rest or be modified out of the players' view; many games have gamemaster screens for cutting off a portion of the common table. The players should be in each others' circle of vision; no player should be excluded from the common environment and the other players shouldn't have to crane their necks or otherwise disrupt the flow of conversation to involve anyone.

Some gamemasters like to sit in the players' circle of vision as well. This "tales around the campfire" model can add intimacy and urgency to the narrative. It also makes questions of lighting less problematic. Others like to be off to the side, separated from the players by the length of the table or in a different chair outside the circle. This "Rod Serling" model can create a disembodied tone for the game that can go a long way toward feeding player senses of isolation and panic. Either model, or some entirely different approach (walking around the table, for instance), can create the atmosphere of fear if the gamemaster is comfortable with it and can use its particular advantages well.

The lighting for a horror game is a problematic issue. Too bright and the horror is easily dismissed and distractions are easily noticed. Too dim and nobody can read their character sheets, rules, notes, or dice. Ideally, in my experience, there should be one light source centered on the middle of the game table or circle of players; the rest of the room should be as dark as is practical. This works especially well when the gamemaster sits in the players' circle of vision; it's no accident that this effective lighting pattern recalls the light of primitive campfires.

Many game rooms don't have adjustable track lighting, however. Small desk lamps or even table or floor lamps can solve that problem, if you can figure out where to stand or clip them to avoid blind-

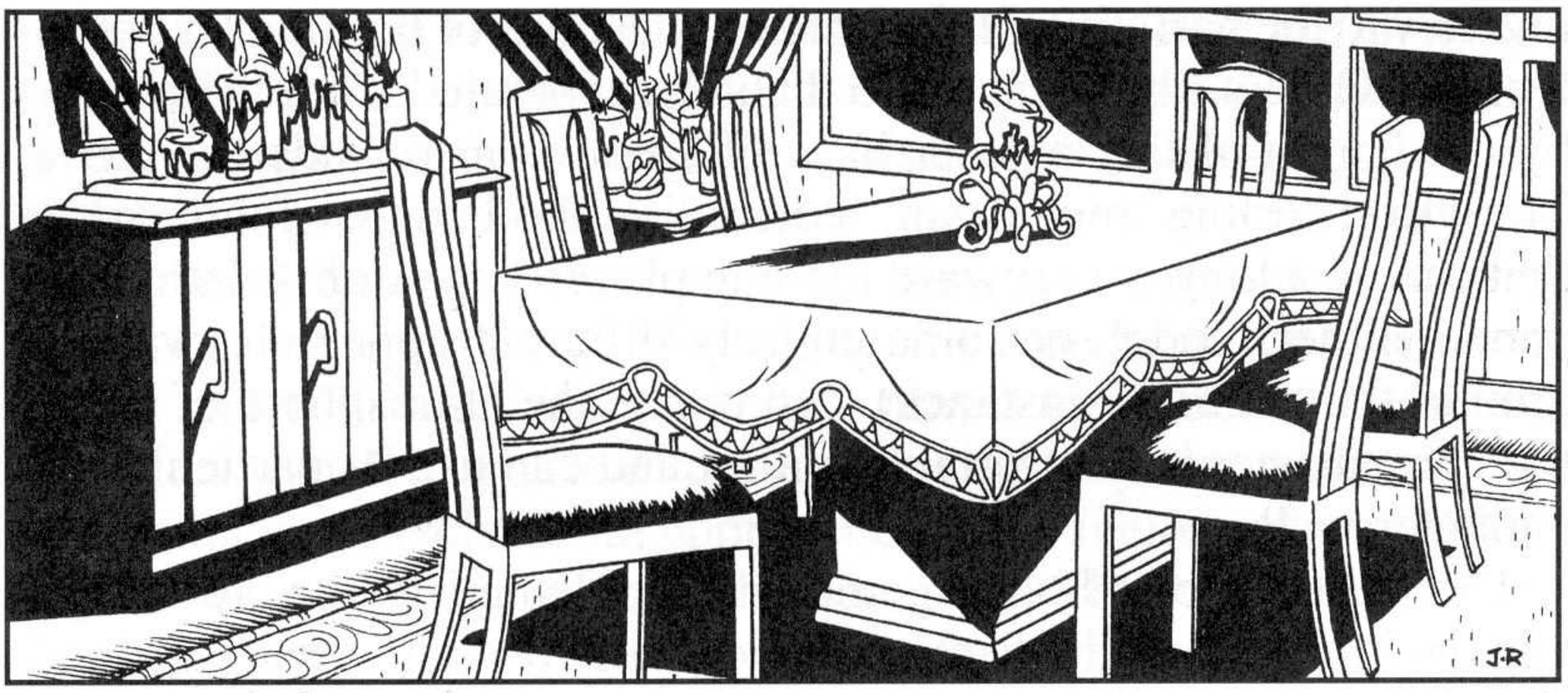
ing one or more players. The default assumption should be to keep the room dark enough to have shadowed corners and light enough to read the fine print without squinting. Candles and colored lights can be surprisingly effective, although many players consider them corny. Dim candlelight can also make it hard to read rulebooks or notes. In the final analysis, you should go with what works best for your gaming group.

6.2.2 · PROPS AND MUSIC

"Decorate your room! Surprise your mother! Create your very own chamber of horrors!"

— advertisement copy for Aurora Monster Models

Many gamemasters use props and music to build the mood and involve their players in the game world. Props, especially, can serve to bring the game world to life. Players are far more likely to attach importance to the weird variant tarot deck or disturbing idol used by the cult if the gamemaster gives them one for their inspection. Detailed clues like maps, notes, telegrams, or even whole books can be written or drawn by the gamemaster and given to the players. Subtle clues can be hidden in them without being signposted. If the main point of a three-page letter is in the postscript or the letterhead, simply describing the letter will give the show away. Giving the letter to the players lets them find the clue for themselves. The text can then be used as a loose end to spin another scenario from.



Another common prop is the picture. Magazines, especially the old copies of *Life* or *National Geographic* that every used bookstore seems to have by the truckload, can be mined for pictures of buildings, mountains, or people for any horror campaign. A picture of a 1940s studio executive or minor starlet can become the leader of a black magic cult, a private detective, or the most recent victim of the locust-men. With sufficiently botched Xeroxing and judicious stains,

any picture can be made just unrecognizable enough to become a quality clue. Ambitious gamemasters with access to Photoshop or similar imaging software can produce armies of NPCs.

The trouble with using pictures is that players will begin to assume that any NPC or location without a picture is unimportant scenery. (A similar, though less immediately harmful, effect can be created with other props). This will severely detract from the reality of the game world, dividing everything into game foreground and pointless background. Since much of the atmosphere of horror depends on background imagery, this creates a problem. Few gamemasters have the time and resources to produce images of everything encountered during a single scenario, much less a campaign. The individual gamemaster must decide whether the tradeoff in world realism is worth the additional details for the foreground. A possible compromise involves making props or pictures for a few red herrings; if the gamemaster has the time, about a quarter to a third of these visual aids should be blind alleys to keep the players guessing.

Background music is another tradeoff issue. The right music can go a long way toward creating the proper atmosphere for horror. A scratchy jazz recording can capture the 1920s for a pulp-era horror game, a tension-filled horror movie soundtrack can set the scene for a claustrophobic trip into an abode of evil, and atonal modern compositions can underscore a science fiction horror game nicely. "World beat" and ethnographic recordings can add local color to globe-trotting campaigns, a Gothic rock album can carry a mood of urban nightmare, and a sufficiently brooding classical piece can work as the backdrop for a more traditional horror story. One interesting approach is to use nature recordings, like storms, swamp noises, or ocean sounds, to create a non-musical mood that can transport the players to the Alpine laboratory, rotting plantation house, or doomed village of inbred fishermen in question.

However, music has its limits. Matching the mood to the music is often difficult; the music may build tension when the narrative is relaxing, or vice versa. Players often tune out the same music played too often as "just background noise," or worse, see it as a comfortable tradition. Lyrics can be distracting or even mood breaking if they seem particularly out of place.

In the final analysis, neither props nor music will save the game, or build the atmosphere of fear by themselves. That is up to the gamemaster. Individual gaming groups should determine how much of each works for them.

6.2.3 · PLAYER WEAKNESSES AND HOW TO USE THEM

"There's nothing funny about a clown in the moonlight."

— Lon Chaney, Sr.

One of the easiest ways to make a session scary is to find out what scares your players and use that as an element of the session. Many people share fears, and even if your players have different triggers, the fear in one player can spread to the others. The trigger need not be something approaching a raving phobia; even something that just sort of creeps a player out or makes him nervous can be used to good effect to build a scene.

Finding out a player's triggers can be as simple as asking (but don't use the answer too soon, since they'll be expecting it) or as subtle as going to the same movies and noting when he jumps or startles. If the player and gamemaster are close friends, they may discuss nightmares, scary books, or other things in the course of conversation — even in the course of setting up a horror game. All of these can be grist for the gamemaster's mill when it comes time to setting a personal note of fear in the night's game.

However, it is extremely important for the gamemaster to respect the player's wishes regarding personal fears. If a player asks you not to use something in the game, don't. If using it seems to create a phobic reaction out of proportion to the normal game play, talk it out afterward. If there was more to the player's fear than good role playing (or good gamemastering), think twice about using that element again. If it seems too strong to mess with, don't. Nobody wants to have their psychic underbelly exploited by friends for the sake of a game. Needless to say, nothing that results (or has resulted) in actual emotional trauma should be used in the first place.

There is one player that the gamemaster can freely exploit to the fullest as a source of fears, psychoses, nightmares, and phobic moments — the gamemaster herself. As gamemaster, feel free to use your own fears to build the session. If something in a book you read or movie you saw gave you the creeps, use it. Remember that nervous, clammy-palmed feeling and build the game toward it. Keep that twisted feeling in the pit of your stomach going while you describe the murder scene. Give yourself the heebie jeebies describing the faceless watchers. Make your own flesh crawl as you slowly reveal the villain's master plan of evil. Open up all your own demons and monster-haunted closets; if it scared you, it might very well scare your players. Even if it doesn't do the job by itself, players can be made really nervous if the game is scaring the gamemaster, too.

6.2.4 · DREAD, TERROR, AND GORE

These three elements should all be part of the gamemaster's arsenal. Nothing is too hard or too low-rent to try at least once during a horror game. Ideally, the scenario or session will have potential places for all of these at some point.

The moment of dread is easiest to create at the climax or the payoff; when the characters (and players) know pretty much all they're going to know about the night's evil and when its potential effects have become apparent. However, epiphanies of dread can occur elsewhere in the game when the players' fears and anxieties begin to feed off of each other. Since the moment of dread is different for everybody, the gamemaster should be on the lookout for it and ready to milk it and spread it to the other players wherever possible. Some players react with dread to psychological horrors; for others the realization that there is something unknown creates it; for still others questions of identity and sanity work well; and for still others, specific stimuli like insects, clowns, homonculi, or disease have that effect. Don't slow the game down to a crawl trying to force dread, though. Dread is very difficult to create and virtually impossible to sustain for very long. Just enjoy it when you get it, and make sure you know more about how to do it on purpose next time.

Terror is easier to create; the natural tension-and-relief rhythm of the game encourages it. A chase, a fast stalking, a series of connected scares from different sources, or a whirlwind attack can create terror. Repeated but brief glimpses of an unknown horror can also create an atmosphere of terror over time. To keep it alive, keep the action fairly rapid; don't get bogged down in a long combat or a planning session among the players. Don't drag it out past its supportable limits, either; terror can turn routine faster than it seems. Put in the relief, or the players will do it for you.

The best time for gore is during combat or during investigation. The corpse of the victim, the grotesque lair or servants of the horror, and the wounds dealt to the characters are all primary points where gore can come into its own. Play up the sprays of blood, the pools of stagnant slime, the glistening something clinging to the human bones in the corner. Medical texts can give gamemasters a lot of really unpleasant ideas. Gore needs to be lingered over just long enough to creep the players out and then left as an unpleasant memory. Prolonged or needlessly repetitious gore makes the players inured to it.

6.3 KEEPING IT SCARY

"Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration."

— Bene Gesserit Litany, *Dune*

The key to keeping things scary is to keep the illusion of internal reality intact and the tension unbroken (relaxed, occasionally, but never broken). As long as the players are accepting their characters' dilemmas as real, or at least as important, they are helping you keep it scary. If they lose their faith in the internal reality of the game world, or worse yet lose their interest, maintaining the tone becomes much, much harder.

Once they're scared, however, they become much less picky; the events and characters can become more and more impressionistic, archetypal, and unnatural. The increasing uncanniness can be built along with the increasing tension. It is this state, the state of fearful belief, that the horror gamemaster wants to encourage as much as possible.

6.3.1 · SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

"It was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural ... yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief...."

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

The willing suspension of disbelief (or, at least, the willing acceptance of a second-order belief in the game world) is the first necessary step in any horror game. In a game session that is part of a larger campaign, the earlier setup, character generation, setting discussions, and so on can quite adequately substitute for any formal suspension. One great advantage that role playing has over other art or narrative forms is its interactivity. The players and the gamemaster work together to build the world, describe the characters, and tell their stories. This means that players have already "bought into" the world from the beginning.

For a given session of a campaign, the suspension of disbelief can be created with as little as an opening narration: "When last we left the characters, they had decided to investigate the crossroads outside the goblin cave." This serves to return the players to the world that they have helped create and the story that they have helped to tell. For first sessions or one-shot scenarios, building the world may take a little longer. A purely mundane encounter, a description of the normal street scene, even something that seems unnatural but is explained

early can ease the players into the game world. Thanks to the nature of role playing itself, once the players have accepted that they are well and truly in the game, they should begin actively working to suspend their own disbelief.

For some groups, a formal starting ritual can serve as the signal that the game has begun and the game world is now the most important thing in the room. This can be the dimming of the lights, the starting of the background music, the narrative introduction, or some combination of all of them. Such formal cues, although they may seem stilted, can do a lot to remind the players that the game is about more than a random chance to socialize and that it takes place somewhere separate from the den or basement or dorm room where the players are currently hanging out.

Once the initial suspension of disbelief is accomplished, it is usually only broken by the gamemaster. Breaking the rules of the game world, whether those be the rules of the game or the game world's natural laws, is one way to break it. The session should be kept as realistic, meaning true to the game reality, as possible while still maintaining the uncanniness or unnaturalness that makes for horror. If the gamemaster has demonstrated that the game world has a sufficient surface reality (by using depth in characterization, realistic political or other details, or whatever other means come to mind), then the players will paradoxically be more likely to accept something unreal. The response becomes "how could this sensibly happen" rather than "nothing here makes any sense."

6.3.2 · THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

"In the literature of natural or supernatural terror, the writer's main concern is with detail."

— Jacques Barzun

An excellent way to build both the surface reality that the horror disrupts and the horror itself is the use of detail. This doesn't mean describing every rivet on the Black Knight's armor, or discussing the inventory of the local pharmacy. It means using the telling details that convey the point that the gamemaster wants the players to realize. Names and attitudes for NPCs, sounds and smells for the surroundings, all of these things build horror by building reality.

Building surface reality is both active and passive. On the active level, make sure (for instance) that the NPCs all have names and at least a hint of a personality. Make sure that you know where the streets run, who's in charge, and what the man on the street is likely to believe about vampires. Add details where they won't bog anything down, and refer to them again later to fix them in the players' minds. Give the players a sense of geography; let them feel that their characters' world extends farther than their flashlight beams.

On the passive level, don't do anything that destroys that sense of surface reality. The town watch shouldn't interfere in one brawl and let another go two weeks later, unless there's a good reason for it. If the players can't tell your unusual happening from any other unclear or illogical detail of the game world, they can't be frightened by it. Don't give the NPCs silly names, or names that don't make any sense given the local culture. Also on the passive level, you might let the players "write" some of the world background. If they want to find a tavern with a good wine cellar, let them, or give them a good, solid, game world reason why all the taverns in town have nothing but local vin ordinaire.

Building horror with details is the key for both dread and gore, and comes in very handy when building terror, as well. Details such as the gibbous moon, the cold wind, or the lingering smell of juniper can all create a certain emotional response in the players, sometimes for no clear reason. The minor, unexplained, but creepy detail is a hallmark of dread, and can come in handy for terror if it is repeated. A strangely noseless face seen reflected in a shop window can make quite an impression, for example. Details that the characters would notice immediately (stinging smoke, fetid stench, creaking boards) may not have anything to do with the plot, but will help the players to get deeper into their characters' experience by giving them more to work with. Remember to give information based on all five senses (six, if there are psychics in the party). Don't concentrate on just what the characters can see. Can they hear the foghorn blowing in the distance? Does the blacktop feel sticky under their boots? Is the sacrificial altar worn smooth by centuries of handling? Does the mysterious tome smell faintly of sweat or camphor? In the real world, people almost subconsciously assimilate these sensory impressions; give the players a chance to do the same for their characters.

In addition to their emotional charge, details can give the players information needed to advance the plot and extend the horror further intellectually. Details such as the length and depth of the claw marks or the large number of bites can both inform and horrify, for instance. The real world is a sea of detail which no gamemaster in her right mind can recapture in a game. Look for the one detail that signifies all the others. The local graveyard fence is rusted, with peeling paint; the sign over the gate is crooked and weathered and the wind from within smells stale and cold. Without even describing the inside of the cemetery, an image has been created. The players see the unkempt patches of tall grass, crumbling headstones leaning at unsafe angles, and the discarded bottles glinting in the moonlight without even being told about them. Good horror short stories are full of this kind of technique; without the space of the novel, they have to establish characters, or places, in a few well-chosen words. A horror gamemaster can pick up more than ideas for the scenario by reading them.

6.3.3 · MAINTAINING TONE

Once the tone of the session has been established, it is important to maintain it. Lengthy digressions from the point, unless they're really scary in their own right, will leave the session's tension slack and uninteresting, or make the players forget the essential clue that sets up the climax.

Fresh infusions of detail or plot development are necessary to move the session forward; make sure they always contribute to the ongoing storyline and make sure they always contribute to the atmosphere of fear. In the usual role playing session, the sequence of play corresponds well to the tension-and-release model of the horror scenario. The gamemaster presents some event, the players discuss it. The next event occurs, the players plan to be present for (or prevent) any further events. And so forth. The first mysterious shape appears on the castle walls; the players discuss it (ideally, in character). Once they've almost finished, they find out about the trail of blood it left; the players decide to follow it. They see the spirit of a murdered man; they react and decide that the mysterious shape was the man's killer. Notice how the players' instinct to analyze the game moves the game along.

This event-reaction model of the game can be used to enhance the tension-and-release model of the horror story. Make sure the events are scary, or hint at something scary, or are at least memorable. The release comes as the players (in character, ideally) discuss the event. The key to horror is to never let the release go on too long; keep the tension increasing. The next event raises the stakes in some way, the characters' planning sessions are interrupted by an urgent phone call, a scream in the night, or a werewolf attack. When the players stay silent and nervous between events, it's time to hit them with the climax.

6.3.4 · HUMOR — ON PURPOSE AND ACCIDENTAL

> *"Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function — that of provoking unease."*
>
> — Angela Carter, *Fireworks*

Humor can be a powerful weapon in the arsenal of tone. Black humor (if it's really, really black) serves to make the horror even more horrible; hysteria is the common component of fear and laughter. The works of Ambrose Bierce almost approach cosmic horror with the sheer bleakness of their irony. The best way to work this in is to give the villain a black, bleak, ironic, hateful sense of gallows humor. The players will be less willing to crack wise if the forces of evil seem to be laughing at them and not with them. Irony is another way to humorously blacken the mood. If an aristocratic witness to

the horror refused to talk to the low-class characters, it will be justifiably amusing when his dead body is found in the trash midden behind a sailors' dive. Ironic deaths need not be deserved (and outside of the EC Comics stable, seldom are). Even more horribly, a little girl whose frock the character had complimented can be found dismembered — with her frock kept meticulously unspotted by the killer. The characters' revulsion at her death will be compounded by the players' suppressed appreciation of the irony.



However, for every successful use of humor to enhance the mood of a horror game, there are many, many uses of humor to break it. For some reason, role players often seem to have great senses of humor, able to see the funny side of just about anything. This admirable trait becomes the bane of the horror gamemaster when it breaks out in the middle of the death scene, interrogation, or other crucial period of the game. Nothing breaks the mood faster than an inappropriate joke, except perhaps an appropriate one. Funny jokes are even worse than unfunny ones. The gamemaster will just have to ask the players to try to restrain themselves for everyone's enjoyment; if a particular player cracks wise repeatedly, they may have to be asked to leave the game, or the game may have to be changed to a less mood-dependent one. If the gamemaster can't prevent jokes entirely, she should try to channel them into an after-game period, when everyone can let loose.

The gamemaster has the same urges to break the tension and dispel the fear that the players do; scaring yourself, while universal, isn't quite natural. Your adrenal glands don't know you're doing this on purpose, after all; they're still back in the caves listening for sabertoothed tigers. The gamemaster must control more firmly the urge to break the tension than any of her players. The players are taking their cues from the gamemaster, depending on her to set the scene and give them all the input their characters receive. When the gamemaster breaks mood with a joke, it's well and truly broken. A

player can be hushed, or ignored, or drowned out with an improvised event. The gamemaster usually can't, and so her joke gives the players license to relax and crack wise for half an hour. This urge is a kind of perverse tribute to the gamemaster and players; if they hadn't actually built any tension, there would be no need to dissolve it. Regardless, it can be damaging, even fatal, to a good horror session. Resist it.

6.3.5 · RESTORING TONE

If the tone is broken, by a joke, a too-long divergence from the plot, a phone call, a Coke break, or whatever, the gamemaster has to restore it or the evening is shot for horror. Depending on the seriousness of the break, a simple request for everyone to get back into character may work. The tension can then be rebuilt "naturally," just as if the break had never happened. Sometimes a break can actually be used to restore tension; if the players have enough information to creep themselves out but haven't put it together, the gamemaster can encourage them to take another look at their situation. This can be done overtly by asking for a plan, or covertly by dropping some additional hint or "accidental" revelation. Anything that gets the players back to discussing the game world is something that can help to rebuild the tone.

If time is of the essence, or if the break in tone was more dramatic than normal, the gamemaster can always fall back on the old standby of immediate danger or interest. An improvised event can be used to restore tone and rapidly rebuild tension, if it is sufficiently interesting and sufficiently scary in itself. The easiest sort of improvised event to toss in is a small combat with a minor monster or a henchman of the villain. Add a creepy detail that meshes with an earlier clue, a gory description of the attacker's filed teeth or blood-matted fur, or imply that the attack means that the characters' location is known to the evil they oppose. Kept short, mysterious, and threatening, an attack can go a long way to restoring the tension all around. An improvised event can also be less dangerous to the characters; an NPC can approach them, they can find a clue, or something else can cross their paths and get their attention.

Even something as mundane as the church clock chiming eleven can restore tone, especially if the players were under the impression that it was just "a little past sundown." If the gamemaster can convey that a lot of time seems to have passed while the characters weren't doing much of anything (which is to say, while the players were breaking tone and distracting themselves), then it might even become a salutary lesson for next time.

6.4
THE VILLAINS REACT

It is important for game world realism (and often for the purposes of maintaining a properly suspenseful tension) that the villains react to the characters' actions. If the characters have been dumping holy water on the Vampire Lord's spare coffins, he's at least going to start posting undead guards at them. If the characters have been spotting the shapeshifting aliens with ultraviolet light, the aliens are going to deploy refracting beams or start attacking UV light sources. Some monsters, especially predatory ones, can react as well, although it should be remembered that any natural predator reacts to a major threat by leaving the area, if at all possible.

The villain's reaction can be a major twist in the narrative, and spin off clues and developments in its own right. The way that the characters are countered can tell them (and the players) quite a bit about the nature of the villain they face. It can also serve to heighten the fear that the players feel on their characters' behalf. Even if the reaction itself is not particularly horrific (although it should be, if at all possible), the fact that the characters are not facing some brainless robot but an actual thinking opponent should scare everyone concerned quite nicely.

For short scenarios, this doesn't have to turn into a complex chess game of move and countermove. Given the constraints of setting, time, and opportunity, the villain may have a limited arsenal of responses. The important thing is that the villain should have more responses, and more focused responses, than simply "hide better" or "kill more people."

The villain's response can also serve to personalize the horror. If the characters have been investigating the deaths of strangers, they may be sickened at the werewolves' brutality but have little personal interest. But, if the werewolves get wind of the characters' interference, they will start to stalk the characters — or the characters' innocent friends and associates. This approach combines the advantages of realistic villain reaction and providing depth to NPC victims.

6.5
WHEN THEY INSIST ON SPLITTING THE PARTY

"'I'm sorry to have to ask you to stay on the surface,' he said, 'but it would be a crime to let anyone with your frail nerves go down there.'"

— the late Harley Warren, in H.P. Lovecraft's "Statement of Randolph Carter"

Compared to making wisecracks or playing computer games, splitting the party may not seem like much of a danger to the horror tone. In some situations it may even seem like the sensible thing for a group of characters on unfamiliar ground to do. It can even be interpreted as a commendable example of intelligent player planning and forethought. However, splitting the party creates logistical headaches for the gamemaster and can actually weaken the mood.

If one player sneaks ahead to scout, or if the party splits into two groups, the gamemaster has to choose which player (or players) to focus on. Suddenly, the other players have no reason to pay attention to the game. Actually, they have an excellent reason *not* to pay attention to the game, since their characters might not know what is happening to the others. This, then, leads to distractions, and to the loss of mood and tone for the players on whom the gamemaster isn't currently focused. Splitting the party is something that you, as the gamemaster, want to discourage for purely "metagame" reasons (reasons involving the quality of the game, rather than any actual in-game reality).

There are two ways to achieve this end, then, and they should be used in tandem. In the first place, don't punish the players for *not* splitting the party. Luring the characters into a trap that a scout could have detected or disarmed is the fastest way to convince the players to begin splitting the party at every occasion. Keep the reconaissance necessary to find the evil or spot the guardians to a minimum. Don't make it necessary for the characters to send only the quietest or most subtle ahead to "case the joint" days or hours in advance. This can be done within genre, if the gamemaster thinks about it briefly. Most unnatural evil is easily spotted (by trained, paranoid specialists like the characters, at least). Zombies and similar guards don't often depend on hearing or seeing intruders, but on magic or brute force to stop them. Bad Places with only one entrance don't need to be cased in detail. Finally, the gamemaster can simply give groups of characters unjustified bonuses on their stealth skills without telling the players; if a party of occult investigators never draws more notice than a single scout would, the "safety in numbers" instinct will take over.

The way to encourage "safety in numbers," of course, is to attack the stragglers mercilessly. Characters who go ahead and split the party should be hit by party-sized resistance. Some gamemasters prefer to carry out such attacks out of sight of the other players, leaving the lone character's (or lone pair of characters') fate as a mystery to be solved later. Some gamemasters prefer to carry out the attack in the full view of the other players, counting on the horror of the attack to both continue the mood of fear and to serve as a salutary lesson on the foolishness of sneaking into the crypt alone. For a first offense, the lone character might only be stunned insensible or have fainted from shock and terror. The rest of the party might even be able to rescue their intrepid, albeit foolish, companion at the climax of the session before he becomes brunch for the Insect God. For a second offense, the lone character can always be mind-controlled or agonizingly tortured (or both). Always make sure, by the way, to have plenty of obstacles that the missing character could have bypassed or controlled with relative ease. If the thief was sent ahead to case the joint, when the rest of the party breaks in they should be faced with lots of locks to pick. If the psychic was sent ahead, the rest should be bombarded with psychic attacks. This reinforces the concept of the party as an organic whole, and makes the other players less eager to lose any potential scout's skills in the future.

If the players are bound and determined to split the party and the gamemaster is willing to take the risk for the purpose of game world realism, then the primary goal should be to keep the whole party in contact with the scouts if at all possible. This allows (or even forces) the whole party to pay attention to the unfolding horror. Radios, walkie-talkies, telepathy, communication spells, spy-eyes, familiars, or anything else that can link the advance group to the main group should be encouraged. Failing that, the gamemaster should switch back and forth between the two groups as often as possible; keep everyone involved in the story. This works best if the main group is also in some potential danger (as well they might be if they sent their psychic ahead to scout, for instance).

Another tactic is to assign players to NPCs where possible. The scout may meet a friendly group of street urchins, or cave elves, or future human sacrifices chained to the wall, or whatever. The party's henchman, meanwhile, can be played by the player of the missing scout. This is difficult to pull off while keeping the game world reasonable. After all, most haunts of evil don't have a lot of friendly NPCs in them just waiting for the players. So, as long as the gamemaster is violating game world rationality in the first place, she might as well do so in a way that encourages party cohesion rather than one that facilitates splitting the party.

6.6 KILLING (AND SAVING) CHARACTERS

Whether to kill the characters in any given session is, in the final analysis, up to the gamemaster. Even the decision to "let the dice decide" is a decision, after all. On a larger scale, invariably saving the characters' lives can ruin the game as much as killing the characters indiscriminately (see Section 8.4.4, Killing the Characters). In the context of the individual scenario, the decision should be influenced in the direction that advances the scenario most toward the desired outcome of fear.

In a one-shot scenario, killing the characters may well be the scariest option; the players are more likely to be impressed by a particularly gruesome or horrifying demise than they are irritated by the loss of a character they didn't intend to play again, anyway. However, killing the characters is not always the scariest thing that can happen. More people fear maiming, mutilation, or other unpleasant things than they do death as such; using those fears against the players may keep the character alive while still imparting a goodly measure of dread. Be careful of maiming or otherwise incapacitating a character in a *continuing* campaign, at least for the sole purpose of giving a momentary shock. It works against the game if a player comes to see his character as useless and not worth playing any more.

Also, it can be distracting and derailing to kill a key character (or a majority of the party) too early in the scenario. If the "lead" character or the majority of the characters is suddenly out of action, it might be impossible to continue the scenario with any degree of suspense. The gamemaster is usually better off keeping the characters alive at least until the climax, unless a really spectacular opportunity for a gruesome death presents itself. Since players are usually more forgiving of "mistakes" in their characters' favor, this probably won't disrupt game realism in the context of one scenario. (Over more than one scenario, of course, keeping characters alive can very seriously damage game world realism.) Ideally, the players will be too frightened (or at least distracted) to notice the sudden retreat of the werewolves, oddly underpowered bullets, or whatever other "lucky breaks" the gamemaster comes up with.

However, if the gamemaster has decided to let the dice fall where they may and a character does die, don't waste it. The death should be described in detail, not just "oops, you're down to minus ten hit points." Ideally, it should be bloody, gruesome, informative, and truly horrific. Everything that a good NPC death has (see Section 4.4.3, NPCs as Body Count) should be present at the death of the player character. If the gamemaster can't scare the players with the death of a player character, she needs to reexamine the scenario.

The character's death should have real consequences, from increasing the odds against the survivors to questions of wills and property. Never trivialize a player's contribution by making a character death a footnote, even in the bleakest and most nihilistic cosmic horror.

6.7
THROWING OUT THE RULES

"What would life be without arithmetic, but a scene of horrors?"
— Sydney Smith, *Letters* (1835)

Short of someone's mother coming into the gaming room with fresh-baked cookies for everyone, nothing breaks the mood of horror like rules questions or, worse yet, rules arguments. Suddenly everyone is reminded that "it's only a game" and worse yet, the carefully constructed reality of the game world depends on a few dice and some arbitrary charts. Lights come on, rulebooks come out, arguments ensue, and the collaborative mood is broken forever. At least with the other interruption, you get to eat the cookies.

Some gamemasters, therefore, prefer to throw out rules that seem overly complex, cumbersome, or contentious. If the lightning attack of the fire bats takes two hours to resolve, something is wrong with the pacing. If the party's psychic has to look up the rules every time he wants to read an object's vibrations, tension and mood are lost. A lot of rules can get in the way of playing, interfere with mood, and serve as nothing but a bone of contention in a game (and a genre) that depend on cooperation to work well.

It's important to remember, of course, that if all the players and the gamemaster have memorized the rules, are comfortable with them all, and can read charts or toss dice in the blink of an eye and move on with the game, there's nothing wrong with a lot of rules. If one player (usually the gamemaster, but not always) knows the rules that well, and the other players have agreed to trust him to play fair and not argue, the same result can occur.

At the bottom line, the game should be paramount. If the players can get a good, scary, tension-filled session and still use all the rules of the game, then more power to them. If, as is often the case, a stripped-down version of the rules for combat or magic have to be used to keep the game moving fast, then rules lawyers should keep quiet and let everyone enjoy being scared. Serious disagreements can be brought up after the session; if the gamemaster agrees she was wrong, she can rule that the broken leg was just a really bad sprain, or whatever. But at the end of the day, it's the gamemaster's game to run (or to ruin); if the players don't trust the gamemaster, the game won't work regardless of how many rules and charts you use.

6.8 SCREWING UP

"Laugh all you like, but the pig is still dead in the basket."
— Transylvanian proverb

Given the delicacy of the horror atmosphere, the unpredictable natures of gamemasters and players, and the relative complexity of the horror scenario, things will break down. Depending on how and where in the process this occurs, the scenario may still be salvageable. If one of the twists has bogged the players down completely, a small combat or confrontation can open the field back up. Alternately, a useful NPC could put the characters back on track (although if this is too obvious, it will break the mood just as surely as letting the players flounder). Psychic characters are often good funnels for clues; if the gamemaster has regularly been granting a psychic creepy and disturbing visions, one that contains a useful clue might not stand out as much as a coincidental meeting with an old match-seller who just happened to see the werewolves' ritual does. If the gamemaster has been using dreams to build atmosphere, the same trick can be used.

If the tension breaks, try again. Treat it as a release, and return to the rhythm. If the tension just isn't building, tonight may just not be a good night for horror. Retrofit the session as an investigative session, or add a small combat. Forcing players to cooperate will only make them stubborn; horror gaming has to be collaborative to work well. A few more clues scattered around, especially ones that will take on a horrifying cast in the light of later information, are always a good investment.

If the climax is too slow to build, the gamemaster should think about putting it off or scaling it down. A clue that looks trivially clear to the gamemaster can baffle even the most intelligent players for hours; they simply haven't been looking at the story from the gamemaster's perspective, or the gamemaster has forgotten to give the players the one piece of evidence that will clinch the matter. Chasing the characters into the Bad Place doesn't always work, either; players are very clever at escaping from seemingly blind alleys. Sometimes, the best that can be salvaged is a gory combat.

Finally, the climax may simply misfire. If the characters defeat the main antagonist with ease, the chance for horror is usually lost. Often, the gamemaster will underestimate the players' cunning, or forget some key item or weapon that the characters possess. If the characters are too weakened by the twists or earlier tensions, they may no longer be able to handle the climax and get wiped out in a heartbeat. This, paradoxically, also destroys the mood of horror. The gamemaster should always be ready to adjust the challenge at the climax to the characters' abilities for maximum horror. The climax might also just not be scary. If that happens, make sure you figure out why; ask the players afterward, tamper with the ingredients, reexamine your inspirational material, or whatever it takes so that the next scenario can go off the rails in a whole new direction.

7.0
BUILDING THE HORROR CAMPAIGN

"'A game?' said Jive. 'No, no boy. It's more than that. It's an education.'"

Clive Barker, *The Thief of Always*

Building the horror campaign is both simpler and more difficult than building an individual horror scenario. Not every moment of the campaign has to lead to fear; there's room for character or setting explorations of another kind. The gamemaster has a broader canvas to work on; many potential monsters, many potential victims, many many Bad Places. However, all these options make building a successful horror campaign more difficult as well. The focus on fear is still the point of the game; but without a connected plot line or a single theme, how can it be maintained? This is the question that should be in the back of the gamemaster's mind while she builds the horror campaign.

7.1
HOW IS HORROR DIFFERENT?

"On horror's head, horrors accumulate."

— William Shakespeare, *Othello*, III:iii

Horror campaigns are different from standard role playing campaigns only in the emotion they attempt, more often than not, to evoke. A horror campaign can be just like any other in setting, theme, goals, or story — as long as fear is evoked by playing it. This drive for fear makes the horror campaign, like the horror scenario, a collaborative experience for the gamemaster and players. Questions that other campaigns can put off until the second or third session, or until the middle of the campaign, or even avoid answering at all, are better resolved in the design phase of the horror campaign. In some cases, the gamemaster should solicit direct player input; in others, she should still think about her players' enjoyment and propensities before building in a feature that might accidentally interfere with the game. The horror campaign cannot be structured as uniformly and with as great a focus on fear as can the horror scenario. Trying to do so will lead to player complaints about "railroading" and unfairness. What the gamemaster can and should do is build a campaign that allows, even invites, the maximum amount of horror into its story.

7.2 THE CAMPAIGN MILIEU

"Meat must be correctly trussed, tied, and balanced on the spit."

— James Beard, *James Beard's Barbecue Cookbook*

A horror role playing campaign, given its primary directive of evoking emotion and building atmosphere, can ill afford the kind of gratuitous stumbling around in search of a structure that other campaigns can allow or even thrive on. The design of the horror campaign, while not necessarily as unitary as the design of a horror scenario, should serve to clear the area for the construction of an emotional impact. This involves answering fundamental design questions, so that aspects of the game don't wind up working at cross purposes. Once the gamemaster has answered them, she has defined the directions she will be building or growing the campaign along.

7.2.1 · HOW SUPERNATURAL?

"To taste the full flavor of these stories you must bring an orderly mind to them, you must have a reasonable amount of confidence, if not in what used to be called the laws of nature, at least in the currently suspected habits of nature...."

— Dashiell Hammett, *Creeps By Night*

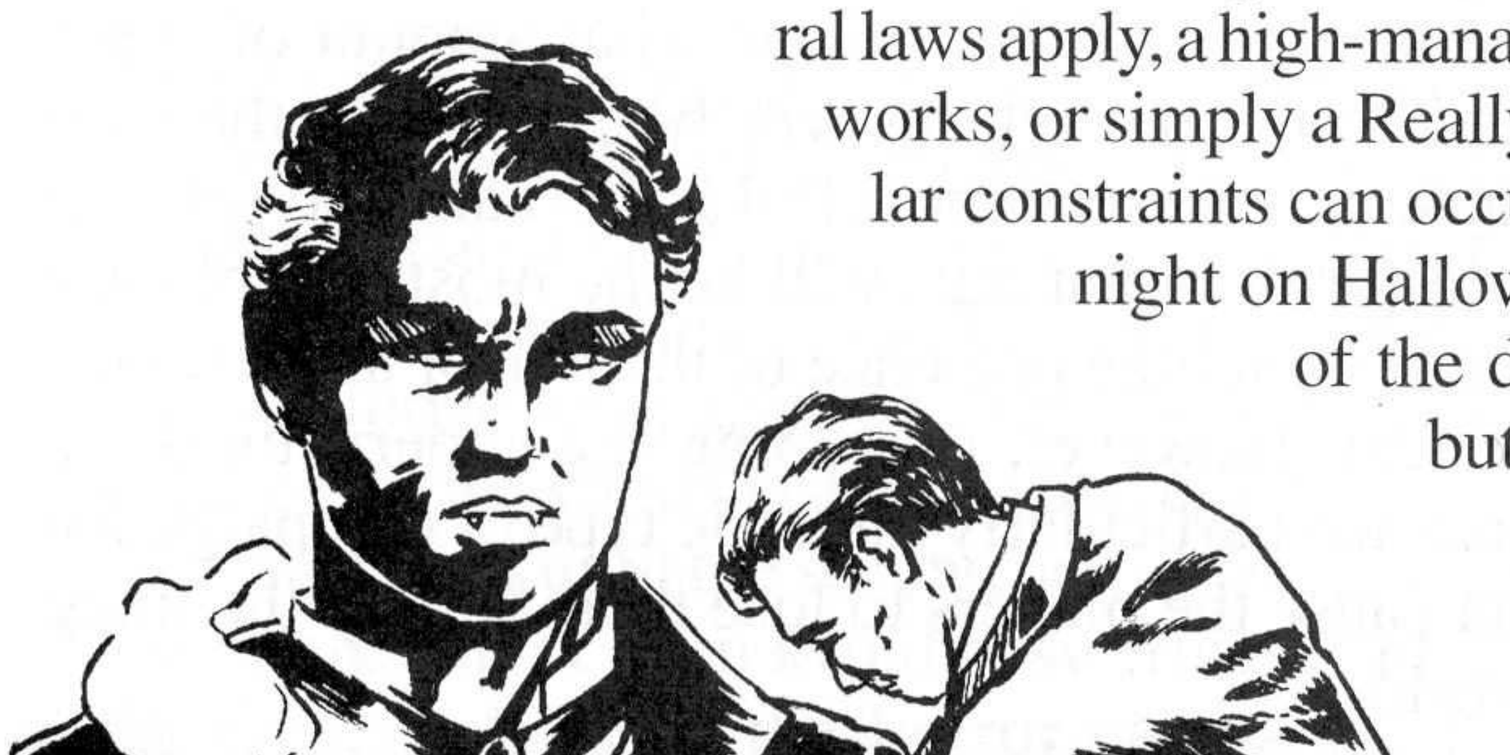
The type of campaign (see Section 2.3) will, in large part, determine the level of overt supernaturalism present in the campaign. Obviously a high-fantasy game will have more supernatural elements intrinsic to its design than a modern game of conspiratorial horror. However, the gamemaster must also decide what amount of supernaturalism over and above the setting will be present in the campaign. This is because, even in the most fluid of dreamland settings, something unnatural (or supernatural) will be the most reliable way for the gamemaster to signal the presence of the horror and to evoke the atmosphere of fear. However, overdoing the supernatural element (especially in a not-particularly fantastic type of campaign like science fiction) can cause the players to lose their faith in the integrity of the game world.

This is why most horror campaigns, like most horror writers, strive to keep the supernatural elements to the bare minimum necessary to invoke fear in the players. Half-seen hints, rumors that seem ridiculous by daylight (or to local officials), disputable evidence and subtlety go a lot farther to build the atmosphere of fear (especially dread) than an over-the-top invocation of bloody ghoulishness will. For the purposes of keeping the campaign connected, of course, a slightly higher level of supernaturalism has to be invoked. Most horror stories end after one event; the illusion of reality can be left intact ev-

erywhere else. In a campaign, it becomes necessary to break that illusion more often; thus a larger-than-minimal level of supernaturalism is often necessary to make those breaks (the scenarios or climactic moments) seem "real" in the context of the game world. This necessary escalation of the supernatural should be countered, and not only by the gamemaster's attempts to keep it to the necessary minimum. The easiest and best way to counter the increase in the supernatural and unnatural that is normal for an ongoing horror campaign is to continually deepen the game world's "surface reality." Give the players more of the game world to believe in, to interact with, to defend if necessary, and the increasing amount of supernaturalism will not seem out of proportion.

That said, extremes of the supernatural can absolutely have a role in the must overtly mundane of campaign settings. The natural time to pull out all of the stops is in the climax of the campaign or of a "story arc" (a connected series of scenarios in a single plotline; see Section 7.5.1, Narrative Structures) within a campaign. Especially if the rest of the campaign has kept the supernatural under cover, the gamemaster's actions in ripping open the curtain of natural law sends a powerful signal that this one is "for all the marbles." Raising the stakes in this way can build tension and fear all by itself. Of course, like many dramatic horror techniques, it loses much of its effect if it is repeated too often.

Another way to increase the level of the supernatural in a "controlled" way is to set constraints on it within the campaign. A relentlessly grim and gritty urban horror game grounded in reality at every turn can take any flight of fancy imaginable in the worlds of dream or magical planes that might surround the "mundane" city. A certain haunted house or circle of stones might be an area where no natural laws apply, a high-mana zone where magic works, or simply a Really Bad Place. Similar constraints can occur in time; at midnight on Halloween all the spirits of the damned come out, but most people are home in bed and never witness it. (The ones who do can be conveniently driven mad, killed, or simply think that it's the effect of too much Halloween partying.)



Some possible levels of supernaturalism are given below, with some suggestions for the horrific elements that might characterize them. In turn, the level of supernaturalism will have an impact on the style of game (see Section 2.4.0) that can be easily run in that setting. Gamemasters should probably not routinely combine elements more than two levels apart without some good reason grounded in the game world's reality. The novels of Tim Powers, for instance, take place on Level Three while constantly alluding to the truth of Level Five. He accomplishes this through the very slow buildup of subtly meaningful details. The result is a world that feels simultaneously realistic and mythic, just as a good role playing campaign should. The climax of a campaign can, of course, reach as high up the scale as the gamemaster feels comfortable running.

Level One: No Supernaturalism

On this level, the unnatural and the uncanny are rooted in things that are real but ignored as uncomfortable: serial killers, cults, insanity, historical horrors like atrocities or human sacrifice, scientific horrors like plagues and toxins, brutal and error-prone conspiracies, social alienation, street crime, poverty, and similar elements. This can be a very difficult game to run for any length of time, although it makes an excellent "background reality" for a bleak horror campaign or a game of psychological horror (see Section 2.4.7). A splatter campaign or a game of political paranoia could also be run entirely on Level One, although the gamemaster would find it challenging to maintain the simmering level of mundane horror necessary to keep the campaign alive. The TV show *Millennium* and most "serial killer" horror novels take place primarily on Level One.

Level Two: "Natural" Supernaturalism

On this level, elements just outside the real world make their appearance. The most common terrors introduced on this level are malevolent yet secretive aliens (such as the gray aliens of current UFO lore), psionics and psychics, and mutants created by radiation or toxic spills. Packs of man-eating animals, more spookily-efficient conspiracies, mind control, ancient astronauts and other unorthodoxies of archaeology, involuntary organ donors, and other things out of urban legends find their natural home here as well. Level Two is probably the lowest level of supernaturalism at which a successful fantasy horror game could be run, and even that could probably not be maintained over any great length. Horror games in any style could be run at Level Two, even madness-and-dream (care would have to be taken to keep the game at the *Jacob's Ladder* level of mundane imagery used in horrifyingly surreal ways rather than turning it into a work of high fantasy such as Lovecraft's *Dream-Quest Of Unknown Kadath*, however). Even cosmic horror (see Section 2.4.6) would work well here; much of Lovecraft's later work, for example, focuses on an-

cient civilizations and alien races. This level is where many of the episodes of *The X-Files* take place, and most slasher movies. *Scanners*, *The Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*, and other "malevolent psychic" movies and novels function on Level Two.

Level Three: Minor Supernaturalism

On Level Three, the supernatural as such makes its first appearance. Ancient curses, voodoo, and the occasional ghost begin to creep into the margins of the world. On a Level Three world there is always something in the corner, but it mostly just follows you with its eyes. Usually, the horrors come from "outside" the safe and normal world of the everyday, either from the depths of space, from strange and foreign lands, or from particularly malign, twisted, and evil minds. Pseudo-scientific vampires (*I Am Legend*, *The Hunger*) and werewolves (*Jekyll and Hyde*) can exist at this level without breaking game realism. Pulp horror (see Section 2.4.2) begins to flourish well on this level, and historical horror comes into its own. Most long-running Level Two campaigns eventually become Level Three as the horrors accumulate, with no real trauma to the realism of the world. Most of the rest of the episodes of *The X-Files* occur on Level Three, for instance. Stephen King's *It*, Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, and other tales of "childhood horror" seem to belong on Level Three, although they often move into Level Four at the climax. The ghost stories of Algernon Blackwood and M.R. James, and the tales of Arthur Machen, mostly function on Level Three. Movies like *Angel Heart*, *The Believers*, and *The Haunting* are Level Three supernatural movies, and demonstrate the fertile grounds for psychological and madness-and-dream games possible on this level.

Level Four: Classic Supernaturalism

The classic supernatural tropes appear on Level Four. Vampires, werewolves, mummies, and the walking dead stalk, ravening, through jungles, small towns, isolated villages, and impersonal cities. The rest of the Universal, Hammer, and American International Pictures "famous monsters of filmland" await their night of dark and unsavory power. Black magicians, Satanists, and occult conspiracies can plot in the interstices of society, and every big city probably has at least one, well-hidden, occult place of power. Mars wants our women, and the gulfs of space hide monsters only matched by the depths of the radioactive oceans. Only the ignorance of the masses, the cowardly instincts, jealousy, and small numbers of the monsters, and the actions of a few dedicated and desperate heroes (usually the characters) keep the horror in check. This is the natural place for pulp and silly (see Section 2.4.8) horror campaigns, although any type or style of horror campaign can be run on Level Four. Characters-as-monsters campaigns (see Section 2.4.4) begin to be easily playable at this

level. Historical horror still thrives, and fantasy horror begins to be a really viable type by this level. Psychological horror becomes hard to maintain, however. Any given episode of *Kolchak: The Night-Stalker* takes place on Level Four, although the series as a whole topples onto Level Five. The TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also takes place on Level Four, barely avoiding Level Five by deft writing and the occasional hand-wave. *Dracula* is an obvious Level Four novel (or movie), as is much of the work of Dennis Wheatley and Anne Rice.

Level Five: Major Supernaturalism

On Level Five, everything possesses some occult or horrific significance. The game world, if it is to retain credibility, now has to propose some active mechanism that keeps mundane society from realizing the level of monstrosity in its midst. In fantasy horror, that mechanism can be as simple as a boundary; horrors happen in the Dark Lands to the west. In modern or science-fiction horror, larger forces (magic, mind control, all-powerful conspiracies, racial amnesia) need to be invoked. In silly horror campaigns, the irrational nature of the world can be played for laughs. White Wolf's World of Darkness takes place on Level Five. Fantasy horror is at its strongest here, and historical horror is still playable at this level. Science fiction and modern horror become visibly strained, however. Splatter style campaigning becomes more difficult to sustain here. William Hope Hodgson's *House on the Borderland* and *Boats of the Glen Carrig* find their great power here. Brian Lumley's *Necroscope* series, and some of his Cthulhu mythos stories (*Burrowers From Beneath*) take place on this level.

Level Six: Overt Supernaturalism

On Level Six, the supernatural and horrific has become an accepted part of society. These are the worlds of dream, the worlds of high fantasy, and the worlds of postmodern horror like Kim Newman's novel *Anno Dracula* or the movie *Cast A Deadly Spell*. Madness-and-dream style horror occurs on this level, and is sometimes (as in Lovecraftian Dreamlands horror or the TSR *Ravenloft* setting) the reality as well. Splatter and psychological horror are almost impossible on this level, and paranoia and cosmic horror become quite difficult. Characters-as-monsters, pulp, and silly horror remain viable styles at this level. The risk for the horror gamemaster who runs entirely on Level Six is that the horror, since it is so "normal," will revert to mere adventure. The way around this is to keep certain rules in place in the world, both social and magical, and center the horrors on their violation (or attempted violation). Conveying this admittedly subtle distinction to the players is a challenge worthy of the finest horror gamemasters.

7.2.2 · DREAD, TERROR, OR GORE?

"If I find that I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify, and if I find that I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out."

— Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*

Although any horror game can (and probably should) try to aim for all three of these horror effects, the choice of one as the "default" can alter the whole nature of the campaign. Dread, terror, or gore are compatible with any type of campaign; fantasy, history, modernity and science fiction hold ample shares of all three. Some styles (see Section 2.4.0), however, encourage or discourage some effects, as do some tropes (see Section 2.2.1). Keeping a handle on your intent can pay off when building clues or devising the events that will drive the characters forward and make the players interact with the campaign world.

Dread

Attempting dread as the primarily emotional impact of the campaign is challenging. It requires that the gamemaster and the players both know and trust each other, since it is so often dependent upon small details and subtle effects to build its full power. It requires that the gamemaster and players put a great deal of effort into the process of building and understanding the campaign world, and the scenarios that take place there. The horror styles most conducive to the creation of dread are cosmic horror, psychological horror, and (if done right) madness-and-dream. Paranoia-and-secret-war adventures can also be conducive to a good shivery dread, although it works best if the gamemaster and players share much the same notion of dystopia (see Section 7.3.3, Politics in the Campaign). As far as tropes go, the Bad Place, the Ghost, the Grotesque, the Omen, and the Unseelie seem to be the most historically successful in invoking dread, although any trope can be made dreadful with careful application.

Terror

Terror is, as mentioned above, the easiest (and therefore probably the best) default effect to aim for in the game. Unlike dread or gore, it can be sustained at length, and a well-worn narrative format (tension-and-release) exists to create it that all but the most jaded player will still respond to. To build terror, however, requires that the game world be something that draws the players in (or chases them on) at increasing speed through its wonders, dangers, and inevitable horrors. The horror styles most conducive to terror are pulp, characters-as-monsters, and paranoia-and-secret-war. Aspects of madness-and-dream or cosmic horror can also impel terror, if they are not allowed to bog down the narrative pace too much. Especially terrifying tropes include Black Magic, the Thing From Beyond, the Vampire, and the Werewolf. Again, like dread, terror can be found in any trope with the proper set-up.

Gore

Setting the default of the campaign to gore is a challenge to the gamemaster's creativity and vocabulary. Keeping the gore fresh (so to speak) becomes the center of the campaign; the more ways that something appalling can happen, the better. Fast pace and lingering close-ups, lots of plot threads and doomed NPCs, and short, sharp shocks are the key to building the gory campaign. Never let the players get used to anything; familiarity breeds boredom, and boredom is the enemy to a proper appreciation of the revolting. Styles of horror particularly well-suited to the production of gore include splatter (of course), pulp (in a fast-and-furious Hong Kong movie style), and madness-and-dream. Particularly fiendish gamemasters might introduce a great deal of gore into a characters-as-monsters style horror campaign before the players became inured to it. The goriest tropes are, traditionally, the Grotesque (again, of course), the Serial Killer, the Zombie, and occasionally the Vampire. But, like the others, any trope can be made horrifyingly disgusting with sufficient time spent reading medical texts or autopsy reports.

7.2.3 · HOW MUCH UNREALITY?

> *"You cannot impose limits on the fantastic; either it does not exist at all, or else it extends throughout the universe."*
>
> — Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Fantastic Considered As A Language"

Unreality is a close cousin to the supernatural, in that both are seemingly necessary to the proper functioning of horror, and both can make a horror game impossible to accept if too overdone. (See also section 4.2.1, The Unnatural Element.) Where supernaturalism is the violation of the "natural laws" of the game world, unreality is the more fundamental shifting of the nature of the narrative, the world, the characters, or anything else that might seem to be a point of reference. The value of unreality is its ability to place the characters (and, by extension, the players) in a "place without laws," where anything can happen. This being a horror game, "anything" is usually pretty bad. Like the supernatural, the level of unreality can (and should) be tailored to remain fairly consistent throughout the campaign, although the climax can pull out any stops that the gamemaster likes.

Increasing levels of unreality can also be combatted with increasing levels of depth and consistency in the "non-horror" portion of the game world, but this is less effective against unreality than against supernaturalism. At its best it can serve as a particularly horrifying contrast, however, as the shards of the world come apart in an especially well-detailed locale.

Unreality can also be contained, much like supernaturalism, within the confines of madness or dream (where it rules supreme, of course) or within certain places in the game world where the fabric of space

and time is worn thinnest. These places needn't even manifest the traditionally supernatural to become scary places indeed. When unreality and supernaturalism combine, the effects can be overwhelming.

Some possible levels of unreality for the campaign are given below, with the types and styles of horror game that are fostered (or discouraged) by it. As in the supernaturalism Section (7.2.1), common elements, source material, and other keynotes of each level are set forth for gamemasters to get a handle on this tricky and elusive subject.

Level One: No Unreality

This might seem to be the safest place in which to run the horror campaign, but hewing strictly to the confines of the real world can hamper the gamemaster's need for the dramatic (or ominous) coincidence, the convenient NPC, or the last-minute lucky break. The natural, normal, real response to monsters or supernatural evil would be TV coverage, scientific inquiry, and other things that might destroy the atmosphere of fear. Modern, and possibly historical, horror are the only types of campaign that could flourish at Level One, although a science-fiction horror campaign might be possible. Only splatter and psychological horror are truly viable styles at Level One. Like No Supernaturalism, No Unreality is a very difficult row to hoe. The movie *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, or nonfiction books like *The Hot Zone* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, may give the ambitious Level One gamemaster some grist for her mill.

Level Two: Hints of Unreality

At this level, the traditional path-smoothing tactics of role playing games can make themselves manifest. Odd coincidences, unexplained noises, and the other subtleties so beloved of many gamemasters can enter at Level Two. Keep in mind that any level of supernaturalism can theoretically coexist even with Level Two, but the surrounding society must never see it and the characters must treat it as the grotesque irruption that it is. Most horror games are implicitly begun at Level Two; the horror may be grossly unreal but the society around it and the narrative told about it are rigorously conventional. It can be difficult to run fantasy games at Level Two, but the other types can be run with minimal difficulty. (The difficulty with fantasy at this level is more the amount of thought that has to go into an internally consistent fantasy society rather than any particular problem with the subgenre itself.) Paranoia-and-secret-war style horror becomes possible, if not particularly plausible, at Level Two. Cosmic horror often depends on a solid base of Level Two unreality, although its effects are almost always carried out at higher levels. The majority of any Lovecraft story, for example, always attempts to maintain Level

Two until the climax. Movies like *Silence of the Lambs* or *Fright Night* both take place roughly within the Level Two narrative construct, as do most of the contemporary horror novels of authors like Stephen King and John Farris.

Level Three: Minor Unreality

At Level Three, things start to happen. This is where foreshadowing, thematic devices, symbolism, and the rich arsenal of horror literature can come into play within the game. Cryptic oracles can be uttered by NPCs, and the characters just take them in stride. It becomes an article of faith that the FBI would have an Occult Crimes Division, or that Mars might want our women. Occasional ripples in time and space can occur (prophecies and Bad Places are the most common in this genre) without causing comment. Guns don't necessarily kill serial killers, and nobody orders an autopsy unless it's dramatically convenient. This is the unreality level of the average horror campaign after a few months of play. Any type of horror from fantasy to science fiction can comfortably exist within Level Three. Paranoia-and-secret-war is at its easiest and strongest here, as are splatter, characters-as-monsters, and cosmic horror. Although most monster movies and horror novels operate at Level Three, a few that push the boundaries might include movies like *The Hitcher* and *The Lost Boys* or novels like *Dracula* and *It*.

Level Four: Recurring Unreality

At this level, things begin to come apart. The narrative starts to take second place to the mood or to the theme. Foreshadowing and symbolism threaten to take over the sidelines altogether, and broad archetypes are seen to underlie the world. Main characters slip out of reality with regularity, as do occasional parts of the storyline. On Level Four, the tropes of horror begin to assume their full power, unconstrained by science. Running a science-fiction horror game becomes more difficult at this level without becoming space opera or full-fledged cyberpunk. Other types continue to flourish at level four. This is the natural strength of the pulp style horror campaign, and madness-and-dream begins to come into its own. Paranoia can still be strong (as in Grant Morrison's surreal conspiracy comic book *The Invisibles*), but the necessary contrasts that make cosmic horror work begin to weaken. Much of the World of Darkness seems to float between Level Three and Level Four; characters-as-monsters remains a viable style. *Twin Peaks*, novels of the high Gothic tradition like *Castle of Otranto*, and the horror tales of Edgar Allan Poe typify the world of Level Four. The movie *Scream* is set on Level Three, but gains its humorous edge by the slow realization among the characters that it is actually taking place on Level Four.

Level Five: Major Unreality

At this level, characters' notions of themselves and the world cease to be fully reliable. The players may still be able to follow the action by virtue of their place as "privileged observers," but the world of the campaign is a world where the laws of cause and effect mean less than the laws of dramatic unity. Pockets of near-total chaos occur, although where they occur can still be predicted by the constraints of the plot or the nature of the symbolism surrounding them. Pulp begins to become untenable at this level. Psychological horror and splatter both become indistinguishable from madness-and-dream. Paranoia has reached the level of Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" or *Valis*. Only the most ornate and florid cosmic horror, like the surreal narratives of Thomas Ligotti, can retain any effect. Movies like *House*, *Angel Heart*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* are examples of Level Five horror in various forms.

Level Six: Complete Unreality

This is pure hallucination. Like Level One, it is very difficult to run horror here. The lack of any connection between observed truth and actual reality makes both horror and resisting horror extraordinarily hard to accomplish. Only madness-and-dream style horror can truly exist on Level Six, although it's not impossible to conceive of a madness-and-dream campaign that is set in the hallucinations of paranoia or obsessive morbidity, for instance. Whether that would be any fun for anyone is another question, of course. William S. Burroughs' works stand at the threshold of Level Six, and Ken Russell's *Gothic* crosses it gleefully. Like Level Six supernaturalism, it is left as an exercise for the advanced.

7.2.4 · AUSTERITY IN THE HORROR CAMPAIGN

Austerity, to borrow a term from *Gamemaster Law*, is the degree to which a character is held liable for his actions. A character who shoots a black magician in a very austere modern horror game will have the local police department on his tail (using every weapon in the modern forensic arsenal; fiber matching, fingerprints, DNA typing, etc.), and if caught, he will be indicted and tried. If convicted, he will go to prison or be executed. A character who shoots the same black magician in a moderately austere modern horror game will be "on the lam" and unable to cross the path of the law again, but can stay "underground" in the same city without the police finding him. In the same situation in a lenient (low to no austerity) modern horror game, as long as there aren't any eyewitnesses the character is home free. The police may even decide that the black magician deserved killing and just ignore any clues that the character left behind.

Generally, the level of austerity inversely tracks the level of unreality; a campaign with no unreality is normally an austere campaign. However, some perfectly realistic situations might hold less severe penalties for character action: the advances in forensic science in the last century have made murder, for example, much harder to realistically get away with even though the austerity level of the world has remained roughly the same. Similarly, a game set in a free-wheeling frontier like the pirate Caribbean or the Old West might have fewer (or at least different) consequences than a game set in the bureaucratic cyberpunk future. Fundamentally, however, in the real world actions do carry consequences and an austere game will attempt to replicate them. Also, even at high levels of unreality, the characters' actions can carry consequences like dramatic irony, justified fate, karma, or similar dramatic and mythic repercussions. Even the highest level of unreality can be played as an austere game if the gamemaster so chooses.

Normally, styles of horror game that privilege game world realism gravitate toward greater austerity. Cosmic horror, paranoia-and-secret-war, and psychological horror games are traditionally more austere. Pulp, splatter, madness-and-dream, and characters-as-monsters are traditionally less austere. Silly horror is almost always totally lenient. Within these broad categories, it is certainly possible to make adjustments one way or another. A madness-and-dream game, for instance, can begin as a completely austere game and gradually grow more and more lenient as the characters' grasp of reality disintegrates. Cosmic horror and paranoia can be played at almost any level of austerity, although cosmic horror depends on realism, and paranoia on consequences, too much to work well as fully lenient games.

Either way, the gamemaster should warn the players about the level of austerity that she intends. This should probably be done out of game, while setting up the campaign; players hate surprises of this nature. If the warning doesn't take, of course, the gamemaster is free to force the whole party to flee to Guatemala to avoid the FBI's investigation of their four-state murder-and-robbery spree.

7.2.5 · HOW MUCH POWER?

Another issue that the gamemaster has to decide before even asking the players to make up characters is the level of power that the characters should have. Almost all role playing games assume that the characters are better or at least stronger than average people, and horror is no exception. But are they merely the babysitter who survives the night, or are they mighty wielders of pure magic, psychic blasts, and superscience? As a rule of thumb, the players are easier to scare with lower-powered characters but are more willing to identify with higher-powered ones. Like many rules of thumb, there are plenty of exceptions, probably in your own gaming group. A particularly

dedicated group of "immersive" role players might find the challenges of playing ordinary high school students gripping and compelling. A gamemaster of a particularly fiendish and malevolent turn of mind might be able to scare the wits out of a party of superheroes. Horrors can run the scale from a single rabid St. Bernard to mindlessly evil gods larger than the Sun.

The gamemaster should always consider the players' preferences when she designs the campaign. Given the collaborative nature of horror gaming in particular, it will be nothing but an exercise in frustration if the power level is set too low (or too high) for players to enjoy themselves. At the very least, she should give the players an idea of the power level where she intends to calibrate the game. This will let players set their mental standards and hopefully prevent miscommunication later.

Having decided the initial power level for the characters, the gamemaster should establish the power of the horrors. Generally, the main horror (the chief villain, or eldritch god, or whoever) should be twice to three times as powerful as the average character, but not immune to the characters acting in concert. The henchmen, chief lieutenants, or secondary horrors should be roughly the same level of power as the characters; these will be the most common antagonists for the party. Hordes and hordes of low-powered guards, goons, summoned monsters, etc. will round out the cast. The key to this calibration is to keep the characters endangered throughout the game, but not instantly doomed.

Splatter, paranoia, cosmic horror, and psychological horror are all traditionally low-powered styles of horror gaming. Both splatter and psychological horror depend on characters' senses of vulnerability for their effectiveness. Paranoia and cosmic horror play off the contrast between the characters' weakness and the overwhelming strengths of the evils that they face. Pulp and characters-as-monsters style horror both tend to be higher-powered styles. Pulp pits powerful heroes against overwhelmingly powerful opponents; characters-as-monsters is as much an exploration of the dark side of power as it is a matter of counting the odds. Madness-and-dream horror and silly horror work all over the scale; questions of power might even seem inappropriate to silly horror.

In many role playing games, the characters increase their power level as time goes by. This can easily be accomodated in horror games, as the low-powered monsters are overcome, the chief lieutenants are thwarted one by one, and eventually the chief villain can be faced down on something like equal terms. The only thing that gamemasters must keep in mind is that the powers of darkness should always stay dangerous — if the characters can crush Great Cthulhu with a glance (or even with serious effort) it's time to end the campaign.

7.2.6 · SCALE IN THE HORROR CAMPAIGN

"Tush, tush. Fear boys with bugs."

— William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, I:ii

Closely linked to the question of power is the question of scale. Scale, again drawing from *Gamemaster Law*, is the level at which the characters are interacting with the world. Are the characters acting on a prosaic scale, simply struggling to get by, scrounging their next meal and hoping to avoid a messy and predictable death? Or are they acting on an epic scale, resolving the fate of nations, saving the world, and daring Hell itself?

Normally, low powered characters operate closer to the prosaic scale while higher powered characters operate at an epic scale. But this is only the standard use of these types; compelling, gripping and frightening horror can be created by juxtaposing opposites as well. Stephen King's *It* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are both novels of low-powered characters battling horror on an epic scale; Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Saint-Germain vampire novels deal with the struggles of superpowered characters to save one prosaic person's life or dignity.

Unlike questions of power, questions of scale can be decided primarily by the gamemaster, at least at first. Some players can become impatient with a prosaic scale, but with enough creativity and effort by the gamemaster, they can be won over. At some point, of course, the characters' actions will begin to determine the scale of the campaign. Like power, scale has a tendency to slip upward during the course of a long-running campaign. This should not be any problem for the prepared gamemaster, and unlike power, scale can be dramatically lowered (at least temporarily) without too many player complaints.

Splatter, madness-and-dream, and psychological horror are styles most often associated with prosaic scale games. Characters-as-monsters style games often begin as prosaic scale games and escalate as the characters become more confident and familiar with their surroundings and powers. Pulp is a classic epic scale gaming style, especially in horror, although it can work on a fairly prosaic level for some time. Much of Robert E. Howard's pulp horror, for instance, concerns his heroes barely surviving some malevolent creature's slavering assault rather than battling for the fate of the world. Paranoia and cosmic horror gain much of their power from slowly widening the scale of the campaign; what initially seems only to concern one character or NPC becomes a battle against insidious forces that can topple governments or devour continents. Silly horror can operate at any scale, although it seems most comfortable when fluctuating wildly between extremes.

7.2.7 · BAIT AND SWITCH: THE SURPRISE HORROR CAMPAIGN

"These books are about the way the known story is not the right or the real story."

— Peter Straub, *The Throat*

One way to ensure the shock of the unexpected is to run the surprise horror campaign. In such a campaign, the gamemaster doesn't tell the players that her campaign is going to be a horror campaign at all. (Hide this book, for a start!) Instead, the players set up an espionage, pulp, fantasy, historical, science fiction, or other kind of game which slowly turns horrific. The gamemaster can even run a few sessions or scenarios with no horror content at all, just to make sure that the hook is well and truly sunk before she brings out the ghosts and vampires.

This can pay great dividends, of course; if the horror is led into subtly and slowly, the players can spend months wondering exactly what is going on until they figure it out. This leads to great player involvement in the campaign world, and a concomitant depth of realism for everyone. The horror only becomes expected later on, and the level of fear can be ratcheted up to continuously keep the players off balance.



This technique can also be used to rejuvenate a campaign that seems about to go stale. The very over-familiarity that is in danger of ruining the game world for the players becomes a source of hidden dangers and deep veins of story potential. Almost any type of campaign can become a horror game with the slow (or rapid) addition of horror

tropes and the active intent to do so on the part of the gamemaster. Horror, after all, is not truly a genre in which games are played as it is an emotion for which games are played.

Of course, the gamemaster runs the very real risk of angry, sullen, uncooperative players with a legitimate gripe. Some players don't enjoy horror gaming and will resent having bought a pig in a poke. Other players, who might not have minded playing in an openly announced horror game, may resent being misled. If done too often, the bait-and-switch approach can lead to apathy on the part of the players; like many horror techniques, repetition dulls its edge. If the gamemaster is sure of the trust and friendship of her players, however, the bait and switch technique will create a really effective foundation for a great horror campaign.

7.3 THE BIG TABOOS

"The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism."

— Angela Carter, *Fireworks*

Since horror deals explicitly with arousing emotions, it can operate on the fringes of some powerful issues. Many of these issues have the potential to make players or gamemasters uncomfortable. This discomfort can add to the uneasiness of fear, or it can derail the game entirely if it becomes too distracting or divisive. Given the level of sensitivity surrounding these issues, gamemasters should go out of their way to get players' approval in advance on any game that deals with them. Even if the player has originally given his consent, he should be able to veto further exploration of a theme that causes real discomfort, insult, or distraction. Many people don't know exactly where their discomfort zones begin until it's too late. Remember, the purpose of any game, even a horror role playing game, is to have fun; leave therapy to the experts.

7.3.1 · RELIGION IN THE CAMPAIGN

"You aren't religious, my dear, are you?"

— Roman Castevet to Rosemary Woodhouse, *Rosemary's Baby*

Religion can enter the horror game in a number of ways. The first is as a villain: witches, voodooists, Satanists, pagans, and various types of fundamentalist Christians have all been cast as villains in various horror games, books, or movies. If a player (or the gamemaster) belongs to any of these religions, using them as traditional role playing game villains can be gravely insulting. Some people

also object to casting anybody's religion (their own or otherwise) as the source (or even the ignorant tool) of evil and horror. This attitude, while perhaps admirable in the abstract, can be very inconvenient to the gamemaster who wants to bring elements of *Dracula*, which draws explicit parallels between vampirism and Catholicism, into her game, to say nothing of the movie *White Zombie*, which grossly perverts the religion of voodoo for the purpose of cheap (but effective) scary thrills.

Another religious problem in role playing games (and horror role playing games in particular) is using religions as trappings of power for the characters. A game based on Dennis Wheatley's Black Magic novels (in which a vaguely heretical, but still recognizably Catholic, Christianity is necessary to defeat a very medieval Satan and his earthly worshippers) would have the characters using holy water, crucifixes, and the Lord's Prayer in concert with magical pentagrams, astral projection, and other forms of magic. Here, a devout Christian player might object either to the trivializing of his beliefs by using them as gaming props or to their being intermingled with a lot of "pagan nonsense." (I won't even get into the theological problems that a devout Southern Baptist would have with using crucifixes and holy water for anything in the first place.)

Finally, of course, establishing an Absolute Good in the campai world can vitiate the concept of horror itself. In the religious hor novels of Frank Peretti, for instance, it's very hard to maintain su pense; we know that God will eventually stomp those rotten demon and do it hard. If a similar belief is part of the game world (or if the gamemaster's actions makes it seem so with too many "divine interventions" or other miraculous saves), the players will find it hard to feel fear. On a slightly smaller scale, why should the characters fear death if they will go to Heaven for fighting evil? Some styles of horror, such as cosmic horror, explicitly negate such ideas for that very reason; such negation, of course, runs the risk of offending believers of all stripes.

In the ideal world, of course, we could all agree that games are games and God is God and never the twain shall meet. In the real world, it's more difficult than that. Having strong religious beliefs (of any sort) doesn't necessarily interfere with enjoyment of a horror game that ignores, or even actively distorts, them (mine certainly haven't, either as player or gamemaster). I'm certainly not saying that only agnostics can play horror games! But for some players, separating their religious beliefs from the game world is harder than it is for others; if the horror campaign cannot bend to accomodate them then something has to give. It is better, of course, for the gamemaster to keep her players' religious beliefs (or lack thereof) in mind when designing the campaign, and to consult the players if she is unsure.

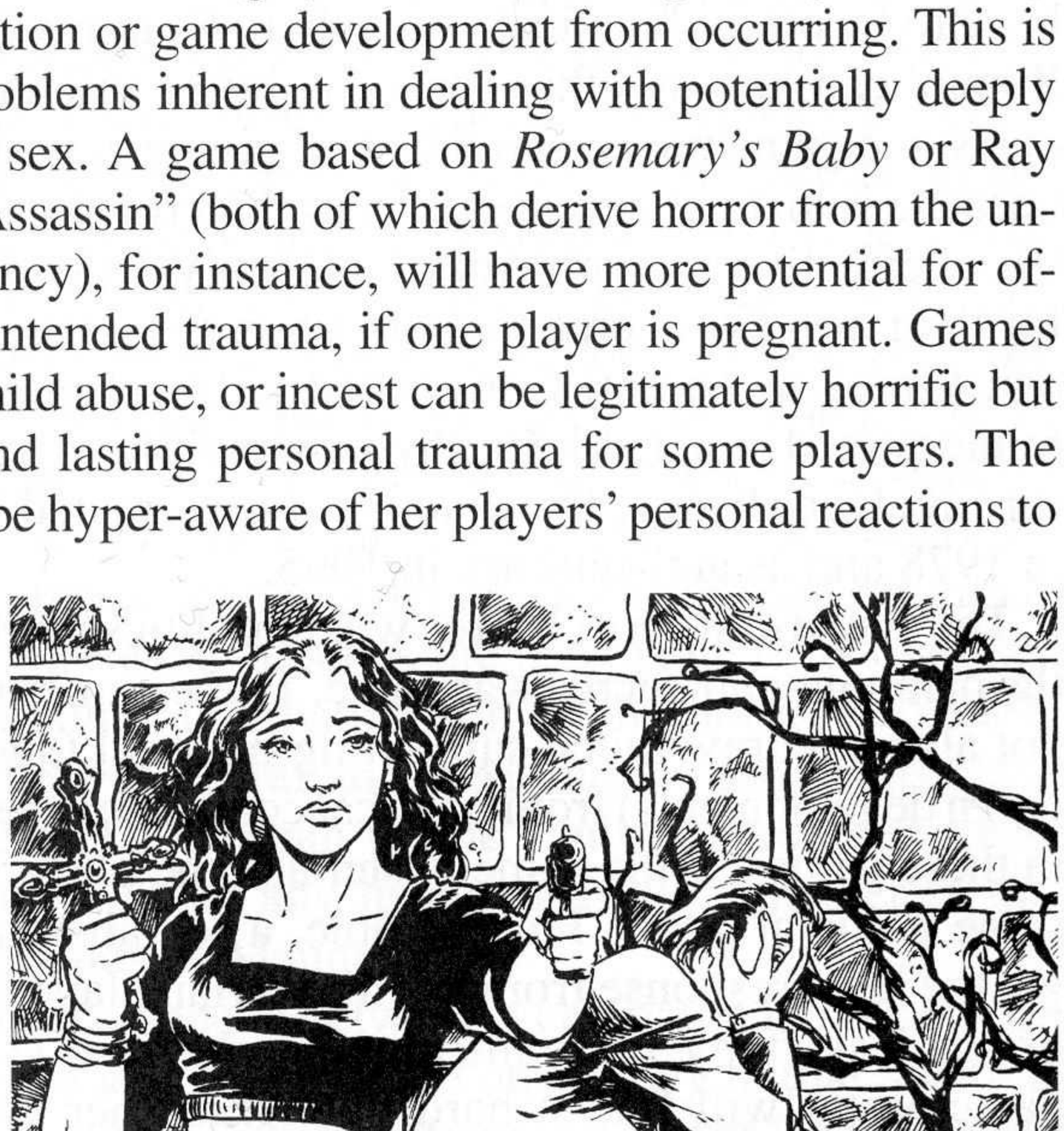
7.3.2 · SEXUALITY IN THE CAMPAIGN

"The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal...."

— from Jonathan Harker's diary, *Dracula*

Sex and horror have been inextricably linked ever since the ancient Greek legends of the lamia, if not well before. This is not the place to get into a deep discussion of the topic, but thinking about any popular horror work from *Dracula* to *Friday the 13th* will demonstrate the point. Normally, this is a tremendous source of power for the gamemaster; she can draw on many archetypes that work on a lot of levels at once when designing her scenarios.

However, sexuality carries just as much potential for offense as religion does. In mixed-gender gaming groups especially, exploiting some sexual themes (like rape or castration, or even relatively innocuous themes like homosexuality or sexual magic) can raise red flags that prevent any useful party cooperation or game development from occurring. This is in addition to the problems inherent in dealing with potentially deeply personal issues like sex. A game based on *Rosemary's Baby* or Ray Bradbury's "Small Assassin" (both of which derive horror from the uncertainties of pregnancy), for instance, will have more potential for offense, or at least unintended trauma, if one player is pregnant. Games dealing with rape, child abuse, or incest can be legitimately horrific but can occasion real and lasting personal trauma for some players. The gamemaster should be hyper-aware of her players' personal reactions to any sexual issue that gets great play in the campaign; back off before someone blows up or breaks down. (See also Section 6.2.3, Personal Weaknesses.) I'm not saying "Don't make the vampire sexy." I'm saying "Don't go into a lot of details about the vampire's sex appeal, or her sex life, without knowing *exactly* what you're doing."



In addition to the dangers of causing offense, there's the fact that sex is undeniably distracting. To put it bluntly, not every player or gamemaster is mature enough, or capable enough, to handle sexual themes well. I'm not talking about sensitivity or morality, I'm talking about effectiveness. Here's a good rule of thumb: if anyone in the group (player or gamemaster) giggles about it, it shouldn't be a major (or even perhaps a minor) part of the campaign. Giggling, regardless of its appropriateness or sensitivity, detracts from a mood of horror. I'll leave it to the individual gamemaster to tell the difference between a potentially game-wrecking giggle and the nervous titter that indicates a slipping hold on panic.

7.3.3 · POLITICS IN THE CAMPAIGN

"The horror story, beneath its fangs and fright wig, is really as conservative as an Illinois Republican in a three-piece suit...."

— Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*

Compared to religion and sex, politics is small potatoes. Players have to be pretty fanatical to object to Communist, Nazi, Democrat, Republican, or any other sort of political villains. (Although, obviously, the gamemaster should avoid giving gratuitous offense, if only because it distracts everyone from the creeping horrors.) The number of effective horror novels that openly depend on political themes for their success is pretty small. Even *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, filmed as an anti-Communist political movie in 1956, can be reinterpreted as anti-McCarthyite with little or no damage to the horror involved. It was, for example, reinterpreted as anti-consumerist in 1978 and as anti-military in 1995.

The specific style of horror where politics might come into play is the paranoia-and-secret-war game. These games many times (though not always) draw much supporting material (and entertaining campaign developments) from political conspiracy theories. It often helps, in these games, if the gamemaster and the players are of roughly the same political stripe. For example, a socialist gamemaster will not get the ideal response from her libertarian players if the horrors from beyond start by dismantling the welfare state. A right-wing gamemaster will find it hard to frighten her leftist players with a horrific vision of a conspiracy to take away everyone's guns and legalize LSD. Although most games of paranoia depend on deeper and more common horrors, if the details aren't scary (or are, in fact, particularly enticing), the game won't work.

More broadly, horror games, like horror novels, can be seen as reinforcing the social order (only the virgin babysitter survives; chaos is defeated by order, etc.) or subverting it (vampires as metaphors for the ruling class, staked by the working-class heroes). The gamemaster should be aware of these two potential political themes, if only to be

able to draw extra dimensions of story from them. Which choice the gamemaster makes shouldn't make too much difference, as long as the story is a scary one.

7.4 THE PHYSICAL SETTING OF THE CAMPAIGN

The physical setting of the campaign, the place where the action will unfold, is an important question in campaign design. Although it can seemingly be changed with greater ease than can, say, the level of unreality, it retains a great deal of impact on the initial design. Since horror role playing games depend so strongly on background details, detailing the setting or settings that the characters will interact with should take a very high priority. This only gains importance if key elements of mood, important clues, or the central concepts of the horror itself are dependent upon the setting, as they so often are.

One potential dichotomy is the one between rural and urban horror. Rural horror is the oldest type; the horror of the Wild Places far from fellow human contact. Cosmic horror and psychological horror seem to flourish with special poison here, where the insulation between character and Outside is stripped to its thinnest. Urban horror is a modern horror; it goes back to the "penny dreadfuls" surrounding the Ripper murders, or at its earliest, to Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" or "Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." The horror in the city is the horror of alienation from humanity and of separation from truths (such as, ironically, nature). The nature of urban horror makes it very fertile ground for characters-as-monsters and paranoia-and-secret-war style stories. Of course, the increasing fears of urban crime, and the increasing suburbanization of the horror audience, mean that the lines between rural and urban horror are not as clear cut as once they were. The "urban jungle" and the secluded toxic waste dump conspire to make any horror possible, whether in the heart of Texas or the wilds of Manhattan.

The main choice to be made is between a campaign that draws its power from its location and depends on consistency in that location to give it depth, and the campaign that draws its power from its variety and depends on the scope of that variety to give it impact. Although there are possible compromises between the localized and the globe-trotting campaign, most horror games will gravitate to one or the other extreme. If this tendency was not anticipated by the gamemaster, she will be playing catch-up at a very inconvenient time.

7.4.1 · CLAUSTROPHOBIA: THE LOCALIZED CAMPAIGN

"Your girlfriend, Peter, lives in the corner penthouse of Spook Central."

— Ray Stantz (Dan Aykroyd), *Ghostbusters*

The localized campaign is mostly or entirely restricted to one city, county, province, or small country. Although individual scenarios may take place outside it, they are driven by events inside the main campaign setting, and the characters expect to return to their "home base" at the end.

This approach gives the gamemaster a chance to build a very detailed, believable section of the game world. Characters will be interacting with the same NPCs, passing the same locations, hearing connected rumors, and generally inserting themselves deeply into the game world. This pays enormous dividends in horror. Characters care about the area and are easier to motivate. Familiar faces or locations can suddenly turn scary or dangerous, increasing the level of horror. Every advantage that a realistic, detailed game world carries is at least potentially accessible in the localized campaign.

The localized campaign also answers one of the nagging metagame questions any long-running horror campaign faces: "Why do *we* keep running into these horrible monsters?" In the localized campaign, the answer is simple: the monsters are where you live. Gamemasters are encouraged to come up with additional variations on that answer, or at least some game world explanation that will hold up under moderate scrutiny, whether it be an interdimensional vortex (such as the Hellmouth in the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) or the curse of the dead autarch who ruled these lands millennia ago.

A localized campaign can have a whole battalion of horrors in it, if it's the sort of place that horrors happen; players are a lot more willing to believe in a lot of unrelated horrors in Victorian London or modern L.A. than in suburban Aurora, Illinois or some generic fantasy city. Fortunately, horror literature is full of places where the horrors seem nonstop: Stephen King's Maine, H.P. Lovecraft's Miskatonic Valley, the Sunnydale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the Louisiana bayous of *Swamp Thing*. The real world also has no shortage of places full of horrific history and legendry: London, Paris, New Orleans, Cairo, and Transylvania only scratch the surface. Any large American city can hold as many horrors as the ambitious gamemaster can stuff into its alleys, steam tunnels, and warehouses: New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles are all classic horror settings with enough variety that characters can never dare to leave.

The final advantages to localized horror campaigns are the psychological ones of implication and constraint. If everywhere the characters go at home is full of horror, it implies that nowhere is safe, and

that any knowledge (of a place's true nature, or its history, for example) is dangerous knowledge. These are feelings and implications that the horror gamemaster should eagerly exploit. The sense of constraint that comes from the localized campaign is simply the sense of being imprisoned with Something Dangerous, writ larger and kept in the background. The characters will wrestle against the city limits or the county line without even knowing why they feel trapped.

7.4.2 · AGORAPHOBIA: THE GLOBE-TROTTING CAMPAIGN

"This quest would require a great deal of time and effort for its completion, given the global reaches where those splinters of evil might be tucked away."

— Thomas Ligotti, "Nethescurial"

The globe-trotting campaign trades the security and depth of the localized campaign for uncertainty and rootlessness, two very 20th-century fears. It's not surprising, therefore, that the majority of globe-trotting horror campaigns are set in the 20th century from the pulp horrors of the 1920s to the far-flung conspiracies of modern times. For the globe-trotting campaign to function, there must be some sort of rapid communication, so that the characters can find out about the evils festering across the continent or overseas. Globe-trotting also requires some sort of rapid transport to place the characters rapidly and reliably on the forefront of the worldwide war against evil. Letting the action slow down for a four-month caravan trip or sailing voyage to the haunted temple is a sure way to let the steam out of any horror game.

The globe-trotting campaign can be implemented in other types of horror games besides late historical or modern ones, of course. High fantasy games can use crystal balls and flying carpets or magical gateways to replace telegraphs and jet planes. Games set in the world's dreamlands, or assuming rapid astral travel, can do the same thing without even requiring the minimal time of conventional transport. A tolerant and cooperative group of players will often let the gamemaster "fast forward" past the long journey in even the lowest of low-tech environments, and perhaps substitute prophetic visions for CNN. Although a wide-ranging futuristic globe-trotting horror game requires rather more development of the nature of the world (or worlds) involved, science fiction makes globe-trotting a snap.

The advantages to the globe-trotting game are variety and isolation. When a campaign's worth of horrors can be drawn from any corner of the world and scattered across four continents, the campaign is potentially thematically richer than one in which all the horrors have to come from Comanche legendry and occur in West Texas. Varying the types of monsters and their settings can also help keep

the campaign from falling into formula. Variety can be used to build believability, as well. Spacing the horrors out geographically prevents the players from asking why their home base just happens to be Monster Capital of the Known World, although it does leave the gamemaster to decide why evil lurks everywhere the characters go.

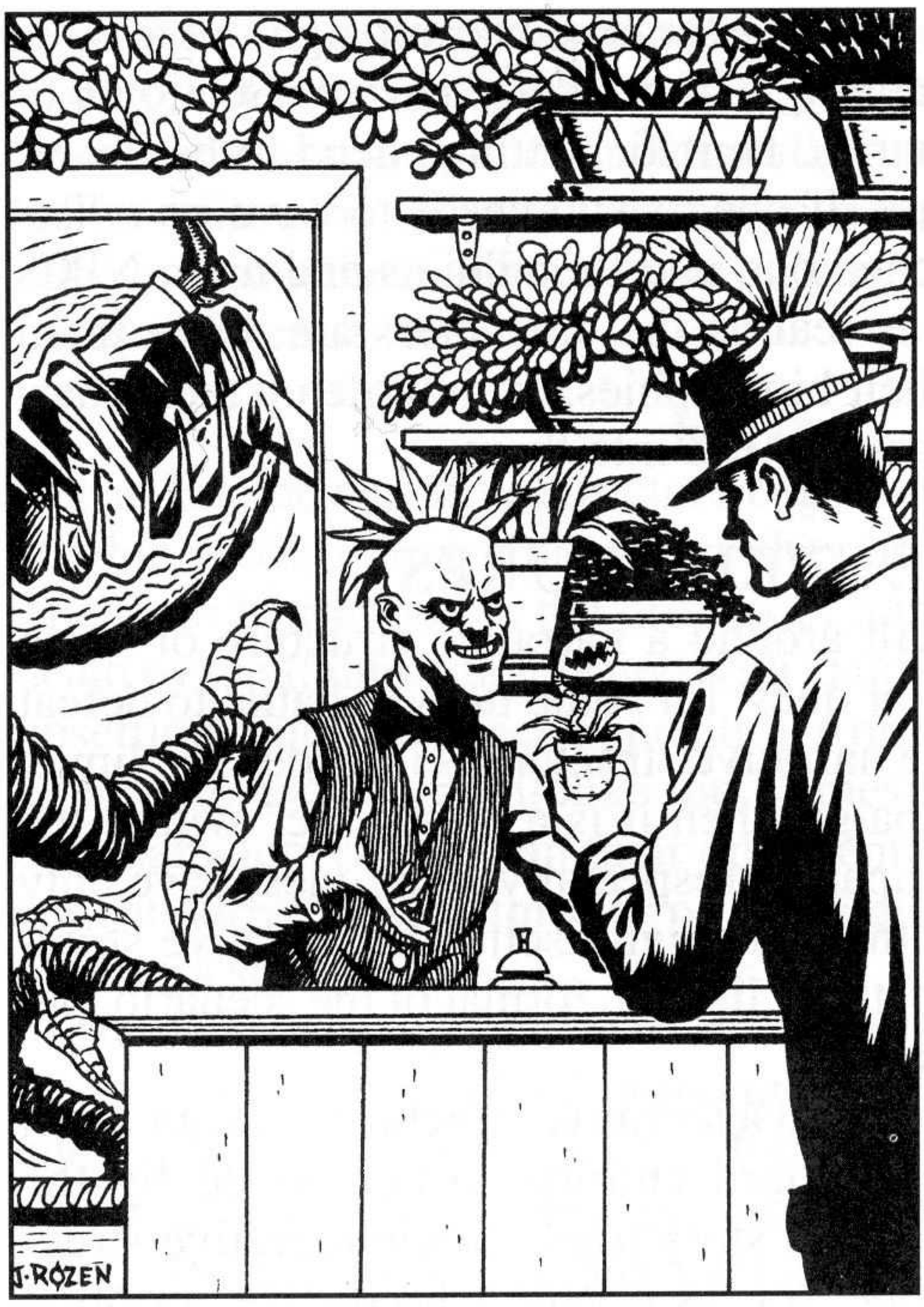
This question can be used to feed the characters' isolation. Thematically, the "dangerous knowledge" motif is only strengthened by having horrors manifest all around the world; the truism that "everywhere is dangerous" becomes far more obvious to players whose characters have, indeed, been everywhere. If everywhere is dangerous, then nowhere is safe. The characters are isolated from all normal society, since normal society (foolishly or blindly) believes that it is safe at home. This theme of isolated alienation is a powerful one in many styles of horror, specifically cosmic horror, paranoia-and-secret-war, and psychological horror.

7.5
BUILDING A TERRIFYING UNIVERSE

"We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror."
— Thomas Ligotti, "The Medusa"

Building the universe of the campaign, be it Whitechapel in 1888 or all time and space, is the fundamental job of any gamemaster. Whether the campaign universe is constructed by historical research, borrowed from a work of fiction or role playing sourcebook, or built from whole cloth, it has to be understandable to the players. Usually, this means that it has to have sufficient detail for the players to place their characters in it, and rules and laws (whether overt or implicit) that the players know that they must follow. The horror gamemaster must do the same thing, but add more detail and make it scary.

Adding more detail is almost always a matter of putting in more thought (for a fictional universe) or doing more research (for a historical universe), or both (for universes that share characteristics of the two). Even as the campaign gets underway, details will continue to accumulate. Details added for one session, or even made up on the fly, have to be integrated into the bigger world picture. New books read (or movies seen) by the gamemaster (or players) may inspire the addition of more sections, more dimensions, more possibilities, to the campaign world. Generally speaking, the gamemaster can't have too much information about her world. (She can easily give the players too much information, either spoiling the fun of discovery, or drowning them in useless facts.) Although there are some exceptions, as a general rule the more depth, dimension, and detail there is in the universe, the more the players can identify with their characters and the more they will



enjoy the experience of playing them. (See also Section 6.3.2, The Devil Is In the Details.)

In addition to mere detail, however, the campaign universe needs to have a design. It needs to follow understandable and reliable rules, even the reliably unreliable ones of madness-and-dream. In most cases, this means paying some attention to the way things work and the way people behave in the real world. Make sure that the villains and monsters that inhabit the campaign universe have internally consistent and sensible motives for action, for instance. Real villains and monsters, from Himmler to man-eating tigers, do. If the game is using a style that departs from the real world (pulp, or madness-and-dream, for instance), make sure that the villains and monsters conform to the expectations of that style. These same points apply to non-villainous NPCs, from the inevitable victims to the party's trusted and wise mentor.

In addition to details and design, the horror universe has to be a frightening place. There should always be more layers to the story, more that man was never meant to know, more evils lurking around the next corner. The weather, the people, the architecture, sometimes even the very laws of nature, have to help frighten the players and threaten the characters. The normal and decent is background, not foreground in the universe of the horror campaign. Horror comes from seeing nice forests and innocent villagers desecrated, violated, or devoured messily. The miasma of terror that looms overhead (or lurks underneath) should be visible, even if only in cracks and omens, in the most placid and lovely place in the horror universe. The horrors, in short, must not end until the campaign does. If the horror is too prevalent, of course, the gamemaster runs the risk of players becoming inured to it (see Section 8.8, Palate Cleansers). The horror gamemaster should keep some things nicer and more normal than others, if only to provide variety. On the large scale, however, the only time that peace, safety and tranquility have any place in the horror universe's *design* is as target, contrast, or reward.

Much of the process of building the horror campaign universe is similar to the process of building a horror scenario (see Section 4.0; Building The Horror Scenario). Horrific settings need to be developed, the narrative structure (if one exists) needs to have its twists and climaxes at least sketched out, and the villains and main NPCs need to be made at least as real as the characters are. Give them background hooks, write their biographies, even write up their character sheets if it will help breathe life into them.

7.5.1 · NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

Many campaigns are built around a narrative structure of some sort, such as the ever-popular quest for some item or battle to defeat some master nemesis. If the narrative structure is intended to climax before the end of the campaign, then it is a "story arc" within the larger campaign. Many campaigns (especially short ones) have only one story arc: the story of the campaign itself. The narrative structure of the campaign is something like the format of the scenario, but it operates over a larger scale.

It is important to emphasize that a narrative structure does not mean that the characters are cardboard cutouts to be moved by the gamemaster along a preassigned story track. Some narrative structures require more "scripting" (or, as people who dislike scripting call it, "railroading") than others, but none of them should replace the players' decisions as the key motivator of the characters' actions. Players are justifiably sensitive to what they see as too much railroading of the storyline, although every player's idea of "too much" is different. Few players, for instance, feel comfortable simply being dumped into a setting with no idea of what the gamemaster has in mind or what kind of stories would work best in it. (If you find yourself with such players, however, count your blessings; they are almost always more than eager to involve themselves in your world and they get into more trouble than any gamemaster could ever think to throw at them.) Players will seldom abandon the quest in the middle of the story arc, for instance, but they usually appreciate having more than one way to complete it.

Nothing, of course, prevents the gamemaster from presenting a series of choices that eventually lead to the same outcome, false dichotomies, or simply using the old "Schrödinger's plot" trick (if the characters leave the city from the east gate, the beggar with the cryptic prophecy is at the east gate, if they leave from the north gate, he's on the north). As a general rule, it's okay to railroad characters as long as the players don't see the tracks or hear the whistle; after all, somebody has to move the story along, and like all the hard parts of the game, it's the gamemaster's job. Just be ready to move with the characters; if despite everything they leave a story hanging in the middle, that's another source of loose ends to bedevil them with later (see Section 8.3.4, Loose Ends and How To Swing Them). It's usu-

ally wise to have a main narrative structure and one or two "subplot" narrative structures for the characters to enmesh themselves in if they leave the main one either accidentally or on purpose.

The following are a few common narrative structures with some hints on using them in horror role playing campaign design, and other notes of interest.

Escape

The Escape narrative structure begins with the characters in some terrible predicament, from which they have to extricate themselves. They can be trapped in the dreams of a madman, under sentence of death by the Illuminati, infected with vampirism, or something equally upsetting. They may face opposition from a villain or villains in their attempt to escape, but unlike the Nemesis structure, the focus is on the characters rather than their opponent. This makes Escape an excellent narrative structure for psychological horror or characters-as-monsters style horror.

The classic Escape narrative in horror is William Hope Hodgson's *House on the Borderland*, although Poe's "Pit and the Pendulum" and Lovecraft's "Shadows Over Innsmouth" handle the theme more deftly (as does the psychological horror of the TV series *The Prisoner*). Putting the characters into the predicament should be done either openly at the beginning of the game or as soon as possible; players tend to react badly to involuntary confinement. The climax of the Escape narrative has to be neatly timed; if it happens too early, much of the potential for horror is lost, but if it happens too late, the players will be frustrated and sullen.

Gauntlet

The Gauntlet is something of a combination of Escape and Quest; the characters are moving through a horrifying place or series of them. The characters are not necessarily imprisoned in the Gauntlet, nor are they necessarily searching for anything in particular. Think of the Gauntlet as the "road movie" of horror. (The movie *Deliverance* is a classic Gauntlet narrative.) When they emerge on the other side, they will be free of the horror; therefore, the climax of the Gauntlet narrative usually occurs right before the final boundary is reached.

The allegorical weight of the journey at its heart makes the Gauntlet an excellent narrative structure for psychological horror or madness-and-dream. A Gauntlet is also an excellent shorter arc to include in any other narrative structure (especially, of course, its cousins the Escape and Quest narratives).

Nemesis

In the Nemesis narrative structure, the characters are opposed by a villain or villainous force, whether the Lord of the Vampires, the Ancient Order of Black Magicians, or the gray alien UFOs. The narrative is the story of their battle, which can take place in one place or

all over the world. The climax of the narrative is the final showdown between the characters and the villain. *Dracula*, for instance, is a classic horror novel of the Nemesis. Most "monster movies" utilize the Nemesis structure.

The villain can face the characters directly throughout, or the characters can battle an ever-escalating number of monsters, henchmen, goons, undead, or whatever and only gradually come to the realization of the villain's true nature or identity. The Nemesis is almost always centered in a very Bad Place indeed. The Nemesis narrative is an excellent one for thematic unity and building a consistent tone; this has made it one of the classic narratives for horror role playing. It is especially strong in pulp and paranoia-and-secret-war style horror.

Picaresque

In the Picaresque narrative structure, the characters battle a random assortment of foes. This is essentially a "no narrative structure" narrative structure. Most TV series are fundamentally Picaresques, with *Kolchak: the Night Stalker* as the premier horror example. Few novels are picaresques, although many continuing series (Leiber's Fafhrd and Grey Mouser, for instance, or Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Saint-Germain series) become picaresque on a large scale. Many long-running horror campaigns become Picaresque in much the same way, built up out of a series of story arcs using other narrative structures.

Picaresque has the advantage of being almost impossible to railroad; players with a severe allergy to railroading will enjoy it. It also makes a good way to introduce one of the other narrative structures. If, in the course of the Picaresque story arc the characters make an enemy of some potential Nemesis, or decide to go in Quest of some mystical device, the fact that they chose their fate will make them accept the awful horrors in store for them. Its disadvantage is its tendency to sink rapidly into either the Scooby Doo or Kolchak syndromes (see Sections 8.7.1 and 8.7.2). The gamemaster must make a concerted effort to keep the Picaresque campaign interesting and varied (building a detailed world helps here). It is also harder to develop a thematic unity for a Picaresque campaign, which can make some styles of horror (like psychological horror, for instance) more difficult to pull off.

Quest

The Quest is the classic narrative structure of fantasy role playing, and still holds a great deal of attraction for role players and gamemasters. In the Quest, the characters must travel to a distant place and carry out some specific action. This often involves obtaining some object; a magic sword, the Holy Grail, or an abducted sister. It also might involve destroying an object or simply activating it. The climax of the Quest comes at the final stage, where the characters have reached the goal and must battle the final foes to achieve their mission.

Although *The Lord of the Rings* is the ultimate Quest novel, the theme is active in horror as well, often combined with the Nemesis (as in Stephen King's *It*). The pulp possibilities of the Quest are almost as obvious as its applicability to psychological horror. All of cosmic horror can be seen as the Quest for forbidden knowledge, and H.P. Lovecraft's *Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* demonstrates that it has a solid place in madness-and-dream style horror.

Mix And Match

Obviously, these narrative structures can be mixed and matched in any number of fashions. The TV series *The X-Files*, for instance, combines a Nemesis (the conspiracy to cover up UFOs) with a Quest (to find "the truth" and Mulder's sister) and elements of the Picaresque (the various mutants, serial killers, and assorted miscellaneous adventures not connected to either the Nemesis or the Quest). In general, a long-running campaign winds up taking on a number of narrative structures, often at the same time. If the gamemaster is paying attention, each structure can have its own satisfactions and its own sense of closure.

7.6
PUTTING THE CHARACTERS IN

"His characters live in the worst possible moral universe: you're punished if you do wrong and you suffer if you're innocent."

— Lloyd Rose, on Stephen King's fiction

Once the world has been built, the gamemaster must place the characters into it. How she does this will depend on many factors, especially the narrative structure of the campaign (or the first story arc), if any. The characters' background hooks and biographies should be used to link them to the ongoing story, not just at first but throughout the narrative. If this is done correctly, the players will feel that their characters are integral parts of the game world and not just its most prominent victims.

One very important question that the gamemaster has to head off at the pass is the "why me" question; why exactly do all these horrible things happen to the characters? "They had to happen to somebody" is an answer that works — once. It's understandable that the werewolf legion had to choose somebody's village to hit first, and the characters just happened to be there. It's even barely possible that the Unseelie chose the same village to infiltrate. The third or fourth time, suspension of disbelief goes right out the window. This can be handwaved away with a general agreement not to ask the question, of course, but the gamemaster had better make sure that every detail of the game world is rock-solid, since its structure is so unbelievable. (See also section 7.4.1, The Localized Campaign).

7.6.1 · OFFICIAL INVOLVEMENT

"That's one of the luxuries to hunting down aliens and genetic mutants — you rarely get to press charges."

— Fox Mulder, *The X-Files*, "Fire"

One excellent way to short-circuit the "why me" question is to make it the characters' job to go after horrors. They can be part of an official police or government agency, sworn paladins of the Crown, initiates of a lodge of white magicians, tabloid TV journalists seeking sensationalism, employees of an eccentric oddity-collecting millionaire, or members of a peculiar gentlemen's club or academic ghost-hunting society.

The gamemaster has to decide the nature of the society, both as the characters understand it and as it really appears. Is the FBI Occult Investigation Bureau just an arm of the Freemasons? Is that eccentric millionaire a vampire checking up on his rivals? The gamemaster should then firmly integrate the society into the game world. Make the NPC who sends the characters on missions a real, three-dimensional person. Give them fellow-workers who can get into scrapes later. Give the organization rivals and patrons of its own. In short, make it more than just a plot-spawning device, make it a part of the game world.

In addition to its many advantages, this approach has the same disadvantages that the Picaresque narrative structure possesses; too many indistinguishable assignments can lead the game into repetition and staleness. Bring the organization into the campaign; center an occasional scenario on its other employees or its rivals. In desperate cases, the characters may return from their latest assignment to find their organization destroyed (or taken over by evil, or both). This will give them a mystery to solve and a Nemesis to pursue; eventually, they may even decide to recreate the organization themselves.

7.6.2 · BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN AROUND THE CHARACTERS

The campaign can, of course, be built entirely around the characters, if the gamemaster wishes. The characters are always the central actors in the story; they never stumble across an evil conspiracy; it targets them. They never accidentally take shelter in a haunted house; they are driven to it by their destiny (or they haunt it themselves). NPCs are all part of the character story; there are no "innocent bystanders." In all the campaign world, the characters, their families, and their destinies are the center of horror. Some styles adopt this as a matter of course: this is the standard approach for psychological horror, for instance. Other styles find it more difficult: cosmic horror is about the essential meaninglessness of any individual character; the story is horror-focused. (That said, there are plenty of tainted lineages and other character-centered elements in cosmic horror.)

Character-centered campaigns can be built around one character (with the other characters involved to the extent that they are associated with the central character) or around the whole party. In the single-character case, the gamemaster should make sure that everyone is willing to go along with the plan; some players object to one player getting more story share, or "spotlight time," than the others, and some players would rather not have their character be the center of malevolent attention for an entire campaign.

If the character-centered campaign is built around the entire party, there should be some common element linking all of the characters to the story, even if it is as simple as being from the same home town. Obviously, the more tightly linked the characters are, the more believable the campaign will be. However, the gamemaster needn't reveal the extent to which the characters are linked at first; if all of the characters have seemingly unrelated hooks that eventually lead back to the Insect God's machinations, this discovery will provide part of the horror of the campaign.

There are two basic approaches to building the entire campaign around the characters; the gamemaster-induced and the player-induced.When the gamemaster builds a campaign around the characters, it usually involves working with the characters' backstory, character hooks, or potential powers and abilities. If all the characters are from the same family or town, the character-centered campaign is the story of their family or town. If one of the characters has a mysterious period of missing time, the campaign is built around what happened then, and the character's attempt to find out why it vanished. If all the characters are dreamwalkers, or psychics, or crusading knights, the campaign will be defined by their common abilities and interests.

This begins to slide into the character-centered campaign induced by the players. Obviously if all the players decided to play vampire hunters or ghost-breakers, they are expecting a campaign centered around vampires and ghosts. The fully player-induced game is even more specific. Once the players get some idea of the setting (either from reading the source material, talking to the gamemaster, or playing a few introductory sessions and scenarios), they develop their own goals. Players may decide to have their characters bring down a Nemesis, go on a Quest, run a Gauntlet, or get into any other narrative structure. They may take an even more active role: they want their characters to build a mighty Fortress of Good, clear out every alien in New Mexico, or take over the world.

This level of player involvement is a great gift to the gamemaster, and a terrific headache. She no longer has to worry about interesting the players; their own goal will do that. She no longer has to carefully lay carrots and sticks around the scenario; the characters are on the move. However, she can no longer predict their actions; designing the Whitechapel scenario becomes much harder if the gamemaster didn't even know that the characters were going to Whitechapel until

last week. For the gamemaster that doesn't mind thinking on her feet and running the game on the fly, however, the player-induced, character-centered campaign is a gift from the gods.

7.6.3 · VISIBLE SCOPE IN A HORROR CAMPAIGN

"The five-headed monster that emerged ... that five-headed monster as large as a hippopotamus ... the five-headed monster — and that of which it is the merest forepaw..."

— H.P. Lovecraft, "Imprisoned With The Pharaohs"

Another useful term from *Gamemaster Law* is the concept of "visible scope." The scope of the campaign is how big the campaign's repercussions are. A campaign that only deals with one village is smaller in scope than a campaign with ramifications throughout the continent, or through all history. Scope is related to the power (see Section 7.2.5) and scale (see Section 7.2.6) of the campaign; usually the higher the power and the larger the scale of the campaign, the bigger the scope. However, characters (and players) seldom have all the information: the werewolves infesting Limehouse may be only one part of the larger plan of the Beast Lord to bring all Europe to an animal state. The characters only see the werewolves in Limehouse (the visible scope) as opposed to a horror that affects the entire Continent (the actual scope).

In horror, especially, it is usually a good idea to keep the visible scope smaller than the actual scope. This increases the element of the unknown (and the potentially horrific) in the campaign. It also helps the gamemaster to keep a handle on the campaign; if the characters can see the actual scope, they might upset some important apple carts that the storyline depends upon. Some styles of horror, such as cosmic horror or paranoia-and-secret-war, absolutely depend on this rule. With other styles, such as pulp horror, it's less important. In psychological horror, by contrast, the visible scope is almost always the actual scope by definition; it's all about what's happening in the character's head.

The climax of the story arc or of the campaign is the place where the characters can get a glimpse, however transient, of the actual scope of the game. This helps provide a reward for the players while (hopefully) delivering a shock verging upon dread. When the climax has passed, so should the vision of the actual scope. Players will hopefully work even harder to get another glimpse of the actual scope; this can only result in better role playing and more focused attention to the game.

8.0
RUNNING THE HORROR CAMPAIGN

"I have clues which we can follow; but it is a long task and a difficult, and there is danger in it,and pain. Shall you not all help me?"

— Van Helsing to Godalming, Morris, and Seward, *Dracula*

Compared to designing and building the horror campaign, running a horror campaign is simplicity itself. The hard questions have been answered, the players have built characters fated (and somewhat prepared) to encounter the unspeakable, and the rules, dice, props, and spooky flashlights have all been assembled. Running the campaign is simply a matter of applying the lessons of running a horror scenario on a larger canvas. As long as the gamemaster retains her creativity (and her own sense of fear and wonder), and as long as the players are willing to be scared (or at least to try), the campaign will take on a momentum of its own. All the gamemaster will have to do is stay out of the campaign's way, keep it from falling into the common pitfalls of horror campaigning, and ride the campaign triumphantly into its natural climax.

8.1 HOW IS HORROR DIFFERENT?

"I'll show you what horror means."

— Mr. Hyde (Fredric March), *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*

The difference between running a horror campaign and running a more conventional role playing campaign is, once again, the central intent of the game: to produce an emotional response in the players of enjoyable, interesting fear. All



role playing campaigns are about telling stories, vicarious adventuring, and similar exercises of the mental muscles; horror is no different. The horror campaign must speak to all those needs at the same time as it evokes the atmosphere of fear.

8.2 PACING THE CAMPAIGN

"...make your table as attractive as you can, then relax. No rush should show on these occasions."

— James Beard, Menus For Entertaining

The horror campaign, like the horror scenario, should be paced to maximize the potentials for horror at every stage of the game. This does not necessarily mean that every session, or even every scenario, in a horror campaign has to be a horror session or scenario. The "tense and release" narrative commonly used in the horror scenario is also very usable in the horror campaign; a non-horror session or two can provide a useful breather for both the players and the gamemaster. This is not to suggest that such scenarios or sessions are merely placeholders for the real stuff. A purely investigative session or scenario may not be very scary, but facts the players learn there can take on a horrifying significance later on. Even a pleasant "down time" scenario (see Section 8.8, Palate Cleansers) can throw the normal horror into stark relief, and give the players a better image of the good things that their characters are fighting for.

Unlike a scenario, a campaign can be trusted to "find its own pace." If the players need extra time to figure things out, the ratio of investigatory or expository sessions to full-fledged horror scenarios can be increased. On the other hand, if the players seem to be impatient to kill things, a quick-and-dirty combat can be manufactured from virtually anything (it is, after all, horror). Slow-paced parties can concentrate on slow-building dread, parties of "action junkies" can concentrate on nonstop monster-stomping with moments of sheer panic, and the gamemaster can adjust her timing to suit the players almost invisibly. Unlike the strict confines of the scenario, where everything has to be wrapped up in an evening, the campaign can leave plot threads, or whole plot lines, hanging until a more convenient (or frightening) time. This leeway in the horror campaign is an important reason that horror scenarios themselves can (and should) be so tightly structured. Neither the players nor the gamemaster have to feel confined by the structure of the scenario, since they worked together to decide when it would happen.

That said, it's often a good idea to start the campaign out with a quick, bloody, and *really* horrific scenario. This gives the players an idea of what they're up against, and lets them make an informed decision about when their characters should be allowed to stumble

into the next one. It also creates a mood that can overhang the campaign for a long time; if the werewolves came boiling out of the storm sewers on the characters' first night in town, the characters (and players) will have a useful feeling of nervousness every time they pass a storm sewer for quite a while. It's also a good idea to pack a lot of foreshadowing into that first scenario; players are at their most attentive before they've decided what details to filter. Having those details come back to haunt them later can also help keep them involved in the game world, which helps out realism and atmosphere.

The pacing of the campaign (or story arc) can be usefully compared to the stages of a chess game. The gamemaster should keep in mind that, unlike in a chess game, the players and the gamemaster are not opponents but collaborators, cooperating to construct the most exciting chess game possible given the pieces on the board. In the "opening" of the campaign, the players are still feeling out the intricacies of their characters, the details of the game world, and trying to make sense of how the two interrelate. In the opening, the gamemaster will have to depend more on "obvious" clues, main NPCs, and more scripted scenarios; she has to make the nature of the world clear, fit the characters into it, and give the players enough information (and enough choices) that they don't feel manipulated into pursuing the plot. Players are generally willing to pursue any plotline, no matter how dangerous or peculiar, but they also generally resent being openly forced to pursue it.

The "midgame" of the horror campaign occurs when the players have some idea of what is going on (whether an accurate one or not is less important). They have decided on a plotline (or plotlines) to pursue, they have a sense of their characters' "reality" and how their characters can affect the game world. Often, the midgame is signaled by the characters' first truly active measures against the horror (as opposed to reactive, defensive, and passive measures, which occupy the majority of the opening). The midgame is a very rewarding part of the horror campaign; the players have accepted the game world's reality and begun to operate along its rules. Subtler hints can be dropped by the gamemaster with some hope that the players will pick them up. Subplots can be introduced (or reintroduced) without hopelessly tangling the players, and loose ends can begin to come back to haunt them without creating a sense of persecution. Scenarios can be more open-ended without running the risk of stranding the characters somewhere that they can't handle or aren't interested in. There are two temptations about the midgame that the horror gamemaster faces: rush through it to get to the big climax, or drag it out to enjoy the collaboration. Of the two, the former is more dangerous; players may feel cheated if they never "get a handle" on what's happening — the midgame is an important period for building game world reality and getting the players to accept that the awfulness of

the climax is not arbitrary. The temptation to drag out the midgame is a problem if it leads the campaign into one of the pitfalls of horror gaming, or if it makes the horror universe too "comfortable" to sustain horror when it should.

The "endgame" of the horror campaign (or story arc) comprises the sessions and scenarios leading inevitably to the climax, the payoff, the big conclusion, the final fight scene, the confrontation in the haunted castle, or the last-chance ritual. At this point, the gamemaster should return the focus to the creation of that last big scare; every clue, hint, and plot twist should direct the characters into the final scenario. The endgame can go on for several sessions and encompass a number of scenarios, but it can only have one direction: the end. By this time, the players won't mind a little "railroading," since they will have had a hand in setting up the climax themselves during the midgame. The unreality level can increase a notch or two as the very laws of the cosmos seem to push the characters into their final destiny. The climactic scenario can then occur at the ultimate pitch of terror, dread, and gore, to the satisfaction of all.

It is interesting to note that the opening-midgame-endgame pattern also recapitulates the tension-release-tension pattern of the horror scenario. Tension is created in the opening, as the characters blindly struggle to find their role and the reason for the evils that are plaguing them. The midgame is a period of relative release, when the characters can feel more "in control" of their actions and their world, even if (especially if) they know it to be a temporary illusion. The endgame is marked by the return of tension; the stakes are high and the outcome uncertain, the face of dread is about to be exposed. The gamemaster should remain aware of this rhythmic cycle in her game, and use it to keep the fear alive.

8.3
THE RATS IN THE WALLS: CAMPAIGN DEVELOPMENT BEHIND THE SCENES

" 'The horror of that moment,' the King went on, 'I shall never, never forget.' 'You will, though,' the Queen said, 'if you don't make a memorandum of it.' "

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through The Looking-Glass*

Once the gamemaster has the campaign off to a good start, she needs to keep track of it. There's nothing more embarrassing than a campaign in which the gamemaster is just as lost as the players, and it's usually not much fun, either. The gamemaster should be taking just as many notes as the players do; players are always making the characters do things that have good plot potential (especially stupid

things). Anything the gamemaster comes up with at the last minute or off the cuff should be written down to be plugged back in later: NPC names, neighborhood descriptions, eerie clues and bits of atmosphere, anything. Don't let the game drag while you make notes, but be sure to remember these details until you have a chance to write them down. The end of the session is a good time, or during a player planning discussion. If the players are fascinated by something that the gamemaster had considered merely scenery, the gamemaster should keep a note of it and possibly increase its role in the campaign. After all, it's already interested the players, which is the first key to success.

Potential subplots may come up if the characters befriend (or offend) a particular NPC; at the very least, that NPC can become a "meaningful victim" later on. Not every NPC needs to be worked into the campaign at every turn, of course; it shouldn't ever seem, for instance, like there are only forty people in Victorian London including the characters. But, if the players remember an NPC, they may want their characters to deal with her again — it breaks game realism if the gamemaster has forgotten her name, her job, and that weird little tune she used to hum.

In short, the campaign should always be gaining more detail and definition for the gamemaster as well as for the players. Not only does this add depth and dimension to the game world, it also helps keep the gamemaster interested. This will be especially important if the characters have resolutely avoided (or the players have rejected) the planned plotline; something has to happen if they never find the werewolves' hideout, and if it can be interrelated with the previous sessions then the campaign can continue on its new course without a visible break. The new plotline can always be worked back into the original, after all, especially if the gamemaster has been interrelating the NPCs or cannibalizing settings.

8.3.1 · KEEPING THE CAMPAIGN CHRONOLOGY

The most important single element of the campaign that the gamemaster has to keep a handle on is the passage of time, both future and past. When is the moon full? When is the Day of Reckoning? When did the Insect God first manifest himself? How many days separated the killings? The gamemaster should have a complete timeline of the campaign as it develops. Using an actual business calendar or diary to keep track of the campaign is often very useful. By knowing what the characters (and their opponents, and the important NPCs) did (or plan to do) at any given time, the gamemaster can make the events unfold naturally, compress time for dramatic purposes without omitting important details, and interrelate events from different plotlines. This last advantage is crucial to maintaining



game world realism; the players find it much easier for their characters to "remember" some event in the game world's past (a mysterious disappearance, weird lights in the sky, the big thunderstorm, the comet) if it was actually dropped into the narrative when it happened, as opposed to being mentioned in expository dialogue weeks later.

In many campaigns, there is one player who keeps the "campaign diary." Reward and praise that player. Some game systems recommend giving the player who keeps the best records extra experience points or other rewards. This is not a bad idea; you can even justify it by saying that since his character obviously learned more from his experiences (he's got all those memories written down, after all), he should get more experience. Even if the rules don't allow it, or the gamemaster doesn't want to openly play favorites like that, letting that player get the last Coke or the extra piece of pizza never hurts. That player's (or, in the perfect game, all the players') campaign diary can serve as a record not only of the chronology of events (which the gamemaster should have on her own) but of the "character view" of those events. Reading that diary can give the gamemaster ideas for new adventures based on what the players (and hence, the characters) thought was important. It can also serve as an additional indication of whether the players are following the plotline, and what needs to be emphasized to draw the players toward midgame (or endgame).

8.3.2 · PRE-PLANNED EVENTS

Any planned narrative structure (campaign, story arc, or scenario) has certain things that have to happen. Even the most resolutely player-driven "simulationist" game, where the players make all the decisions without any gamemaster scripting or hinting, has some event that "sets the scene." In a more conventional game, the final climax, or payoff, is often fairly tightly planned (even though its outcome is usually in doubt until it occurs), along with a number of encounters (see also section 7.5.1, Narrative Structures).

The gamemaster should know what triggers those set encounters. Often the trigger is simply the calendar; the werewolves will attack when the moon is full; the cultists will try to summon the Insect God on the summer solstice. Sometimes the trigger is some action in the game; the vampire will only leave the city after killing six women; the dark elves will only begin haunting the village when their forest is entered. Sometimes the trigger depends purely on the characters; the helpful dream won't come until they've read the book on dream lore; the werewolves won't start stalking them until they use silver bullets. Sometimes the trigger depends on the players; the serial killer won't strike until the players have finished dealing with the vampire; the old match-seller won't mention the haunted house until the players have figured out the old map the gamemaster gave them, since without it their characters will all die.

These triggers can be changed by the gamemaster to keep the story moving, as long as she knows how moving them will affect the rest of the campaign narrative and as long as the players haven't figured out the trigger for themselves already. If the vampire has been really deadly to the characters, the gamemaster may decide that he leaves the city after only four killings, for instance. Even calendar-determined events can change; the werewolves can have a device that reproduces full moonlight and lets them attack early (or late); the cultists can find another scroll that lets them open the gates for the Insect God on the Venusian summer solstice instead.

Pre-planned events are supposed to strengthen the game by giving the gamemaster an opportunity to foreshadow, drop hints, build mood and theme, and otherwise enhance the narrative. They shouldn't be straitjackets or prisons. Remember that every element of the game, from the most intricately planned event to the most casual description of the scenery, needs to contribute to building the atmosphere of fear (or at least, not detract from it). Many of the elements of a pre-planned event can be stripped out and recycled in another setting if the players never reach (or trigger) it. No idea is so great that it can't be rebuilt later, or simply ignored, if that's what the players want.

8.3.3 · OPPORTUNITIES AND REACTIONS

Many of the pre-planned events are triggered by character action. These responses go a long way toward building game realism; in the real world, if someone breaks into your house you'd do something about it — call the cops, get an alarm system, buy a big dog, or move. In the game world, if characters break into the lich lord's temple, he's going to react in much the same way — call his priests, put up warding spells, summon a guardian demon, or move. (Yes, move. The lich lord didn't necessarily become an immortal undead magician by being stupid, or even by being brave.) Building these reactions in as pre-planned events gives the characters a sense of the

"cause and effect" that any game world needs to demonstrate to reach the midgame and thus build game realism and player involvement. It also adds an important element of player choice to pre-planned events. Players can hardly whine about being hunted by undead ghouls if their characters started it by interrupting that ceremony in the desert graveyard.

Sometimes, these reactions can't be (or just aren't) pre-planned by the gamemaster. Either the characters have done something completely unexpected (which happens a lot), they've done something expected at an unexpected time (which can throw off the relationships between triggered events and other pre-planned events in the campaign chronology), or the gamemaster has just not gotten around to mapping out the specific result for every trigger action in the campaign (something that is practically impossible, anyway, in all but the most railroaded campaigns). It's important to still make something happen. Monster behavior can be modeled on real-life animal behavior. For example, most animals will retreat if threatened convincingly, unless their young are unable to move, in which case they will attack with redoubled ferocity. Villainous responses to trigger events should flow from the villain's motives (see Section 4.3.2, Motives) in a relatively reasonable way (even if the villain is a complete and utter madman, there's no reason to make him act like an idiot). The gamemaster should avoid the temptation to direct the villain's reaction according to the gamemaster's knowledge of the characters' actions — the villain has to be role played to become real. Of course, if the gamemaster has been carefully murky about the villain's powers, or the identity of the shadowy stalkers, or the extent of the conspiracy, the villain can still reasonably know an awful (and, hopefully, frightening) lot about the characters and their actions or even plans.

Don't forget, of course, that the other NPCs will also be reacting to the characters' actions, to the villains' reactions, and to any other trigger events that occur during the campaign. It is virtually impossible to plan the reaction of a single villain to every possible character action, much less tens (or hundreds) of NPCs. What is important is that when those responses are visible, they should make sense both in the game world and to the players. Characters will likely get a whole different (and most likely, less pleasant) reaction from the police after their tenth arrest for breaking and entering (like so many characters might have after a few sessions of sneaking into haunted houses, mysterious temples, or ancient family crypts) than after their first. Conversely, characters who have saved the beloved local priest from the werewolves should have a better reputation in the neighborhood; urchins tell them the local rumors, muggers let them pass unmolested, barmaids bring refills faster.

The secret to making all of this work is to generalize. In a modern urban horror game, official NPCs will react badly to vigilantes, while locals might react well. Already, almost every potential NPC has at least a potential, reasonable, response to a whole set of triggers. Keep the options open, and the responses reasonable.

8.3.4 · LOOSE ENDS AND HOW TO SWING THEM

"There are several points about God, entrails, immortality and mermaids which you did not bring up again...."

— James Whale, to the Hollywood Production Code Office

Every game session spins off loose ends. Even if the murdering werewolves have been stopped after only killing four people, those four people have families, friends, and landlords. Perhaps one victim's sister has decided to devote her life to monster-hunting; the characters could run across her trail later on in the campaign. Perhaps the brother of one victim has been driven mad by the horrors he witnessed; his delirium might hold hints of some new infestation.

Most likely, the characters have ignored one or two of the subplots in their quest for justice; the mysterious egg that they found in the first cave has been left to hatch, the strange parchment that one victim carried has been stolen from the police evidence room, the old beggar whose prophecy put the characters on the trail is actually a powerful seer with his own agenda. Any properly twisty horror scenario carries within its clues and atmospheric elements the seeds of two or three more sessions, or even a whole new story arc. Rereading the scenario notes (or the players' campaign diary) can spark plenty of great ideas based on red herrings, wrong turnings, or simply inspired bits of impromptu role playing.

These loose ends can be brought back into the game whenever it's most convenient (or scariest) to do so; the ties to earlier sessions will add depth and realism to the game world. They can even be retroactively added to the campaign theme or continuity as a whole, if they weren't part of it to start with. It's always better to let the players think you planned it all along, of course; they'll pay a lot more attention to the "throwaway" pieces of scenery and description if they think it will all lead to something big later.

An unused character hook is often a good place to work in a loose end, especially if the campaign has gone on for a while. It's important to remind the players that their characters are part of the game world, and can be effected by its coincidences and changes just like the NPCs can. Tying them into a seeming triviality can be a surprisingly effective way of doing just that.

8.4 THE CHARACTERS IN THE LONG RUN

"In the long run, we are all dead."

— John Maynard Keynes

In the long run, the game is about the characters. This is especially true if the campaign is a series of story arcs rather than just one; or if the gamemaster is using the picaresque narrative sequence. The relationship between the characters and their world is as important as (and can sometimes reflect, although it shouldn't) the relationship between the players and the gamemaster. Given the centrality of the characters in many campaigns, specific guidelines on their care and feeding can come in handy. It's important for "plot-centered" or "setting-centered" gamemasters to realize that the believability (and playability) of the characters is central to the ability of players to believe in the plot and setting. If the gamemaster neglects the characters at the expense of building an intricate plot, the players won't care about it when she does get around to revealing it to them. Apathy is fatal to horror.

8.4.1 · PERSECUTING THE CHARACTERS

"You wouldn't be able to do these awful things to me if I weren't still in this chair!"

— Blanche Hudson (Joan Crawford),
Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?

Since the characters are central to the horror game, it is only natural for them to eventually become the center of its horrors. No matter how contrived the story that gets them into the haunted forest or abandoned warehouse, it becomes personal when the Things start coming after them. It's important for the gamemaster to really make it personal to the characters. If the characters (and the players) are to feel fear, it has to come through personal involvement. Abstract concern for others, or even a sense of personal danger, is simply adventure. To run horror, the player must be made to feel unease on his character's behalf. Ideally, both the character and the player will become sufficiently identified with each other and involved with the game world that when the game world threatens the character, the player feels it. The personal connection is essential.

Killing beloved, related, or friendly NPCs is an excellent way to start making the terrors personal ones. Tailoring the actions of the horrors to the characters' weak points is only good strategy, and in some game styles (madness-and-dream or psychological horror, for

instance), it can be the key to the atmosphere of fear. Villains should always try to identify their opponents, and seek out their vulnerabilities. They should seek revenge if they escape (or do so from beyond the grave, even if they don't).

Keeping the characters isolated is an excellent way to begin. If they're already the suspicious types that characters so often are, it won't take much to get the police believing that the characters are behind this rash of murders and the characters believing that the police are covering for the real villain. Even if the style is not overtly paranoia-and-secret-war, a little distrust can go a long way to build that sense of persecution that every character should subconsciously feel.

After a few sessions of this, the characters may start to take what seem to be sensible precautions. They stop going into the crypt, start dynamiting the old deserted mill, never read any eldritch scrolls, always leave the chest sealed, and possibly even move to the next duchy to grow the perfect avocado. In short, they turn into cowards. Although in the world of most horror role playing games cowardice may be an understandable reaction, it should never be a wise one. This is because it short-circuits the atmosphere of fear for the players, and spoils all the gamemaster's fun.

Gamemasters should go out of their way to get the action moving. If the characters have hooks or flaws (or talents) that make them especially susceptible to curiosity, fascination, or even possession, the gamemaster should invoke them to short-circuit cowardly strategies. The cleric might find himself dreaming of the sealed chest night after night until finally he dreams that he opens it — and awakens to find himself standing beside the chest, which has somehow become unlocked. NPCs are another great way to drag the action back to the Bad Place or back into the tension of a horror scenario; let the characters' trusted mentor happen to read the eldritch parchment aloud, or have a character's sister wander into the crypt at night.

Finally, of course, the gamemaster should make every effort to demonstrate that the characters need the knowledge that they're avoiding. If they refuse to read the blasphemous tome, they never find the spell that short-circuits the lich lord's mental powers. The demonstration can be active, as well as passive: the villain steals the sealed chest, and opens it herself, when the stars are right for the evils within to prosper. Dynamiting the mill only lets the festering Thing In The Basement have more time to grow. Players should learn that there are only two choices in horror: face your fears now, or let them grow stronger. If they learn that at the expense of one or two characters' limbs, sanities, or lives, that's just part of the tuition.

8.4.2 · REWARDING THE CHARACTERS

"My life has crept so long on a broken wing
Thro' cells of madness, haunts of horror and fear,
That I come to be grateful at last for a little thing."

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Maud*, III:vi

It is important for the players to feel rewarded for their actions. For some players, this can be simply the delight of a horror shared and vicarious thrills enjoyed. More commonly, the player will want this and some tangible result for their characters to enjoy, some benefit or reward for suffering.

In certain games, and with certain players, simple survival is benefit enough. And indeed, it is hardly a trivial one, considering the obstacles that characters have to face in horror role playing games. Every player should feel that their character's life is a precious reward after battling unspeakable evils for any length of time.

A slightly more measurable reward might be the goodwill of certain key NPCs. Even if the game is a paranoia-and-secret-war style game of conspiratorial horror, if they've convinced one local sheriff, FBI agent, or reclusive millionaire of the dangers they face, that NPC can be a reliable friend for life (and, of course, a source of more story ideas). In more conventional horror games, the good opinions of the local police or city guard, priests or other holy men, or even the emergency staff at the hospital, can make the difference between life and death. The good opinion of NPCs is the best reward to give characters in a horror game; it adds depth and realism (and potential victims) to the game world while not overbalancing the game's power or scope. It also encourages the kind of emotional involvement in the game world that results in the best horror role playing.

The next-best reward in horror games is information. This can flow from friendly NPCs, of course (local rumors, police records, property plans), or it can be hard-won from the villains in the course of the story arc. Once the werewolves are driven out of the warehouses, the characters will know about a network of secret passages under the waterfront. Once the cultists of the Insect God are defeated, the characters will gain their sacred texts and accumulated knowledge of the weak points of the world. Even when this knowledge isn't actively cursed or tainted (as the sacred texts of the Insect God might very well be), it can be a double-edged sword. The knowledge of secret tunnels or weak points in space-time means that the characters have yet more places to defend and watch for monsters, for instance.

More tangible rewards can also exist, of course. The haunted house can be willed to the characters for exorcising it, the lich lord's temple can hold gems and gold, or the occult Nazis' stash of bearer bonds and Krugerrands can fall into the characters' hands. Tangible goods make even better double-edged swords than information does, of course; gems can be cursed, houses can be targets, and even bearer

bonds can be counterfeit (or place the user on an FBI list of people to keep an eye on). Characters are also a lot less likely to give up a useful (even if cursed or otherwise tricky) tangible good than they are to forget inconvenient information, too.

Ideally, every reward from a new gun to a million dollars to the Black Tome of Alphosuchus should set up another challenge. One gamemaster I know only gives the characters what they need to kill the monster in that scenario; his players have been known to break out in goosebumps when they stumble across a "convenient" case of hand grenades or a makeshift flame thrower. When you can scare the players with the *treasure*, you're really running horror.

8.4.3 · SUBVERTING THE CHARACTERS

"I say I am a man, but who is the other who hides in me?"
— Arthur Machen, "The Great God Pan"

One of the great themes of horror gaming is subversion; the characters are mind-controlled, hypnotized, enchanted, possessed, zombified, driven into homicidal mania, or otherwise turned against their companions and made to serve evil with almost metronomic regularity. This theme is a powerful one, lurking at the heart of many horror game systems and virtually all styles of horror. Players sometimes object to this treatment, but their objections can be minimized by two factors: warning, and trust.

Warning the players (though not necessarily the characters) is as simple as dropping the hint at some point during the campaign that a certain villain, or monster, or artifact, or location, can subvert one's will. It's not even necessary to spell it out in all cases. Most players understand that being mesmerized, for instance, is part of the risk you run when you tangle with a vampire. That first exsanguinated corpse is all the warning that players need to get them (subconsciously, at least) expecting vampiric mesmerism. In less well-known cases, it's always good to manifest the effect on an NPC first. The characters don't even need to be present at the occasion, and eyewitness testimony can drop the hint without losing the terror; "All I know is that Sergeant Riley turned on us and killed four men before we were able to bring him down. At the end, he seemed to want to tell us something, but then his eyes glazed over again, and he turned his gun on himself." A partially-effective first attack (the characters are paralyzed, but don't turn against their friends — yet) is another highly efficient warning. The warning can be as simple as passing a note to a player; the other players will immediately become suspicious of something, but will have no solid reason "in-game" to act against the subverted character. Some gamemasters pass a number of notes, whether informative or simply innocuous, to prevent the subversion from becoming too obvious. The warning, however it is delivered, is another excellent chance to scare the players, and since they'll be expecting a psychic attack (or whatever) for the rest of the game, they'll be in a slightly paranoid and jumpy state as well.

Trust is the other essential ingredient. Allow the player to play his character, even while in a state of complete amnesiac hypnosis or homicidal berserk rage. Many players actually get kind of a kick out of having their character serve evil and whale on their friends, with the perfect excuse "I was mind-controlled" to explain it. Even players who fudge their abilities to give the unaffected players the edge should be allowed to play their subverted character unless it grossly interferes with game realism. If you trust the players to run well and truly subverted characters when the game requires it, they'll trust you to only subvert them in the service of the story and not to fulfill some deranged case of gamemaster megalomania.

The ultimate issue of gamemaster and player trust comes with the "wolf in the fold" scenario. In the wolf in the fold, one of the characters is actually in the service of evil. Unlike a common possession or mesmerization, the other characters (and often the other players) don't know that the character has been subverted. This subversion can occur during the campaign (for example, if one character opens a haunted chest or puts on a cursed ring), or it can be cooked up between the gamemaster and the player in question at the beginning when the character was created. The wolf in the fold almost always becomes a major subplot, or even the central narrative of the campaign. This raises a number of issues, in addition to the normal spotlight time or story share issues created whenever one character is made a central actor. It can be very difficult to retain party unity and player cohesion once one of their own has been unmasked as an active agent of evil. The gamemaster must decide whether this will harm the game more than the horror that will occur when the traitor's plans are unmasked; in some styles, such as paranoia-and-secret-war, mutual player suspicion may even help the mood. Blackmail or extortion are mundane versions of subversion, most often encountered in highly political games, conspiratorial horror, or similar types of horror. The same caveats apply to using blackmail on a character as apply to any other kind of subversion, although it makes for an interesting wolf in the fold situation since, unlike mesmerism or possession, the victim is always potentially able to come clean and beg for forgiveness.

Like the question of the wolf in the fold, the severity of the subversion should be left to the gamemaster's good judgment. A player who enjoys, or at least understands, his character's transient role as the opener of the sealed window or even the zombie with the axe may object to violations of his character's personality or those of other characters. Mind control is, after all, mental rape, which is why it is so consistently horrible and frightening. It is metaphoric rather than actual, which gives the gamemaster more leverage to present it in game terms, but like physical rape it should only be introduced in games where all the players (and the gamemaster) agree that it will only advance the fictional horrors. Real trauma, again, has no place in the game.

8.4.4 · KILLING THE CHARACTERS

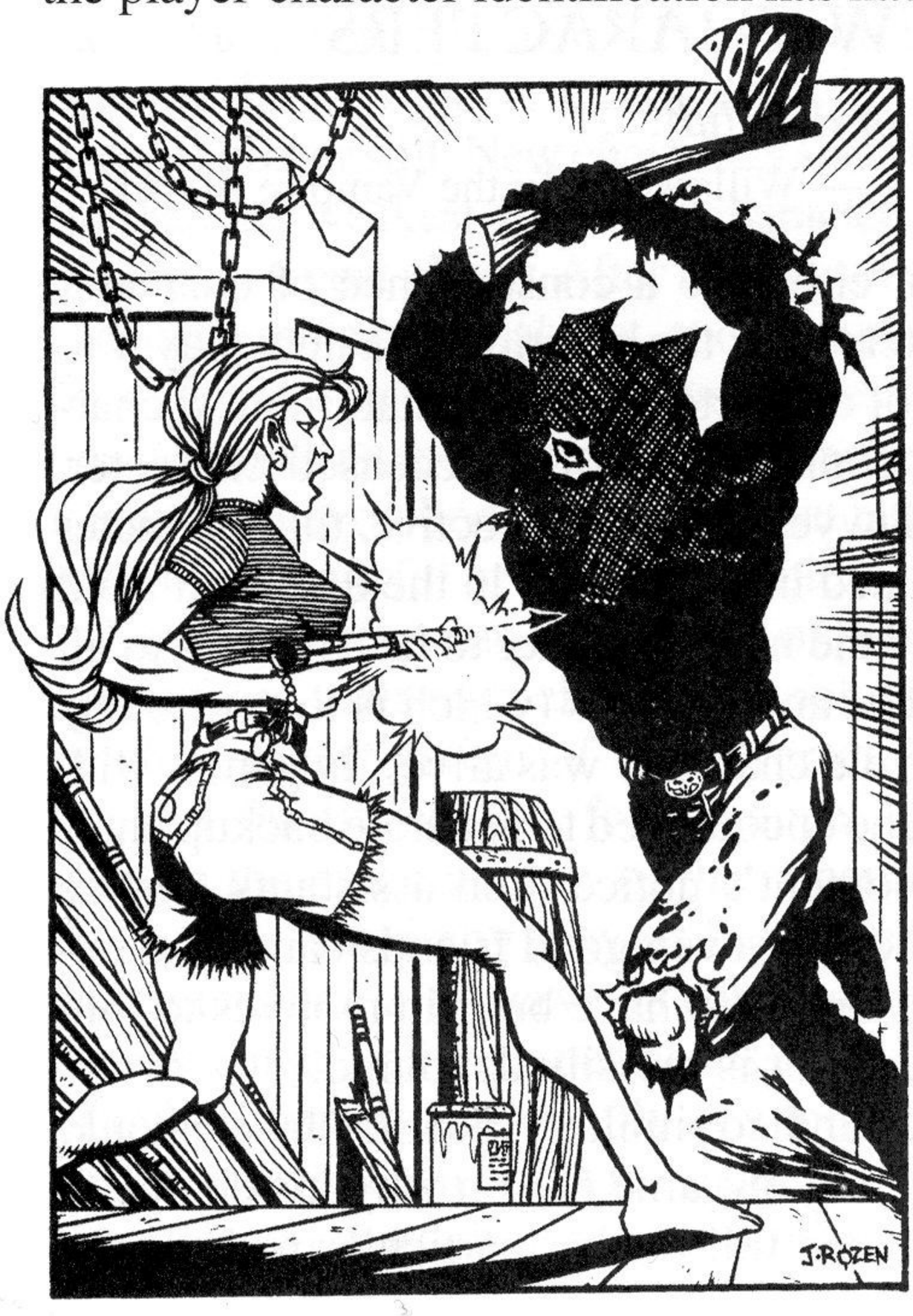
"Everything dies, baby, that's a fact."

— Bruce Springsteen, "Atlantic City"

At some point, the characters will die. Whether they die in bed at a ripe old age or in youthful agony in the acid pits of the Insect God is, in the final analysis, immaterial. What is material is how their death affects the game, both as a horrific experience and as a game that the players (and gamemaster) enjoy. Those are the factors that the gamemaster must keep in mind when determining when (or if) to kill the characters, or allow them to die.

Some gamemasters prefer to save the lives of characters where at all possible. This can create an unrealistic sense of character immunity which can destroy suspension of disbelief, or at least seriously harm any real sensation of horror. Why be afraid, after all, if your character is in no real danger?

Other gamemasters kill characters with the fine impartiality of Jove hurling his thunderbolts. This, of course, runs the risk of turning off the players. Character generation is usually a lengthy process, especially in a proper horror game that requires detailed character backgrounds and hooks to function at its highest pitch. If the player has to go through it every adventure, the sense of fun will wither on the vine. The sense of horror also suffers from too-frequent character death; the longer the player runs a character, the more likely he is to identify with him and his fears. Threats to a short-time character are less likely to affect the player, since the player-character identification has had no time to develop.



The horror game-master, therefore, has to walk a tightrope between insulating the characters and leaving them exposed to the horrors without warning or defense. There are a number of possible compromises. Some gamemasters subtly weight the odds in favor of the characters and then let the dice fall where they may. If the characters have armor and their opponents don't, for instance, it's a lot easier to run a fair combat with some assurance that the characters will survive it. Character parties often have a wider range of skills

than their horrific opponents. If these skills are used to strike at the villain's weak point, this can go some way to tilting the odds in the characters' favor without overt manipulation. Goons, henchmen, minor monsters, or lesser undead are famously bad shots; keep them that way. Gamemasters should also keep in mind that characters have a natural advantage strategically: the players' many heads are better than her one. Allowing this "natural" strategic superiority to flower is another way to even the odds without actively saving the characters' lives.

Another possible compromise method is the "warning shot" principle. A character that is clawed unconscious isn't killed outright. A character that faints insensible isn't killed outright. A character that is mind-controlled into catatonia isn't killed outright. But all of these characters have received a "warning shot" from the game. (Characters whose player is not present at the session, for whatever reason, should always get the warning shot rather than be killed. Players *really* resent finding their characters dead when they come back from Christmas break.) The trouble with the warning shot principle is that eventually, the villains and monsters have to start shooting to kill or else the fear is gone. If the gamemaster and the players have been working together to build the atmosphere of the game, rather than in an adversarial "gamemaster vs. players" way, players can be surprisingly understanding when their characters are shredded in some grisly fashion. They may even come to welcome the real danger, authentic horror, and chance for a heroic death that playing it straight can offer.

8.4.5 · ADDING NEW CHARACTERS

"When did she get to join the club?"
— Willow, Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Adding new characters can either be a consequence of character death, a player's change of interest, or the addition of a new player to the gaming group. In the case of character death, the natural new character is one with a personal connection to the deceased character. Whether son, brother, family lawyer, or hired detective, this character can usually be rapidly assimilated into the party in the deceased's old role. Many gamemasters allow the new character to have access to all the old character's diaries, notes, and journals (which is to say, to any notes the player kept while the old character was alive). In games with a high fatality rate, players can be encouraged to generate backup characters who can step in at a moment's notice. Lab assistants, novice priests, legmen, younger brothers, or even good friends can make excellent backup characters, and can often have built-in motives to join the campaign once their predecessor is messily devoured.

Character resignation can be handled similarly, but the player should remember to provide a convincing in-game reason why his character resigned and why nobody else can follow that particular path — the

game ends if all the heroes resign, after all. New characters of new players can have any connection imaginable to the existing characters, or to the campaign. The potential for the gamemaster here is endless.

Regardless of the origin of the new character, issues of character trust (especially in a conspiratorial horror game, for instance) need to be smoothed over in character; the best way to do it is to allow the new character to "prove himself" in a tight spot. In some games this can be as simple as seeing irrefutable proof of the aliens, or the conspiracy, or the Insect God — the new character knows too much now, and has to work with the old characters for his own good. In other games, this can involve a long "feeling-out" process. After all, a group of monster-hunting paranoids is not going to blithely accept just *anyone* without some internal reservations, especially if he could be a plant or agent of evil (see also section 8.4.3., Subverting the Characters). The gamemaster should let the players determine how long this proving period takes place; if they would rather assimilate the character fast and get back to the game, oblige them. If they wish to role play a more realistic process of suspicion slowly turning to trust, let them do that, too. (Don't violate the characters' integrity by pulling a "wolf in the fold" on them if they choose the fast track, unless there's sufficient in-game reason for the characters to have been actively foolish.)

The new character should be built with just as many hooks and biographical details as a beginning character, for the same reasons. It is advisable for the new character to have some connection not only to the surviving characters but to the action of the current story arc. This will allow for a more rapid transition into the game. Or perhaps the gamemaster has a particularly suitable NPC that the players already trust who can become the new player character — in that case, the transition can be even smoother still. New characters should generally be no more powerful than the weakest surviving character, especially if the newcomer is played by a new player. After all, the survivors have earned their power at considerable personal cost, and their players may resent being "passed over" for newcomers. Individual parties may differ; if the new player is one who understands the magic rules better than anyone else in the game, it may be in everybody's interest to let him play an occultist, even if he's relatively powerful or knowledgeable.

New characters can be a source of plentiful new plot developments, either from their own character-hook-laden past, or from their independent investigation of whatever evil the characters have uncovered. A family lawyer, for instance, might have a whole different take on the machinations of the conspiracy in the court system than the one the surviving players have been able to piece together. New characters can also serve as carriers of new items (haunted houses, family curses, alien experiences), new themes (trust, omnipresence of evil, diversity), or simply new perspectives. Played right, adding new characters can make the game itself seem fresh and new without as much awkward thrashing around as in the standard opening game.

8.5 KEEPING THE PLAYERS INTERESTED

"When in doubt, always have two men with guns burst in the door."

— Raymond Chandler

Keeping players interested in the long run takes variety. Different groups of characters (often following deaths, institutionalizations, maimings, or mysterious disappearances of earlier characters) battling different evils in different parts (or different social circles) of the game world, can keep the campaign going for some time. Even a localized, low-powered, low-unreality game can be kept moving with sufficient ingenuity in plots and subplots. Loose ends can be brought back in, and generate storylines of their own. The only key is to keep the types of horror different; changing styles (see Section 2.4, Campaign Styles) for a story arc or two can often help with this. Setting story arcs in the game world's past, parallel histories, across the river (or ocean), or in the land of dreams can also create interesting variations. Villains can return from the dead, mysterious artifacts can suddenly gain new powers, and every character hook can eventually become the center of its own story arc.

Think of these variations and extensions as "sequels," "remakes," "homages," or "spin-offs" of the original campaign. TV shows like *Star Trek* have spawned a seemingly endless number of sequels, comic books, novels, and fan fiction; any half-decent horror campaign should be able to do the same, given sufficient time and interest by the gamemaster and players. Find a story that worked well and rework it; if the players really enjoyed (and were really frightened by) the werewolf hunt in Whitechapel, send them after the werewolves' parent pack in Budapest. If there is a particularly helpful NPC police detective in the regular campaign, let the players run her and the other NPC cops in a short story arc, with the main characters as mysterious and distant "NPCs." Run "seasonal" scenarios; what would a horror scenario based on Christmas be about, in your campaign? Fourth of July?

If there's a player who is particularly good at gamemastering, let him run a story arc or two set in the campaign world's past or somewhere else in its present. Anything that causes the players to look at the game world with a new perspective adds realism and depth to it; this increases the horror, and keeps the players interested.

8.6
KEEPING THE PLAYERS CHALLENGED

It's important to keep the players challenged. They should always have something else that they want their characters to accomplish. Character goals should not be confused with player goals; the character wants to survive, make money, discover the Lost Continent of Atlantis, or whatever. The player wants to have fun, be part of an interesting story, and be scared. Some players react badly if their characters' goals are never met, but *all* players lose interest if their characters' goals are always met. Players are often more satisfied with a heroic, or even sufficiently cool and gruesome, death (that really isn't part of their character goals) than by finding buried treasure and retiring (which might very well be what their character wants most). Campaigns should not be based on frustrating character goals, but in most horror universes, they don't have to be. The constraints of battling evil and protecting the innocent are usually more than enough to keep characters poor, battered, and hungry. Sometimes, of course, the campaign will be centered around a character goal, especially one that arises from a character hook (finding out what happened during that period of missing time, for example). The gamemaster and player should make sure that once the character has met his goal, he still has a good and sufficient reason to remain in the campaign. Failing that, a replacement character should be "ready to go" once the main character has vanquished his personal demons and left the action.

8.7
CAMPAIGN PITFALLS

> *"Surely one of the primary rules for ... an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words — especially if you are going, at the end, to produce an invisible whistling octopus."*
>
> — Edmund Wilson, "Tales of the Marvellous and Ridiculous"

Even with the best intentions, a campaign can slip into ruts or pitfalls that make playing a laborious chore rather than an exciting diversion. Sometimes gamemasters and players don't even notice these pitfalls until they've been banging their heads against the sides for several sessions. Usually, letting the campaign get stuck in a trap is the gamemaster's fault (although players can aid and abet certain pitfalls more easily than others). Regardless of whose fault it is, it is almost always up to the gamemaster to get the game out again; only she has the "big picture" and the degree of detachment necessary to look at the campaign as a whole. If your players notice a pitfall before you do, it's gotten pretty bad. The players should, of course, do what they can (without destroying their own suspension of disbelief and enjoyment) to help put the campaign back on the right track.

8.7.1 · PITFALL: THE SCOOBY DOO SYNDROME

"I guess that wraps up another mystery."

— Freddy, *Scooby Doo Where Are You!* (every episode)

In the Scooby Doo syndrome, every scenario or story arc is the same. No matter what, it's always the first (or third, or youngest, or whatever) NPC that the characters meet who has the key to the mystery. The monsters are always defeated the same way, or always have the same motives, or are otherwise indistinguishable. The police are always wrong, or always corrupt, or always have to bail the characters out. The treasure is always cursed, or never cursed.

The cure for the Scooby Doo syndrome, assuming that any dregs of interest are left in the campaign, is radical and sudden change. Find the formula and break it. Twice, if possible. The first NPC, rather than the disguised mastermind, becomes a messy victim about halfway through; and the characters' clever trap unleashes some even more horrible terror. Then, in the next story arc, break it a different way. The first NPC is a disguised mastermind; but his plan has gone awry and is running out of control. Change styles of horror, kill characters, let evil win, decimate a portion of the game setting, anything to make the old formula impossible.

8.7.2 · PITFALL: THE KOLCHAK SYNDROME

"I run a lot."

—Carl Kolchak, *The Night Stalker*, "Legacy of Terror"

The Kolchak syndrome is variety solely for variety's sake. If the characters fought vampires last time, this time they fight werewolves, and next time it's aliens. Without any kind of linking continuity, thematic unity, or overall point, it rapidly becomes "monster of the week" rather than a story with development, depth, or interest.

The Kolchak syndrome is not as serious as the Scooby Doo syndrome; often the individual scenarios work fine, but only damage game realism when looked at as a whole. The solution to the Kolchak syndrome is not to come up with some master explanation for everything. That virtually never seems plausible, especially if it has to be retroactively implemented. Simply begin weaving the individual storylines together. The surviving aliens can uncover the vampire's grave and attempt to resurrect him. A lich lord might resurrect NPCs killed in earlier sessions (two or three or four different arcs or scenarios, ideally) as his undead army. Build themes or narratives from the stories that naturally link, and only use surface elements (like NPCs or setting locations) from those that were just thrown in at random. If all else fails, the FBI (or the Inquisition, or the local equivalent for your campaign) can come in and start looking for some common link to all the mysterious deaths in town — keeping in mind that that link is going to be the characters, since there wasn't another one.

8.7.3 · PITFALL: THE ABBOTT AND COSTELLO SYNDROME

"Last night I went through another one of my horrible experiences."

— Larry Talbot (Lon Chaney, Jr.),
Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein

The Abbott and Costello syndrome can be caused either by continuous and ongoing joking (see Section 6.3.4, Humor), by a more general failure of tone, or by a misjudgement of the power level of the campaign. For whatever reason, the players can't take the threat seriously. From brain-freezing horror, it has become an adventure campaign, or worse, a four-hour joke session every week.

The solution to the Abbott and Costello syndrome is to gear up a real shocker. Pump up the villains' power, supercharge the supernatural, go whole hog on the unreality. Blow the doors off the scenario with explicit gore, adrenaline-overdose terror, and pure, unadulterated dread. Cut off jokes immediately (a polite, deadpan request to "please get back to the game" pours cold water on jokes better than getting mad does), take away the characters' crutches, and leave the players drenched in tension. After that wakeup call, discuss the situation with the players; explain that you thought the game had been suffering from a lack of horror and ask them which they prefer — the old way or the new way? If they prefer the old way, you're doomed; just give up, the horror campaign is dead. An entertaining adventure or silly campaign might be salvageable from its wreckage, but don't try to reanimate the corpse.

If, on the other hand, they prefer the new way, explain that you're going to need their cooperation — once the players have officially signed off on being scared rather than being smartalecks, you'll see a whole new level of roleplaying out of them. For a while. The next story arc should be compelling and original; if the gamemaster drops the ball here, then the campaign is dead. On the other hand, if the gamemaster can keep the players' interest through the honeymoon, she can usually resurrect the campaign and send it to new heights of horror.

8.7.4 · PITFALL: THE DARK SIDE IS STRONG IN THIS ONE

"Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

The Dark Side syndrome results when the player characters begin to act like the horrors they theoretically oppose. NPCs are casually murdered on suspicion; "His eyebrows meet, he's a werewolf." Overkill is the word of the day; characters never take a pistol when a

submachine gun and a pound of C-4 can do the job. Whole buildings are burned down "just to be safe." Evil magic is used, deals with demons are struck, nothing is too blasphemous or horrible to solve the problem of the day. Bit by bit, the characters have become evil.

The gamemaster has two possible responses to the Dark Side syndrome. The first is to accept it; turn the style into characters-as-monsters or psychological horror and begin to work that angle. Give the most murderous characters a lust for human death; turn them into ghouls. The dealers with demons can easily be granted demonic powers. The mindless warriors can become lycanthropes. Begin to explore the depths to which they can sink, and try to build fears that way.

The other response, if the characters-as-monsters option is unwelcome, is to slap the characters across the face with their actions. The next building they burn down should have a homeless woman and her baby in its attic; let them see her panic and hear her screams. The next NPC killed on suspicion should be innocent. Overkilling weapons should fire through the walls and injure innocents, or bring down the ceiling on the characters. Bring the police into it, if that wouldn't totally upset the game world reality. Poison the families and loved ones of the characters with the demons and black magics that the characters use. The embodiment of evil in the campaign should attempt to recruit the characters as "worthy successors." In short, let the players see the carnage their characters have wrought. They may have their characters go mad, or sacrifice themselves heroically, or retire, or break down, or take up religion in penance — if the players just say "Oh. Well, we won't do that again" and their characters go back to loading their guns, it's time to end the game.

8.7.5 · PITFALL: THE PLAN NINE SYNDROME

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

— Eros (Dudley Manlove), *Plan Nine From Outer Space*

The Plan Nine syndrome occurs when it becomes apparent that the campaign makes no sense whatsoever. The gamemaster can no longer plot scenarios since there's not any logical reason for anything to happen, or the characters begin reacting randomly since cause and effect have ceased to operate. The campaign is just unutterably stupid and empty.

This can happen to even the best gamemasters if they lose the big picture. Any number of perfectly developed scenarios, cunningly plotted story arcs, and carefully burnished character hooks can add up to a big ludicrous mess when they are seen in relation to each other. There are only two ways to try getting out of this pitfall; make a big break or embrace the madness.

The big break is difficult to pull off, but simple in concept — discuss the campaign with the players, decide that the most ridiculous portions of the storyline "never happened" and go on from there. Once again, bring elements of the stories that did happen into a future scenario or story arc; try to determine the rational consequences of the things that did happen and have them impact future parts of the campaign. Run a couple of minimalist scenarios that are firmly grounded in the accepted past of the campaign world; keep your ambitions low. Build depth into the portions of the campaign that can withstand it, and skip lightly over those portions that still seem dodgy.

Embracing the madness is more difficult, but it can be done without the players' immediate knowledge and cooperation. Any ludicrous story can be accepted if the narrator (the gamemaster and players' memories) is unreliable. Increase the unreality level in the individual scenarios; transform the campaign into a madness-and-dream style game of horrific images. Call everything into question; reveal the characters' beloved mother as a shapeshifting alien or a time traveler. Eventually, the entire campaign becomes a welter of horrific and uncertain images.

Combining the embrace of the madness with the big break is a clichéd trick, but it can work to save an otherwise doomed campaign. Once the madness has become uncontrollable and obvious to the players, their characters awaken in an insane asylum. A kindly doctor (or priest, or whatever) assures them that they've been here for several months, raving in lunacy, but that this new therapy (or magic drug, or sacred ritual, or whatever) shows promise. Let them rest in the asylum for a while, and fill them in on their "real" past; at the point where the campaign fell into the Plan Nine syndrome, their characters actually went mad. Nothing since that point has happened at all; it was all hallucinations and dementia. Adventurous gamemasters may want to keep the "past" of the characters dim and have echoes of their madness reoccur as the players discover that what they thought were the "aliens" were actually something very different in reality — but something just as evil.

8.8 PALATE CLEANSERS: NON-HORROR SCENARIOS IN A HORROR CAMPAIGN

It can often be an excellent idea to run a non-horror scenario even right in the middle of a story arc. It can make the game more realistic if not everything is tied into the monstrous evil. Perhaps this haunted house is actually a fraud, set up by local thieves to drive away witnesses or by fake "psychics" to pull them in. This kind of thing can be both relaxing and enjoyable for the characters and players alike (it

will also help their reputation if they aren't immediately assuming that every weird light is the aliens returning). If the players seem restive and unhappy, a simple hack-and-slash fight against brigands, gangsters, or orcs can bring the escapist joy back to their lives. So much in horror reminds the players that their characters are doomed, hopelessly outmatched, and generally living on borrowed time that letting them beat up lesser evils can be very therapeutic. Even a perfectly normal "day in the life" type session can provide increased character depth: how do the characters act when they're not fleeing for their lives or breaking into haunted crypts? A vacation from immediate life-threatening worry, or a chance to solve a problem in one session, can be crucial to maintaining player equanimity and willingness to subject themselves to further horrors.

It's important to keep these sessions tied into the main campaign, however. Regular NPCs should recur, background events should still happen, and nothing should be done to destroy the general atmosphere of fear in the campaign world itself. Don't let the tension relax so much that it can't be picked up again. Clues can always be found during these sessions that only become important, and frightening, much later.

8.9 WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?

Ideas from horror games come from horror novels, short stories, films, comics, other games, television series, or cartoons. (See Section 9.0, Bibliography, for some good starting points.) However, that's just the beginning. Everything that you see should inspire questions. What if the stop lights were talking to each other? What if that carpet didn't have anything underneath it? What if my girlfriend is a homicidal maniac? (You might want to keep that last one to yourself.) Everything can be scary, if you look at it the right way, or at least mysterious, which is a start. Think about babies and very small children; everything is scary to them, because they don't know anything about it. Monsters under the bed? Things in the vacant lot? Campfire stories? None of it is irrational in a horrific world; use those fears and what they represent in your own game.

The most important source for the gamemaster's ideas is her own fears. Whatever she's scared of is something to look closely at. If you fear rats, find out just how scary they are — they can chew through concrete, they breed at an enormous rate, they can crawl up your pants leg where you can't get at them, they're fast and can hide anywhere, they carry diseases, they bite babies — all of those things can be elements of something really scary in your own games. Find the source of your fear, and communicate it to your players. That's the key to horror.

9.0
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY

9.1
BIBLIOGRAPHY

"I couldn't live a week without a private library."
— H.P. Lovecraft, letter to Woodburn Harris, 2/25/29

9.1.1 · HORROR FICTION

The mass of horror fiction is far too great for any one volume to list by now. Even the mass of worthwhile horror fiction is beyond the scope of this Bibliography. Here, I have simply attempted to list the best horror fiction in my own personal experience, slightly weighted to usefulness for role playing ideas or images. The best of the best (defined as the ones that gave me personally the biggest sense of the creeps) are marked with asterisks. The dates are dates of publication; obviously, some collections are posthumous. Take my opinions with a grain of salt; anyone who ranks Edward Gorey as "better" than Nathaniel Hawthorne obviously has something seriously wrong with him.

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*Gorey, Edward, *Amphigorey* (1972), *Amphigorey Too* (1975), *Amphigorey Also* (1983)
Hambly, Barbara, *Those Who Hunt the Night* (1988)
Harris, Thomas, *Red Dragon* (1981), *Silence of the Lambs* (1988)
Hartwell, David, ed. *The Dark Descent: the Evolution of Horror* (1987)
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)
Hearn, Lafcadio, *Some Chinese Ghosts* (1887), *Kwaidan* (1904), other short stories
*Hodgson, William Hope, *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* (1907), *The House on the Borderland* (1908), *The Night Land* (1912), *Carnacki the Ghost Finder* (1913), many short stories
Hoffmann, E.T.A., *The Best Tales Of Hoffmann* (1816)
Howard, Robert E., "Pigeons From Hell" (1938), *Skull-Face and Other Stories* (1946), *Solomon Kane* (1968), *Cthulhu And Kindred Horrors* (1987), many other short stories

*Jackson, Shirley, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959)

James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), other short stories

*James, M.R., *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1904), *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (1911)

King, Stephen, *'Salem's Lot* (1975), *The Shining* (1977), *Night Shift* (1978), *Different Seasons* (1982), *Christine* (1983), *Skeleton Crew* (1985), *It* (1986), *Misery* (1987)

Kirk, Russell, *Old House of Fear* (1961), *The Surley Sullen Bell* (1962), *The Princess of All Lands* (1979)

*Klein, T.E.D., *Ceremonies* (1984), *Dark Gods* (1985)

Lee, Tanith, *Red As Blood* (1983)

*Le Fanu, J. Sheridan, *Uncle Silas* (1864), *In A Glass Darkly* (1872), *Ghost Stories and Mysteries* (1975)

*Leiber, Fritz, *Conjure Wife* (1953), *Our Lady of Darkness* (1977), *Heroes and Horrors* (1978), many short stories

Levin, Ira, *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), *The Boys From Brazil* (1976)

*Lewis, C.S., *Perelandra* (1943), *That Hideous Strength* (1945)

*Ligotti, Thomas, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1989), *Grimscribe* (1991), *Noctuary* (1994)

*Lovecraft, H.P., *The Outsider And Others* (1939), *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* (1943), *The Dunwich Horror And Others* (1945), many other posthumous collections

Lumley, Brian, *Fruiting Bodies And Other Fungi* (1993), other short stories

*Machen, Arthur, *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The House of Souls* (1906), *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (1949)

Matheson, Richard, *I Am Legend* (1954), *The Shores of Space* (1957), *Shock 1-4* (1961-1970)

Martin, George R.R., *Fevre Dream* (1982), *Armageddon Rag* (1983)

McCammon, Robert R., *They Thirst* (1981), *Usher's Passing* (1984), *The Wolf's Hour* (1989)

Morgan, Robert, *The Things That Are Not There* (1992), et seq.

Newman, Kim, *Jago* (1991), *Anno Dracula* (1992), *The Bloody Red Baron* (1995)

Onions, Oliver, *Widdershins* (1911)

*Poe, Edgar Allan, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845), *Tales of Edgar A. Poe* (1845)

*Powers, Tim, *Anubis Gates* (1983), *On Stranger Tides* (1987), *Last Call* (1992), *Expiration Date* (1995), *Earthquake Weather* (1997)

Rice, Ann, *Interview With The Vampire* (1976), et seq.

Sarban, *Ringstones and Other Curious Tales* (1951), *The Sound of His Horn* (1952)

Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein* (1823)

Shepard, Lucius, *Green Eyes* (1984)

Simmons, Dan, *Song of Kali* (1985), *Carrion Comfort* (1989), *Children of the Night* (1992)

*Smith, Clark Ashton, *Out of Space And Time* (1942), *Genius Loci and Other Tales* (1948), *The City of the Singing Flame* (1981), many other posthumous collections

Spencer, William Browning, *Résumé With Monsters* (1995)

Stableford, Brian, *The Empire of Fear* (1988), *The Werewolves of London* (1990), et seq.

Steakley, John, *Vampire$* (1990)

Stevenson, Robert Louis, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *The Body-Snatcher* (1895)

*Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* (1897), *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), various short stories

Straub, Peter, *Ghost Story* (1979), *Shadow Land* (1980), *Floating Dragon* (1983)

Strieber, Whitley, *The Wolfen* (1980), *The Hunger* (1981)

Süskind, Patrick, *Perfume* (1985)

*Wagner, Karl Edward, *Night Winds* (1978), *In A Lonely Place* (1983), *Why Not You And I?* (1987)

Weinberg, Robert, *The Devil's Auction* (1988), *The Armageddon Box* (1991)

Wellman, Manly Wade, *Who Fears the Devil?* (1963), *Worse Things Waiting* (1973), *After Dark* (1980), many other short stories

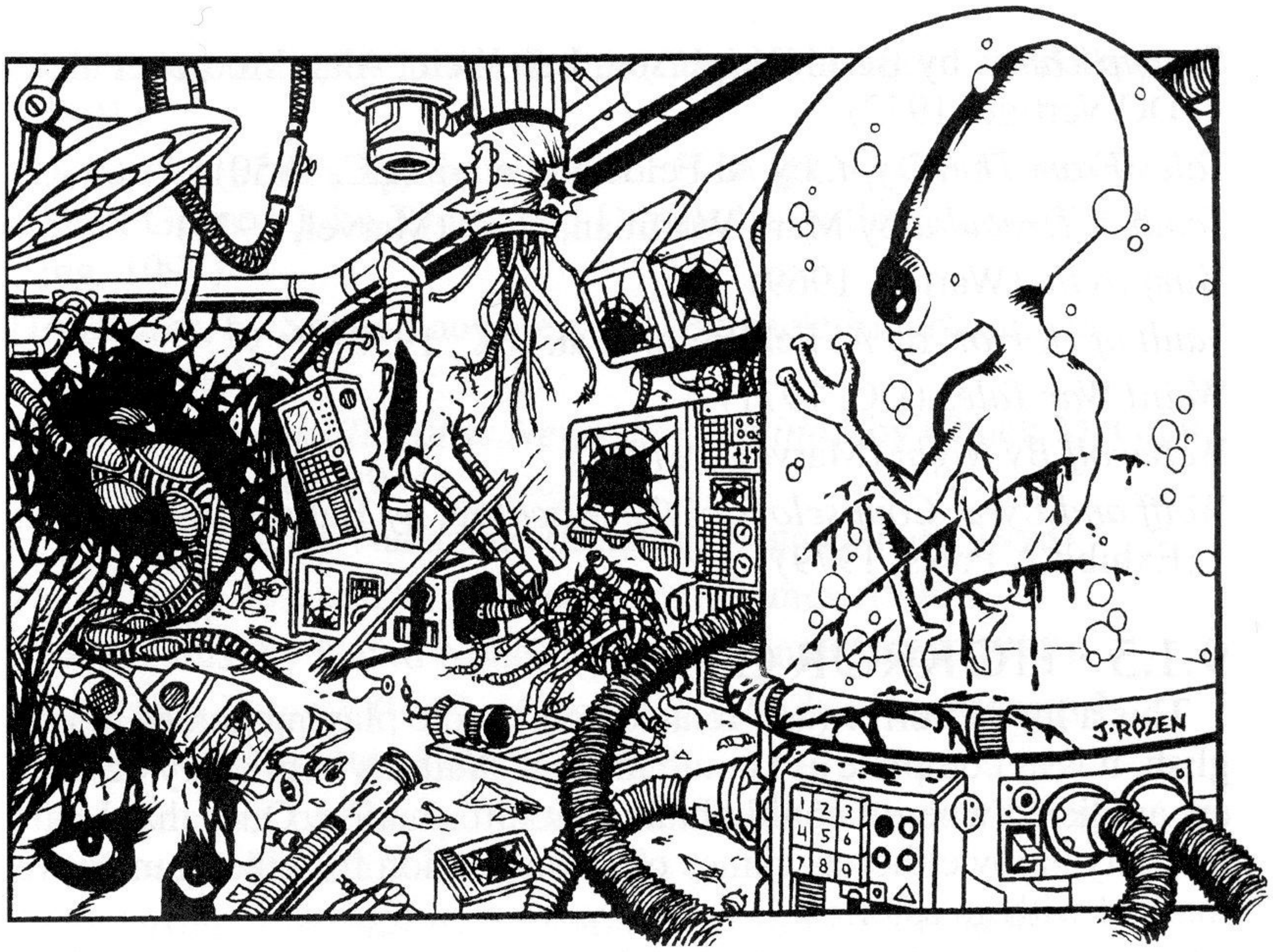
Wheatley, Dennis, *The Devil Rides Out* (1934), *To The Devil a Daughter* (1953), *The Satanist* (1960), et seq., as ed.: *A Century of Horror* (1935)

Wilson, F. Paul, *The Keep* (1981), *The Tomb* (1984)

Wilson, Gahan, *I Paint What I See* (1971), *"...And Then We'll Get Him!"* (1981), *Is Nothing Sacred?* (1982), *Still Weird* (1994), *Even Weirder* (1996)

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn, *Hotel Transylvania* (1978), *The Palace* (1978), *Tempting Fate* (1982), et seq.

Zelazny, Roger, *A Night In The Lonesome October* (1993)



9.1.2 · HORROR COMICS

There are a lot of horror comics out there; this is just a bare smattering. Personal favorites are marked with an asterisk. Dates mark the beginning of the comic's run.

**The Chuckling Whatsit*, by Richard Sala (Fantagraphics, 1997)

Creepy, by Archie Goodwin, et al. (Warren, 1965)

Doom Patrol, by Grant Morrison, et al. (DC, 1987)

Dr. Occult, by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, et al. (DC, 1938)

**From Hell*, by Alan Moore and Eddie Cambell (Kitchen Sink, 1991)

Haunt of Fear, by Al Feldstein, et al. (EC, 1950)

Hellblazer, by Jamie Delano, Garth Ennis, et al. (DC/Vertigo, 1988)

House of Mystery (DC, 1951)

House of Secrets (DC, 1956)

**I, Vampire!* (DC, 1981)

**The Invisibles*, by Grant Morrison, et al.
(DC/Vertigo, 1995)

Morbius: the Living Vampire (Marvel, 1973)

**The Phantom Stranger*, by Len Wein, Jim Aparo, et al. (DC, 1952)

**Sandman*, by Neil Gaiman, et al. (DC/Vertigo, 1989)

Spectre, by Jerry Siegel, Jim Aparo, John Ostrander, et al. (DC, 1940)

Swamp Thing, by Berni Wrightson, Len Wein, Alan Moore, et al. (DC/Vertigo, 1972)

Tales From The Crypt, by Al Feldstein, et al. (EC, 1950)

Tomb of Dracula, by Marv Wolfman, et al. (Marvel, 1971)

Vampirella (Warren, 1969)

Vault of Horror, by Al Feldstein, et al. (EC, 1950)

Weird War Tales (DC, 1971)

Werewolf By Night (Marvel, 1972)

Wolff and Byrd, Counselors of the Macabre, by Batton Lash (Exhibit A Press, 1979)

9.1.3 · HORROR GAMES

This a list of horror (and related genre) role playing games in English. It is as complete as I could make it. Authors or primary designers are listed where I could obtain that information. Ones that I particularly enjoy either as games or as inspiration for other games are marked with an asterisk.

Abyss, by Marco Pecota (Global Games, 1997)

Armageddon, by C.J. Carella (Myrmidon Games, 1997)

Asylum, by Aaron Rosenberg (Clockwork Games, 1997)

Attack of the Humans, by David Dunham (Rapport Games, 1990)

Beyond the Supernatural, by Randy McCall and Kevin Simbieda with Erick Wujcik (Palladium Books, 1988)

Blood (Underground Games)

Bloodshadows, by Greg Farshtey (West End Games, 1994)

Bureau 13: Stalking the Night Fantastic 3rd Edition, by Richard Tucholka (Tri Tac Systems, 1990)

**Call of Cthulhu*, by Sandy Petersen and Lynn Willis (Chaosium, 1981)

Changeling: the Dreaming, 2nd Edition, by Ian Lemke, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1997)

Chill, by Gali Sanchez, Garry Spiegle, and Michael Williams (Pacesetter, 1984)

Chill, 2nd Edition, by David Ladyman (Mayfair Games, 1990)

Conspiracy X, by Rick Ernst, Shirley Madewell, and Chris Pallace (New Millennium Entertainment (now published by Eden Studios), 1996)

**Cthulhu By Gaslight*, a campaign world for *Call of Cthulhu*, by William A. Barton (Chaosium, 1986)

Dark Conspiracy, by Lester Smith (Game Designers' Workshop, 1991)

**Delta Green*, a campaign world for *Call of Cthulhu*, by Adam Scott Glancy, John Tynes, and Dennis Detwiller (Pagan Publishing, 1997)

Deadlands, by Shane Lacy Hensley (Pinnacle Entertainment Group, 1996)

Don't Look Back (Terror is Never Far Behind), by Chuck McGrew (Mind Ventures, 1994)

Dracula, by Barry Nakazono (Leading Edge Games, 1993)

The End, by Joseph Donka (Scapegoat Games, 1996)

EsperAgents, by David Nalle (Ragnarok Enterprises, 1989)

**Forgotten Futures IV: The Carnacki Cylinders*, by Marcus L. Rowland (Forgotten Futures, 1997)

**Ghostbusters*, by Sandy Petersen and Lynn Willis with Greg Stafford (West End Games, 1986)

Ghostbusters International, by Aaron Allston and Douglas Kaufman with Bill Slavicsek (West End Games, 1989)

**The Golden Dawn*, a campaign world for *Call of Cthulhu*, by Scott Aniolowski, et al. (Pagan Publishing, 1996)

GURPS Atomic Horror, by Paul Elliott and Chris W. McCubbin (Steve Jackson Games, 1993)

**GURPS Black Ops*, by Jeff Koke and S. John Ross (Steve Jackson Games, 1997)

GURPS Blood Types, by Lane Grate (Steve Jackson Games, 1995)

GURPS Creatures of the Night, by Scott Paul Maykrantz (Steve Jackson Games, 1993)

GURPS CthulhuPunk, by Chris W. McCubbin (Steve Jackson Games, 1995)

**GURPS Horror, 2nd Edition*, by J.M. Caparula and Scott Haring (Steve Jackson Games, 1990)

**GURPS Illuminati*, by Nigel D. Findley (Steve Jackson Games, 1992)

GURPS Reign of Steel, by David Pulver (Steve Jackson Games, 1997)

**GURPS Voodoo*, by C.J. Carella (Steve Jackson Games, 1995)

Hidden Invasion, by Paul Arden Lidberg (Nightshift Games, 1995)

Horror Hero, by Alan Dickerson, et al. (Hero Games, 1994)

It Came From The Late, Late, Late Show, by Bradley K. McDevitt and Walter H. Mytczynskyj (Stellar Games, 1989)

Justice, Inc., by Aaron Allston, Steve Peterson, and Michael A. Stackpole (Hero Games, 1984)

**Kindred of the East*, a campaign world for Vampire: the Masquerade, by Rob Hatch, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1998)

**Kult*, by Gunilla Jonsson and Michael Petersén (Metropolis Games, 1993)

Lawnmower Man (Leading Edge Games, 1993)

London By Night, by David Nalle and Eric Olson (Ragnarok Games, 1984)

Lost Souls, 2nd Edition, by Joe Williams and Kathleen Williams (Sage Lore Productions/Marquee Press, 1992)

**Mage: the Ascension, 2nd Edition*, by Phil Brucato, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1995)

Masque of the Red Death, a campaign world for *Ravenloft*, by William W. Connors, et al. (TSR, 1995)

Necroscope (West End Games)

**Nephilim: Occult Roleplaying*, by Frédéric Weil, et al.(Chaosium, 1994)

**The New Inquisition*, by Greg Stolze and John Tynes (Archon, 1998)

Nightbane, by C.J. Carella (Palladium Books, 1995)

NightLife, by Bradley K. McDevitt, L. Lee Cerny, and Walter H. Mytczynskyj (Stellar Games, 1990)

Orrorsh, the Horror reality for *TORG*, by Chris Kubasik (West End Games, 1991)

**Over the Edge*, by Jonathan Tweet with Robin D. Laws (Atlas Games, 1992)

Pandemonium, by Stephan Michael Sechi (M.I.B. Productions/ Atlas Games, 1993)

**Paranoia*, by Greg Costikyan and Ken Rolston, et al. (West End Games, 1984)

**Puppetland*, by John Tynes (Tynes Cowan Corp., 1996)

Rapture: the Second Coming, by William Spencer-Hale with Dave Newton and Michael J. Hill (Quintessential Mercy Studios, 1995)

Ravenloft, a campaign world for *AD&D*, by Bruce Nesmith, Andria Hayday, and William W. Connors, et al. (TSR, 1990)

Shattered Dreams, by Matthew D. Grau, et al. (Apex Publications, 1994)

Species (West End Games)

Tabloid!, by David "Zeb" Cook (TSR, 1994)

Tales From The Crypt (West End Games)

Tharkold, the Techno-horror reality for *TORG*, by Paul Hume and Greg Gorden (West End Games, 1992)

Vampire: the Dark Ages, by Jennifer Hartshorn, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1996)

Vampire: the Masquerade, 2nd Edition, by Andrew Greenberg and Mark Rein•Hagen, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1993)

Vampire Hunter$, by Mark Arsenault and Paul Arden Lidberg (Nightshift Games, 1998)

Warhammer Fantasy Role Play, by Richard Halliwell, et al. (Games Workshop (now published by Hogshead Publishing), 1986)

Werewolf: the Apocalypse, 2nd Edition, by Bill Bridges, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1994)

**Werewolf: the Wild West*, by Justin Achilli and Ethan Skemp, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1997)

The Whispering Vault, by Mike Nystul (Pariah Press (now published by Ronin Press), 1994)

Witchcraft, by C.J. Carella (Myrmidon Press, 1996)

Witch Hunt, by Paul D. Baader and Roger Buckelew (StatCom Simulations, 1983)

**Wraith: the Oblivion, 2nd Edition*, by Richard Dansky, et al. (White Wolf Game Studio, 1996)

9.1.4 HORROR NONFICTION

Here are some of the nonfiction books about horror that I have used, either while writing this sourcebook or writing and running horror games myself. As always, my favorites (those I have found particularly useful) are marked with an asterisk.

Bloom, Clive, ed., *Creepers: British Horror and Fantasy in the 20th Century* (Pluto Press, 1993)

Carter, Lin, *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos* (Ballantine, 1972)

Daniels, Les, *Living In Fear: A History of Horror In the Mass Media* (Scribner's, 1975)

Douglas, Drake, *Horror!* (Macmillan, 1966)

Florescu, Radu, *In Search of Frankenstein* (New York Graphic Society, 1975)

Golden, Christopher, ed., *Cut! Horror Writers on Horror Film* (Berkley, 1992)

Gross, Louis S., *Redefining the American Gothic* (UMI Research Press, 1989)

Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Methuen, 1981)

*Jones, Stephen, & Kim Newman, eds., *Horror: The 100 Best Books* (Carroll & Graf, 1990)

Joshi, S.T., ed., *The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* (Dell, 1997)

*Joshi, S.T., *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life* (Necronomicon Press, 1996)

Joshi, S.T., *The Weird Tale* (Univ. of Texas, 1990)

*King, Stephen, *Danse Macabre* (Berkley, 1982)

*Lovecraft, H.P., *Supernatural Horror In Literature* (Dover, 1973)

Magistrale, Tony, & Michael A. Morrison, eds., *A Dark Night's Dreaming: Contemporary American Horror Fiction* (Univ. of South Carolina, 1996)

McNally, Raymond T., and Radu Florescu, *In Search of Dracula* (New York Graphic Society, 1972)

Melton, J. Gordon, *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead* (Visible Ink, 1994)

*Peebles, Curtis, *Watch The Skies!* (Smithsonian, 1994)

Pethman, Stephen, ed., *The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (Avenel, 1986)

Punter, David, *The Literature of Terror* (Longman, 1980)

Raino, Eilo, *The Haunted Castle* (Routledge & Sons, 1927)

Schweitzer, Darrell, ed., *Discovering Modern Horror Fiction* (Starmont House, 1985)

Shay, Don, ed., *Making Ghostbusters* (Columbia, 1985)

Skal, David J., *The Monster Show* (W.W. Norton, 1993)

*Sullivan, Jack, ed., *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural* (Penguin, 1986)

*Wolf, Leonard, ed., *The Essential Dracula* (Penguin, 1993)

9.1.5 · HORROR ON THE NET

Here are a few horror-related Usenet newsgroups to browse; be sure to mention where you read about them!

alt.books.anne-rice

alt.cult-movies

alt.folklore.ghost-stories

alt.horror

alt.horror.cthulhu

alt.horror.video

alt.horror.werewolves

alt.movies.monster

alt.tv.x-files

alt.vampyres

And, of course:

rec.games.frp.advocacy

rec.games.frp.misc

There is a lot of horror on the World Wide Web; here are a few of the most comprehensive sites, with one or two of my personal favorites.

*Cabinet of Dr. Casey: www.cat.pdx.edu/~caseyh/horror/index.html

DarkEcho: www.darkecho.com

Dark Side of the Net: www.gothic.net/darkside

Horror Net: www.horrornet.com

*H.P. Lovecraft Archive: www.primenet.com/~dloucks/hpl/

*Ragged Entelechy: www.oceanstar.com

9.2 FILMOGRAPHY

"Horror is the engine that powers every movie you ever loved."

— John Skipp & Craig Spector, "Death's Rich Pageantry"

9.2.1 · HORROR MOVIES

It's easier to narrow down the good horror movies than it is good horror fiction, but it's still too big a job for this filmography. Once again, my personal favorites are listed here (with their directors in parentheses), with asterisks for my own personal idiosyncratic "best of the best."

Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (Charles Barton, 1948)

*Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979)

An American Werewolf in London (John Landis, 1981)

*Angel Heart (Alan Parker, 1990)

*Barton Fink (Joel Coen, 1991)

Beetlejuice (Tim Burton, 1988)

The Believers (John Schlesinger, 1987)

Big Trouble in Little China (John Carpenter, 1986)

The Birds (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963)

The Black Cat (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1934)

*Brazil (Terry Gilliam, 1981)

*Bride of Frankenstein (James Whale, 1935)

*Candyman (Bernard Rose, 1992)

Carrie (Brian de Palma, 1976)

*Cat People (Jacques Tourneur, 1942)

Chinese Ghost Story (Siu-Tung Ching, 1987)
The Collector (William Wyler, 1965)
Deliverance (John Boorman, 1972)
Dracula (Tod Browning, 1931)
Duel (Steven Spielberg, 1971)
Evil Dead II (Sam Raimi, 1987)
Eraserhead (David Lynch, 1978)
Five Million Years to Earth (Roy Ward Baker, 1968)
Flatliners (Joel Schumacher, 1990)
The Fly (Kurt Neumann, 1958; David Cronenberg, 1986)
Frankenstein (James Whale, 1932)
*Freaks (Tod Browning, 1932)
Fright Night (Tom Holland, 1985)
The Frighteners (Peter Jackson,)
*Ghostbusters (Ivan Reitman, 1984)
Godzilla, King of Monsters (Terry Morse and Inoshiro Honda, 1956)
*Halloween (John Carpenter, 1978)
The Haunted Palace (Roger Corman, 1963)
*The Haunting (Robert Wise, 1963)
Hellraiser (Clive Barker, 1987)
Horror of Dracula (Terence Fisher, 1958)
House (Steve Miner, 1986)
The Howling (Joe Dante, 1981)
In The Mouth of Madness (John Carpenter, 1995)
Invaders From Mars (William Cameron Menzies, 1953)
*Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956)
Island of Lost Souls (Erle Kenton, 1933)
Jacob's Ladder (Adrian Lyne, 1990)
Lost Boys (Joel Schumacher, 1987)
*Near Dark (Katherine Bigelow, 1987)
A Nightmare On Elm Street (Wes Craven, 1984)
*Night of the Living Dead (George Romero, 1968)
Nosferatu (Franz Murnau, 1922)
Peeping Tom (Michael Powell, 1960)
The People Under The Stairs (Wes Craven, 1992)
*Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)
*Rosemary's Baby (Roman Polanski, 1968)
*Re-Animator (Stuart Gordon, 1985)
Scanners (David Cronenberg, 1981)
Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Scream (Wes Craven, 1996)
Suspiria (Dario Argento, 1977)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974)
The Thing (Christian Nyby, 1951; John Carpenter, 1982)
*Tremors (Ron Underwood, 1990)
Vampire's Kiss (Robert Bierman, 1989)
Village of the Damned (Wolf Rilla, 1960)
The Wicker Man (Robin Hardy, 1973)
The Witches (Nicolas Roeg, 1990)
The Wolf Man (George Waggner, 1941)
*X — the Man with the X-Ray Eyes (Roger Corman, 1963)
Young Frankenstein (Mel Brooks, 1974)

9.2.2 HORROR ON TV

Horror seldom works well on the small screen, but plenty of talented people have tried it. As always, personal favorites are marked with an asterisk.

The Addams Family (1964-1966)
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1996-present)
Dark Shadows (1966-1971; 1991)
Forever Knight (1992-1993)
The Invaders (1967-1968)
Kolchak: the Night Stalker (1974-1975)
Millennium (1996-present)
Night Gallery (1970-1973)
The Outer Limits (1963-1965)
*The Prisoner (1967-1968)
*Scooby Doo, Where Are You? (1969-present, in various versions)
Tales From the Dark Side (1984-1988)
Thriller (1960-1962)
The Twilight Zone (1959-1965; 1985-1988)
*Twin Peaks (1989-1991)
War of the Worlds (1988-1990)
*The X-Files (1993-present)

ROLEMASTER™

5500 Rolemaster Standard Rules™ $30

The *Rolemaster Standard System* is a detailed, state-of-the-art FRP system that adds realism and depth to your campaign without sacrificing playability. The *Rolemaster Standard Rules (RMSR)* is the cornerstone of this system and provides all the guidelines and rules needed to play *Rolemaster*. Its primary parts are concerned with character definition, character design, and performing actions. These rules are designed to provide both the Gamemaster and the players with tremendous detail and flexibility in character development and the resolution of a wide variety of actions and activity. *Rolemaster Standard Rules* are essential for tying together and using the Standard versions of *Arms Law*, *Spell Law*, and *Gamemaster Law*. Experience *Rolemaster* and experience the ultimate in fantasy roleplaying!

5520 Arms Law™ $16

Feel the thrill of melee, brace against a monster's charge, master the martial arts, let your arrows fly—do battle with the best combat system around! In *Arms Law* you get a fantasy/medieval melee and missile combat system with attack tables. Plus you get a dozen different critical strike tables for 29 different weapon types including Slashing, Puncture, Unbalancing, as well as tables for brawling, martial arts, fumbles, weapon breakage, and more! *Arms Law* is 1 of the 4 cornerstones of the *RMSS*; but it's fully compatible with the earlier editions of *Rolemaster*.

5521 Gamemaster Law™ $20

GMs, learn how to use the system to its fullest potential! *Gamemaster Law* provides a wealth of guidelines and details that a Gamemaster needs to run a *RMSS* or any other FRP game. Also provided are tips and guidelines on group dynamics, player motivations, and story presentation that will prove invaluable to GMs of all systems. *Gamemaster Law*, one of the four cornerstones of the *RMSS*, is fully compatible with older versions of *Rolemaster*.

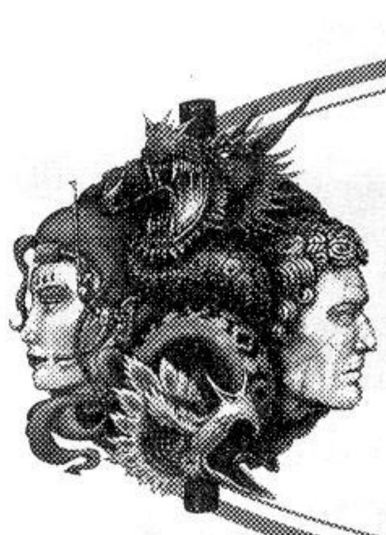
5522 Spell Law™ $25

Feel the crackling flow of Essence course through you as you repel the soul-tearing power of a dark cleric! Stand firm against the insidious power of the mentalist, and loose the ravening elemental force of nature against your foes!

Spell Law provides over 200 spell descriptions, critical strike tables for attack spells, spell failure tables, and everything else needed to provide a fully detailed magic system adaptable to any FRP game. *Spell Law*, one of the four cornerstones of the *RMSS*, is fully compatible with older versions of *Rolemaster*.

5541 Races & Cultures: Underground Races™ $16

Come to the depths of the worlds and explore many fully detailed cultures! Each of the underground races in this volume, including Dwarves, Gnolls, Gnomes, Goblins, Halflings, Hobgoblins, Kobolds, five different kinds of Orcs, and Troglodytes, have pages of specialized weapons, lifestyle & religious notes, training packages, spell lists, adolescent development tables, and much more!



The Standard System™

5524 Weapon Law: Firearms™ $18

Now you can run combat for the *Rolemaster Standard System* in post-medieval settings! *Weapons Law: Firearms* provides all of the tables and information you need to resolve combat involving firearms from any era, from the Renaissance to the modern day. Now the thrust, parry, and assassin's dagger can be met with hot lead as much as cold steel!

5602 Martial Arts Companion™ $18

After a short lifetime of studying under the masters at the temple, you have graduated to journeyman and are ready to take your wisdom and strength into the world. But have the masters prepared you for the dangers of real life? The *Martial Arts Companion* gives you all you'll need to add the depth of martial arts to your normal game. Whether you run historical, fantasy, or modern day games, this book will help you give martial artists the strengths (and weaknesses) they deserve.

5700 Black Ops™ $16

Want to experience the dark, mysterious world of espionage, mercenaries, and counter-terrorists? Then you need to explore the realm of *Black Ops*—the first genre book for the *RMSS! Black Ops* brings you into the complex, and often dangerous world of modern day covert operations with new rules for creating characters and handling combat.

5701 Pulp Adventures™ $16

In *Pulp Adventures* you'll find three new Pulp era character professions, equipment lists, and more than a dozen new training packages. Also included are guidelines on how to use *Weapon Law* in the Pulp era, plus details on using magic. And as a bonus, you'll get a timeline of major events, and lists of major motion pictures, popular radio shows, popular dances, and personages of the Pulp era.

5702 Shades of Darkness™ $16

In the not too distant future, technology has spawned a darkness no one knew could even exist. The darkness, like a tidal flood swept across the Earth threatening to make mankind just another extinct species. The darkness fell… and came the Taint….

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