

Scarier



Horror Play



Peter Rudin-Burgess

CREDITS

Written By: Peter Rudin-Burgess

Scariest Horror Play,
Copyright 2021 Parts Per Million Limited

International House, 12 Constance Street, Constance
Street, London, England, E16 2DQ



Sample file

CONTENTS

1. Introduction	3
1. Safety Tools	5
2. Invest in your game	8
3.Subtle Violence	12
4.Dilemmas	15
5.Isolate Your Characters	18
6.They are all in on it together!	22
7.Overmatch your Characters	26
8.Limit the Game	31
9.Partial Information	35
10.Bond with the NPCs	37
11.be less superheroic	42
12.Overcome Character Flaws	45
13.The Rhythm of horror	48
14.Heroic Sacrifices	52
15.Horror Communications	55
16.Humanize Victims	57
17.EmphasisE Sensations	60
18. Ask the Oracle	63
19.Meta-gaming fear	66
20.Show the Consequences	69
21.Out of time	73
22.Wounds on the Body	76
23.Last Thoughts	78



1. INTRODUCTION

Possibly the hardest genre to roleplay is that of horror. This is ironic as probably the second biggest selling RPG of all time is Call of Cthulhu, a game of cosmic horror.

Just about every game claims to be capable of running horror games. Still, in my experience, very few do anything at all to help the GM convey anything of the sensations we get when watching a horror movie.

This is partly because what would be horrific in a movie is often a staple of our daily diet in games. Skeletons are low-level D&D monsters, as are zombies. When faced with a Mummy, our heroes will often draw their weapons and attack. Our favorite movie characters would turn tail and

run.

In my background, Call of Cthulhu was the first game in which the wisdom of “If it has stats, we can kill it.” no longer held true.

Kill, loot and move on is ingrained into the psyche of a great many players.

This book was inspired by someone asking me about creating a solo horror roleplaying game that was scary enough to scare the player.

In meeting the challenge, I created a game I would not be prepared to play. Of course, this says more about me than the game, but I confess it was not playtested.

Solo roleplaying is somewhat different from social roleplaying. Still, I hope that the advice in these pages helps anyone wanting to run a horror game.

Solo play has the unique challenge of; how do you scare yourself when you know what is happening? My attempts at getting a scary group game running have often been defeated by players not engaging with the atmosphere. One ill-timed joke can destroy all your efforts in an instant.

This book is a pick’n’mix selection of tips and advice. Take the bits that make sense to you, maybe give the others a go, and keep the ones that work for you.



1. SAFETY TOOLS

I do not think there is any genre in which safety tools are more important than in horror. Horror always deals with dark themes and unpleasantness. Of all the subgenres of horror, the modern-day period is possibly the most disturbing. It can feel very real and very close to reality.

You may not think that safety tools are needed in solo play, but I disagree. There will be times when the story seems to be heading towards one definite destination, and it is one you do not want to visit.

There are many very good safety tools for group games, and I strongly recommend using them, or at the very least discussing them before proceeding with any RPG, and a horror one

especially. For example, in my previous book *Easier Solo Play*, I talk about my experience with a player who struggled with depression. Yet, very few of our peers knew anything about it.

Veils, are a common safety tool, and as a plot device can be used to protect players from things they may not want to play through, you literally say that you will draw a veil over the scene and not discuss it explicitly, as if a movie had faded to black. The problem with veils is that the disturbing thing still happened, and you know it happened.

For solo play, I recommend changing the narrative as a safety mechanism. If the game is going on a particular trajectory and realize that the destination is not something you want in your game, introduce an event that deflects the story from that path. It could be a knock at the door just as the villain has you at their mercy or a cell phone message that needs immediate attention. Small, seemingly mundane events like this can deflect a chain of events. Some players can feel like the solo oracle runs the game, and if the oracle says something bad should happen, then it should happen, or you are cheating.

I do not subscribe to that point of view. I play games for fun and horror games for fun tainted with a frisson of fear. The common factor is always fun. If it stops being fun, change the game until it is fun, or stop.

This same solo technique works for group play. If you are running a horror game and realize that the route things are going could be uncomfortable for you or your players, deflect the course.

This can give you time to talk to your group about what could have happened and about how you and they feel about it being in the game.

Sample file



2. INVEST IN YOUR GAME

My first experience of Call of Cthulhu was in about 1985. We were playing a campaign. It was mid-December if I remember correctly, so it was dark outside, and the wind was up. The venue was a drafty house, so the odd creak here and there certainly didn't hurt the atmosphere.

We all crammed around a dining room table with a short side up against a wall and window. The curtains were drawn but occasionally bellied out when the wind gusted outside.

One player, who will remain nameless, but is nicknamed after a bear who likes picnic baskets, was asked to roll for a skill check or something. As he reached for his dice, which happened to be

close to this curtained window, a claw lashed out and grabbed his hand.

The player screamed, the rest of the players screamed, the Keeper screamed.

We also rather upset the cat that had settled down behind that curtain and wanted to play with the dice.

That was my first real experience of horror roleplaying, and it was the pinnacle of the horror experience. I have only once ever got close to the point where the player was as scared as the player character, but that is what I have always striven for.

I am not saying that you have to buy a cat.

In this game, the dark, winter night helped set the scene. The wind outside, the drafts in the house, the curtains moving with the drafts, and the subdued lighting all contributed.

As we were all invested in the scene, rather than a cat wanting to play with the dice or possibly just being malicious for the sake of it, being comic, it became just enough of a trigger to jump-scare the player.

It was all about the atmosphere.

You can invest time and effort into setting up your playing area. You can control the lighting. If you can work in low-light, I could go as far as a

candle in a wine bottle. It would take a few sessions to get enough wax on the bottle to make it really old school, but worth considering. Just please do not set fire to your desk, house, or yourself. A safer option if you are using lots of paper are small tealight lanterns. You can get a pack of them online for about \$15.

Music is another excellent way to build atmosphere. Not every scene in a horror game is going to be horrific. Part of the skill in running a horror game is to know when to increase the pressure, inducing Dread and when to ease it off. Pile on the pressure constantly, and it loses its impact.

Changing the music so you switch to the dark, impending doom music as you enter the spooky house will reinforce its nature.

Props are another way of supporting a mood or atmosphere. How far you go down that road depends on how quickly and easily you can create them.

My background is in solo roleplaying. Solo play is dependent on improvisation, and over-preparing is the enemy of improvisation. If you have spent a lot of money and effort creating props, you are more inclined to manipulate your story to make sure you get to use them.

Some props are guaranteed to get used, such as

a themed dice tray or dice. These don't come with that same obligation to be used.

In solo play, I also get to choose the where and when of the game. You may not have this luxury when running for a group. If you play every Tuesday night by VTT, then you will have a problem.

There is nothing to stop a solo role-player from taking some dice and a notepad and playing a game sat on a bench in a graveyard. But, if doing that, don't be surprised if you soon start using headstones as inspiration for NPC names and dates.

The only proviso I would add is that I have had one or two people who have taken offense at playing a dice game in a churchyard. Thankfully, I wasn't playing overtly satanic, or I could have caused even more offense!

But the location was a great boost for a simple ghost story.



3. SUBTLE VIOLENCE

The problem with all-out violence is that we become inured to it extremely quickly. For example, the Slasher flick is a staple of the horror movie genre, but it frequently fails in RPGs because the player characters are often more violent than the villain!

The phrase murder-hobo only applies to the supposed heroes in most games. Those homeless characters traveling around the country murdering just about anything that isn't human, elf, dwarf, or halfling. Even those species are not safe if they look at the heroes the wrong way.

This combat-first approach can destroy any sense of horror. Turning back to movies, the zombie movie is a classic horror genre, but to a

sword-swinging fighter, they are 2HD cannon fodder monsters. The only consideration for anything from beyond the grave is whether it can be hit by magic weapons.

Subtle violence is both an existential threat; it can kill your character, but it is also hidden, or its source is hidden.

This could be a sudden stab with a stiletto blade on a nightclub dance floor. Your character has no idea of who did it, amongst all the jostling bodies and the strobing lights.

I once had a character bitten by a snake. The bite was easily treated by an antivenom from the local hospital, just 20 minutes away, but fatal if left untreated. Then the characters discovered that the phones were out. Then their car had been tampered with. Finally, when they wanted to use the computer to email, the power went out.

Every avenue they explored cost them time and made it more obvious that the snake was not there by chance. Someone was out to get them.

The characters were driven further into the house to find a solution. They needed to defeat their tormentor, get the power back on, and call for help.

Traps do not have to be the preserve of the dungeon.

A disconnected gas pipe in the kitchen is just waiting for someone to try and flip the light switch, checking if the power is still out.

The point of these subtle assaults on the characters is to leave them with all of their agency, a core element of roleplaying, but to leave them impotent with nothing to fight against.

When you employ this tactic, the power comes from the antagonist playing with the characters and reaching out to them at any time, while the characters are unable to reach the antagonist.

In group play, it works best if you can play on one aspect of every character. It keeps everyone in the spotlight and on their toes.

In a solo game, you don't have that problem because you are always in the spotlight.

Subtle violence is not an end in itself. Instead, it is a way to demonstrate the antagonist's power and reach before you step up the action to a confrontation.



4. DILEMMAS

The simple dilemma is a wonderful tool to tell your players that things are not going to be easy. The perfect dilemma is between two bad outcomes. Dilemmas are not exclusive to horror, I use them in combat scenes all the time. Catch the villain or save the innocent is a classic dilemma.

I was running a horror game set in modern-day Germany. The actual place was made up, an amalgam of several places I have visited. My character was a private detective looking for a kidnapped child. The last known location was a house scheduled for demolition in the Marktplatz. I gained entry to the house, and it all looked remarkably clean and tidy for a house about the be

demolished. In one of the reception rooms was a table, and on the table was an Ouija board, and under the glass was a Swatch watch, of the sort that the child was known to have.

I went to look at the board, and the glass twitched in my hand. So I put the glass down rather quickly, and it moved on its own. I knew full well what an Ouija board was, so I put my fingertips on the glass, and it started to spell out a message. The force behind the board could tell me where to find the missing child, but only if I set it free.

That was all the information I had, set free an unknown occult force, and save a child or try and find the child by mundane means.

In this case, I took the bait and agreed to its terms, and I was locked into always having to do one more thing for the spirit force before it would release the child. So again, I was being strung along.

When I tried the other option, ignoring the board and finding the child independently, I directly conflicted with the spirit. It was a horrible feeling; there was no good outcome I could see, and yet I was clearly on the right path.

Later, at the end of the adventure, the spirit had possessed the body of the child, and I faced another dilemma. I could trap the possessed child in a place it could never hurt anyone again, at the

cost of the child's life, or liberate both child and spirit from the condemned house freeing the spirit to possess person after person. This was not a nice spirit, and a great deal of harm would come from setting it free. What to do?

This example was a solo game using Dark Streets and Darker Secrets. I was lucky in that when I was faced with each choice, I had to decide. In a group game, dilemmas can cause splits amongst the players and their characters. These need to be played out. A good dilemma should not be an easy choice!

Once you have that division in the party, a GM can start to manipulate it. Whichever choice the characters make, you can throw the complications in their path.

You will also get creative parties that will think of a third way. This makes preplanning for a dilemma situation very difficult. They are far better in an improvised game, where the GM can respond.

As a rule of thumb, I would throw the negatives of both choices at the characters if they fail to choose either choice.

One should never penalize a creative solution, but you can make the characters work for their victory!



5. ISOLATE YOUR CHARACTERS

In countless horror movies, it is the person who goes into the spooky house, or woods or tomb, on their own that you know they are going to have a very bad day.

And so it is with player characters. As a party, they are strong, separate a character, and they have exploitable weaknesses.

It is much easier to tailor a threat to challenge one character than challenging an entire party. Not only can the party support each other, but the GM is just one person trying to outwit a group. The GM has to juggle everything; the players only have to look out for themselves.

In solo play, this is somewhat easier to separate your character from any supporting NPCs. However, in a regular group, they will often try to stay together.

I was playing ApoCthulhu, a post-apocalypse Cthulhu game that takes place after the bad guys won. My group was in town, trying to loot some foodstuffs from the abandoned stores on the edge of town when I thought I saw something in the cornfields on the other side of the highway. As soon as I entered the field, the corn was over my head, and I may as well have been in a maze. Suddenly, I had zero visibility, just inches in front of me, no points of reference except where I had just come from, and no support.

Now I was clearly vulnerable, and it goes without saying that there was something in that field with me.

Isolating a single character from a group nearly always introduces an element of meta gaming into your session. The rest of the players become spectators for the few minutes that the character is isolated. They may not be able to influence the actions, but they will absorb some of the mood and tone of that individual scene.

It will be hard for players to not want to avoid being caught alone in your locations.

But what do you do to these isolated characters?

Mostly, this depends on the goals of the antagonist in your horror game. It could be just a whispering voice in the dark, asking questions, or pleading for help. But, on the other hand, it could be an assault by an unseen assailant.

The goal is to tailor each encounter to the isolated character, so they are ill-equipped to deal with it. If you get the party fighter on their own and throw a zombie at them, that will play to their strengths and isn't going to unsettle them. Throw the same zombie at the party illusionist, in the dark, by surprise, and they may be out of their depth. Chances are they will survive, but not without a scare.

Isolation can be used as a step before subtle violence or in conjunction with it. It is about instilling fear and uncertainty. Once the characters are too scared to venture out alone, isolation has done its job and lost its effectiveness.

It normally only takes one or two isolation events before the characters will decide not to get separated. That simple decision is what you are really after. The characters have modified their behavior simply because they are worried or scared of being caught alone.

The helpful haunting is a good tool that uses isolation. When a character is alone, the helpful ghost gives them a clue or hint. These can be

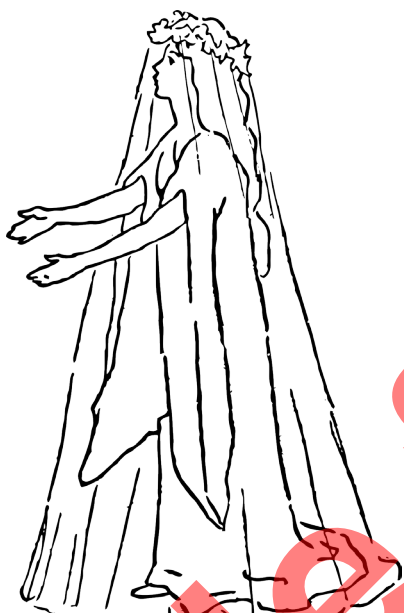
very obscure; for example, Harry Potter keeps catching a glimpse of a face in a shard of a mirror. It keeps him guessing as to who or what it could be. However, a helpful haunting can be obviously helpful. For example, if you have set up a many-stage quest and the first stage is to find a key to a box, then the helpful spirit leaves the key beside the bed of a character overnight. The box that the key opens may be hidden in the gardener's cottage in the next stage, so the helpful spirit leaves a pair of gardening gloves for the character to find.

This is saying that the characters are being watched, their needs are known by whatever is helping them, but their personal space is being invaded.

You can then turn the haunter against them when they do something that the haunter doesn't like. For example, maybe the keys to the character's car disappear when they talk about leaving, or a wire is cut when they want to try and capture the haunter on camera?

The helpful haunter only interacts with one character, someone they have adopted, and feels it has an attachment.

This can then mutate into something very stalker-ish and disturbing.



6. THEY ARE ALL IN ON IT TOGETHER!

In many ways, this is similar to isolation, but it is about isolating all the characters. Give them no one to turn to for help, even if it is just the perception that the police, locals, village elders, or whoever, are part of the conspiracy.

You can do this with a simple word or look from an NPC. What you are saying is that there is no help. One of the most chilling examples of this that springs to mind is HAL9000, when asked to open the dock doors, replies, “I’m sorry Dave, I am afraid I cannot do that.”, and in that instant, both maroons Dave in space, and declares HAL9000 to be the hidden enemy. Thus, Dave is in a very precarious position and is denied the

single necessity at that crucial moment.

Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* plays on this, with an entire town in on the conspiracy. The same device is used in the 1973 movie *The Wicker Man*.

If you are not familiar with the film, a police officer arrives on a remote Scottish island looking for a missing girl. All the islanders insisted that the girl was never on the island, despite mounting evidence to prove she was. In the end, the girl's disappearance was a lure to attract the police officer to the island. The islanders, having rejected Christianity, are following a pagan god and need a human sacrifice of someone who came willingly to the island and who was 'king-like', which the islanders take his role as a law enforcer to be. Unfortunately, it does not end well for the police officer.

On the island, the belief in what they were doing was so unshakable that even the classmates at the school would insist that the missing girl had never attended.

I don't recommend stealing the plot of *The Wicker Man* to use on your character or party, but it does illustrate the device. From looking for one perpetrator, everyone was involved, and there were no friendly faces to turn to.

At the gaming table, you can hint at this by

removing helpful people. Even if the people involved are not yet openly hostile, they could just start avoiding the characters. For example, stores may be shut when the characters need something, or there are no vacant rooms at the only guesthouse. Contacts never return calls or claim to be called away on more important business.

You are cutting them off from their support network.

On a smaller scale, you could bring down a bridge closing the only road out of a remote village, sink the only supply boat. The village fishing fleet set sail the previous day. In a house, you can cut the telephone wires, and in a contemporary setting, cut the power to the nearest cell mast. You can cut the power so personal electronics cannot be recharged, and you can keep count as batteries start to die.

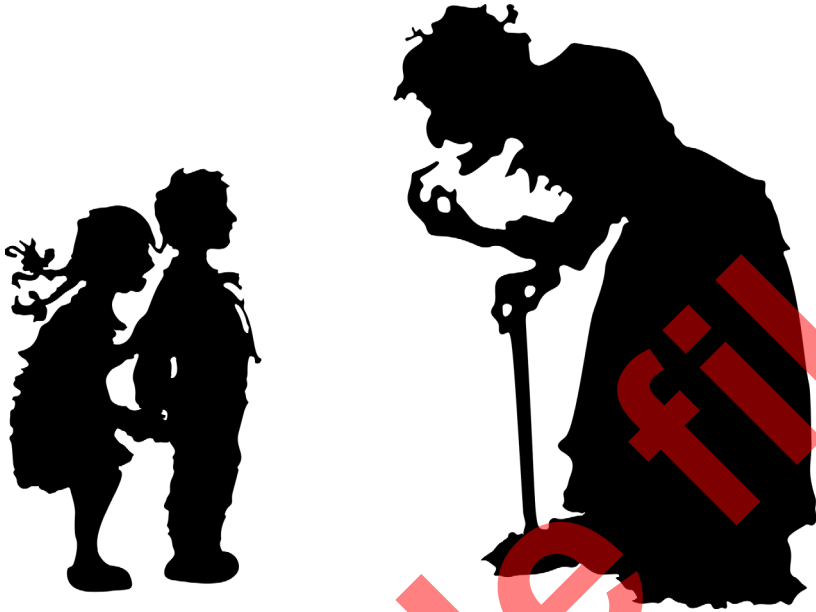
These techniques work best when they are not obvious. For example, let the characters work out that more and more NPCs are not responding or that it is the third time you have told them that there is no phone signal.

One eternal question in horror play is are you trying to scare the player or the character. Of course, the middle ground is putting the player in fear of their character's life.

This technique is part of that middle ground. It

is not directly horrific, but it is a device to increase the tension in the game. It may disappoint characters or make them angry. It could even possibly scare them, especially if you cut the electricity to the supposedly haunted house, but the biggest effect is on the player, who has a greater understanding of their characters' isolation.

Sample file



7. OVERMATCH YOUR CHARACTERS

I was playing a Rolemaster game, and we had struggled through the villain's hordes to get to the final confrontation. Rolemaster is built around exploding dice that they call open-ended rolls. Roll over 95 on a d100, and you get to roll again and add the second roll to your first. Roll over 95 gain, and you can keep on rolling and adding. There is no upper limit to how high your roll can get. When you are fighting in Rolemaster, you roll the dice, add your skill, deduct their defense, and then compare the result to a table. The maximum result is 150. The higher the final roll, the more damage you do. There is no explicit damage roll, that is read off the attack table, but you do get to

roll for a critical effect, also on a d100.

The first round of combat and I tried to duck and weave through the villain's lieutenants arrayed before him. This was an absurdly difficult maneuver, -70 on my roll, but my roll exploded and exploded again; the final total was well over 200, and I only needed 101 for success! I was in front of the villain with enough of my combat round remaining to make a strike. This was another phenomenal roll, and even after the villain's defenses, it ended up at over 300. More than twice what was needed for a maximum result. That would hurt, but it is the critical roll that kills. I rolled a 66, which, if you have played Rolemaster, you will know is one of the magic numbers. The strike went straight through the villain's lungs and pretty much instant death.

I don't think I have ever had such an amazing set of dice rolls since. I was rolling 96 to 00 back to back.

Great rolls, but a rather disappointing anticlimax to a massive quest. If it had been death by a single hitpoint, or somehow borderline, then it would have been worth fudging it and letting the villain stagger away. If it had been in the general melee, maybe a lieutenant could have spirited the body away.

It was neither of those things. It was a once-in-

a-lifetime run of such extreme luck, and the result so cut and dried that to fudge the result would have ruined the campaign even more than the early demise of the villain.

I am one hundred percent sure that everyone has a similar experience of one-punching a villain that had been set up as a battle royale.

In a fantasy game, this is okay. We all know it happens, the dice rolls themselves are a tale worth telling, and that is my entry when telling fishermen's tales of fantastic dice rolls.

In a horror game, instadeath is a horrible thing. All the work you have put into building up the atmosphere is instantly destroyed by shouts of excitement and "my dice roll is bigger than yours" banter.

One of the unique things about the horror genre is that you are not supposed to get out alive.

This gives you explicit permission to massively overmatch the characters.

Try putting a monster that can only be hurt by magic weapons in the middle of New York City. Your characters are going to have a hard time finding anything that can hurt it. This is the premise behind the Omen franchise and An American Werewolf in London. The 'monster' cannot die, but the characters do not know that.

If your GM does pull this on you, I suggest finding a Bishop, Arch-Bishop, or Cardinal playing golf and stealing their golf bag. There is at least a chance they have blessed their clubs, hoping it may improve their swing, and a bag of Holy clubs could arm your entire party.

I find monsters do not make good horror villains because they are too easy to understand. If it is a monster, you need to kill it. If it is a supernatural monster, you probably have to banish it.

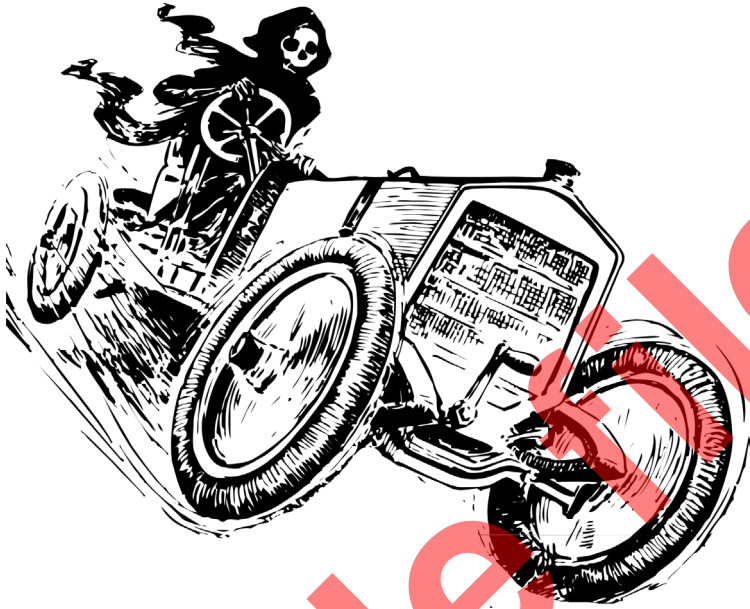
The best way to use monsters is by tying them to a location. A vampire in a castle works because you have entered the lion's den, you are on its territory, and it holds all the cards. Van Helsing knew what he was hunting. He was not on a quest of discovery. Vampire hunting horror games work because the players can buy into the genre. Hunted by vampires games work for the same reason, but the odds are firmly on the vampire's side in both cases. The characters are completely overmatched and outgunned. The fear is fear of death itself. The location is not a single place; it is a mental landscape where the players can picture the events. They are tapping into pop culture.

Mummies work in an egyptology setting, either in a museum or pyramid, because they are believable. A Mummy as a wandering monster in a dungeon isn't.

What you want to do is maintain hope, even

if you know that the characters are doomed. Characters against an overmatched villain have two choices, flee or fall. You can create horror by leading the characters to the point where they realize that they have just those two choices too late.

Sample file



8. LIMIT THE GAME

Horror works best when it is a direct contrast to your group's normal gaming diet. If you encountered the living dead last week, and again this week and next week is another dose of living dead; it will stop being horror and become mundane.

This is a common problem with trying to inject horror into many D&D-style campaigns. The players and characters are just inured into killing everything they meet. If it is undead, you try and turn it, and if that fails, you kill it.

If you create a game that is specifically set up for horror, you get two big gains. First, if the characters are created for this specific game, there

is less emotional attachment should they die. The second gain is that you can set up the game right from the start to be horror. You can tailor character creation, the setting, and the opening scene.

A game with a limited scope does not have to carry the burden of being the start of a campaign. Instead, it can be an end in itself.

I had been reading a series of graphic novels called *Shamen King* by Hiroyuki Takei. The Shamen can integrate with ghosts and battle spirits. Although these are manga comics, it deals with a cross-section of horror themes, revenge from beyond the grave, cannibalism, and betrayal.

I set up a horror game using *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* as my rules. The characters were intentionally 'normal' people. My game was built around the idea of possession, an unwilling integration in *Shamen speak*. What I ended up with was a kind of hybrid of manga spirit battles and *The Exorcist*. If a character died during a spirit battle, they died in real life. The possessing spirit trapped the characters in an abandoned bowling venue and explained the 'rules', they fight for their lives and their souls; if they live, they would be free; if they failed they die, and their soul goes to hell to suffer the spirit's torment in its place.

The game went through a phase of disbelief; this must be some prank, then discovery. These

were not the first victims, and their lifeless bodies were still in the seats where they died or hiding in closets and behind bins.

I then played out the first spirit battle, a powerful demon against a pharmacist called Himari. She didn't last long, and the other characters could see her body twisting and writhing as the battle took place. While Himari fought in an out-of-body experience above her friends and her own body.

After the fight and death of Himari, I took the pressure off and let the characters explore their location, they tried to escape, but doors and windows slammed shut and locked, isolating them. They tried to shout for help, but the public address system started blaring out music to drown out their voices.

Then the second battle happened.

I had no idea how the characters were supposed to defeat the demon. I was open to suggestions. I wasn't committed to killing them all one by one, but that was obviously on the cards.

If anyone had got out alive, that would have been the end of the game. The prize was their life. When they didn't, that was the other possible, and more likely, outcome.

The self-contained nature of the game made the possibility of the character's deaths very real.

It also focused the mind on the here and now, not on plans for the character's future.

Nothing stops you from carrying on a game if the characters survive and you want to play on, but you are not committed by starting with a limited scope game.

Sample file



9. PARTIAL INFORMATION

Locked in an ancient reference library, I pored over an old occult text. After hours of study, I had finally grasped the ritual to summon the star vampire.

There was nothing now to stop me from waiting for the appointed day and carrying out the ritual.

That probably sounds like successful research until you hear that the rituals for binding and controlling a star vampire were not in the volume I had studied.

It is a cliché that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. But, that is a cliché that you can play upon by giving your characters the correct but incomplete answers.

If you are a GM who likes to prep in detail, you can decide what knowledge the characters can learn and break it into smaller pieces. Then you can scatter these nuggets across different NPCs, locations, and tomes.

Partial information can shatter your player characters' confidence once they realize that they only have part of an answer. How can you trust something that you know maybe incomplete? Information comes in many forms. Fortunately, eyewitness accounts are notoriously unreliable, so they become your friend as a source of partial and inaccurate information. You can signpost what you are doing by giving the characters contradictory first-person accounts of an incident. These could be witnesses they get to talk to or two diaries from different family members who attended the same event. Make it obvious once, and then the characters must rely on their own judgment from that point onward.

Half a ritual may create the monster that is the main threat in the adventure. The characters create the very thing that endangers them. Cults that don't truly understand what they are dabbling with are another source of partial and possibly inaccurate information.

Normally, a thinking party of characters will research, formulate a plan, and execute it. Instead, with partial information, what you are doing is letting them build their plan on shaky foundations.



10. BOND WITH THE NPCs

It could be just me, but this is something that I find really easy to do in solo play, and play by post, but extremely difficult in group play.

Getting player characters to bond with your NPCs is really powerful in horror genre games. If the characters, or the players, do not care about an NPC, their death or threats against them are just another digit on the body count.

When the characters care, that is when it becomes personal.

Game system selection for running your horror game can make this easier or harder. For example, the Year Zero Engine games, like *Mutant Year, Zero*, *Vaesen*, and *Forbidden Lands*, have bonds

between characters as part of character creation.

Fiasco is all about relationships, and they are key to the way the game is played.

GURPS and Hero System also build relationships into character creation.

The king of the hill in this respect is Delta Green. In a Delta Green game, your bonds to NPCs are a vital outlet for the mental pressures your character will inevitably suffer. You can form new bonds with other agents, but this will diminish your bonds with friends and family. Arc Dream, the publishers of Delta Green, really understood the importance of bonding normal people to a player character.

An NPC that your characters care about is a powerful motivator. Just enough blacksmith going missing is a plot hook. A close friend or romantic significant other going missing is a personal attack.

An NPC that the characters care about is one that they will turn back to help when everyone is fleeing. It is an NPC that a character will consider sacrificing themselves for.

Once you have the connection, you can use it to amplify the horror by creating dilemmas or dividing loyalties.

Players are not going to bond with mediocre NPCs that mean nothing to them. It is the GM's

job to create NPCs that the characters can grow attached to.

This is about listening to your players and trying to identify with what they are looking for. Then, what do they respond to?

Before you try and run your next horror game, try threatening a few incidental NPCs and see what sort of response you get. For example, if a character is trying to hook up with one of the servers in the tavern and they end up dead, what reaction does that provoke? If it is seen as a transparent plot hook; you may have trouble.

I had the most success getting players to care about an NPC by rescuing the NPC and showering praise on the party because of their actions. Once the characters had saved them, the characters enjoyed the benefits of being seen as heroic. That NPC was instrumental to their nice feelings.

That gave me a platform to build off of.

At the top of this chapter, I said that I found having the characters care about NPCs was easier in solo and play by post games.

The reason for this is different in each format. In a solo game, it helps to have fewer NPCs but to make them more recurring. This helps make the world feel more persistent. As you create NPCs on the fly, creating many NPCs can take up a lot of

time. Reusing NPCs takes less time and are easier to get into character.

You can adopt persistent NPCs into group games. Reduce the number of NPCs that you create and reuse them. Once the players know their names, they are part way towards caring about them.

With play by post, the difference is down to the detailing. When you write your responses, you have as much time as you want to craft your actions. I always encourage players to tell me what they want to do and say and tell me how they say it, any gestures, mannerisms, and movements. For example, if they are giving their reservations about a course of action, are they pacing back and forth, counting the points off on their fingers, or jabbing the stem of their pipe at whoever they are talking to to add emphasis? These little, seemingly trivial extra details make it really easy to imaging the character as they speak.

No one wants the GM to launch into a twenty-minute monolog about how the librarian hands them a book, but you can add two or three adjectives to an NPC, and each time they interact, try and add one additional piece of description, inspired by those adjectives. The adjectives serve as an anchor point. It keeps the NPC consistent. The adjectives may change over time, but they should only change based upon the character's

actions or a major plot device.

The goal is to make these NPCs easier to picture for the players.

I had an NPC that was based loosely on my own grandmother. She [the NPC] owned a bakery and general store. It was the usual place to buy rations before heading into the wilderness. Every time the party bought rations, she would quietly say to the party wizard that she had put an extra sandwich in his rations.

Much later in the game, the party caught a thief sneaking out the back of the bakery with the store's takings. The protective response from the party was immediate and unconditional. All for the sake of an extra sandwich. I believe that this taps into the idea of the random act of kindness, or that little things can make a big difference.



11. BE LESS SUPERHEROIC

If your characters can carve their way through an army of goblins and slay dragons before brunch, the chances of scaring them with a creaky window shutter on a still night are slim.

The central characters in horror movies and books are often flawed and frequently normal people, just like you and me.

That semblance of normality helps reinforce that these horrible things could happen to you.

Operation White Box is a WWII game with the original D&D rules at its core. It would make no sense to have a 10th level infantryman with 90 hit points that could be shot forty times and seemingly not even feel it. The way the game handles it is to

define three different levels of realism. A realistic game gives a character just 1d6 hit points. At the opposite end, they get 1d20 for a Hollywood action movie level of survivability.

By making a point of how character survivability changes the nature of the game, the GM has to make that choice, and the players understand. If you have 1d6 hit points and a machine gun bullet can do 3-8 [d6+2] damage, you do not want to get shot. More than that, every firefight you go into carries a real risk of death.

The game is capped at 5th level, so although you can get more hit points with experience, the danger is still there.

Games that do not use levels do not have the problem with hit point inflation. One of the oldest games in the hobby [traveler] does not make you any more robust or bulletproof regardless of how many adventures you have survived.

Games where the threat of death is real, are less heroic because the characters have to be more cautious.

Caution is the first step towards fear.

I am not saying that you cannot run horror in D&D, but I am saying that it gets extremely hard in game systems where characters are of heroic proportions. This often goes hand in hand with

games that use levels. Low-level characters are probably quite fragile, which is fine; high-level characters are often very robust and not easily scared.

Picking your game system is just like picking the right tool for any job. You can put in screws with a hammer, but using a screwdriver will prove to be the better option in the long run.

Sample file

FEAR

12. OVERCOME CHARACTER FLAWS

The horror in this game style comes from limiting the character's options until their only choice is the thing they fear they will fail at. Fear of failure is a powerful motivator.

This came up in a game I was playing recently. The setup will sound familiar. The party had all the fighters in the front row to serve as a shield, and behind that was the wizard hurling spells from a safe distance.

Arrayed against them were ghouls and ghosts, and behind that I believe it was a spined devil.

The battle commenced, and it swung from one side to the other. The characters had the upper hand

until a couple of key fighters were paralyzed, then the odds swung against them. Finally, a few lucky rounds and the odds when back in the character's favor. As the end of the fight approached, only two figures remained. The wizard and the devil. The wizard only had his dagger and a firebolt cantrip; the devil was immune to fire.

The wizard drew his knife and advanced.

The wizard's player was not feeling supremely confident at that moment. Unfortunately, the same was true for all the players as they had to sit and watch the fight's outcome.

A wizard without magic not being very good at fighting is not really a character flaw, but it does highlight the point.

Overcoming flaws is challenging for players who normally choose to play to their strengths.

This technique works really well in games where the villain is some form of tempter or deceiver. What they offer needs to be resisted, or the character may fall under their power or be beholden to them.

Characters with faults or weaknesses that the player chose for themselves are often the best to exploit. For example, I had a character in a Coriolis game that had been horribly burned as a teenager. Since then, they have had a fear of open

flames. The adventure's villain was a mystic and mind reader and knew of my weakness. When I had them cornered, they held a simple candle to a wall hanging and burst into flames. The mystic pulled it down, so it landed on the floor between us, setting light to cushions and rugs.

All the time the fire was there, it was in every description and drove the "What do you do?" question at the heart of all roleplaying.

A weakness is not a weakness if it doesn't come up in the game. Horror games are the perfect time to use these weaknesses if your villain is in a position to leverage them.



13. THE RHYTHM OF HORROR

Horror games, and movies, have a rhythm. There are many different styles of horror, body horror [the chest-bursting scene in Alien], slasher movies, zombie apocalypses, hunted [Blair Witch Project], and psychological [Silence of the lambs] to name a few.

Each of these examples has periods of calm. The characters are allowed to recover, then mounting tension in a repeating cycle. Each cycle has the recovery get shorter, and the tension gets greater.

You want to emulate this cycle in your horror games. If you cannot complete a game in a single

session, then end the game after a period of tension and at the start of a quiet period.

I ran a game with a classic haunted house. There was a sense of general mounting weirdness during the days, but the spirits resented the characters being in the house overnight. This was the rhythm, day and night. Each day, the spirits became a little more emboldened, and more things started to happen. It progressed from what could be thought of as 'you are not welcome here' like doors and draws jamming shut and things the characters moved from their proper spot reappearing where they had come from, to the active hostility of a poltergeist.

The increasing hostility shortened the feeling of the pressure being off.

Each night there was a more active threat. The first night the sheets and blankets were used to try and smother the characters as they slept. The next night the spirits tried to possess one of the characters and have them kill the others. The third night a 'Fury' apparition appeared in the top corner of each bedroom and tried to kill each character.

On the first day, the spirits wanted the characters to leave; they were locked in and not allowed to leave from the second day.

Taking the pressure off the characters makes it feel worse when you pile the pressure back on.

The contrast heightens the difference.

Constant pressure overloads the players, and they will become desensitized to it, and those scenes will lose their power. It is a bit like a bad slasher movie. After the first 10 minutes, you have seen every possible novel use for a chainsaw, and then it is just repetition. You want to avoid that feeling of repetition. You are trying to scare the characters, not bore them.

There are four different kinds of fear. Unease, Dread, Terror and Horror.

You can step up and down this progression.

Do not skip the unease stage. This is where you get to play with the player's expectations. At this point the players do not know what is ahead in the adventure. You can use the most subtle of effects for the greatest impact. The goal of the unease stage is not to confirm or deny anything, but there is definitely something that isn't right.

Dread is when your characters know what could happen but don't know for sure that it will. This is where partial information can give the characters knowledge of what happened to other victims in the past, but not how or why it happened.

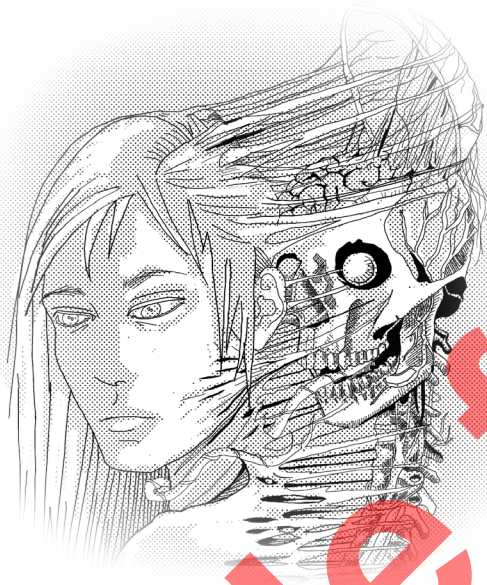
Terror happens the moment before the big reveal. The characters know for certain what will happen and that it is definitely going to happen. They are just waiting for it to happen. This is

probably the height of fear that we can manage in a roleplaying game.

Terror can be maintained for quite long periods if the characters can avoid the bad thing happening. There is a cliché, “You can run, but you cannot hide.” That sums up sustained terror. You can also step down from terror to dread, maybe the sun rises, and the characters get to live at least until the next sunset.

Horror is the moment of revelation where everything is known and the source of the fear is revealed. Horror is generally short-lived. This is the jump scare as the thing bursts out amongst the characters. Horror may be the genre’s name, but in reality, it is a fleeting moment, frequently followed by the phrase “Roll for initiative.”

What we strive for is to move back and forth between unease and dread, and then between dread and terror, and only at the last moment do you cross the line to the horror reveal.



14. HEROIC SACRIFICES

Heroic sacrifices are similar in many ways to dilemmas [above]. The choice is whether one character dies or they all do.

This is Gandalf's big moment in Moria against the Balrog.

The goal is for the characters to reach this conclusion themselves, not you forcing it on them.

In a group game, I would freeze time for most of the party while you play out the fight scene for the sacrificial character. This is a mark of respect for their sacrifice; they should not have to be competing for your attention as the others are fleeing through the dwarven halls.

Games where the combat is long and drawn

out are not good candidates for the heroic sacrifice unless your group is happy to just call it. I find that very dissatisfying, but your group may feel differently.

Depending on the game, death need not be the end. This is the case with the Balrog; it was the end of Gandalf the Grey and the return of Gandalf the White. The important thing is that the return was not immediate; the party all thought Gandalf was dead, so it remained for quite some time. Without that sense of loss, the sacrifice has no meaning.

Not every game or genre has the option for reincarnation, resurrection, or raising the dead.

For the player, the value of the sacrificial death depends on the value of the character. If this is your first dungeon, you are all first level, and you want to hold off three orcs while the party escape; there is little or no real value to it. The player can create a new character in five minutes and be back in the game.

If the adventure is a one-shot and gets towards the end of the game, it is similar. If the character was going to be binned in the next thirty minutes anyway, there is no real sacrifice.

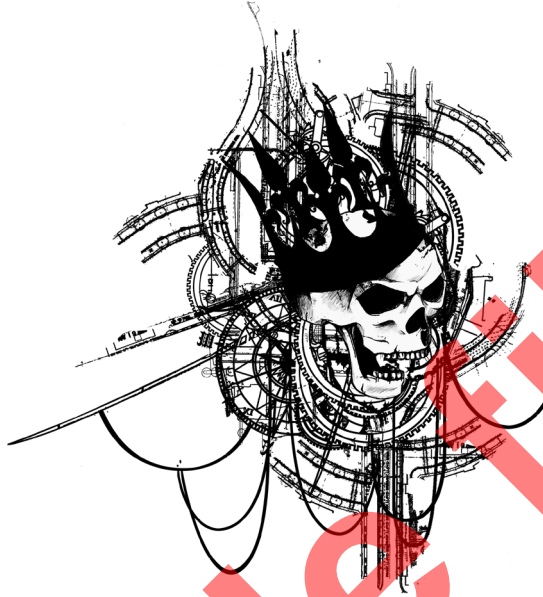
No value means no horror.

The horror in the heroic sacrifice comes from the choice being a high-value sacrifice and the

GM accepting the offer. Many players would hope to play some kind of fate or fortune point and somehow survive. That is not the deal that is on offer here.

For the GM, this is a chance to let rip and use every possible action for a creature to its maximum effect. A real no-holds-barred fight to the death. If the character survives, it is because they deserved it and won it. If they don't, they have bought the survival of the party.

Like so many horror tools, this is something that you should not overuse, or it loses its impact.



15. HORROR COMMUNICATIONS

Horror communications is a plot device where you send messages, from beyond the grave, to the characters.

I like two variations of this.

The first is the dead character scenario. If you had just had a heroic sacrifice, you have a player with no character. What you can do is let them play on as a ghost. The only proviso is that they cannot communicate with the characters directly. I encourage the player of the dead character to be creative in how they attempt to communicate. Their options will vary depending on the setting and time period.

There is something very spooky about getting an SMS message from a dead friend!

The second version is an NPC that only communicates from a distance. These could be emails, SMS, or carrier pigeon. The eerie thing is that they have knowledge that they shouldn't possibly be able to know. There is a scene in *The Matrix* where Morpheus directs Thomas Anderson as if he can see everything.

The NPC could be a ghost, an astral projection, or communicating from outside your perceived reality. A low-tech version of this is painting messages on a wall when no one is present. Normally, this is a way of offering assistance to the characters without putting a new person in the party.

You can have fun with this if you can really send SMS messages to the player! If you are not sending real SMS messages, you can prepare a selection of messages in advance and just pass them to the player as needed. Prepare many, for every situation you can think of. It doesn't matter if you don't use them all. If you always appear to have the right message prepared, the players may even find that spooky in its own right.

A few very generic messages are also good to have ready. For example, "It's coming", "It's behind you.", and "Run now!" are good for many situations.



16. HUMANIZE VICTIMS

Humanizing your victims is about making your players care about them. This is different to making your characters care about your NPCs because you will never get to play a dead body.

I play in a regular 5e game via Fantasy Grounds. The GM removes the tokens of anything dead to simplify the battleground. At the end of the battle, there is just us. What the characters should see is bodies strewn around and piles of viscera from terrible wounds. Instead, what we get is a cave floor clean enough to eat your dinner off.

We care so little about the bodies that they simply cease to exist.

You need your characters to care so much about the victims in your horror games that each one is personal.

How you can approach that is to start with their description. Put the killing blow on the hidden side. If they had their throat ripped out by a werewolf, have them lying face down, maybe an arm folded under their head, as if sleeping. It is only when the character turns them over that the wound is obvious.

Make sure your victims are all named. Back in the 1970s, I had a t-shirt with my name on it. It was when getting transfers added to clothing while you wait was new. So you picked the letters of your name and some other graphics, and they would make your t-shirt right in front of you. This was in the days before anyone realized that very bad people could come up to children and pretend to know them if they had their names emblazoned on their t-shirts. The point of this digression is that if you are playing in that time period, you can put the victim's name right front and center.

In modern or future settings, take a moment to think about the contents of the victim's wallet or purse. There could be money and ID, but also photographs of a spouse or partner and children.

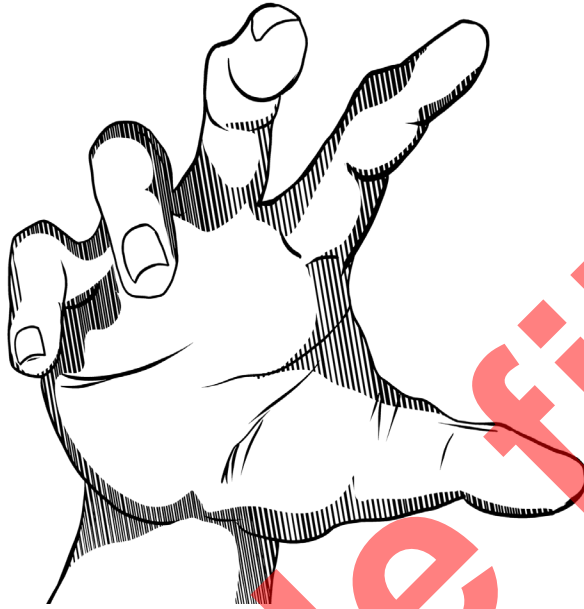
Who identifies a body is important as well. If a body is identified by a parent or spouse, that

is a much more powerful emotional scene. The same body identified by a town guard or sheriff moves from emotionally powerful to emotional detachment. Officials have to deal with death daily.

You can pick out elements of a character's backstory and link them to the victim. For example, maybe they were born in the same place, studied at the same university? Shared some common experiences?

It is tempting to throw emotional hook after emotional hook at your players in an attempt to make them care, but if it becomes too obvious, the players are more likely to balk against it.

This is a fine line to walk. But, if you can pull it off, the impact of the death is massively magnified.



17. EMPHASISE SENSATIONS

We frequently prioritize vision in roleplaying. First, we describe what characters can see, describing scenes and distances. The second most used sense is that of hearing. Horror games demand more.

We commonly think of humans as having five senses. We actually have many more than that, but in games, we rarely ever even make strong use of all five.

Horror is rife with sensory cliches. Footsteps heard from rooms above, the sound of creaking doors opening or closing, a child's rocking horse starting to move of its own accord. Then you have the temperature drops as spirits enter a room, and

we talk of the damp of the grave. Demonic horror uses the smell of sulfur or brimstone.

I recommend using more sensory information in your horror games. For every location, NPC or event, consider three different senses and note how the characters will experience it.

You do not have to immediately describe everything with all these senses, but feed them out as the scene plays out. For example, does an NPC wear too much perfume? It could be to cover the smell of decay, but whatever the reason, it would be immediately obvious if encountered inside a building. Are their hands cold to the touch? That is unlikely to be noticed until you shake hands or offer a gallic kiss. Do they breathe with a very slight rattle, as if they need to clear their throat?

A room could suffer a sudden temperature drop, frost creeping out from the corners of windows, and a dressing table mirror. These are followed by an unexplained smell of roses when none are present in the room.

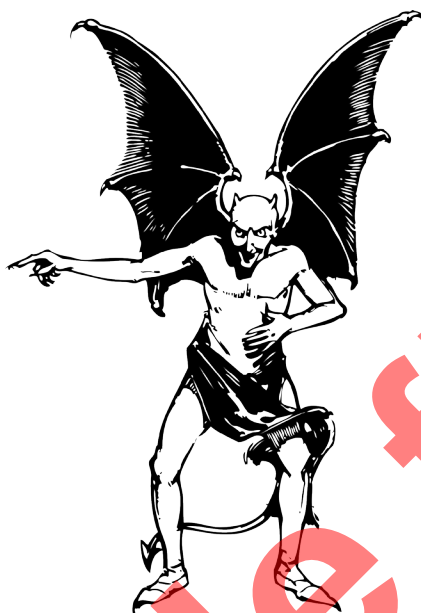
This extra layer of sensory information exists to emphasize the unease stage in the horror rhythm. A strange smell or strange damp patches do not give anything explicit away, but they clearly signpost that something is definitely not right!

I was running a game, and the character latched on to the fact that the smell of roses presaged the

apparition. This then became central to all the plans to deal with the ghost. Was this intended as part of the plot? No, it wasn't, but it gave the character something to work with. As the relationship with the ghost changed, and it felt more threatened, I changed the scent to that distinctive smell of hot metal and oil.

This signposted to the character that something fundamental had changed, and not for the better!

This approach of emphasizing the other senses is so powerful in horror because one of your goals is to let the characters know that there is something 'out there', but you don't want to reveal it. Fear of the unknown is a powerful motivator. The other senses reinforce that whatever it is that the characters are up against is there, that it is unnatural, but it doesn't reveal what it is.



18. ASK THE ORACLE

If you are familiar with solo play, you will know exactly what I mean by an oracle. However, if you are not a solo player, an oracle may need some explanation.

At its most basic, oracles answer questions. Oracle answers require interpretation, just as the oracle of Delphi was known for giving obscure answers to penitent's questions.

In most solo roleplaying games, you roll a dice, and depending on the result, you get a yes or no answer.

Like many rolls in RPGs, you can add modifiers to bias the result towards yes or no.

Oracles are not normally purely binary. If you were using a d6, for example, a 1 could be an emphatic no. A 3 could be a barely negative, 4 would be barely positive, and 6 would be a really strong yes. 2 and 5 would just be regular no and yes answers.

Now when you form a question and roll your dice, you have six possible answers.

How does this help you run a horror game?

It helps because you can abdicate control over the villain to the dice. Not even you will know what it is going to do next.

If your characters create a circle and start a seance, they ask, “Is anybody here?” you roll the d6 and get a 4, a barely positive result. What does that mean? How about a sudden draft rustles the drapes and makes the candle flame dance?

The characters were hoping for a knocking on the table or some obvious answer, but press on anyway. They ask, “Is the spirit of Vladimir here?” Rolling a 1, they get an emphatic negative answer. A ghostly woman’s face appears in the space over the seance and screams at the characters!

One of the secrets to using an oracle is to have in your mind what both yes and no answers will look like before you roll the dice. This can help prevent you from being completely stumped by an

unexpected answer.

The standard yes and no, the 2 and 5 on our d6, are the most common sense things that could answer that question. The more emphatic or softened answers are variations on those most common sense answers.

If you are running a ghost using this technique, it is worth you creating a list of oracle rolls in advance. The players will soon realize that you are rolling a d6 every time they ask a question about the ghost; if they think it is entirely random, it will lose some of its mystery. On the other hand, if you have a list of a hundred d6 rolls prepared, you can just tick off a roll as it is used and give your answer.

If your ghost, lunatic, or demon is controlled by an oracle, not even you will know what it will be doing.

If you have not used an oracle in this way before, it is worth practicing a little first. Just imagine a character walking around one of your planned locations, asking the questions you think the character may ask, and seeing what you come up with.



19. META-GAMING FEAR

One of the biggest turn-offs about games like Call of Cthulhu or the myriad variations on the theme is when the GM is directed to inflict a mental health condition on a character.

There are two issues with this for me. The first is taking away player agency. The whole premise of roleplaying is that the player controls their character. So if the GM steps in and says, now you have to behave like this... you are taking away the whole point of playing your own character.

The second issue is inexperience. If I have never been pyrophobic, how can I play a character that is, especially if there is a chance that someone

around the table may well have been trapped by fire or been caught in a fire. They may well know exactly what it is like, and my bad attempts at playing it may well be offensive or even demeaning.

I suggest that when your rules say to inflict this kind of mental harm on the character, that you discuss it at the table. As long as the player knows what caused the harm, and the effect, they are much more likely to develop good ways to play that effect. It may not be what the random table in the rules said, but this way, your player is still playing their character in their own way.

Mental or emotional harm is not the same as, say, breaking a character's leg. The player is still in control with a physical wound, and the character's personality is not changed. However, when you start to inflict mental harm, you impose temporary or permanent changes on the character's personality.

Many games have fear game mechanics, D&D has the Fear spell, Rolemaster has resistance rolls against Terror. These all do the same thing; they take away player agency. They also do not advance the shared storytelling in any shape or form. On the other hand, if you tell the player your character has failed their Terror resistance roll, the sight of the dragon fills you with terror; what do you do? You let the player decide their character's actions.

The goal in running a horror game is to get

the players to play their characters as they pass through the different stages of fear. Getting them on board and letting them play characters that are scared will make your horror games all the better.

Sample file



20. SHOW THE CONSEQUENCES

All actions have consequences. In most D&D-style games, the characters just walk away from them and never have to deal with the fall out of their actions.

I was playing the Index Card RPG. Like many games, it uses the 5-Room Dungeon format for adventure. 5-Room Dungeons do not need to be dungeons, nor do they need rooms.

The idea of a 5-Room Dungeon is that it gives you a structure from plot hook through to a final conflict and resolution.

Index Card RPG adds an extra step, and that is to return the character to their starting point.

Suppose your village was being terrorized by a

necromancer. Your adventures see you bring the necromancer down and free the village from the threat when you return home. In that case, you will see the consequences of your actions, the village free from oppression, and you being heralded as a hero.

If things do not go so well, the consequences of your actions could be an enraged necromancer sending wave after wave of reanimated corpses into the village until no one is left alive. Not such a good outcome.

Consequences anchor the characters in their world. They are part of what makes horror games different from many fantasy games.

Not all consequences are foreseen, and it is the unintended consequences that you can leverage as a GM. Dilemmas [above] are built around consequences. Both horns of a dilemma have undesirable consequences. Normally, when presenting the players with a dilemma, you will make sure they know the consequences. You want them to make an informed choice, knowing that it will not end well.

This suggestion is about unforeseen consequences.

Alien RPG is another 5-Room Dungeon based game. Here they rename them Prolog, Act I, Act II, Act III, and Epilog, but it is still a 5-Room

Dungeon under the skin. Rather than suggesting the characters return to the beginning to see the consequences of their actions, Alien RPG wraps it into the Epilog, capping it off with the last entry of the doomed crew or team in a ‘captains log’ or officers dispatch.

If your characters start shooting off guns, think about where the bullets go that miss their intended targets? If they cast out a demon, where does that go? Back to hell, or is it looking for another host? If a banished demon goes back to hell, would it rather flee its host before it is banished and find another victim?

If the demon knows that it has a battle on its hands, might it not want to go out in a blaze of glory? Literally?

Fun consequences come back to haunt the characters. If they banish a demon, then the host now knows that demons really exist. What if they follow that line of logic to their own conclusion? NPCs can be very good at reaching the ‘wrong’ conclusions, especially if they have been touched by evil. I could imagine someone knowing that demons now exist and that hell exists may well assume that all the bad things in the world are the devil’s fault. Those that seem to have extremely easy lives have probably sold out or done a deal with the devil. Therefore it is logical to assume that all the billionaires in the world are in league

with the devil. You now have an NPC about to launch their own crusade against the richest 0.1% of the world's industrialists.

Another NPC in the same situation may assume that everything that has ever gone wrong for them was the fault of demons and blame the local church minister for not protecting them.

Sample file



21. OUT OF TIME

Putting time pressure on your players takes away options. There is a very nice game mechanic that does this very simply and is quite good at disconcerting players at the same time.

I have been using drama pools in solo games for several years, but I recently saw them as a core game mechanic in the WAIN system by EN Publishing, the game behind Judge Dredd, Strontium Dogs, and Rogue Trooper.

A drama pool is a random countdown to an event. You first decide what the event is going to be. It could be opening the gates to hell; it could be that the possessed person's body gives out under

stress. Any event can have a drama pool as long as it may happen at any time. An event that is going to happen at a fixed point is not suitable. The 4th of July celebrations are not a good candidate for a drama pool. Discovering the ritual to open the hell mouth is.

Now you have your event you create a dice pool. The bigger the pool the less likely the event is going to happen. Pools between 1d6 and 6d6 will cover most situations.

At each step, that could be a time interval, or a way point in a quest, any defined point, you roll the entire pool of dice. Any dice that land on a 6 you discard from the pool. Over time the pool will shrink as dice are discarded. When the last die is discarded, the event happens.

A 1d6 pool will typically take three throws to show a 6, but it could be on the first throw, or you could throw the dice forever and not get a six. That is the way that random rolls work. A six dice pool could come up with six sixes on the very first roll.

It is this uncertainty that adds to the fear factor for characters. They do not know how long they have, how many mistakes they can afford to make.

It is also always disconcerting to hear the GM throwing a lot of dice behind the screen.

A mean GM may put the dice pool in full view, roll it in the open and make it obvious when discarding dice. This way, the players can see the diminishing pool of dice, even if they do not know what they are for. They will assume that it is nothing good.

Mörk Borg has a similar scheme. The game is played during the end of times. You decide how many steps there are between now and the end of the world. At the start of each day, a d6 is rolled, and on a 1, the world takes a step towards the end. I believe this is based upon the Christian tradition of the seven seals being opened to herald the second coming of Christ [Revelations Ch 5–8].

Drama pools are more flexible than just ending your campaign on the whim of a dice roll. The goal of the pool is to make the players aware that they are up against the clock, but not one that they can predict.



22. WOUNDS ON THE BODY

This is a simple GMing trick if you are playing a body horror or slasher-style horror game.

When you describe the wounds and injuries, focus on the wound on the body, not what has hit the floor.

If someone loses a hand, a surprisingly common occurrence in Rolemaster games, don't worry about the hand, but describe the bloody stump.

As humans, we will always focus on the person; once something is cut off, it becomes less important.

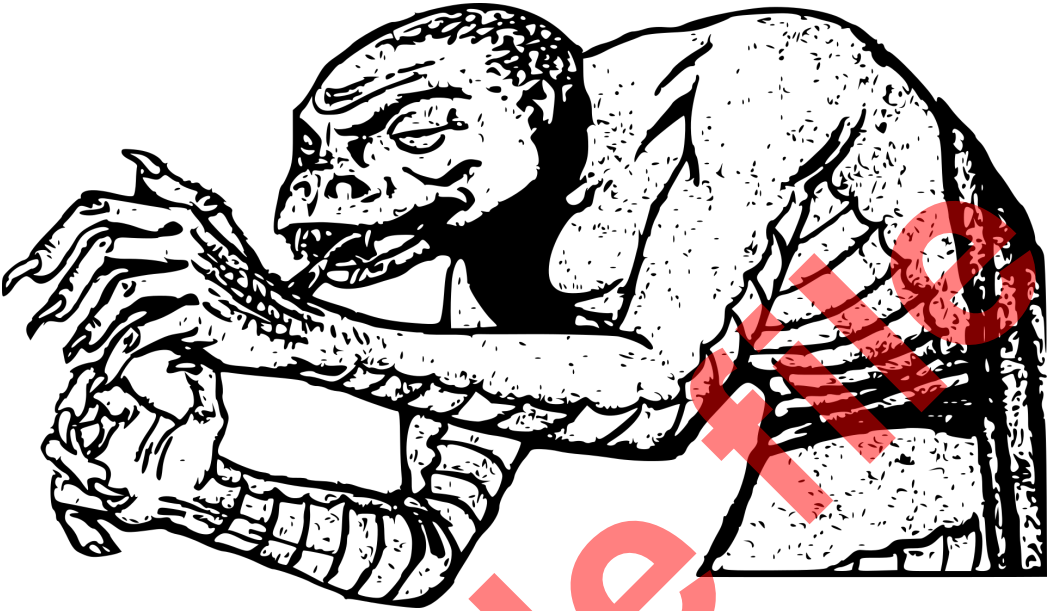
If the body is lying in a pool of their own blood,

make sure you describe the unnatural paleness of their skin from where they bled out. Describe the wound that caused the loss of blood in the first place, and describe the blood matting their hair. Blood on the body is a lot more horrifying than a pool of blood on the floor.

Strangely, the same trick can be used when describing your monsters. Don't describe them as a whole; think about what would draw the eye, and describe those parts in greater detail, using the most evocative language you can.

This is the roleplaying equivalent of the Hollywood close-up. For example, there is a close-up of the alien jaws opening in the movie *Alien* to reveal a second set of jaws inside. These are called pharyngeal jaws and really exist in nature; the moray eel has them; they just do not extend out telescopically as they do in the movie. Taking the time to describe the alien mouth opening and the second set of jaws within will bring home the alien-ness of the *Alien* in that situation.

If you focus on the claws of ripping beasts or the dripping saliva of a werewolf prowling back and forth, looking for an opening to lunge in. We can all imagine what a werewolf looks like. Your job as GM is to breathe life into these monsters and make them real.



23. LAST THOUGHTS

I have played many different games looking for systems that support the style of horror that I wanted to experience. Some do a great job in supporting the GM; others, not so much.

There is only so much that the rules in the book can do to create that atmosphere. The rest has to come from you, the GM.

Horror gaming is fraught with dangers. It, by necessity, deals with dark themes and bad experiences. We have to be constantly aware that we may be having an unintentional effect on any of our players. Gaining consent once at the beginning of the game is not enough; you need to check in with your players at the end of each

session and make sure they are still okay with how the game is going.

A lot of horror games fall into two schools, Cosmic Horror and Vampires.

I am guessing that those are franchises that sell many games, but there is a lot more to the horror genre than just those two.

Alien RPG does a good job at bringing that movie franchise to life. The Storyteller systems of Onyx Path, Vampire, Werewolf, and Chronicles of Darkness are good systems. One of my favorite horror systems is Dark Streets and Darker Secrets.

You will notice that D&D does not feature on this list of games. That game is great at what it was built for, sword and sorcery high adventure. However, it does not work so well for horror simply because what should be truly monstrous is reduced to simply a monster. Characters kill monsters all day, every day, with a short rest to heal their wounds. D&D is not a game of life-changing consequences. I am not saying it cannot be, but it isn't by design.

Part of the problem with D&D is that D&D players are trained to solve most problems at the end of a sword. Killing monsters is the way to advance your character and get more powerful. Killing monsters and taking their stuff is the way to get more powerful and rich.