

### INTRODUCTION

**Fear Itself** is a new roleplaying game of personal horror. This game includes and adds to the GUMSHOE system, a modular rule set featured first in **The Esoterrorists**. It combines bullet-proof investigative rules for playing and devising adventures, with a solid set of general abilities as well as horror-specific rules. Further new releases will build on the GUMSHOE foundations here, and add new genre-appropriate features to GUMSHOE for each type of game. Look for **Unremitting Horror**, a supplement to both **Fear Itself** and **The Esoterrorists**.

### GAME DOGMA

Over the last few years, there have been many developments in the roleplaying game design field, and we've been watching them with interest. A year ago we devised a simple new set of rules for new games we are producing, our game dogma.

Our new games will be:

Fun to play
Easy to learn
Easy to teach
Easy to play
Innovative
Approachable
Sustainable



A GM should be able to learn each game in half an hour, nuances in a hour or so. It should be easy to teach the basics of the game to a novice in fifteen minutes. The design should take account of developments in gaming over the last ten years and offer something genuinely original. GMs will want to run the game time and time again, and players will want to play it.

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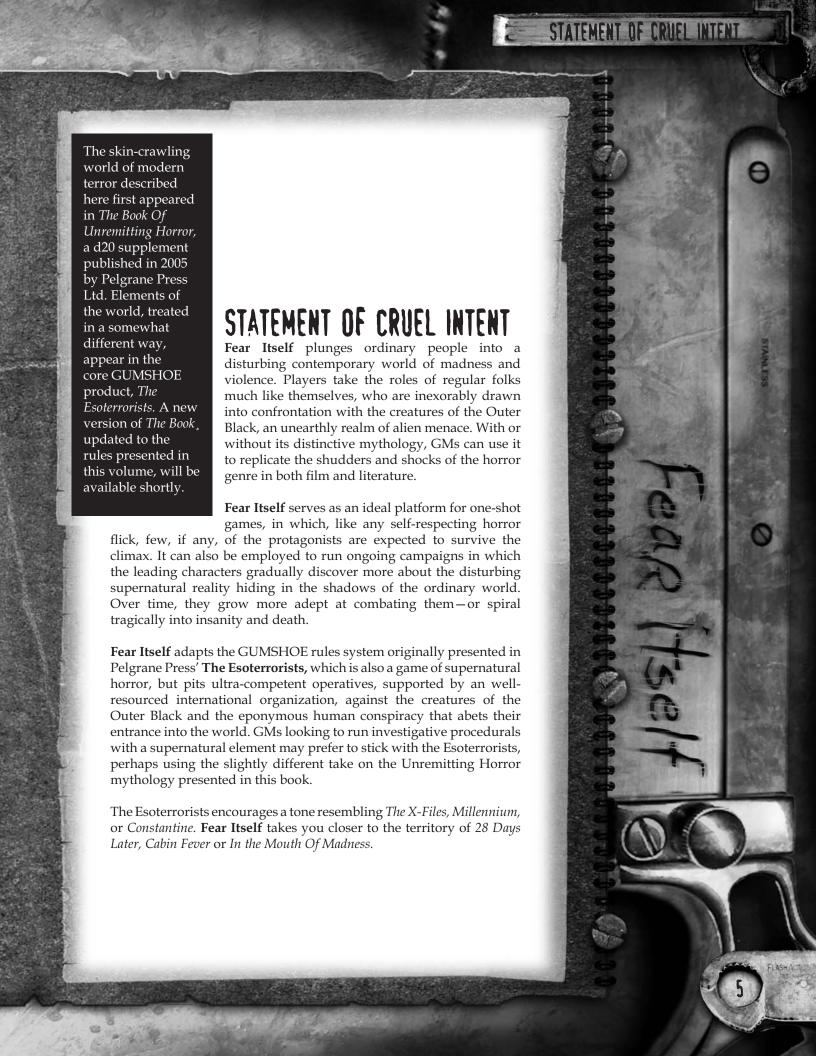
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**Fear Itself** characters begin play as ordinary people, unaware of the presence of supernatural forces in their world. They're people like the players, from normal walks of life. Their backgrounds may slightly prepare them for confrontations with danger, but such experience may only lend them the overconfidence needed to walk headfirst into the shredder.

Even characters with expertise in law enforcement, the military or other danger-ready occupations will be relatively inexperienced; see sidebar.

Character Creation
Quick Reference

- Taking into account the series premise, create your concept. (May or may not be a stereotype.)
- Choose a risk factor.
- Specify the worst thing you ever did. (GM may defer this stage until one or two sessions of play.)
- Buy abilities.
- Specify sources of stability.
- (At the first session, after you hear descriptions of other PCs) Select the player character you most like (your affinity) and most dislike (your enmity.) This step is omitted if the main characters don't know each other before the first scenario begins.

#### THE PREMISE

Your GM will probably present you with a series premise to use as a springboard in character creation. The premise explains what the characters have in common, and requires you to create your PC within certain boundaries.

#### Example premises might include:

- You are all students at the same high school
- You're regulars at a hipster coffee shop in a bohemian neighborhood
- You're passengers on a cruise ship
- You're former members of the same army unit
- -You're clients and staff members of an upscale mental institution

#### THE CONCEPT

The first step in character creation is to choose a **concept**. The best concepts are quick and punchy, consisting of an adjective and a noun. The noun tells you who the character is at first glance, while the adjective modifies it with additional detail. Unexpected combinations of verb and noun can lead to compelling, original-seeming characters.

**Example concepts**: surly secretary, manic party girl, standoffish rocker, ethereal copy shop clerk, intense comic book collector, stolid reporter, nervous actress, depressed accountant, drunken writer, condescending office manager, arrogant salesman, fast-talking dog trainer, loutish seminarian, perky waitress, blissful slacker, handsome gambler, extroverted scientist, alienated cabbie.

Unless the GM tells you otherwise, assume that the game takes place in a realistic version of the world as we know it. If you suggest that your cruise ship passenger is a ninja assassin from the Ninety-Nine Killer Army, be prepared to be reminded that modern-day

ninja assassins are purely fanciful characters.

Ask for the GM's approval before creating a character whose backstory includes a pre-existing familiarity with the occult, especially of genuinely supernatural events. In many cases the GM will want a cast of characters who have no idea that monsters and demons really exist.

If the GM finds that your proposed concept doesn't quite fit, she'll work with you to preserve the basic sort of character you want to play, while still conforming to her overall framework for the series.

### STEREOTYPES

Many players find it easy to dream up character concepts for high-flying space operas or gritty fantasy epics but become completely stumped when asked to invent perfectly ordinary people they might meet on the street. They may find it useful to pick from a list of common genre stereotypes¹. Astute readers will note that these are the same types that appear in teen comedies. That's because most horror stories with multiple protagonists are marketed to the same teenage audience. Many groups may prefer to add dimension to these characters by putting a decade or so of age and life experience on them. This gives you the post-graduate good girl, the aging jock, and so on.

#### 6000 GIRL

The good girl is an ordinary young woman. If not chaste, she's more modest and circumspect about her sexuality than the other young women in the cast of characters. Smart and cautious, she becomes the ultimate prize of the shadowy forces stalking the group—often proving herself more determined to survive than those around her. Example: Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*.

#### SEXY GIRL

Dressing provocatively and always ready for a quick roll in the hay, the sexy girl acts as foil to the good girl. Often she's nasty in both senses of the word, rudely asserting her social superiority. The sexy girl often meets a grisly end typical of the genre's twisted version of Old Testament morality (see Paris Hilton in *House Of Wax*) but may evolve into a better person worthy of survival (Franka Potente in *Creep*.)

#### JOCK / STUD

The male equivalent of the sexy girl, the jock/stud is the socially dominant alpha male who typifies masculine values, often in a

negative way. He is often paired with the sexy girl. He may prove himself worthy and die nobly or establish himself as a shitheel and die ignominiously, but either way he's headed for the chopping block.

Example: Nicolas Le Phat Tan, Sheitan



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In the case of other genres, it is the practice of game designers to flatter the audience and tell them that they're playing not the lowly stereotypes of lame pop culture, but the eternal, psychologically resonant archetypes of myth and literature. Forget that noise. Horror, especially in cinematic form, thrives on outright stock characters. This may be because it's a disreputable genre catering to hacky creative instincts, but more likely its use of stereotype goes hand in hand with the social/sexual anxieties the genre so often dabbles in.

#### BRAIN

The brain is the guy, often exaggeratedly geeky, equipped with the obscure background information needed to figure out what's trying to kill the group, and why. His undoubted skill with computers may be augmented with a general expertise improvisatory gadgetry. In social situations he may be betrayed by his compulsively awkward behavior. or simply see his legitimate concerns casually dismissed by his more worldly castmates. Example: Cory LeGros, The Last Winter

#### **AUTHORITY FIGURE**

This is the protective combat expert character, often older than the other characters, who teaches them to fight back against the creatures of darkness. His fate in a horror movie is often to bite the dust at the end of the second act, to further intensify the jeopardy faced by the other characters. A character run by a cautious roleplayer may achieve a longer lifespan. Example: Ving Rhames, *Dawn Of the Dead* 

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#### **BURN OUT**

This comic relief character is the quintessential slacker, his senses so blurred by pot smoke that he fails to see the enormity of his jeopardy until it's tragically too late. In an ongoing **Fear Itself** campaign, his cheery good nature and dulled perceptions may turn out to be a surprisingly effective survival mechanism.

Although he's not a horror character per se, the Platonic exemplar of this type remains Brad Pitt in *True Romance*.

#### 6000 GUY

Here we find the male everyman character, often young, frequently presented with a minimum of specific detail, so that audience members can project a sense of identification onto him. He protects others and retains a basic, common-sense morality no matter how dire circumstances become. Example: Cillian Murphy in 28 Days Later.

#### PREACHER MAN

A genre where evil takes on solid form invites questions of religious faith. The priest or preacher is a standard figure in supernatural horror, especially the devil

> Exorcist, Bless the Child, Exorcism Of Emily Rose.) Religious figures trained in their culture's exorcism techniques be able to hold creatures of the Outer Black at bay. Or maybe not... Example: Harvey Keitel, From Dusk

> > Til Dawn.

subgenre



## RESTRICTION ON CONCEPTS

#### Pregenerated Characters

With the exception of a few TV series and comics with ongoing casts of characters, most works of horror are closed-ended, with finite conclusions. In many instances they dispose of most or all of their leading characters by the time they're done. GMs wishing to replicate this structure are strongly advised to create their own casts of PCs and pass them around to their players for divvying. If you're only planning on four to six hours of play, you're wasting your player's time by asking them to spend even fifteen minutes building their characters. This is especially important in convention play, which requires finite storylines. Depending on your players' tolerance for pregenerated characters, you might consider using them even for longer series. This allows you to fashion tales of personal terror, arising from the characters' very specific support networks, past histories, and neuroses. Then again, a true collaboration between GM and players will likely be even more memorable for all concerned.

### RESTRICTIONS ON CONCEPTS

When a GM announces the start of a straight-up horror game, there are certain character types nearly every player gravitates towards. However, if everybody plays one of these types, the group composition becomes skewed, and warping the feel of the game so that it longer resembles a typical horror story. (It's the tragedy of the commons, with hit dice.)

In Fear Itself, the GM prevents this from occurring by imposing quotas. Only one player per group may choose each of the coveted character types. Players decide between themselves, by whatever means of negotiation they desire, who gets to play them. Wise groups will ensure that their combat specialist is played by a member with a good attendance record.

The restricted types are:

- combat / investigation **expert.** This catch-all includes police officers, military veterans, karate champions, private eyes, and any other type with a similar skill set. When in doubt as to whether a character falls into this everpopular category, GMs are enjoined to judge ruthlessly. This is a single character not one combat expert and separate investigative specialist.

- **psychic**. For more on psychic powers, see p. 22.

Further, characters of either category are fumbling, resource-starved exponents of their type. Characters must lack not only innate ability, but also opportunity to call on powerful patrons or organizations for help. Players choosing such characters must explain why the lack the full wherewithal otherwise indicated by their background. The most obvious option is to make the character young and unseasoned.

Players can make their combat/investigative experts army trainees, police academy cadets, or apprentice private eyes working for their P.I. uncles on weekends. Or you can go to the other end of the age spectrum and create infirm and forgetful retirees. Alternately, the characters may be mere self-taught wannabes, or washouts, cashiered for skeevy behavior.

GMs should warn players wanting to play the combat/investigative character that they're picking an especially fragile character type. The horror genre tends toward an intensely skeptical view of authority figures. If the authorities were any good, they'd be able to rescue you from the creeping things up in the abandoned house. Instead, they're never there when you need them, or are slaughtered with near-comic efficiency as soon as they appear. (The enduring example of the ineffectual authority figure in horror is Martin Balsam as the detective who goes snooping into the Bates residence in *Psycho*.)

Likewise, psychic characters are in some way vulnerable or weak. Most should be experiencing their powers for the first time. Alternately, they might have spent years blocking out their abilities after an initial run-in with the Outer Black, or could be returning to sanity after a lengthy psychotic break. At any rate, they'll be isolated from other psychics—if any others even exist in the GM's world.

Also like combat types, psychics are especially fragile. While authority figures are often the first to get killed, psychics get priority seating in the rubber room. Their unearthly perceptions allow them to see more than ordinary people, and in a place stalked by unremitting horror, that's a bad thing indeed. Warn would-be psychics of the inherent hazards of their character choice.

GMs wanting to emphasize the contrast between mundane characters and supernatural evil are free to disallow psychic characters altogether. They may be especially inclined to do so when

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## Fear Healf

replicating the non-supernatural slasher sub-genre, typified by *Hostel, The Devil's Rejects* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

No group is obligated to include either a psychic or a combat/investigative expert.

### RISK FACTORS

One recurring question bedevils any plotter of horror stories: why don't they just run away? When the audience intensely identifies with characters in jeopardy, you want them to get out of danger. However, the characters can't get out of danger, or your horror tale is over.

However, because plot arises out of character, GMs need to enlist their players' help in giving the PCs good reason to go down into that dark basement even when all external logic cries otherwise.

During character creation, after arriving at the concept, each player chooses a **risk factor**. This is a basic component of the character's psyche that motivates him to risk horrific encounters. When presented with a situation that triggers the risk factor, the character is obligated to plunge deeper into jeopardy, or suffer a loss of Stability — see p. 44.

Each risk factor notes a character type for which it is especially suitable. These are just guidelines. Highly original characters can be created via unusual matchups of types and risk factors, as in the skeptical sexy girl, or the good guy drug fiend.

Players may propose risk factors not provided here, but you should feel free to reject them if they strain credibility, or if you can't immediately think of three ways to incorporate them into a scenario.

If you're having trouble choosing a risk factor, go for Curious or Protective. Both of these choices keep your character sympathetic, engage you in a wide variety of horror situations, and dictate little else about your PC's personality.

Although you're only obligated to take one risk factor, you may select more than one if required for your desired characterization. Many folks in real life exhibit more than one of these risk factors.



#### **CURIQUS**

When confronted by a mystery, you can't help but investigate. Damn the risks, there's something going on here and you're going to figure it out! You may be a dedicated scientist, envisioning the fame and glory that will redound to you when you publish this in your scientific paper. Or you might simply be a layman determined to turn every question mark into a period. Either way, you delve heedlessly down into darkened basements, open dusty coffins, and recite the spidery incantations written on crumbling manuscripts.

**Especially appropriate for:** Brain

#### DISMISSIVE

You hate being told what do to. No matter what your age, you retain the perceived immortality of youth. So if someone tells you not to go into an old dark house, you're going to show them that fear is for lesser mortals. Don't worry! There are plenty of bad things in the world, but they always happen to other people.

Especially appropriate for: Sexy Girl

#### DRUG FIEND

You've never met a psychotropic chemical you didn't like. You may be addicted to one or more of them even as we speak. If so, you'll take any stupid risk, if it means a chance to get high.

You may be jaded by nature's vast pharmacopia, and seeking new chemical thrills. Word of a new high, especially if it's rare, naughty, and available only to a few, sends you into a tizzy of desire. You'll open any door, enter into any company, for a taste of next year's exotic buzz.

**Especially appropriate for:** Burn Out, psychic

#### GREEDY

Let others have their kinks and quirks. You're a straightforward, honest fellow, who seeks that which man has sought for all eternity. Material wealth. Money. Gold. All the toys and status that redound to the man gifted with a fat bank account. Whether you're living in threadbare squalor or swanning about a chic penthouse, you're still looking for that big, final score. (If you got it, you'd be happy for a day before you upped your ambitions and started looking for a really, really big score. But so what?)

You'll take any risk if there's a chance of significant profit in it.

**Especially appropriate for:** Jock / Stud

#### GUNG HO

Some men were born to be trod upon. You were born to be the treader. You're a big, bad muscle machine—or intend to become one. Ever since you were a kid, the sight of a shiny weapon made you salivate. A weak society ruled by wussies has kept you down until now, depriving you of opportunities to crush your enemies beneath your ever-eager boot heels. Maybe you were turned down for the police academy after you failed the psych evaluation, on account of your enthusiastically expressed violent fantasies. Or even the army. What kind of weak-kneed, politically correct army turns down a guy because he dreams of killing, anyhow?

You react to danger, especially to reports of supernatural monsters, with glee. This is what you were put on this earth for. To shoot questions and ask answers first. Wait a minute...

Anyhow, you'll step into any situation that might relieve the itch on your trigger finger.

**Especially appropriate for:** combat/investigative expert

#### HORNY

They say that the brain is the largest sexual organ of all, but in your case, your higher reasoning shuts off when the private parts turn on. When faced with a choice between caution and the opportunity for sexual adventure, the beast with two backs wins every time. The whiff of danger merely sharpens your sense of libertinism. Whip cracks? The clank of chains? A dank, slimy orgy site in the middle of nowhere? Muffled screams, on the other side of the curtain? You're already stripping off your T-shirt! What could possibly go wrong?

**Especially appropriate for:** Jock / Stud, Sexy girl

#### OBLIVIOUS

You don't seek out danger so much as you have a bad habit of stumbling into it, unawares. You see the world, and its potential threats, through rose-colored glasses. Through a combination of bad luck, absent-mindedness, and an overly trusting attitude, you drift into bad neighborhoods, fall into traps, and trespass where sensible people are not meant to tread.

**Especially appropriate for:** Burn Out, Good Girl

#### PROTECTIVE

Thoughts of your own safety mean little to you when others are at risk. You may tell yourself that you care only for yourself and your immediate friends, but when the chips are down, you'll leap into the fire for any deserving person in need of help. You won't sacrifice your life pointlessly, but may be prone to overestimate your capacity to effect needed rescues.

**Especially appropriate for:** Good Guy, Good Girl, Preacher Man, Authority Figure

#### SKEPTICAL

A healthy sense of disbelief can turn fatal in a world where things really do go bump in the night. You're a card-carrying debunking rationalist, constitutionally incapable of believing in the supernatural. Despite your ferocious defense of the scientific method and deduction from available facts, no amount of first-hand evidence can sway you to accepting in the reality of the Outer Black. When faced with an Unremitting Horror, you rush toward it, hoping to find the wires, the latex prosthetics, and the hidden PA system. Even when you admit that one incident might have been genuinely supernatural, that doesn't stop you from heedlessly trying to debunk subsequent manifestations. Even if 0.00001% of cases are genuinely paranormal, that doesn't mean that the blood corpse charging toward you right now is anything other than a man in a rubber suit. Why, you can practically see the zippe...AGGHH!!

#### **Especially appropriate for:** Brain

#### THRILL-SEEKING

Danger is your middle name. If you're a person of means and experience, you've done it all: sky-diving, base-jumping, scuba diving in shark-infested waters... If you're young and without resources, you settle for the time-honored dangers of teenage life, from elevator riding to drag racing. Either way, the possibility of imminent death gives you an adrenaline rush more satisfying than any artificial chemical. Dank caverns? Monsters? Bring 'em on, baby.

#### Especially appropriate for: Stud / Jock

#### VENGEFUL

When someone hurts you or your loved ones, you can't rest until the wrongdoers receive their comeuppance. "Hurt" can mean genuine injury, or just distress, embarrassment or insult. In fact, any kind of fight works for you, so long as you can feel the fuel of righteous indignation coursing through your veins. You may wage it with fists or at a distance, through sabotage and manipulation, but either way, you forget or downgrade the risks you face as you pursue your campaign of retribution. Hot, cold — revenge is a dish you're ready to serve at any time, at any cost.

**Especially appropriate for:** Preacher Man, Authority Figure

### THE WORST THING YOU EVER DID

Horror stories often revolve around issues of guilt and redemption. (Well, more often it's guilt and destruction, but you'll figure out a way for your character to survive against all odds, won't you?) As such, each player is required to specify what dark secrets your character might feel guilty about.

#### **Examples**:

- partially responsible for accidental death of a loved one
- killed in self-defense
- •embezzled money
- stole someone's boyfriend or girlfriend
- committed incest
- crashed your parent's car and lied about it
- watched a gang rape and didn't intervene or report anyone
- missed an important family occasion because you were high
- beat a guy up because he triggered your suppressed homosexual impulses
- •cheated on an exam
- •falsely accused somebody of a crime
- •killed an animal for fun
- displayed cowardice in a crisis
- plagiarized the manuscript of your bestselling novel from an unpublished writer
- illegally downloaded a roleplaying book, cheating struggling creative people of needed income

You get to decide your character's attitude toward this past act, whatever it is. It might haunt him constantly, or tweak at his conscience only on special occasions. Your character might be in a deep state of denial, pretending that it doesn't matter or even that it never happened the way everyone says it did. A cold and unfeeling character may recall his wrongdoing with blithe disregard. An outright psychopath might take pride in his cruelest misdeeds.

If you're concerned for your character's long-term survival, remember that GMs instinctively nudge events toward satisfying conclusions. Sympathetic characters almost invariably outlive their nastier counterparts. Genuine guilt, provided it isn't taken to angsty, self-involved extremes, is more appealing than callous unconcern.

Players portraying earnestly virtuous characters may pick comparatively minor misdeeds, provided that their characters feel an enormous sense of guilt over them.

It is entirely possible that your character unfairly blames himself for events beyond his control. He may be an abuse victim, irrationally convinced that he was somehow complicit in crimes perpetrated against him. His role in mixing up his grandmother's pills before her fatal heart attack might be all in his head. Guilt doesn't have to correspond to objective reality to manifest itself as a potentially crippling psychological weakness.

The skeleton in your closet is revealed to the other characters only if you choose to do so. You might keep it as a dark secret or proclaim it through slurred lips on from every bar stool in town. It might be that your offense is an infamous matter of public record, and that everyone who follows the news knows what you did. Maybe you killed your wife, for example, but were acquitted of the crime after a notoriously botched prosecution.



## Walking the Psycho path

Get clearance from your GM before playing an absolute nutcase. She has plenty of nasty antagonists in store for the players already and may not need you to menace the group from within. Some groups, even within the grim and fatalistic framework of the horror genre, take genuine umbrage when a player works against their interests. Truly sociopathic characters may be better suited for oneshot convention runs, or guest appearances wherein a visiting player briefly takes part in an ongoing series. Psychopathic

Psychopathic characters should take a number of the following risk factors: dismissive, drug fiend, gung ho, horny, thrill-seeking, and vengeful. Give yourself a poor Stability rating. At the GM's discretion, you may also suffer a +1 modifier on all Stability roll Difficulty Numbers.

#### **Spending Guidelines**

If you're new to the system and unsure as to how to spend your build points, use the following quick pick method.

- •For Investigative
  Abilities, go through the
  list as a group, making
  sure you have all of
  these abilities covered.
  Once you've chosen your
  abilities, spend your
  remaining points on
  your favorites. Combat/
  investigation types should
  spend an extra point or
  two on Cop Talk and
  Investigative Procedure.
- For General abilities, buy 8–12 points in Health and Stability. Pick three or four other highlight abilities and buy around 8 points in each. Then spread around the remaining points between the other abilities. When in doubt, invest in Fleeing. Combat/ investigative characters should concentrate on Scuffling and Shooting, and to a lesser extent, Athletics, Drive, and Infiltration. Psychic characters should treat
- an area of concentration, probably their best one. Especially in the case of General abilities, these are guidelines for creating a perfectly serviceable baseline character. Feel free to deviate from them, within the rules, to create unusual character concepts. If you want to be able to take endless physical punishment, exceed the recommended Health. If you want to start out as only marginally sane, skimp on

Stability points, and so on.

their psychic ability as

### BUYING ABILITIES

Starting **Fear Itself** characters receive a variable number of points to buy investigative abilities, depending on group size, and 60 points to purchase general abilities.

# OF PLAYERS	INVESTIGATIVE BUILD POINTS
2	16
3	12
4+	10

Players who can only attend every now and then get the same number of investigative build points as everyone else, but are not counted toward the total when deciding how many points to allocate.

No matter how many players you have in your group, everyone gets 60 points to spend on general abilities. All players get the 1 point in Health and 1 in Stability for free. Characters who are neither combat experts or psychics may purchase the general ability of Fleeing at a rate of 2 rating points for each build point spent. If you're having trouble spending all of your points, buy more Fleeing.

#### SOME ABILITIES ARE CAPPED.

If an investigative ability is capped, you can't buy it during character creation, unless you are the group's resident combat/investigation expert. You can add it to your character during play, but only by justifying in-character how you acquired this familiarity. Maybe you've learned some tips from the resident expert, or have taken a night course.

If a general ability is capped, and you are not the group's resident combat/investigative expert, the maximum value you can ever purchase in that ability, at the start or during play, is half the value (rounding up, if necessary) that the combat/investigative expert has invested in it.

Josie's character, police cadet Shakira deMoraes, is the group's resident combat/investigative expert. During character creation, Josie buys 8 points of Shooting, a capped ability. The other players are all limited to 4 or fewer points of Shooting.

After several sessions, she increases her Shooting to 10. Now any other player may increase their Shooting rating up to 5.

In the unlikely event that no one in your group wants to play a combat/investigative specialist, the other players may buy only 1 point of any capped investigative ability, and no more than 4 points of any capped general ability.

Psychic powers are inherently capped. If you aren't the group's designated psychic, you can't take them at all.

Another limit applies to general abilities: your second highest rating (aside from Fleeing) must be at least half that of the highest rating (aside from Fleeing.)

Erik wants to have a Stability rating of 30. This requires him to take at least one other ability at 15. This would leave him only 15 points to spend on all of the other general abilities. Erik reconsiders, opting for a lower Stability, so he can spend his other points more freely.

If you want, you can save build points from character creation to spend later. If your GM is running an ongoing series, you will accumulate additional build points during play.

#### ACADEMIC

History
Humanities
Languages
Law
Natural History
Occult Studies
Research
Social Sciences
Trivia

#### INTERPERSONAL

Bullshit Detector
Bureaucracy
Cop Talk
Flattery
Flirting
Impersonate
Interrogation
Intimidation
Negotiation
Reassurance
Streetwise

#### TECHNICAL

Investigative Procedure\*
Photography
Science

#### PSYCHIC POWERS

Medium\*
Messenger\*
Premonitions\*
Remote Viewing\*
Sensitive\*
Synchronicity\*

#### GENERAL

Athletics
Driving
Filch
Fleeing
Health
Infiltration
Mechanics
Medic
Preparedness
Scuffling\*
Sense Trouble
Shooting\*
Shrink
Stability

### ABILITIES

The following abilities are available to **Fear Itself** characters. Abilities followed by an asterisk are capped.

#### INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

The following abilities are the bread and butter of GUMSHOE characters.

Ability descriptions consist of a brief general description, followed by examples of their use in a story. Creative players should be able to propose additional uses for their abilities as unexpected situations confront their characters.

Certain specific actions may overlap between a couple of abilities. For example, you can enhance image resolution with either Computer Science or Photography.

Some abilities, like Research, are broadly useful, and will crop up constantly. Others may be called for many times in the course of one scenario, and not at all in others. When building your character, strike a balance between the reliable workhouse abilities and their exotic, specialized counterparts.

Investigative abilities are divided into the following sub-groups: Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical. The purpose of the subgroups is to allow you to quickly find the best ability for the task during play, by scanning the most likely portion of the overall list.

#### BULLSHIT DETECTOR (INTERPERSONAL)

You can tell when people are lying. You must usually be interacting with them or observing them from a close distance, but sometimes you can spot liars on

Players who have read The Esoterrorists will note that Fear **Itself** characters are both less specialized and less knowledgeable in general than the elite protagonists of the Esoterrorist setting. That setting makes all of its PCs investigators, and provides a wide variety of police skills to differentiate them. In **Fear Itself**, the characters come from all walks of life. You'll have, at most, one character with significant knowledge of sophisticated investigative procedures. The same holds true for the more obscure academic pursuits. Accordingly, in Fear Itself, many Esoterrorist abilities are replaced by a few catch-alls.

Why No Lying Ability? Unlike many other RPG rules sets, GUMSHOE does not treat lying as an ability unto itself. Instead, characters employ it as a tactic while using any of the various interpersonal abilities. With Bureaucracy, you tell functionaries what they want to hear. Using Cop Talk, you convince police officials that you're their kind of guy, and so on. There's a little bit of deception in nearly every successful interpersonal interaction.

television, too. Unfortunately, nearly everyone lies, especially when facing possible trouble from the authorities. Sometimes you can infer why they're lying, but it's hard to reliably discern motive or get at the facts they're working to obscure.

Not all lies are verbal. You can tell when a person is attempting to project a false impression through body language.

Certain individuals may be so adept at lying that they never set off your bullshit detector. Some people believe their own falsehoods. Psychopathic personality types lie reflexively and without shame, depriving you of the telltale tics and gestures you use to sense when a person is deceiving you.

#### BUREAUCRACY (INTERPERSONAL)

You understand the ins and outs of bureaucratic organizations, whether they are governmental offices or large business

concerns. You know how to get what you want from them in an expeditious manner, and with a minimum of ruffled feathers. You can:

- persuade officials to provide internal information
- find the right person in the hierarchy to talk to
- find out the structure, history and agenda of a bureaucracy
- find the person who really knows what's going on
- locate offices and files
- borrow equipment or supplies

Bureaucracy is not a catch-all information gathering ability. Bureaucrats wish to convey the impression that they are busy and harried, whether or not they actually are. Most take a profound, secret joy in directing inquiries elsewhere. When players attempt to use Bureaucracy to gain information more easily accessible via other abilities (such as Research),

their contacts snidely advise them to do their own damn legwork.

#### COMPUTER SCIENCE (TECHNICAL)

You are adept with computers, and can write sophisticated code of your own as well as analyzing that written by others and retrieving information from hard drives and other media. You can:

- make or break codes and ciphers
- recover hidden, erased or corrupted computer files
- find detailed, high-resolution images within a blurry video image or blurry JPEG
- increase the clarity of audio recordings, zeroing in on desired elements

#### COP TALK (INTERPERSONAL)

You know how to speak the lingo of police officers, and to make them feel confident and relaxed in your presence. You may be a current or former cop, or simply the kind of person they immediately identify as a solid, trustworthy citizen. You can:

- coolly ply cops for confidential information
- get excused for minor infractions
- imply that you are a colleague, authorized to participate in their cases

#### FLATTERY (INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at getting people to help you by complimenting them, as subtly or blatantly as they prefer. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- perform minor favors
- regard you as trustworthy.

#### FLIRTING (INTERPERSONAL)

You're adept at winning cooperation from people who find you sexually attractive. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- help you in small ways
- date you

It's up to you whether a high rating in Flirting means that you are physically alluring, or simply exude a sexual magnetism unrelated to your looks.

#### HISTORY (ACADEMIC)

You're an expert in recorded human history, with an emphasis on its political, military, and economic and technological developments. You can:

- recognize obscure historical allusions
- recall capsule biographies of famous historical figures
- tell where and when an object made during historical times was fashioned
- identify the period of an article of dress or costume

#### HUMANITIES (ACADEMIC)

You are broadly acquainted with the classics, literature, philosophy, religion, archaeology and the arts. You may be a well-read autodidact or have an undergraduate degree, or portions thereof, on your C.V.

The humanities ability may reflect a basic grounding in all of these disciplines, with specialization for your profession. If you're an ordained minister, you'll know a great deal about your own faith, and see other disciplines through that prism. If you're a musician, you'll know the other disciplines via your knowledge of music history, and so on.

#### IMPERSONATE (INTERPERSONAL)

You're good at posing as another person, whether briefly misrepresenting yourself during a phone call or spending long periods undercover in a fictional identity.

Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult. Brief voice-only mimicry pits you against a Difficulty Number of 4. Face-to-face impersonation requires successful roll against a Difficulty Number of 7 every five minutes of sustained contact between you and the object of your impersonation. (Difficulty Numbers are explained on p. 37.)

#### INTERROGATION (INTERPERSONAL)

You're trained in extracting information from suspects and witnesses in the context of a formal police-style interview. This must take place in an official setting, where the subject is confined or feels under threat of confinement, and recognizes your authority (whether real or feigned.)

#### INTIMIDATION (INTERPERSONAL)

You elicit cooperation from suspects by seeming physically imposing, invading their personal space, and adopting a psychologically commanding manner. Intimidation may involve implied or direct threats of physical violence but is just as often an act of mental dominance. You can:

- gain information
- inspire the subject to leave the area
- quell a subject's desire to attempt violence against you or others

#### INVESTIGATIVE PROCEDURE (TECHNICAL, CAPPED)

This skill is a catch-all for the various investigative abilities omitted from **Fear Itself**. It allows you to fake your way through the following:

- Ballistics (processing evidence relating to the use of firearms)
- Electronic Surveillance (the use of audio recording equipment to gather evidence)
- Evidence Collection (bagging and tagging important clues)
- Explosive Devices (defusing and assembling explosive devices and reconstructing detonated ones)
- Document Analysis (studying handwriting, typescripts, paper and so forth)
- Fingerprinting (finding, transferring and matching fingerprints)
- Forensic Accounting (combing through financial data looking for irregularities)
- Forensic Anthropology (performing autopsies on deceased subjects to determine their cause of death)
- Forensic Entomology (studying eggs and larvae in a decomposing corpse)
- Forensic Psychology (application of psychological insight to the solving of criminal cases and gleaning of useful information from observation of individuals)
- Textual Analysis (studying the content of texts, as opposed to the physical characteristics of documents)

#### LANGUAGES (ACADEMIC)

For each rating point in Languages, you are verbally fluent and literate in one

Profession

If your GM allows you

to create characters of

horror cast of teens or

specify a profession for

your character. If your

correspond to one of the

standard abilities listed

in the previous section,

but instead best matches

one of the catch-all **Fear** 

**Itself** abilities listed in

this section, you get a

bonus spend once per

session. You get a free

when gathering clues

directly related to your

Julianne Carew stumbles

onto a canvas, its oils

in the distinctive style

Jean-Bertrand Arabal.

Although *Fear Itself* 

ability, she's able to

make a free spend to

realize that this is no

fake, and was painted by

Arabal himself, despite

his supposed suicide in

As with any information

these bits of professional

available from a spend,

knowledge are never

1957.

core clues.

includes no Art History

still wet, completed

of deceased artist

1- or 2-point spend

Struggling painter

profession.

twentysomethings),

you may choose to

profession does not

any age (as opposed

to the archetypal

language other than your native tongue. You may specify these when you create your character, or choose

opportunistically in the course of play, revealing that you just happen to speak Javanese when circumstances require it. You are not learning the language spontaneously but revealing a hitherto unmentioned fact about your character. You may elect to be literate in an ancient language which is no longer spoken.

#### LAW (ACADEMIC)

You are familiar with the criminal and civil laws of your home jurisdiction, and broadly acquainted with foreign legal systems. At a rating of 2 or more, you are a bar-certified attorney. You can:

- assess the legal risks attendant on any course of action
- understand lawyerly jargon
- argue with police and prosecutors

#### NATURAL HISTORY (ACADEMIC)

You study the evolution, behavior, and biology of plants and animals. You can:

- tell when an animal is behaving strangely
- tell whether an animal or plant is natural to a given area
- identify an animal from hair, bones or spoor
- identify a plant from a small sample

#### **NEGOTIATION (INTERPERSONAL)**

You are an expert in making deals with others, convincing them that the best arrangement for you is also the best for them. You can:

- haggle for goods and services
- mediate between parties that are at odds
- swap favors or information with others

#### OCCULT STUDIES (ACADEMIC)

You're an expert in the historical study of

magic, superstition, and hermetic practice from the stone age to the present. From Satanists to the Golden

Dawn, you know the dates, the places, the controversies, and the telling anecdotes. You can:

- identify the cultural traditions informing a ritual from examining its physical aftermath
- supply historical facts concerning various occult traditions
- guess the intended effect of a ritual from its physical aftermath
- identify occult activities as the work of informed practitioners, teenage posers, or out-and-out cultists

Your knowledge of the occult is that of a detached, even disapproving, outsider. This ability does not allow you to work magic or summon supernatural entities. Doing either of these things is bad; it weakens the fabric of reality and warps the practitioner's psyche. You can, at best, fake your way through a ritual while attempting to pass yourself off as a believer. Even in this situation, your actions do not evoke supernatural effects.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY (TECHNICAL)

You're proficient in the use of cameras, including still and video photography. You can:

- take clear, potentially useful photographs of scenes
- spot manual retouching or digital manipulation in a photographic or video image
- realistically retouch and manipulate images

#### REASSURANCE (INTERPERSONAL)

You get people to do what you want by putting them at ease. You can:

- elicit information and minor favors
- allay fear or panic in others
- instill a sense of calm during a crisis

#### RESEARCH (ACADEMIC)

You know how to find factual information from books, records, and official sources. You're as comfortable with a card catalogue and fiche reader as with an Internet search engine. You know the right people to talk to to gain information in various walks of society, and your SIM card is full of their phone numbers.

#### SCIENCE (TECHNICAL)

You maintain a broad knowledge of any scientific field not covered by its own ability in **Fear Itself**. These include astronomy, chemistry, engineering, genetics, paleontology, materials science, physics, and applied technology. You may have only this general familiarity, or might also practice a profession — see sidebar.

#### SOCIAL SCIENCES (ACADEMIC)

You are broadly familiar with the academic fields of anthropology, communication, economics, education, geography, linguistics, political science, and sociology. As with humanities, you are either well-read, have an undergraduate's broad education, or know these other fields through a professional specialization — see sidebar.

#### STREETWISE (INTERPERSONAL)

You know how to behave among crooks, gang-bangers, druggies, hookers and other habitués of the criminal underworld. You can:

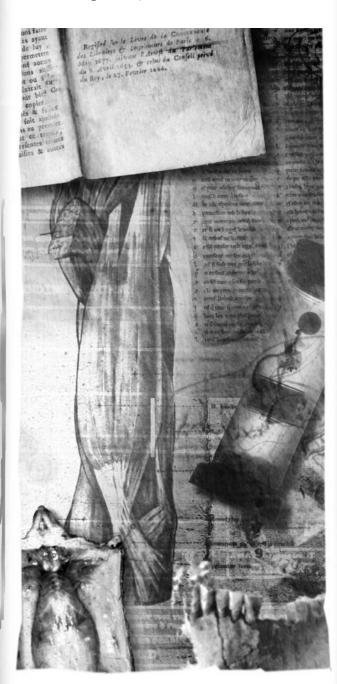
- deploy criminal etiquette to avoid fights and conflicts
- identify unsafe locations and dangerous people
- gather underworld rumors

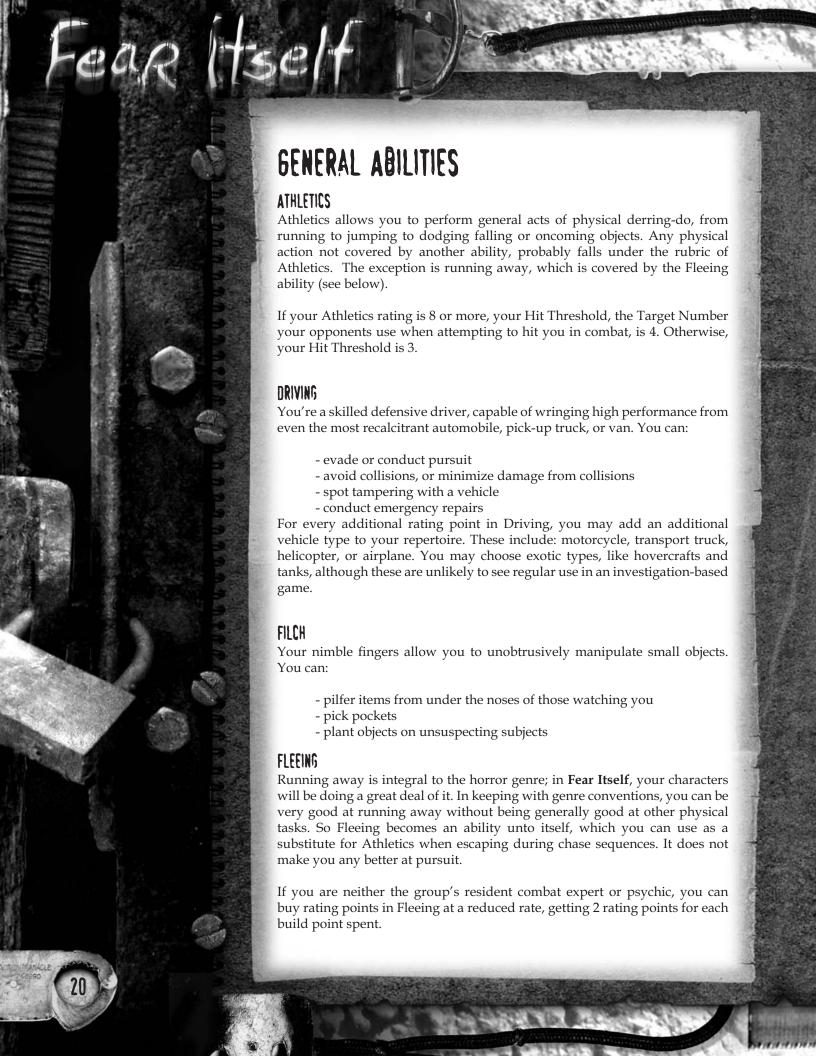
#### TRIVIA (ACADEMIC)

You're a font of apparently useless information that would stand you in good stead as a contestant on a quiz show. You're especially good in the following spheres of interest:

- celebrities and entertainment
- sports records and statistics
- geography
- arts and letters
- names in the news

This catch-all ability also allows you to know any obscure fact not covered by another GUMSHOE ability. (In moments of improvisatory desperation, your GM may allow you to overlap with abilities which none of the players at the current session possess, or which no one is thinking to use.)







Health measures your ability to sustain injuries, resist infection, and survive the effects of toxins. When you get hit in the course of a fight, your Health pool is diminished. A higher Health pool allows you to stay in a fight longer before succumbing to your injuries.

When your Health pool is depleted, you may be dazed, wounded, or pushing up the daisies. For more on this, see "Exhaustion, Injury and Gruesome Death," p. 40.

#### INFILTRATION

You're good at placing yourself inside places you have no right to be. You can:

- pick locks
- deactivate or evade security systems
- move silently
- find suitable places for forced entry, and use them

Despite its name, Infiltration is as useful for getting out of places undetected as if its for getting into them.

#### MECHANICS

You're good at building, repairing, and disabling devices, from classic pit-and-pendulum traps to DVD players. Given the right components, you can create jury-rigged devices from odd bits of scrap. Mechanics doubles as an investigative ability when used to:

- evaluate the quality of workmanship used to create an item
- determine the identity of a handmade item's maker by comparing to known work by that individual

#### MEDIC

You can perform first aid on sick or injured individuals. For more on the use of this ability, see p. 37.

#### **PREPAREDNESS**

You expertly anticipate the needs of any situation by packing a kit efficiently arranged with necessary gear. Assuming you have immediate access to your kit, you can produce whatever object the group needs to overcome an obstacle. You make a simple test (p. XX); if you succeed, you have the item you want. You needn't do this in advance of the adventure, but can dig into

your kit bag (provided you're able to get to it) as the need arises.

Other abilities imply the possession of basic gear suitable to their core tasks. Characters with Medic have their own first aid kits; Photographers come with cameras and accessories. If you have Shooting, you have a gun, and so on. Preparedness does not intrude into their territory. It covers general-purpose investigative equipment, plus oddball items that suddenly come in handy in the course of the story.

The sorts of items you can produce at a moment's notice depend not on your rating or pool, but on narrative credibility. If the GM determines that your possession of an item would seem ludicrous or and/or out of genre, you don't get to roll for it. You simply don't have it. Any item which elicits a laugh from the group when suggested is probably out of bounds.

Inappropriate use of the Preparedness ability is like pornography. Your GM will know it when she sees it.

#### SCUFFLING

You can hold your own in a hand-to-hand fight, whether you wish to kill, knock out, restrain, or evade your opponent.

#### SENSE TROUBLE (GENERAL)

This ability allows you to perceive (either with sight or other senses) potential hazards to yourself or others. For example, you can:

- hear the tread of a psycho killer as he sneaks up behind your cabin
- see a skulking figure hiding in the high weeds
- smell the vinegary, rotting odor given off by a creature of the Outer Black, as it lies in wait behind the stairs
- spot the metal trap door hidden beneath that artfully-scattered skiff of dead leaves
- have a bad feeling about that noise the car engine has been making since you left the rest stop

Players never know the Difficulty Numbers for Sense Trouble before deciding how many points to spend, even in games where GMs generously inform the players of other Difficulty Numbers. Players must blindly choose how much to spend.

The GM does not roll in secret, so even a failed roll allows the group the sense that something is amiss. They just don't know exactly what this is. Think it as the game system equivalent of tension-building eerie music in a horror movie.

GMs should never require the use of this general ability to find clues to the mystery at hand. Instead, use Investigative Abilities, defaulting to Investigative Procedure when no ability seems more appropriate. Sense Trouble is for a scenario's action-oriented sequences.

#### SHRINK

You can provide comfort, perspective and solace to the mentally troubled. You may be a therapist or counselor, a priest or pastor, or just a empathetic and intuitive individual. You can restore panicked characters to a state of calm, and treat any long-term mental illnesses they accrue in the course of their investigations.

#### SHOOTING

You are adept with firearms.

#### STABILITY

Jarring or stressful events can exert a damaging longpsychological toll. Confrontation with supernatural manifestations of Unremitting Horror can provoke outright madness. Your Stability rating indicates your resistance to mental trauma.

You get Stability 1 for free.



## PSYCHIC POWERS

From the beginning of time, certain individuals have been sensitive to otherworldly vibrations. The origin of psychic powers remains obscure. In most cases, they seem to be conferred at birth, passing down through generations as an inherited trait. It is not uncommon for powers to remain latent until puberty.

For every true psychic, there are hundreds of charlatans, some of them self-deluded. Combining sleight-of-hand with simple observation, some of it covert, they're able to elicit enough information from their clients to sound prophetic. Occult circles are rife with phony psychics, so you'll probably run into some of them during play. A fake medium might make an interesting choice for a player character.

When creating a psychic character, determine his attitude toward his abilities. The

character may show off or exploit them for material gain. He may adopt a strict code of ethics, allowing himself to use them only in an altruistic fashion.

It is just as likely that he fears them and use them as little as possible. Though many psychics think of themselves as spiritual healers peering into a world of positive light, all render themselves additionally susceptible to the dark energies of the Outer Black each time they draw on their abilities. If the character has so much as brushed against the machinations of Unremitting Horror, his psychic powers have, depending on the nature of his so-called gift, served as a conduit for unbearably nightmarish feelings, sendings, or visions.

Mechanically, some psychic powers, like Premonitions, are treated as ordinary general abilities. Typically you roll against a Difficulty Number to access or control them. In many cases you or your fellow players then use one or more investigative abilities to interpret the information your gift has garnered.

Others, like Aura Reading, operate in a slightly different manner. In this case, you are charged a number of points from your pool each time you use the ability. If you spend the points, you automatically get the answers you seek.

Your GM will ensure that no core clue ever depends solely on the successful use of a psychic power. However, you may be able to use psychic powers to get clues which are also available via a standard investigative ability, or which are the equivalent of extra information available from investigative spends.

Even GMs who provide Difficulty Numbers to players before they roll general abilities should withhold them in the case of psychic powers. They're inherently mysterious and variable in effect, and their practitioners can never reliably guess how they'll work in any given circumstance.

Remember, GMs retain the right to disallow psychic powers if they don't fit the tone of their planned series.

In a standard **Fear Itself** series, we strongly recommend that the psychic character be able to take only one psychic ability.

#### AURA READING

To those with the sight to see, every living organism is surrounded by a nimbus of energy. By studying the color and movement of this energy, you gain insight into people and animals.

When you read a person's aura, you can:
- examine the subject's general emotional
state, determining which of the following
adjectives best fits his current condition:
joyful, depressed, angry, amused, confused,
frightened, or relaxed. (Costs 2 points per
attempt.)

- tell whether the subject is healthy or unhealthy. (Costs 1 point per attempt.)

- determine if the subject is under the influence of a spirit or other supernatural being. (Costs 4 points per attempt.)

The aura projected by creatures of the Outer Black is so intrinsically wrong that sensitives unlucky enough to perceive it suffer a traumatic emotional jolt. Whenever you see such an aura, you must make a Difficulty 4 Stability roll, with a possible loss of 5. Intelligent beings of Unremitting Horror can suppress this aura at will, replacing it with an ordinary human aura reflecting whatever emotion or condition they desire. They employ this latter ability when disguising themselves as people.

#### MEDIUM

You can speak to the spirits of the dead.

(Or rather, you speak to discarnate entities, most of whom identify themselves as such. A typical medium believes that they're ghosts, communicating from the afterlife, but maybe you've begun to suspect that a more sinister explanation is in play.)

Sometimes you hear these entities speaking to you unbidden, especially when you enter areas of particular emotional import to a troubled spirit. To contact a specific entity, you must typically organize a séance, a ritual in which a small group of sympathetic observers participates. The presence of skeptics may disrupt the proceedings, preventing contact with the world beyond.

Typically you work through a spirit

Psychic Powers and Madness Psychic powers leave your mind open to the malign probings of the Outer Black. The GM keeps a running tally of the number of times you draw on a psychic power in any given session. This number is then applied to the Difficulty Numbers of your Stability rolls.

Even if you haven't used a psychic power at all during the current session, you always face a +1 minimum modifier to the Difficulty Numbers of all Stability rolls.

However gained, your Difficulty Number modifier applies to all rolls, even in the case of non-supernatural horrors, like incidents of violence. Your extrasensory awareness may force you to make additional Stability rolls to which your duller colleagues are immune. A continuous state of heightened sensitivity can be tough to bear in the aftermath of a fight, or even as you pass a roadside accident.



guide, a personal guardian spirit who acts as a sort of otherworldly switchboard operator to the great beyond. Be sure to describe your spirit guide, or what you know of him, during your first in-game séance. Your spirit guide remains constant throughout you career. It may be the ghost of a departed loved one or acquaintance, a historical figure, or an iconic figure of uncertain derivation. Examples of the latter category often bear exotic names: they might be of Persian, Indian or Native American extraction.

During a séance, you hear all of the dialoguing spirits in your head. You may remain in control of your body throughout, repeating what you hear to the other participants. Alternately, you can open your body to spirit possession. In this instance, both the spirit guide and any contacted spirits take control of your physical form, speaking directly to participants in a distorted version of your voice. As in a dream, you retain little or no recollection of what possessing entities do or say while you're under their volition. It's also more impressive to paying clients, may allow for clearer communication with outside questioners. Your spirit guide is supposed to protect you from malign spirits or overactive ghosts while you're in this state, returning control of your body to you if matters get out of hand. However, he may be helpless to intervene if a powerful Outer Black entity chooses to toy with you. For all you know, your guide might himself be a malign presence of the Outer Black. Possession is riskier than simply listening to voices in your head.

At any rate, your spirit guide attempts to contact the desired individual, who then manifests to reply to questions. Vague answers are a sign that an imposter—at best a lonely spirit unrelated to the subject—has substituted itself for the genuine article. Alternately, they may indicate inquiries beyond the genuine spirit's comprehension, such as the specific nature of the afterlife.

Spirits may be able to achieve spontaneous, unwanted connections to you. Only rarely will these be full-blown possessions. More likely, you merely hear the whispering of eerie voices deep inside your mind. You can attempt to fend off an unwanted contact attempt by rolling your Medium ability against a Difficulty Number determined by the GM. If your result exactly equals the Difficulty Number, the subject spirit possesses you, whether you like it or not. Difficulty Numbers increase during situations, such as séances, where you've opened yourself up to the spirit world. They decrease when

you're going about your daily business in completely mundane surroundings. A malign entity finds it much harder to possess you when you're shopping in a well-lit, crowded supermarket than when you're alone at night in a creepy old house.

When you're seeking communication with the spirit world, Difficulty Numbers are determined by dramatic necessity. Spirits anxious to communicate with the living world are easier to reach than reluctant communicants. The ghosts of both the long- and recently-dead are hard to contact. The former have reincarnated, merged with the cosmic ether or are safely enmeshed in heaven's bliss, whereas the latter are still confused and on the road to their mysterious final destinations.

Once in touch with a spirit, you (or another séance participant) uses an Interpersonal ability to get useful information out of him, as you would with an ordinary living subject. During a possession-style communication, the medium is for all intents and purposes absent and may not ask questions.

If you are possessed and wish to break contact against the spirit's will, roll your Medium ability against a base Difficulty of 4. Especially tenacious spirits, like a Mystery Man (p. 50) may pose higher Difficulties.

Contact with malign intelligences requires a Stability roll with a Difficulty of 4 or more, with a possible loss of 2–3 in the case of minor entities, and as high as 6 in the case of exceptionally powerful or nasty presences.

#### MESSENGER

You receive messages from unknown discarnate entities. Unlike a medium, you can't dial up a specific ghost to talk to, nor can you specify particular questions your entities will answer. Instead, their communications indicate a mood. Which mood they suggest seems to depend on events in which you are involved, or have the capacity to influence. When you or your colleagues and loved ones are relatively safe, the communications are lulling and calm. When imminent danger threatens, they become erratic, energetic, and ominous. On other occasions, the communications from beyond seem to portend large-scale threats to persons beyond your immediate circle. They might reach an apex of anxiety before a destructive storm, terrible accident, or terrorist attack. When the source of their concern is not immediately apparent, you may be able to use investigative abilities to decode the content

25

of their communications.

You receive the messages in one of the following ways. Specify your choice before play begins.

- Raudive Voices: Leave a tape recorder or other audio device running and unattended in an apparently sound-free environment, preferably in the middle of the night. When you listen intently to the recording, faintly whispering voices can be dimly heard.
- Automatic Writing: Enter a trance state at a desk with writing implement at the ready and plenty of paper on hand. Unseen hands seize yours, rapidly scrawling out a stream of consciousness series of words of obscure mystical meaning. Much of what you write borders on gibberish, but useful advice may be hidden within. Sometimes it's in code; on other occasions, you recieve material written in a language you can neither read nor write.
- **Automatic Art:** As above, but you use art supplies and receive images instead of words.
- Music From the Grave: Again you enter a trance state, in this case while seated at a piano or holding a violin. (Discarnate beings appear to favor these two instruments. Your GM may approve other suitably atmospheric choices.) You are unconscious of your playing and do not recall it when you hear it on playback. Alternately, you may scribble down compositions on sheet music, which must then be played by a trained musician.

At times you'll feel an irresistible impulse to use this power immediately. This most often happens when the spirit world is in turmoil, anticipating some dreadful event. If you fail to heed the call, you are treated as if you've resisted your risk factor—see p. 48. Under these circumstances it costs you 1 point from your Messenger pool to use the power. To call on it deliberately, without the urging from beyond, costs 3 points per use.

#### **PREMONITIONS**

Ordinary investigations reconstruct events from the past. By using your psychic gift, you can receive visions of the future. These appear to you in the form of vivid waking dreams, with visual and

auditory components. In some instances you may even detect smells or respond to climactic conditions like cold or humidity. You feel as if you are witnessing these future events. Depending on what you're attempting to inquire into, you envision yourself in the middle of them, perhaps even as a victim of whatever catastrophe you're envisioning.

As far as you can tell, the future is not irrevocably predetermined. When you focus on events over which you have no control (including control by indirect influence), they tend to happen as you imagine. But when you experience a grim vision and can do something to stop it from coming true, you can avert the future you predicted.

To use this ability, pose a question about the future. It must specify or imply a particular time frame. For example:

- What will happen tonight at the party?
- What will happen if I open this door?
- What will the killer do this evening?

Once you've framed the question in your mind, you go into a trance. The base Difficulty for Premonition attempts is 4. The following situational modifiers apply:

SITUATION	MODIFIER TO BASE DIFFICULTY
Answer is mundane or not especially noteworthy	+3
Event involves creature(s) of Unremitting Horror	+2
Event involves Mystery Man	+3
Outcome of event depends on large number of disparate people or interacting forces	+1
You have already envisioned this event, and have taken action to forestall original outcome	-1 per previous vision

Requests for information not specifically

about future events go unanswered. Also unanswered are questions with an indefinite time frame. Examples of inapplicable questions:

- Who is the killer?
- What will I die of?
- Is that all there is?

Perhaps mercifully, your visions are generally blurred, so that you can't always tell exactly who or what is eviscerating your uncle with a circular saw. In other words, the visions don't provide core clues, or significant detailed information you don't already have. Instead they tell you what the stakes are if you fail to act. If you've learned already by other means that the circular saw killer is Leon, the high school janitor, you probably do see him in the vision. If not, you know that something terrible is going to happen, but you still don't have the killer's identity.

(Otherwise your game will face the same structural flaw of most TV shows centering on psychic detectives, which is that the protagonists need only wait until the seer gets a clear enough vision to solve the mystery.)

#### REMOTE VIEWING

Also known as clairvoyance, this gift allows you to see distant events. You must focus on a particular location, either one you've been to before, or one you can pinpoint on a map. Photographs can also be used to home in on particular locations, but you have to be sure where they were taken.

While using the ability, you go into a trance and close your eyes. You then envision the chosen location, perceiving it in a blurry monochrome, as if through a very old and unclear security camera monitor. Most remote viewers experience their visions in gradations of green or blue. You receive only visual information. Remote Viewing does not allow you to look into the past or future. You see what's happening at the location right this minute.

The base difficulty of establishing a Remote Viewing connection is 3 for a place you've been to personally, and 4 for one you've located only through documentation. It is modified according to the distance between you and the location:

DISTANCE	MODIFIER TO BASE DIFFICULTY	
Half a mile or less	-2	
Half a mile to one mile	-1	
1–10 miles	0	
10-100 miles	+1	
100–500 miles	+2	
500–1000 miles	+3	
Anywhere on earth	+4	

If other realities exist, it is not possible to see into them with Remote Viewing. Should anyone offer to show you how to see into the Outer Black, turn them down. Instant and incurable madness would surely result from the most fleeting visual contact with it.

Anything awful you see while Remote Viewing can trigger a Stability roll, just as if you were present.

Intelligent and powerful supernatural beings can tell that you're watching them, and view *you* remotely in return. They can detect your location, memorize your appearance, and possibly even read your mind.

Outer Black entities and their human minions can shield places from your prying, adding anywhere from +1 to +3, depending on the being's power, to your base Difficulty.

#### SENSITIVE

Whenever people experience powerful emotions, they leave behind a faint psychic residue which sensitives such as yourself can detect, even years after the fact. The emotional fallout from especially traumatic events may impose itself on you automatically. Usually, though, you spend a few minutes concentrating, and are then able to read the most powerful feelings associated with a given location. You fix on the single most resonant feeling the place gives off.

The GM determines what this is, according to the following general guidelines. Human emotions are stronger than those of animals. Recent events are more potent than older ones. Negative experiences, especially of violence, linger more

tenaciously than happy ones. The presence of Outer Black entities overwhelms mere human feelings. Above

all, dramatic necessity rules, so that you're more likely to pick up on psychic vibrations relevant to your situation in the current storyline than useless red herrings.

Deliberately turning on your sensitivity costs 2 points per instance.

If Outer Black creatures are currently present when you use the power, you gain a disturbing glimpse into their warped and sadistic psyches, triggering a Stability roll with a Difficulty ranging from 5 to 8.

#### SYNCHRONICITY

Meaningful coincidences happen to and around you. Often these provide new insight, serving as personal omens giving you direction in life when you can't figure out what to do next. These events are never overtly supernatural, inexplicable, or particularly improbable. If you dream about a kingfisher, and then find a dead one in your garden, nothing eerie has happened. It's just a coincidence—but in imputing meaning to it, you may find a way out of your current dilemma, whatever that may be.

To draw on your powers, you must situate yourself in a place where random events are likely to occur. If you're sitting in a locked, empty room with no phone, there's not much that can happen to you. However, if you go and sit in a crowded park, the range of possible coincidental events increases immeasurably. Difficulty Numbers correspond to your location and its range of possible meaningful, random events, with 1 being a crowded street and 8 the aforementioned locked room.

Synchronicity doesn't provide core clues. Instead, it gives you guidance on

what to do next when you're stumped. Often the coincidences will redirect you to facts you

already have on hand but have neglected or improperly interpreted.

### The All-Psychic Series

Although GMs are generally advised to allow only one psychic per group, an interesting variation to the typical horror campaign is one in which all of the characters are gifted with extrasensory powers. In this case, they either know each other at the start of play, through spiritualist or New Age circles, or quickly become bound to one another through a series of linked and ominous

Such a group, with its extra opportunities to make Stability rolls, will be more fragile than most. In our opinion, that would be part of the grim fun of such a series. However, GMs hoping for more of a supernatural heroes vs. monsters feel may wish to dole out generous quantities of free Stability points, or reduce the standard difficulties of Stability rolls. Needless to say, in an all-psychic series, no caps apply to psychic powers. Depending on group size, you may wish to allow characters to take up to two psychic abilities apiece.

Although synchronicity is the safest of the psychic powers, entities of the Outer Black can use it against you, too. You may be confronted with sanity-challenging manifestations. For example, a person suicide might unknowingly hesitate until the exact moment when you're passing below to leap from a high window, then land on the sidewalk right in front of you. Users of this gift are also at high risk of freak accidents.

### SOURCES OF STABILITY

When under stress, each of us searches for reasons to keep it together and persevere. In **Fear Itself**, you quantify your character's Stability by specifying its sources. For every 3 points you invest in Stability, you must name one thing that keeps you sane when the terrors of the world threaten to shred your psyche.

These sources of stability fall into three categories: personality traits, activities, and people.

Innate sanity-preserving personality traits might include Stoic, Zen-like, or Emotionally Resilient. Define these as you please, subject to GM approval. GMs are encouraged to allow broad latitude, only ruling out obviously nonsensical traits. If you pick more than one personality trait, see to it that they don't contradict one another. For example, don't pair Sense of Humor with Grim Implacability.

Activities are pursuits or hobbies which calm you, giving you allowing you to regain your sense of perspective after a stressful incident. Again, let creativity be your guide. The GM will disallow blatantly ridiculous choices. Efforts to

use these pursuits to overcome plot obstacles within the game must be backed up with relevant skills.

Even if you pick hang-gliding as a stability-granting hobby, you won't be able to hang-glide you way into the enemy compound unless you've also bought the Athletics ability.

By far your richest source of Stability is a support network of friends and family whose strength you draw on in times of quiet. A name and identifying phrase are sufficient for each. You may not use other player characters; they go through the same stresses you do and remind you of the horrors you confront. It's permissible, but risky, for multiple characters to lean on the same folks as members of their support network.

Relying on others is a source of strength, but also of danger. Once you come to the attention of entities of the Outer Black, such as the Mystery Man, they may use your loved ones against you. They may turn them to evil, possess them, or take the tried and true route of subjecting them to horrible tortures. If anything bad happens to them, you not only face immediate, difficult Stability tests, but may permanently lose the rating points they're linked to. Your wife, mother or child can no longer soothe your spirit if you can only visit their scarred and broken bodies in a secluded mental hospital.

You may not select more personality traits than you do people, or more activities than you do people.

*Ralf buys 15 points of Stability for his character, the* low-rent pickpocket Michel McCoy. 15 divided by 3 is 5, so he needs to choose 5 sources of stability. He sees Michel as a bit of a loner, and so starts with a personality trait: Self-Reliance. Then he picks an activity: throwing darts. Like many roleplayers, Ralf prefers his characters without messy emotional entanglements, but now he's faced with a dilemma. He can't select more personality traits than he does people. The same goes for activities. So he must break down and pick a person to relate to. He chooses Thelma, his alcoholic landlady, who's always there with a reassuring word and a slightly dirty glass of warm whiskey whenever he needs somebody to talk to. Now he can go ahead and pick a personality trait, wise-cracking humor, and a second activity, rereading the works of Friedrich Nietzsche.



### WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Next select a **personal goal** for your character. Even if the GM wants your characters to be familiar with the supernatural at the outset of the series, your personal goal should be of a mundane nature. Pick something you can actually take concrete steps to achieve. Imagine your character is at loose ends, and the GM asks you what you're doing. Can you describe an active course of action you can undertake to move you closer to this personal goal, in which you'll have to work to overcome obstacles? If you can visualize such a scene, one that's dramatic and interesting to describe, and for other players to listen to, you've got a strong personal goal. If not, rethink.

Interesting goals often involve the people you choose as sources of stability; see above. Be careful about linking them to your activities, however. Calming pursuits may be good for recovering shattered sanity, but don't lend themselves to dramatic scenes in which you overcome obstacles to reach your personal goal.

The best goals require your character to undergo some kind of personal change, or challenge the people around her to do the same. They have emotional consequences, for you and for others. Even if your character is otherwise unsympathetic, the pursuit of your goals should suggest some kind of hope for redemption. Ideally, your fellow players will be rooting for you to succeed, and will feel bad if you fail. This sense of stakes provides the series with a sense of ongoing drama, apart from the gore and the soul-eating and the abject, terrorized weeping.

#### SAMPLE GOALS:

- Care for an infirm parent
- Get into a good college
- Get your lover off heroin
- Prevent greedy idiots from ruining your life's work
- Prove the untruth of accusations against you
- Prove you can still do your job after a disastrous setback
- Pursue your dreams of pop stardom
- Raise funds for much needed church repairs
- Regain custody of your daughter
- Regain the respect of a justifiably disapproving parent or mentor
- Save your business from bankruptcy
- Woo the coolly aloof popular girl

Consider yourself empowered to create supporting characters which the GM will portray during the course of the game. The GM may remain consistent with your initial description of these characters, but may surprise you during play by allowing them to change over time, or reveal previously unknown facets of their past histories or personalities.

Whenever possible, goals should relate to the series premise. For example, let's say that the GM proposes a series in which all of the PCs work for the same large and utterly mundane corporation. That implies that a certain amount of the action throughout the series will center around the workplace. Suitable goals would therefore include:

- Erasing rumors of an embarrassing office fling
- Finding the office thief
  - Getting that promotion

- Mollifying a blackmailing co-worker
- Undermining your psycho supervisor
- Winning funding for your department

Collaborate with other players to create overlapping goals. Strife between major characters is a genre staple, so feel empowered to create goals contrary to one or more of the other players.

## AFFINITIES AND ENMITIES (OPTIONAL)

The following, final step of character creation applies only where the player characters are well acquainted with one another as the series begins. If you're a group of students from the same high school or disaffected hipsters employed in the same copy shop, this step applies to you. If you're a group of strangers who awaken together in a darkened dungeon, or answer a mysterious summons to a mansion at midnight, not so much.

First, each member of the group in turn describes their characters, with an emphasis on how that character's immediate circle are likely to perceive him. Focus less on your past history (unless it's something that you talk about all the time or is otherwise inescapable to your acquaintances) than on your personality and typical behavior.

A good character intro for Michel McCoy, from the above example, would be: "I am a nervous, twitchy guy with a sarcastic sense of humor who never lets anyone past my defenses. You don't know what my profession is, but you suspect that it's something sleazy. Maybe you've seen my impressive card tricks."

A less useful intro might sound like this: "I was traumatized at the age of eight when my stepfather killed my mother in front of my eyes. I'm a pickpocket by profession and only really trust my drunken landlady Thelma. But you won't know any of those things about me, because I always play things close to my vest."

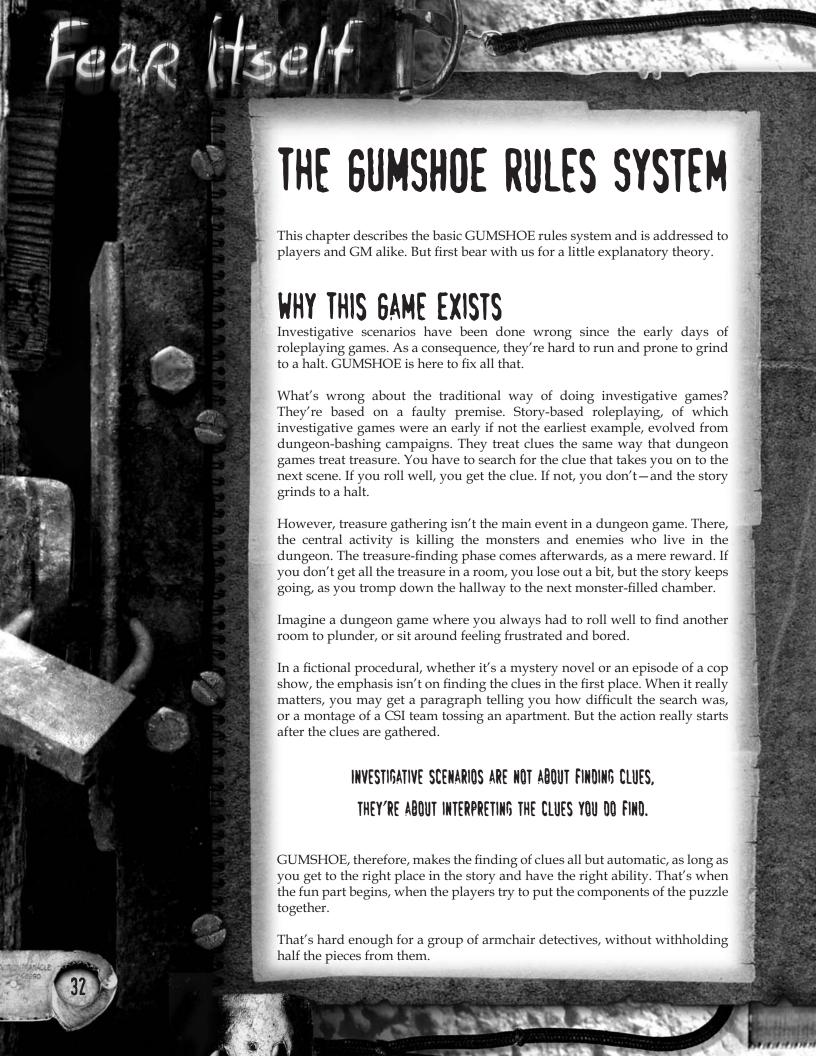
Having heard all of the character descriptions, you then specify which you like best, and which you like least, giving reasons for each.



Ralf answers for his character, Michel, as follows: "I'm extremely wary of Shakira. A cop in training is still a cop. Sketch seems like a stand-up guy to me. I find junkies like him comfortingly predictable.".

Feel free to specify the degree of affinity or enmity you feel. Your feelings need not be reciprocated. You might like somebody you despises you, or vice versa. Players who declare their allegiances later in the process will probably alter their choices to reflect what they've heard so far.

As events unfold during play, you may find your loyalties shifting, learning to dislike your previous favorite or earning new respect for your nemesis. These are interesting character developments, so be sure to play them up.



### MYSTERY STRUCTURE

Every investigative scenario begins with a crime or conspiracy committed by a group of antagonists, which usually draws the player characters directly into the action. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities. If you use the GUMSHOE rules for straight-up crime drama, the team investigates a crime, finds out who did it, and puts the culprits under arrest.

In the Unremitting Horror setting, the group is placed in danger due to the actions of malevolent humans, supernatural entities or most commonly both. They may find a way to thwart or even kill the human antagonists. Despite their relative lack of field experience, they may destroy any supernatural creatures or effects generated by the bad guys. Or they might end up involving the police, the media or the military, having finally found enough evidence to persuade them.

Your GM designs each scenario by creating an investigation trigger, a sinister plot, and a trail of clues.

#### THE INVESTIGATION TRIGGER.

This is the event, often a gruesome crime, that plunges the player characters into the action and prompts them to begin an investigation. Examples:

- A school friend of all the player characters is found murdered, obviously slain during a ritualistic killing. (Scream)
- On a camping holiday or a trip into the woods, one of the group vanishes under sinister circumstances. (Blair Witch Project)
- A friend or relative goes missing, with strange clues left behind. Nobody but the players suspects anything is amiss.
- A teacher or other authority figure begins to behave strangely, and one of the players discovers evidence of bizarre rites. (The Faculty)
- Sightings of supernatural creatures or phenomena, which adults and authorities dismiss. (Every 1950s teen horror flick ever made)
- The apparently mundane death of a friend or family member, who entrusted a terrifying secret to one of the players. (Ring)

#### THE SINISTER PLOT.

This sets out who the bad guys are, what they've done so far, what they're trying to do, and how the investigation trigger fits into the overall scheme. The GM also determines what has to happen to prevent the plot from going forward. This, unknown to the players, is their victory condition — what they have to do to thwart the bad guys and bring the story to a positive conclusion.

Once the GM has the logic of the story worked out from the villain's point of view, she then thinks in reverse, designing a **trail of clues** leading from the investigation trigger to an understanding of the sinister plot and its players, sufficient to get to work destroying it.

Optionally, the GM may also plan a series of antagonist reactions. These lay out what the bad guys do when they find out that they're being investigated. The GM determines what conditions trigger them, and what the antagonists attempt to do. These may include further horrific crimes, intended to terrify the characters into staying well away. They may try to set the authorities against the characters, or have them carted off to mental hospitals. They may attack the players. Foolish, overconfident

or risk-taking antagonists may take them on directly. Clever antagonists will strike from a distance, taking great pains to cover their tracks.

#### Mundane MYSTERIES

The scenario structure given in the main text assumes you're using the Unremitting Horror background, or a similar setting of occult investigation. Ordinary crime dramas may call for a simpler structure. The bad guys could still be furthering a sinister plot, or they may be doing nothing after committing the triggering crime other than hoping that the investigators don't catch up with them. In this case there is no ongoing conspiracy to disrupt. To achieve victory and bring the scenario to a successful conclusion, the investigators need merely prove their case against the criminals. The climactic scene might involve wringing a confession from the wrongdoer, or provoking him into revealing the crucial bit of evidence which will ensure his conviction.

Tip For Players: Containing Speculation Investigative scenarios often bog down into speculative debate between players about what could be happening. Many things can be happening, but only one thing is. If more than one possible explanation ties together the clues you have so far, you need more clues. Whenever you get stuck, get out

and gather more

information.

## FROM STRUCTURE TO STORY

The GM's structure notes are not a story. The story occurs as you, the team of players, brings the structure to life through the actions of your characters. The story proceeds from scene to scene, where you determine the pace, discovering clues and putting them together. Your characters with locations. interact gathering physical evidence, and supporting characters run by the GM, gathering expert and eyewitness testimony.

The first scene presents the mystery you have to solve in order to have a chance of survival. You then perform legwork, collecting information that tells you

more about the case. Each scene contains information pointing to a new scene. Certain scenes may put a new twist on the investigation, as the initial mystery turns out to be just one aspect of a much bigger story. As clues accumulate, a picture of the case emerges, until your characters arrive at a climactic scene, where all is revealed and the bad guys confronted. A wrap-up scene accounts for loose ends and shows the consequences of your success—or, in rare instances, failure. (Why is failure possible at all? Its possibility creates urgency and suspense.)

To move from scene to scene, and to solve the overall mystery, you must gather clues. They fuel your forward momentum.

#### GATHERING CLUES

Gathering clues is simple. All you have to do is: 1) get yourself into a scene where relevant information can be gathered and 2) have the right ability to discover the clue (if appropriate) and 3) tell the GM that you're using it. As long as you do these three things, you will never fail to gain a piece of necessary information.



It is never dependent on a die roll. If you ask for it, you will get it.

You can specify exactly what you intend to achieve: "I use Natural History to see if I can identify what sort of bone Jocky dug up."

Or you can engage in a more general informational fishing expedition: "I use Research to see what I can find out about that abandoned hospital."

For much of the time, if you're just searching an area, you won't even need to specify an ability. You can simply tell the GM that you are searching, and you will find any clues that are there for you to find.

If your suggested action corresponds to a clue in the scenario notes, the GM provides you the information arising from the clue.

College student Suzie Corello pays a visit to hospital to talk to the heavily traumatized Jennifer Case. Jennifer's big sister Amy was Suzie's best friend; Jennifer was present at Amy's grisly suicide (or supposed suicide) and hasn't been the same since.

Jennifer stares at Suzie across a desk full of crayons and paper, clearly too terrified of the doctors to speak.

Suzie's player, Kira, says, "I do my best to reassure Jennifer, letting her know that she's safe and she can trust me." This is all she needs to do to get the information she needs to proceed to the next scene, an investigation of the old railway tunnel out of town. The GM says "Jennifer's mouth moves, but she's still too intimidated to produce more than a dry croak. Suddenly she begins to draw on the loose paper in front of her. It's some sort of arch or doorway, and she scribbles over and over across the black opening in the middle."

For each scene, the GM designates a **core clue**. This is the clue you absolutely need to move to the next scene, and thus to complete the entire investigation. GMs will avoid making core clues available only with the use of obscure investigative abilities. (For that matter, the character creation system is set up so that the group as a whole will have access to all, or nearly all, of the necessary abilities.)

Certain clues allow you to gain special benefits by spending points from the relevant investigative ability pool. During your first few scenarios, your GM will offer you the opportunity to spend additional points as you uncover these clues. After that it's up to you to ask if it there's anything to be gained by spending extra time or effort on a given clue. You can even propose specific ways to improve your already good result; if your suggestion is persuasive or entertaining, the GM may award you a special benefit not mentioned in her scenario notes.

Each benefit costs either 1 or 2 points from the relevant pool, depending on the difficulty of the additional action and the scope of the reward. When asking you if you want to purchase the benefit, the GM always tells you how much it will cost. Additional information gained provides

Simple Searches Many clues can be found without any ability whatsoever. If an ordinary person could credibly find a clue simply by looking in a specified place, the clue discovery occurs automatically. You, the reader, wouldn't need to be a trained investigator to find a bloody footprint on the carpet in your living room, or notice a manila envelope taped to the underside of a table at the local pub. By that same logic, the PCs don't require specific abilities to find them, either. When players specify that they're searching an area for clues, they're performing what we call a *simple search*. To perform simple searches, they must narrow down the scope of their examination by specifying a particular area or object within the scene:

- "I look in the roll-top desk."
- "Is there anything in the tub?"
- "Dibs on the medicine cabinet!"
  On the other hand, characters who do have relevant abilities can glean clues without getting this specific. With Investigative Procedure (or an equivalent ability from another GUMSHOE setting), clues become available to a player simply by being on the scene and indicating that you're looking for them.

flavor, but is never required to solve the case or move on to a new scene. Often it makes the character seem clever, powerful, or heroic. It may grant you benefits useful later in the scenario, frequently by making a favorable impression on supporting characters. The benefit may allow you to leap forward into the story by gaining a clue that would otherwise only become apparent in a later scene. On occasion, the additional information adds an emotional dimension to the story or ties into the character's past history or civilian life. If you think of your GUMSHOE game as a TV series, an extra benefit gives the actor playing your character a juicy spotlight scene.

"Can I tell what the drawing is supposed to represent?" asks Kira. The GM knows that it's the abandoned railway tunnel. This information isn't necessary to move forward right at this moment, and Suzie could find it out by doing a few hours of research in the local library. But it would be impressive, and look a lot better in the movie, if she could answer that question now.

"Do you want to spend a History point?" asks the GM. Kira agrees, and reduces her pool from its maximum of 3, down to 2. Kira has already established that her character Suzie is artistically inclined, setting up her easel in areas of natural beauty around the countryside. This gives the GM an opening to justify Suzie's impressive insight, while also giving her a distinctive character moment.

The GM explains as follows: "It clicks in your mind immediately. You remember that dark opening from the day you spent trekking through the woods on the south side of town, looking for suitable local sights to paint. This one suggested itself to you from the history books, but when you eventually found it, you didn't like to stay too long near

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it. It's the old tunnel out by the disused station."

Suzie gulps. "I knew that place would come back to haunt me," she says.

Spending points on benefits gives you an edge at the end of the scenario, when you are awarded points to improve your character. Thus it is to your advantage to propose cool benefits to the GM, even when they aren't specified in the scenario.

The act of spending points for benefits is called a **spend**. The GM's scenario notes may specify that you get Benefit X for a 1-point spend, or Benefit Y for a 2-point spend.

GMs of great mental agility who feel comfortable granting their players influence over the details of the narrative may allow them to specify the details of a special benefit.

If you wish to make a spend in a situation where the GM has no special benefit to offer you, and cannot think of one that pertains at all to the investigation, you do not lose the points you wish to spend.

#### INCONSPICUOUS CLUES

Sometimes the characters instinctively notice something without actively looking for it. Often this situation occurs in places they're moving through casually and don't regard as scenes in need of intensive searching. The team might pass by a concealed door, spot a droplet of blood on a polished kitchen floor, or approach a vehicle with a mad axeman lurking under the back seat. Interpersonal abilities can also be used to find inconspicuous clues. The classic example is of a character whose demeanor or behavioral tics

Who Finds It?

Sometimes you know that a clue will definitely be found during a given scene, but must decide which character does so. Most often, the clue, though easily found on a cursory examination of a scene, will be somewhat inconspicuous. The bloody footprint might be under a piece of furniture. The table with the envelope taped to it might be on the other side of the diner. Because it is mildly inconspicuous, it doesn't make sense that everybody will spot it at the exact same second. If one or more players have a relevant ability, choose the player with the highest current pool in that ability. If no one has a relevant ability, or no ability seems to apply to the situation, ask yourself which player seems most in need of a win. Pick either the PC who has received the least time in the spotlight, or suffered the worst setbacks, during the current session. (This technique of doling out positive moments according to dramatic need can also be applied to other benefits, from lucky breaks to hookup opportunities, to which no ability clearly applies.) This rule applies to any GUMSHOE setting.

establish them as suspicious.

It's unreasonable to expect players to ask to use their various abilities in what appears to be an innocuous transitional scene. Otherwise they'd have to spend minutes of game time with every change of scene, running down their abilities in obsessive checklist fashion. That way madness lies.

Instead the GM asks which character has the highest current pool in the ability in question. If two or more pools are equal, it goes to the one with the highest rating. If ratings are also equal, their characters find the clue at the same time.

Suzie visits the school library to conduct research on the history of the area, following her disturbing experiences at the hospital. Her friend Lucy Green accompanies her to help pore over the books. The school librarian is a member of the local cult, and is livid at Suzie's meddling. The GM decides that the Social Sciences ability will alert them to the boiling fury underneath the librarian's facade of gray-haired serenity. Both characters have the skill; Suzie has 2 points in her pool, while Lucy has 3.

"Lucy," says the GM, "you can't quite tell what's wrong, but the librarian's body language seems tense, as if she were full of rage. As she smiles at you, you could swear she's thinking about leaping over the counter and tearing your throats out."

# TESTS

A test occurs when the outcome of an ability use is in doubt. Tests apply to general skills only. Unlike information gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

DIE ROLLS ALL DIE ROLLS IN GUMSHOE USE A SINGLE ORDINARY (SIX-SIDED) DIE.

Even in the case of general skills, the GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most general ability uses should allow automatic successes, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like investigative abilities.

There are two types of test: simple tests and contests.

# SIMPLE TESTS

A simple test occurs when the character attempts an action without active resistance from another person or entity. Examples include driving a treacherous road, jumping a gorge, sneaking into an unguarded building, binding a wound, shooting a target, disconnecting a security system, or remaining sane in the face of creeping supernatural horror.

The GM determines how hard any given action is by assigning it a Difficulty Number ranging from 2 to 8, where 2 offers only a slim chance of failure and 8 verges on the impossible. The player rolls a single die; if the result is equal to or higher than the Difficulty Number, the character succeeds. Before rolling the die, the player may choose to spend any number of points from the relevant ability pool, adding these to the final die result. Players who forget to specify the number of points they want to spend before rolling are stuck with the unmodified result.

In the game world, expenditure of pool points in this way represents special effort and concentration by the character, the kind you can muster only so many times during the course of an investigation.

Suzie wants to climb a high wall to get a good view of the librarian's garden, where a cult meeting may be going on. The GM needs the group to get to the other side of the wall and therefore assigns the relatively low Difficulty Number of 3 to the task. Suzie's player, Kira, has a full 8 points in her Athletics pool. She decides that she really needs a win on this one and decides to spend half of them on the attempt. She rolls a 5. With the 4 points from her pool, this gets a final result of 9. Displaying impressive aerobatic grace, Suzie hauls herself over the wall.

The **Fear Itself** setting is meant to be a straight-up and brutal horror game. Losing points is meant to hurt. To evoke that spirit faithfully, the GM never

reveals Difficulty Numbers.

GMs running GUMSHOE in non-horror environments, or who wish to water down the setting's intentional level of oppressive nastiness, may choose to reveal Difficulties.

The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

Lucy has just failed her Driving test to keep control of a van she and the other characters are traveling in, as it goes skidding towards the edge of a wet mountain road. She spent 2 points from her Driving pool on this attempt. The GM decides she'll have one more shot at it before the van goes over the edge. Now she must spend at least 3 Driving points. Fortunately she has 4 points left in her pool. The Difficulty Number of the attempt to regain control is 5. Lucy rolls a 6, adding 3 points to get a final result of 9. She manages to bring the van around just in time, coming within inches of the edge.

#### PIGGYBACKING

When a group of characters act in concert to perform a task together, they

designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

Suzie, Lucy, Russell and Max attempt to sneak into the principal's house to root through

Difficulty Numbers and Story Pacing Just as the GUMSHOE system keeps the story moving by making all crucial clues accessible to the characters, GMs must ensure that tests and contests essential to forward narrative momentum can be easily overcome. Assign relatively low Difficulty Numbers of 4 or less to these crucial plot points. Reserve especially hard Difficulty Numbers for obstacles which provide interesting but nonessential benefits.

For example, if the characters have to sneak into the cultists' house in order to stage the final confrontation, assign the relatively low Difficulty Number of 4 to the task. If it seems to the characters that they ought to have a tougher time of it, insert a detail justifying their ease of success. The cultist assigned to patrol duty might be immersed in a popular novel, say.

his computer, which they are sure holds cult secrets. Russell, with an Infiltration of 8, takes the lead. Suzie, Lucy and Max have 2, 0, and 4 points in their Infiltration pools, respectively. Suzie and Max pay 1 point apiece; their pools go down to 1 and 3. Because Lucy has no points to spend, the Difficulty Number of the Infiltration increases from 4 to 6. (If the group left her behind, it would be easier to sneak in, but she's the one with the computing savvy.) Russell spends 3 points on the attempt and rolls a 1. This would have overcome the Difficulty if it wasn't for Lucy's presence. Clearly, she's knocked over one of the plant stands in the hall...

In most instances a group cannot logically act in concert. Only one character can drive a car at one time. Two characters with Preparedness check their individual kits in sequence, rather than checking a single kit at the same time.

#### COOPERATION

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll.

Russell and Max are trying to fix their broken-down car so they can escape in it before the flesh-hungry mountain

cannibals catch up with them. Russell has 3 points left in his Mechanics pool. Max has 2 points. They decide that Russell is the main mechanic, and Max his assistant. Both choose to spend all of their remaining points on the attempt. Russell adds 3 points to the die roll. Max spends 2 points, but adds only 1 to the die roll.

Russell's player rolls a 3, for a result of 7. This beats the Difficulty Number of 6, allowing them to start the engine and pull away as a crowd of ragged, dusty men come running down the slope, waving femurs and shouting angrily.

## CONTESTS

Contests occur when two characters, often a player character and a supporting character controlled by the GM, actively attempt to thwart one another. Although contests can resolve various physical match-ups, in a horror game the most common contest is the chase, in which the investigators run away from slavering entities intent on ripping them limb from limb.

In a contest, each character acts in turn. The first to fail a roll of the contested ability loses. The GM decides who acts first. In a chase, the character who bolts from the scene acts first. Where the characters seem to be acting at the same time, the one with the lowest rating in the relevant ability acts first. In the event of a tie, supporting characters act before player characters. In the event of a tie between player characters, the player who arrived last for the current session goes first in the contest.

The first character to act makes a test of the ability in question. If he fails, he loses the contest. If he succeeds, the second character then makes a test. This continues until one character loses, at which point the other one wins.

Typically each character attempts to beat a Difficulty Number of 4.

Suzie flees through the empty school from the gym teacher, a cultist who is pursuing her with a nail-studded baseball bat. His Athletics pool is 6; the gym teacher's is 7. As the fleeing character initiating the chase sequence, she's the first character to act. She rolls against a Difficulty of 4, spending 1 point. She rolls a 4, and manages to scramble toward the dining hall.

The gym teacher spends 1 point as well, rolling a 3. He lumbers through the echoing corridors, swinging his bat.

Suzie spends another point, taking her Athletics to 4. She rolls a 2. That's not enough to get away. Suzie has backed herself into a corner, pinned between rows of lockers. The gym teacher advances on her. Now she has no choice but to stand and fight.

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap faces a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant.

A character running through a swamp finds it harder to move quickly than the marsh creature pursuing him. In this case he might face a Difficulty Number of 4, while the marsh beast gets the lower Difficulty of 3.

Throughout the contest, GM and players should collaborate to add flavor to each result, explaining what the characters did to remain in the contest. That way, instead of dropping out of the narration to engage in an arithmetical recitation, you keep the fictional world verbally alive.

#### FIGHTING

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving any of the following abilities:

- Scuffling vs. Scuffling: the characters are fighting in close quarters.
- Shooting vs. Shooting: the characters are apart from one another and trying to hit each other with guns or other missile weapons

The aggressor is the first character to move against the other. When the status of aggressor and defender are unclear, the combatants compare their current pool numbers in the abilities they're using in the fight. The character with the highest number chooses whether to act as aggressor or defender. (Unlike an ordinary contest, in a fight it is often advantageous to strike first.)

A contest proceeds between the two abilities. When combatants using the Scuffling or Shooting abilities roll well, they get the opportunity to deal damage to their opponents.

#### HIT THRESHOLDS:

Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more.) The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to harm

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# Fear Hear

him. Less competent supporting characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.

#### DEALING DAMAGE:

When you roll on or over your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage to him. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die which is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

WEAPON TYPE	DAMAGE MODIFIER
Fist, kick	-2
Small improvised weapon, police baton, knife	-1
Machete, heavy club, light firearm	0
Sword, heavy firearm	+1

For firearms, add an additional +2 when fired at point blank range.

Supernatural creatures often exhibit alarmingly high damage modifiers.

Characters may never spend points from their combat pools to increase their damage rolls.

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less (see sidebar), that combatant collapses from exhaustion and is unable to continue fighting. Any combatants currently engaged with him in a close quarters fight can then deal another instance of damage to him.

Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead, they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become seriously wounded—see sidebar.

# EXHAUSTION, INJURY AND GRUESOME DEATH

Unlike most abilities, your Health pool can drop below 0.

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness Roll. Roll a die with the absolute value<sup>1</sup> of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness roll is based on your Health pool *before* you make this reduction.

Russell T. Jones is being chased by pretty coed cultists through the rooms of a spacious beachfront property. They hit him with a harpoon, dropping his Health pool to -2. He really wants to get away from them, lest they barbecue him and serve him up at tonight's slumber party. Thus he must remain conscious. The absolute value of -2 is 2, so this is the Difficulty of his Consciousness roll. He chooses to expend another 2 Health points he doesn't have, pushing himself onward toward the front door. That gives him a bonus of 2 to his roll. He rolls a 6, for a final result of 8. Russell gets away, but now his Health pool is down to -4.

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to -5, you are hurt, but have suffered no permanent injury, beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. However the pain of your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on Investigative abilities, and increases the Difficulty Numbers of all tests and contests, including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1.

A character with the Medic ability can improve your condition by spending Medic points. For

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.

every Medic point spent, you regain 2 Health points—unless you are the Medic, in which case you gain only 1 Health point for every Medic point spent. The Medic can only refill your pool to where you were before the incident in which you received this latest injury. He must be in a position to devote all of his attention to directly tending to your wounds.

If your pool is between -6 and -11, you have been seriously wounded. You must make a Consciousness roll.

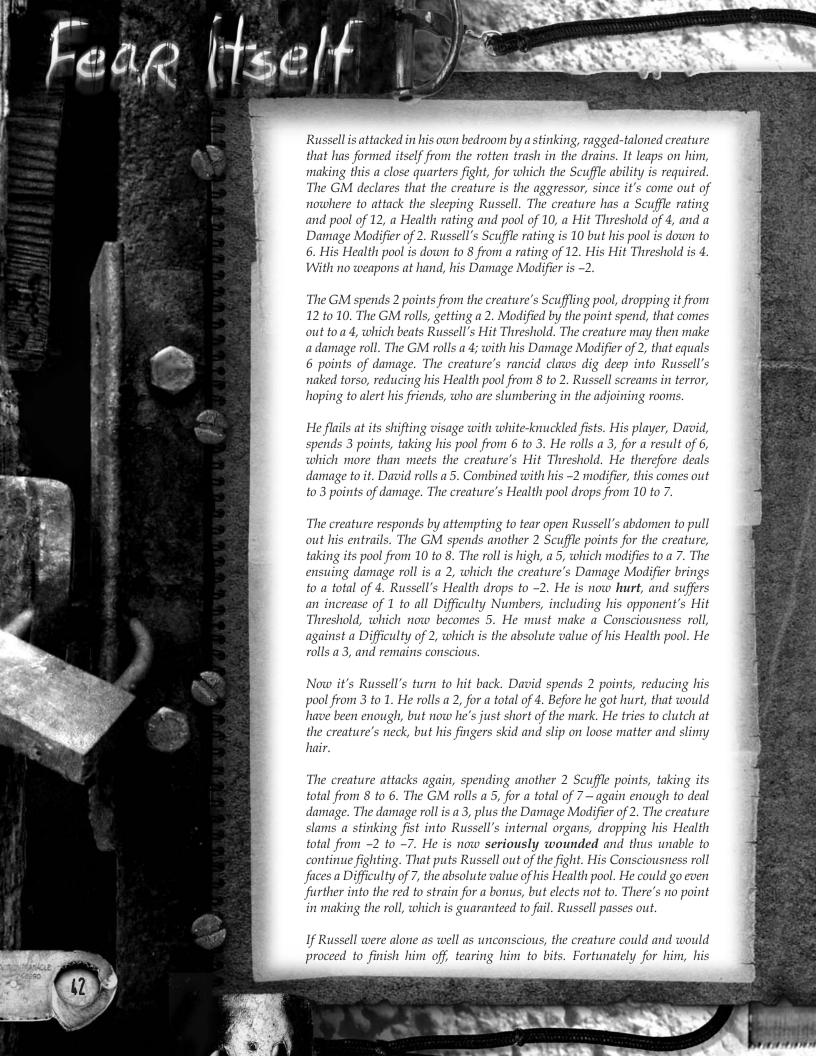
Whether or not you maintain consciousness, you are no longer able to fight. Until you receive first aid, you will lose an additional Health point every half hour. A character with the Medic ability can stabilize your condition by spending 2 Medic points. However, he can't restore your Health points.

Even after you receive first aid, you must convalesce in a hospital or similar setting for a period of days. Your period of forced inactivity



is a number of days equal to the positive value of your lowest Health pool score. (So if you were reduced to -8 Health, you are hospitalized for 8 days.) On the day of your discharge, your Health pool increases to half its maximum value. On the next day, it refreshes fully.

When your pool dips to -12 or below, you are dead. Time to create a replacement character.



friend Max Cipriani comes to help him, pounding on the bedroom door. With its Scuffle down to 6, the creature doesn't feel up to a battle with a fresh opponent. As Max busts down the bedroom door, it scuttles up through the window, leaving behind only a noxious stench as it disappears into the night.

Russell is seriously wounded and will die if not stabilized. Fortunately, Max has had first aid training and can stop the bleeding. A long convalescence now awaits the unlucky Russell.

#### FREE-FOR-ALL COMBAT

Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent. The GM abandons the aggressor/defender model. Instead, the GM determines an order of action, ranking all participants in the combat according to their present *pool* values in the fighting skills they'll be starting the fight with—Scuffling or Shooting. Ties are broken in favor of characters with higher *ratings* in those skills. If characters are still tied, player characters win out over creatures and enemies, and early-arriving players win over late-arriving players.

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins. When called upon to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons. Some supernatural creatures may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession, and may divide them up between opponents within range, or concentrate all of them on a single enemy.

Creatures may choose to use their actions to deal additional damage to downed or helpless opponents rather than engage active opponents. They automatically deal once instance of damage per action. Only the most crazed and bestial human enemies engage in this behavior.

Characters who join a combat in progress come last in order of precedence. If more than two characters join during the same round, the GM determines their relative precedence using the rules above. The fight continues until one side capitulates or flees, or all of its members are unconscious or otherwise unable to continue.

#### ARMOR

Armor may reduce the damage from certain weapon types. With the exception of the combat and investigative expert, characters in **Fear Itself** are unlikely to own or use armor, but rules are given here for completeness's sake.

If you're wearing a form of armor effective against the weapon being used against you, you subtract a number of points from each instance of damage dealt to you before applying it to your Health pool. Light body armor, as worn by police officers, reduces each instance of damage from bullets by 2 points and from cutting and stabbing weapons (knives, swords, machetes) by 1 point. Military-grade body armor reduces bullet damage by 3 points.

Lucy's dad Stanley, the group's resident combat and investigative expert, is shot by one of the cultist teachers from his daughter's school. The GM rolls a 3 for the cultist's damage, adding 1 point for his high-caliber handgun, for a total damage of 4. Stanley wears light body armor, reducing the damage to 2 points. His Health pool decreases from 6 to 4.

Light body armor is heavy, hot, and marks you out as someone looking for trouble. All of these drawbacks apply doubly to military-grade body armor. Characters can't expect to walk around openly wearing armor without attracting the attention of the local SWAT team. Also, most genres of horror don't empower the characters to fight their antagonists with military-grade weapons! Unless the story specifically allows for it, Fear Itself characters should not encounter military levels of weapons or armor. Ransacking the attic to find an uncle's old army kit is fine; going after the Bad Things with Uzis and flak jackets is not.

In choosing to make contemporary body armor highly effective against firearms, we're drawing on the portrayal of Kevlar vests in cop shows and movies. We make no claims for any resemblance between these rules and real life. The rules also favor close-up physical confrontations, which are more in keeping with the horror genre than firefights. GMs using the GUMSHOE rules in more realistic, horror-

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free investigative settings may wish to reduce the effectiveness of body armor against gunfire.

Creatures often have high armor ratings. They may possess hard, bony hides or monstrous anatomies that can take greater punishment than ordinary organisms. Most supernatural creatures are more resistant to bullets and other missile weapons than they are to blunt force trauma, slashes, and stab wounds.

#### COVER

In a typical gunfight, combatants seek cover, hiding behind walls, furniture or other barriers, exposing themselves only for the few seconds it takes them to pop up and fire a round at their targets. The GUMSHOE rules recognize three cover conditions:

**Exposed:** No barrier stands between you and the combatant firing at you. Your Hit Threshold decreases by 1.

Partial Cover: About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.

Full Cover: Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

#### One Gun, Two Combatants

If you are at the mercy of an opponent with gun well in hand and ready to fire, he can empty his entire clip or chamber at you before you get to him, or get yourself out of range. This situation occurs for example, ifhe holds you at gunpoint or charge him from more than five feet away with no cover. The Difficulty is 1 (an automatic hit), 2 if your Athletics rating is 8 or more and you are moving. He rolls one instance of damage, which is then tripled. Yes, we said tripled. And, yes, the tripling occurs after weapon modifiers are taken into account. This is why few unarmed people attack a gun-wielding opponent when he has the drop on them.

If your opponent has a pistol but it is not well in hand and ready to fire, you may attempt to jump him and wrestle it from his grip. If he has a pistol well in hand but is unaware of your presence, you may also be able to jump him, at the GM's discretion. The characters engage in a Scuffling contest to see which of them gets control of the gun and fires it. The winner makes a damage roll against the loser, using the pistol's Damage Modifier, including the +2 for point blank range.

If you jump an opponent with an unready rifle, a Scuffling combat breaks out, with the opponent using the rifle as a heavy club.

#### AMMO CAPACITY

GUMSHOE sets aside the loving attention to firearm intricacies characteristic of most contemporary-era RPG systems. For example, characters need reload only when dramatically appropriate. Otherwise, they're assumed to be able to refill the cylinders of their revolvers or jam clips into their automatic weapons between shots.

When reloading is an issue, GMs may request a Shooting test (Difficulty 3) to quickly reload. Characters who fail may not use their Shooting ability to attack during the current round.

On the run from a horde of cultists as the sun begins to set, a wounded Stanley crawls into the opening of a storm drain to hole up. Unfortunately for him, a trio of Blood Corpses is lurking nearby, and they have his scent. The GM decides that limited resources will increase the sequence's sense of terror, and declares that Mitchell has only four shots left in his handgun, and only one extra ammo clip in his pocket. She plans to have the Blood Corpses gang up on him, forcing him to make a Shooting test to successfully reload as they rush him.

#### RANGE

The effect of range on firearms combat is likewise simplified nearly out of existence. Handguns and shotguns can only be accurately fired at targets within fifty meters. The range limit for rifles is one hundred meters.

### STABILITY TESTS

Even non-supernatural effects often prove emotionally destabilizing. Every violent encounter puts you at risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Any confrontation with the supernatural threatens a complete psychotic break, manifesting as a bizarre detachment from reality.

When an incident forces challenges your fragile sanity, make a Stability test against a Difficulty Number of 4.

If you fail, you lose a number of Stability points. The severity of the loss depends on the situation. As with any other test of a general ability, you are always permitted to spend Stability points to provide a bonus to your roll. However, it's never a good bet to spend more points than you stand to lose if you fail.

INCIDENT	STABILITY LOSS
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to do serious harm	2
You are in a car or other vehicle accident serious enough to pose a risk of injury	2
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to kill	3
You see a supernatural creature from a distance	3
You see a supernatural creature up close	4
You see a particularly grisly murder or accident scene	4
You learn that a friend or loved one has been violently killed	4
You discover the corpse of a friend or loved one	6
You are attacked by a supernatural creature	7
You see a friend or loved one killed	7
You see a friend killed or loved one in a particularly gruesome manner	8

GMs should feel free to assess Stability Losses for other incidents, using the examples provided as a benchmark. Some especially overwhelming creatures may impose higher than normal Stability losses when seen from a distance, seen up close, or ripping your lungs out. In adventures, when a Stability test is called for, a Stability test with a potential loss of 4 points is described as "a 4-point Stability test".

Here's a Stability test in action:

Suzie's current Stability is 8. While watching the neighbor's house through her curtains after dark, she sees a squat, inhuman figure lope across the lawn and vanish behind a bush. Like any other Stability test, Suzie's player, Kira, will be trying to beat a Difficulty of 4. Confident that this mere glimpse of a creature constitutes only a minor brush with destabilizing weirdness, Kira elects to spend only 1 point to bolster her roll. Alas, she rolls a 1, for a result of 2, two lower than the Difficulty Number. Having failed, she suffers a Stability loss of 3. Having spent 1 point on his bonus and lost another 3 to the failure, Suzie's new Stability pool value is 4.

Characters make a single roll per incident, based on its highest potential Stability loss.

Suzie and her friend Daniel are wading through the water down at the old abandoned railway tunnel, looking for signs of a suspected cult by the light of their battery torches. Animated corpses lurch up from beneath the water to attack them. Suzie blazes away with her father's pistol, driving off the creatures, but not before they tear Daniel open in front of her eyes, pulling him limb from limb like dogs savaging a rag toy. Her player, Kira, makes a single roll, with a potential Stability Loss of 8, the worst of several pertaining to the incident.

Groups craving an additional point of complexity can occasionally alter Difficulty Numbers for Stability tests depending on the character's attitude toward the destabilizing event. Characters who would logically be inured to a given event face a Difficulty of 3, while those especially susceptible face a 5. A character who has had extensive training in treating injuries might, for example, face a lowered Difficulty when encountering gruesomely mutilated bodies. A stock car racer would get a better chance against

# Fear Hself

car accidents. No character type gets a break when encountering supernatural creatures.

#### LOSING IT

Like Health, your Stability pool can drop below 0.

If your Stability ranges from 0 to -5, you are **shaken**. You can still do your job, but seem distracted. You can't spend points from the pools of your Investigative abilities. Difficulty Numbers for all general abilities increase by 1.

If your Stability ranges from -6 to -11, you acquire a **mental illness**. This stays with you even after your Stability pool is restored to normal. See below for more. You also continue to suffer the ill effects of being shaken. Furthermore, you permanently lose 1 point from your Stability *rating*. The only way to get it back it to purchase it again with build points.

When your Stability reaches –12 or less, you are **incurably insane**. You may commit one last crazy act, which must either be self-destructively heroic or self-destructively destructive. Or you may choose merely to gibber and drool. Assuming you survive your permanent journey to the shores of madness, your character is moved to a nice, sunny hospital, where friends and family can come to visit, and the drugs make everything you ever were seem numb and far away. Time to create a new character.

Using Sources of Stability

Consider the following optional rule, which can also be combined with the standard mental illness rules. It means that Stability loss will affect PC behavior much earlier, but it can be great fun to play. Optional Stability loss affects a character's relationship with their sources

of stability, whether people, mental states or hobbies. For every three Stability points, one source of stability is affected. The player should choose the most appropriate one. This instability should manifest as changes in behavior, or in relationship problems. For example, an artist might find his hand trembling when painting, a wife might be distant and cold to her husband. If you use these rules, when Stability drops below 0. it should be easier to determine the nature of

a mental illness defined

in Losing It.

# MENTAL ILLNESS

If the incident that drove you to mental illness was mundane in nature, you suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD.) You are haunted by dreams of the incident, and spend your days in a constant state of anxiety and alert, as if prepared for it to repeat itself at any moment. Whenever your senses register any input reminding you of the incident, you must make a Stability test (Difficulty 4) or freeze up. If you freeze up, you are unable to take any action for fifteen minutes and remain shaken (see above) for twenty-four hours after that. Tests to see if you show symptoms of PTSD do not in and of themselves lower your Stability pool.

If driven to mental illness by a supernatural occurrence, you face a range of possible mental disorders. The GM rolls on the following chart or chooses a disorder based on the triggering circumstance. The player is then sent out of the room, while the GM and other players collaborate on a way to heighten his sense of dislocation and disorientation. [Footnote: This approach requires the consent and cooperation of all players. If you prefer, just have players with insane PCs roleplay their mental illness without using this device.]

#### Delusion.

The other players and GM decide on a mundane detail of the world which is no longer true and has never been true. For example, there might be no such thing

as a squirrel, a Volkswagen, or orange juice. Maybe John Lennon was never assassinated, or never existed in the first place. PCs and supporting characters deny knowledge of the chosen item, person, or event.

#### Homicidal Mania.

The GM takes the player aside, tells him that he knows one of the other players is a supernatural creature, and tells him just how to kill the monster.



#### Megalomania.

When the character fails at a dramatic moment, the GM describes the outcome of his ability attempt as successful, then asks the player to leave the room. Then the GM describes the real results to the other players, and invites the megalomaniac player back into the room.

#### Multiple Personality Disorder.

At moments of stress, another player is assigned control of the character, speaking and acting as if he's an entirely different person.

#### Paranoia.

The other players are instructed to act as if they're trying to keep straight faces when the affected player returns. Occasionally they exchange notes, make hand signals to the GM, or use meaningless code words, as if communicating something important the player is unaware of.

#### Selective Amnesia.

The group decides on an event that did happen in the world that the player has now forgotten all about. He's married, or killed someone, or pseudonymously written a best-selling book. Many people he meets refers to this new, verifiable fact of which he is unaware.

# RISK FACTORS AND STABILITY

If characters in horror movies were run by roleplayers, there would be no horror. No one would go down into the sub-basement, read incantations found in moldy tomes, or take a shower with a known maniac on the loose.

Your risk factors encourage you to abandon the flinty rationality of a player controlling a game piece. They give your characters the same unruly impulses that inspire real people to make the dumb choices—which they do on a regular basis.

Your GM will tell you when you find your risk factor impelling you to irrationally heedless action. When in doubt, she'll explain exactly what you have to do to satisfy your impulse. You are never obligated to obey it. By exerting unusual force of will, you can control your behavior.

At a price.

Sometimes your GM will refer to your risk factor in her scenario notes, as a means of moving the plot ahead and getting you into trouble. This is referred to as a hard risk factor. Whenever you resist a hard risk factor, you lose either 4 Stability points or one-third of your Stability pool, whichever is greater. (The GM is always empowered to specify a risk factor as hard, whether or not it literally shows up in her notes. In a heavily improvised scenario, the notes exist only in the GM's head, anyway.)

On other occasions a situation tangential to the main storyline would logically trigger your self-destructive tendencies. This is called a **soft risk factor**. It costs you 2 Stability points to resist a soft risk factor.

In neither case do you get to roll Stability to avoid the loss. It is automatic.

## REGAINING POOL POINTS

Whenever the PCs are able to create a temporary haven for themselves in which they're free from danger and horror manifestations for an hour or more, they may refresh up to 3 general abilities, except for Health and Stability. They lose all refreshed points if their supposed place of safety is penetrated or reveals itself as a place of hazard. The characters get only one opportunity for this accelerated refreshment per session.

Use of the Shrink ability and achievement of emotionally significant goals (see below) permit limited recovery of Stability points in the course of an episode. Full refreshment occurs between stories. It is possible only when the character is able to spend calm, undisturbed quality time associating with the people and carrying out the activities that serve as the character's Sources of Stability.

The Health pool refreshes over time, at a rate of 2 points per day of restful activity. (Wounded characters heal at a different rate, over a period of hospitalization; see p. 41.) Use of the Medic ability can restore a limited number of Health points in the course of a session.

Pools for the physical abilities of Athletics, Driving, Scuffling, and Shooting are fully restored whenever twenty-four hours of game-world time elapses since the last expenditure. The remaining general abilities refresh at the end of each case, like investigative abilities.

# STABILITY GAINS

In a game of emotional horror, PCs may regain lost Stability points by helping supporting characters to feel a sense of safety, serenity, or acceptance in the face of horror or catastrophe. They may provide purely emotional solace, or actively work to rescue a supporting character from danger. Although the characters may gain information or move toward completion of a goal by providing this aid, their actions must be selfless, or go above and beyond their obligations, to qualify for this reward.

In some instances, especially impressive investigative feats may bolster a PC's Stability, by restoring his confidence. This reward is especially appropriate in the case of point spends suggested by the players.

When a PC qualifies for a Stability gain, the player rolls a die and adds the result to his Stability pool. The pool never increases beyond the character's Stability rating.

# IMPROVING YOUR CHARACTER

At the end of each story, each player gets 2 build points for each session they participated in. (This assumes a small number of 3-4 hour sessions; if you play in shorter bursts, modify accordingly.) Players who had characters die in the course of the story only get points for each session involving their current character.

These build points can be spent to increase either investigative or general abilities. You may acquire new abilities or bolster existing ones. If necessary to preserve credibility, rationalize new abilities as areas of expertise you've had all along, but are only revealing later in the series.

What Do Pool Points Represent? Pool points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that each character gets his or her own time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little bit of your spotlight time. More active players will spend their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments to shine.

Remember, all characters are significant to the story. Pool points measure your opportunities to demonstrate that significance during any given scenario.

Pool points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. The team members' ignorance of them is analogous to TV characters' obliviousness to commercial breaks, the unwritten rules of scene construction, and the tendency of events to heat up during sweeps.

We represent this most purely in the case of investigative skills, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to a purely fictional construct, the length of the episode.

However, where a pool could be seen to correspond to a resource perceptible to the characters, we handle refreshment in a somewhat more realistic, if also abstract, manner. Characters' ebbing Health scores are perceptible to the characters in the form of welts, cuts, pain, and general fatigue. Stability is less tangible but can be subjectively measured in the characters' moods and reactions. Physical abilities, also tied to fatigue and sharpness of reflexes, are also handled with a nod to the demands of realism.

# Fear Itself vs. Esoterrorists Both *Fear Itself* and its precursor game, *The Esoterrorists*, reference the creatures of Unremitting Horror and the Outer Black, but use them for their own purposes. In *The Esoterrorists*, creatures are summoned by the sinister international conspiracy of the same name, using energies created by the worldwide spread of anxiety and cognitive dissonance. By shutting down the human conspirators, the experienced and well-resourced characters of that game can staunch the flow of supernatural weirdness—temporarily, at least. There are monsters out there, but the ultra-competent

good guys enjoy the upper hand.

A Fear Itself series is meant to be even scarier than its counterpart. It may not even be set in the same universe as a *The Esoterrorists* game. GMs can use the same creatures, but without the human conspiracy angle. Even if there are Esoterrorists, and an Ordo Veritatis to combat them, the solitary, resource-strapped unfortunates who comprise a proper Fear Itself PC group will never know about them. They're not worried about how these events fit into a wider global framework. They're frantically trying to remain alive and sane.

An ambitious GM might set out to turn a **Fear Itself** series into an *Esoterrorists* game over time. The characters can start out as hapless ordinary people who, after many terrifying exploits, demonstrate the necessary competence to be recruited as members of the Ordo Veritatis. At this point, they might be given crash courses in investigative techniques, justifying the introduction of the wider variety of investigative skills operative in Esoterrorists, along with and a generous allocation of new build points, so the characters can afford to purchase them. A several-year break in game time may make this transition sharper and more believable. During this shift in time, characters may undergo changes in personality. They might adopt new cover identities. They could lose old Sources Of Stability and gain new ones. Or the GM may choose to ignore this rule, which is not present in Esoterrorists.

# **CREATURES**

Though many of the supernatural creatures encountered in Fear Itself are physically gruesome, all of them should be in some way psychologically upsetting—not just for the characters, but for the players as well. This effect is fairly easy to achieve if your players are readily creeped out by standard horror imagery. Many roleplayers are used to games of power fantasy, in which their cool powers can be counted on to triumph against the forces of darkness. Simply by making them play ordinary people unequipped to deal with the nasty threats they face, you may create a sense of powerlessness that makes even the most prosaic creatures seem supremely horrifying.

If you're running the game for seasoned horror aficionados, on the other hand, you'll have to work to crank up the sense of unease. Avoid standard or overused monsters, or put a new, sickly modern spin on existing tropes. Think more Clive Barker than H. P. Lovecraft. Each writer created beasties that were skin-crawling for their time, but Lovecraft's Cthulhu creatures have been so well loved in gaming fandom that they've become downright cuddly, losing their squirming psychosexual overtones. When creating creatures, use contemporary frankness concerning issues of violence and sexuality to push your player's buttons.

The Unremitting Horror mythology designates most creatures as denizens of the Outer Black, a bleak, distant plane of existence utterly hostile to human life. Its beings come to our reality to feed and to play.

This section presents a few sample creatures. For more, see the upcoming relaunch of the *Book Of Unremitting Horror* for the GUMSHOE rules system.

Creatures do not have Stability ratings. They are, by any human standards, already insane.

## THE MYSTERY MAN

The term "Mystery Man" is a catchall for a class of alien entity of near god-like power who delights in psychological torture and degradation. Each individual has its own specific name; the one appearing in the scenario at the end of this book is called Hungerwood.

Mystery Men drive people mad for pleasure. A Mystery Man seeks out individuals, often in a group, who he deems susceptible to psychological breakdown, yet of sufficient depth and interest to make the effort entertaining. Once he targets a victim or victims, he loses (or perhaps only willingly abandons) the ability to interfere directly with their minds. His goal is to drive them over the edge incrementally, through a series of ever-nastier psychological manipulations. He could pulp their brains immediately simply by opening a psychic link between his mind and theirs, but what delight would there be in that? Then he'd merely have to find another coterie of sufficiently entertaining targets. And those with the right balance of fortitude and weakness are hard to find. Likewise, he never launches direct assaults against them, though he may manipulate third parties into doing so. Physical violence is only a means to a more delectable end – emotional mutilation.

All Mystery Men enigmatically refer to this pursuit as the Ocean Game.

After prolonged pursuit by a Mystery Man, PCs should be afraid that everyone they meet might be one of his mental thralls, if not their ultimate antagonist in the spectral flesh. The Mystery Man can manifest in a variety of forms, adopting new ones at will.

In order to target a group of victims, the Mystery Man must introduce himself to them, though he may do so in stages, to heighten the tension. He suffers no obligation to explain how he does what he does, or offer any explanation for his actions beyond his own psychic sadism.

Although he claims to be indestructible, the PCs may find old documents about the Mystery Man archetype suggesting that it is possible to destroy him, or at least to sever the bond between him and his victims. Unfortunately they never go into detail and usually conclude prematurely with the author's descent into gibbering lunacy.

God-Like Power: The Mystery Man can refresh any single pool at will. In combat, he can do it once per combat round. Otherwise, he can do so once per minute. He cannot be hurt or seriously wounded and need never make a Consciousness roll. If reduced to -12 or fewer Health points, the Mystery Man dematerializes. He returns to the Outer Black, where he must remain for at least twenty-four hours. For the



next seven days, he is unable to come within three hundred feet of any persons who were present when he dematerialized.

**Distort Reality:** The Mystery Man can alter the physical environment around an individual for up to twenty-four consecutive hours. This is

not an illusion, though he can turn off the effect at will when others approach, making it seems to the victim like a hallucination. Because the alterations to the surrounding area are objectively real, attempts by the victim to disbelieve what he beholds or wake up from the nightmare are doomed to fail.

The limits of this effect are roughly within the victim's line of sight. Use of binoculars or other sight-extending equipment by the victim merely increases the area the Mystery Man can alter. If the target moves, the Mystery Man can move the effect so that the environment continues to distort as he travels. He can place a victim back inside a traumatic memory from the past, make the walls of a house breathe and sweat, or turn a forest into a dark wood of reaching, hungry trees. If he wishes to insert other characters into the scenario, the Mystery Man must manifest in the desired form, or use other people enthralled with his Pull the Strings ability (below), altering their appearance as his twisted scenario demands.

Flawless Imitation: The Mystery Man can perfectly imitate any person he's observed for even a few fleeting moments. The imitation looks, sounds, even smells like the original, right down to body language. Characters can spot the fake by noticing out-ofcharacter behavior. Bullshit Detector tells them that something is off about the imitation's statements, but does not outright reveal him as the Mystery Man. Only after the character (or player) voices the thought that this might be the Mystery Man does the illusion take on flaws. Now the imitation looks mostly like the original, but with horrible, distorted qualities. Your "mother's" flesh suddenly becomes sallow and purulent. Your pig-tailed "niece" reveals a sharp set of fangs, and so on. This effect calls for a Stability test, with a possible loss of 4 Stability points.

**Pull the Strings:** The Mystery Man may dominate the mind of any non-PC. He can force new behavior, including complex actions. He can extract memories, implant new ones, even change the victim's personality. This effect is permanent, if the Mystery Man wants it to be.

## **OVVASHI**

Ovvashi are humanoid demons who prey on society's refuse: drug addicts, the homeless, and the downand-out. They appear as ordinary, almost painfully nondescript vagrants of either sex. Shuffling through places where the homeless congregate, they quickly find new friends, ensuring a warm welcome with their dirty plastic bags laden with cheap booze and smokes. Having won their confidence, they draw tales of woe from their newfound mates. To seal their allegiance, they withdraw from their bags the objects their victims most desire. Typical gifts include money, drugs, and food, but the ovvashi are also capable of materializing very specific items, like an exact replica of a long-lost memento, or even a particular photograph of an abandoned loved one.

The first gift comes without strings attached. After that, the ovvashi's friends must do favors for it to get more of what they want. The ovvashi slowly turns the group members against one another, until they commit heinous and degrading acts of betrayal. It engineers a campaign of murder, with the least effective members of the homeless group dying first. The demon uses its knowledge of the crimes it has inspired to keep its pawns hooked, doing its bidding until no one is left. The last derelict standing is killed by the gnashing, shark-like teeth of the ovvashi itself, after which point it trudges off in search of a new band of the disenfranchised to destroy from within.

**General:** Athletics 12, Driving 3, Filch 8, Fleeing 8, Health 20, Infiltration 8, Medic 8, Preparedness (special), Scuffling 15, Shooting 8, Shrink 8, Sense Trouble 8. **Damage Modifier:** 0

Appear Innocuous: The ovvashi looks like an ordinary derelict except for its multiple rows of triangular, shark-like teeth. It is, however, able to psychically influence those around it to ignore this glaring sign of its inhuman origin. Only characters who specifically state that they're closely examining the ovvashi's features may notice the teeth. If this is an essential piece of information to the plot, any character with Natural History gains the clue automatically. If not, the character must spend 2 points of Natural History to learn the horrible truth. Any characters seeing the teeth must then make a Stability test for seeing a supernatural creature, the potential loss depending on the distance from which they observe it.



Derive Power: Whenever a victim is killed by its machinations, the ovvashi consumes its soul. It does this by taking a small portion of the remains, like a fingernail or hank of hair, and smoking it in its pipe, which itself is carved from a bone of a previous victim. After smoking its victim's soul, the ovvashi gains an additional 12 points to spread amongst its general ability pool. Unlike ordinary pool points, these cannot be refreshed. The ovvashi retains them until they are spent, or until its bone pipe is destroyed. The demon is extremely attached to the pipe and will negotiate for its return if stolen.

No psychic residue remains of a soul smoked by an ovvashi. No ghost, no spirit, not even an emotional vibration, is left behind for sensitives to detect.

Extract Secrets: By sitting and patiently listening to a person who regards it sympathetically, the ovvashi can encourage the subject to reveal his deepest, darkest secrets. In most cases, the demon uses ordinary psychology. Where the subject holds tightly to his secrets, the ovvashi can use supernatural means to impel him to spill the beans, making a Shrink test against a Difficulty of 4. Unlike an ordinary use of the Shrink ability, this can force the subject to unwillingly reveal his most shameful, closely-held secrets.

**Uncanny Preparedness:** The ovvashi can withdraw from its pile of plastic bags any object desired by a potential victim. Consumable items, including food, cigarettes, and drugs, work just like the real thing.

Size of the items is limited to objects that could credibly fit in an ordinary shopping bag. Items remain in existence for twenty-four hours only. The ovvashi can wish them away before that time.

When it wants to pull out all the stops in manipulating a victim, it uses its Extract Secrets ability to work out exactly what item will arouse the most desperate need. When presented with their heart's desire, characters must do what they can to satisfy the ovvashi and gain the item, or suffer the same Stability loss as if they ignored a Risk Factor. As they become crazier, the horrible acts proposed by the ovvashi seem progressively more sensible.



# DESIGNING SCENARIOS

Unlike the typical GUMSHOE game, a **Fear Itself** scenario privileges scenes of mental and physical danger over purely investigative sequences. Typically the characters are threatened by some kind of Outer Black menace, or attempt to intervene for others who are menaced. To bring the monsters' reign of terror to a temporary end, they must solve a mystery and take action using the information they've garnered. However, the mystery is much simpler than, for example, an Esoterrorists scenario, and interspersed with much running and screaming on the part of the PCs and supporting cast.

# PERSONALIZED HORROR

A **Fear Itself** scenario should draw the PCs into encounters with personal horror. Scenes should be tailored to the individual characters' risk factors, fears, and inner demons.

To make give such sequences punch, allow the characters time to establish themselves as having normal lives. Give your stories time to breathe by inserting mundane dramas involving the people who serve as the characters' sources of stability. Keep the pressures of ordinary life on the characters as they're drawn into the midnight world of the supernatural. Permit them to further their ordinary goals as well as their quest against the Outer Black. Surprise the players by setting scenes of horror in apparently ordinary places, or by switching suddenly from soap opera sequence to gut-munching terror. Take a tip from the introductory scenario that concludes this book, and allow moments of humor to lull the players into a false sense of security before you put the hammer down.

# STRUCTURE

A straightforward investigation can be seen as a series of scenes arranged in a straight line, with multiple ways to move from each scene to the one following it. Improvisation consists of reacting to the players by switching the order of scenes around, or interpolating new scenes in this order.

The looser structure of a **Fear Itself** scenario still consists of an investigative line, in which the characters pursue a series of core clues until they achieve a resolution of some sort. This is called the **spine**. In your notes, it can consist of large sections of fleshed-out narrative, or a barebones list of the elements that need to occur to comprise a minimally satisfying narrative. See the introduction to the adventure included in this book, *The Ocean In the Forest*,

for a sample spine.

Surrounding this rudimentary spine are any number of confrontational scenes, in which any of the following can happen:

- The creatures (or other antagonists) make an aggressive assault on the lives or sanity of their targets, whether these are the PCs, recurring members of the series' supporting cast, or supporting characters involved only in the current scenario.
- One or more PCs pursue their personal goals.
- A flashback (see p. 57) reveals new information about one of the leading characters.

Confrontational scenes can be even looser than the spine. In your notes, they can consist of carefully detailed prose descriptions. However, unless you're preparing an adventure for someone else to run (as in the case of *The Ocean In the Forest*) you're probably better off with rudimentary point form notes. By keeping your notes sparse, you can give yourself a foundation of ideas to improvise from, without spending undue time writing up scenes which might not occur.

# FLOATING CORE CLUES

The following technique is suitable for any GUMSHOE game.

It is sometimes useful to structure a scenario with one or more free-floating core clues. These typically advance the story from one distinct section to another. Where an ordinary core clue is linked with a

particular scene, a floating clue can be gleaned in any one of several scenes. The GM determines during play which scene gives up the clue.

Floating clues allow you to control the pacing of a scenario. They allow the characters to play out all of the fun or interesting experiences in one section of the scenario before the story takes a dramatic turn. For example, you might want them to separately

meet all of the suspects in a murder investigation before they, and the PCs, get locked up for the night in an old dark house. To achieve this, withhold the core clue that moves the PCs to the dark house until after they've met all of the relevant supporting characters. That way, you prevent them from leaping ahead into the narrative without getting all the information they need to fully enjoy what follows.

Likewise, a floating clue allows you to perform like a ruthless editor, skipping unnecessary scenes when you need to kick the narrative into a higher gear. Let's say you've chosen five possible scenes in which the PCs might logically get a necessary core clue. You figure that this phase of the investigation should take about an hour. If the PCs breeze through the scenes in ten minutes apiece, you can save the core clue for the last scene. If they linger, taking twenty minutes per scene, you'll want to make the core clue available after the third scene.

Player frustration level usually serves as a better trigger for a floating core clue than a predetermined time limit. If they're having obvious fun interacting with the vivid supporting characters you've created, you can give them more of what they want by saving the core clue for the final scene. On the other hand, if you see they're getting bored and frustrated, you can slip in the floating clue earlier.

The scenario in this book uses a floating core clue structure.

# RUNNING SCENARIOS

The following techniques prove themselves invaluable when running a horror series based on the personal stories of the characters. When designing scenarios, leave yourself room for them. Continue to look for new opportunities to use them during play, as your focus on characterization takes the story in unexpected directions.

## DIRECTED SCENES

When following the characters in personal moments, use **directed scenes** to compress time and share your dramatic intent with the players.

In a directed scene, you place one or more PCs in a scene just as it's getting interesting, avoiding the preliminaries and pedestrian connective detail a talented writer or film editor always cuts out of a story.

You stage a directed scene for Ralf's character, Michel. "You're in Thelma's hotel room, the slime from the green blurry things still marring your sport coat. She's throwing bottles at her locked bathroom door. Judging from the terrified, whiskey-rotted voice on the other side, she's got a man in there."

If the player appears puzzled, you may choose to give him an assignment of sorts, explaining what the scene is meant to establish

"Here you're to dramatize your relationship with Thelma."

Directed scenes may establish sources of stability, risk factors, or personal goals, moving them from the static potential of entries on the character sheet to dramatic enactment in actual events unfolding before the entire group.

Juice them up by enlisting the other players to take on supporting roles during these scenes. Give them a brief description of the supporting character, and tell the chosen player what that character wants to accomplish.

Lynne seems a little bored by the proceedings, so you assign her the role of Thelma. "You love Michel like the son you never had, but he's always trying to get between you and your pleasures. Your intention is to get rid of him as quickly as possible, with a minimum of fuss and hurt feelings."

Once a directed scene has dramatized the character aspect you want to establish, and seems to be running out of steam or headed off on a tangent, end it by cutting to a new scene. To maintain forward momentum and avoid confusion, it's best to make the next scene a standard one involving all of the group and concerning the main action, rather than another directed scene.

## FLASHBACKS

A special sort of directed scene is the flashback, in which characters enact scenes from their character's pasts. Your goal as GM is to surprise not only the other players, but the spotlight player as well, by throwing new light on their backstory. Again, the point is to take a part of the character's background which usually stays in the player's head, and in a description only the GM reads, and bring it alive for everyone. It goes without saying that the player's choices are somewhat constrained during a flashback sequence; you must contrive to prevent them from doing anything that changes what has been conclusively established about their characters in the present-day main action. However, where flashback seems to contradict a character's description of his own past, you can certainly treat what happens in the memory sequence as truth, and the description as a self-serving account or false memory.

Use rules only sparingly during flashback sequences. They're necessary only when the outcome of a past action cannot be deduced from what's already been established in the series. Step in when necessary to guide events so that they don't contradict the present timeline. This may be especially important when you've directed other players to take on supporting roles.

You're running a flashback scene in



which Shakira remembers a frightening run-in with her abusive father when she was a child. You've assigned Erik the role of her father, and he's playing it to the hilt, by describing the character going after Shakira's mother with a kitchen knife. You can't run it as a typical Scuffling contest between father and mother, because Shakira's mom is one of her sources of stability, and thus alive and kicking in the series' current timeline. Instead you step in, guiding Erik's actions by saying, "Of course, Bruno didn't kill Rosirene that day, but..." Then you allow the scene to continue to another satisfying conclusion that maintains your campaign's established continuity.

The TV show *Lost*, which has horror elements even if it isn't primarily a scary show, makes absolutely

brilliant use of the flashback device. It allows them to introduce each character twice — once, as who he seems to be to the other castaways, and again as he really was in his life before he came to the island. Watch, learn, and steal.

For example, you might want to include a series of linked flashbacks in a single episode. As in the main timeline, each flashback sequence ends on with an unresolved question. Thus you have two lines of suspense running concurrently. One asks what will happen next in the present, the other what still stands to be revealed in the flashbacks.

Flashbacks concerning your character are as much for the benefit of your fellow players as for you. You may have everything interesting about your own character in your head, but can convey only a fraction of this in a quick verbal description to the other players. *Showing* your character doing something makes a much more vivid impression than simply *telling* the GM and other players about him. If you occasionally finish a flashback feeling that it hasn't added much, remember to consider how it sharpens your character portrayal for other participants.

#### SCENE HINTS

The following GM hints apply equally to flashbacks and directed scenes.

Flashbacks and Campaign Style The usefulness of flashbacks depends on the mode of horror you hope to evoke. They suit a literary-style campaign with a heavy emphasis on characterization. If you're playing a cinematic horror game with a high body count and gleeful reliance on teen-flick clichés, you'll want to skip them altogether. In such a game, characterization that goes beyond the stereotypical is out of genre.

- Never forget who your focus character is, and what the scene is meant to accomplish. Some players may try to take over a scene when given a supporting character to play. If they dominate, signal them to dial it back, perhaps reminding them of the scene's dramatic purpose. The scene is always about a player character.
- Strong scenes are about conflict. If the PC or a supporting player seem to be defusing the tension, throw an element into the scene to kick it back into high gear.
- Take notes. Vivid supporting characters may suddenly come to the fore in mid-scene. If so, you'll want to bring them back later, either

in the back- or main story. It's embarrassing if you've forgotten crucial information when the time comes to reuse them.

#### - See that something interesting is happening to everyone at the same time. This may be challenging, as it is often the wary player's goal to make sure that nothing interesting ever happens to his player.

## CUTAWAYS

One of the huge mistakes characters make in horror movies is to split up in the face of danger. As GM, you should always be encouraging players to make it.

You'll also want to run solo scenes, or sequences with only a few cast members present, during mundane scenes that develop character and further the PCs' personal goals.

To do this, you'll need to rely on the cutaway technique. Here you spotlight the actions of a few players while the others look on. In some genres, gamers can get restless while off-stage. In a properly bloodcurdling horror game, they'll likely be glad for a few moments of respite when it's somebody else's *cojones* laid out on the sizzling griddle.

You can find more complete descriptions of the cutaway technique in other roleplaying products, including ones by this author. In brief, the secrets to its successful use are:

- Allow all players to observe cutaway scenes they're not involved in as spectators. Require them to separate their own knowledge from character knowledge. Properly managed, it's always more ominous to know what horrible events might be in the offing than to be surprised. (This mode of suspense is what makes Alfred Hitchcock's movies so inexorably compelling years after they were made. Which is not to say that there's anything wrong with the occasional out-of-nowhere jolt.)
- Keep scenes short and snappy. Think about how quickly ensemble TV shows pop from one story thread to the next. Cut on cliffhanger moments, or when the spotlight player(s) need time to think of what to do next.

## MAINTAINING MENACE

More so than in more adventure-oriented roleplaying games, your primary duty as GM is to sustain a mood of unease. Occasional moments of comic relief and relaxation can work in your favor, softening up the players for the tension to come. However, if your players are more bored or complacent than scared, take whatever immediate action you can to ramp up the creep factor. Whether you throw in a an omen of doom, a disturbing visual image, or a flat-out assault by enemy forces, remember that subtlety only goes so far in horror. Don't be afraid to grab the players by the metaphorical lapels. Horror is not meant to be fair. It's best if you don't have to abandon your storyline's internal logic to toss in a scare, but that's a secondary consideration to keeping the fright going. Emulate the shamelessness of horror movie directors. Throw in unrelated scares to make the players jump. Use dream sequences and hallucinations if need be. A sustained mood comes before everything else.

Also, our advice from *The Esoterrorists* about employing fright-flick soundtracks to put your players on edge goes double in **Fear Itself**. There, the protagonists get to vanquish the horror. Here, they might all turn out to be meat for the grinder...

# THE SKEPTICAL AUTHORITIES AND OTHER LIMITATIONS

It is a standard trope of horror that the traditional guardians of order and normality, such as the police, parents, teachers and news agencies, are resolutely blind to what the protagonists are going through. The usual scenario involves young protagonists, who know the dreadful truth, struggling against the obstinacy of the older generation.

There is a sound dramatic reason for this. Successful horror depends upon a sense of isolation, whether this is geographical (the lonely cabin in the woods) or social (nobody in town believes you!). The reassurance of a support network is poison to the sense of creeping unease that horror seeks to cultivate. Eventually, once the protagonists have already been through hell, society may come to their aid and recognize that they were right all along, but this only happens at the end of the investigation, if at all.

The Games Master should enforce this convention stringently, cutting off player access to outside support. Cellphones fail to work. Phone lines are cut. Cars break down and bridges collapse. Police are politely skeptical or threaten to run you in for wasting their time, depending on how you approach them.

All of these limitations then act as motivators for the players to press ahead with the investigation. Unless they can *prove* that sinister events are afoot in their quiet country town, the police will be worse than useless. Unless they can find out for certain exactly what web of occult association links the murder victims, they are liable to join them. If they don't find out what happened to Charlie, nobody will. There isn't a police station around for miles, the phones aren't working, and he could already be dead...

The GM may find it hard to give the players the impression that running to the authorities would be a bad idea. Risk Factors and character background help with this, as some characters will naturally recoil from police involvement, but in case these are not enough

for the story, the following three classic demotivators may help:

- The police would never believe us. Who in their right mind would go running down to the police station babbling about skinless walking corpses?
- The police would assume we were responsible. Have the players had to kill anyone? Have they been put into a position where it looks like they've killed someone?
- The police are in on it. Worst of all is the possibility that the authorities themselves are somehow complicit in the horror. Can you really trust them to watch over you?

# TIPS FOR PLAYERS

Mastery of the following concepts will help your character to prosper in an environment of Unremitting Horror. Well, maybe not prosper, *per se*. Let's say, it may keep him alive and sane for slightly longer than average...

# BELIEVE YOU MIGHT BE SUCCESSFUL

Yes, this is a game of horror, in which your characters might well be horribly disfigured, slaughtered, or driven irrevocably insane. That said, the best way to fail is to become defensive and do nothing. Don't let the fear bring your planning ability to a halt. Instead, talk through the most obvious options, quickly pick the one that seems the most appealing, and then execute that plan. Will something horrible happen? Of course it will—it's a horror game! Something appalling will happen no matter what your plan is. So choose a plan, be bold, and seize the initiative. Pick the type of terrifying risk you're most able to confront.

As in any game, your GM will allow any halfway credible plan you come up with a good chance of success, and will place nasty obstacles in your way to make it more exciting. So pick something quickly, grit your teeth, and plunge into the dark, knowing you have no better choice.

# FIND A WAY TO BE PROACTIVE

**Fear Itself** characters are ordinary people who find themselves dropped suddenly into a world of horror. Realistically, they might respond to extreme violence and eruptions of supernatural awfulness by curling up into a ball and doing nothing. Although it makes perfect sense for your characters to freak out and become paralyzed by fear, this is not very interesting, at least after an obligatory scene of muttering in disbelief. When creating characters, or developing their personalities during play, think about realistic ways to portray them as proactive and resourceful, even in the face of mind-shattering horror. Players in horror games often make the mistake of thinking solely about how realistic their responses are. Instead, make interesting choices and then find a way to make them realistic. An interesting choice is one that keeps your character moving and doing things.

Most of the time a group of players gets stuck, it's because they've considered and rejected not only the foolish options, but the sensible ones as well. Often you can find a way forward by refusing to be talked out of half-decent plans. There is no perfect plan. At best, you'll find one that requires desperation and

daring, and might still cost you your lives.

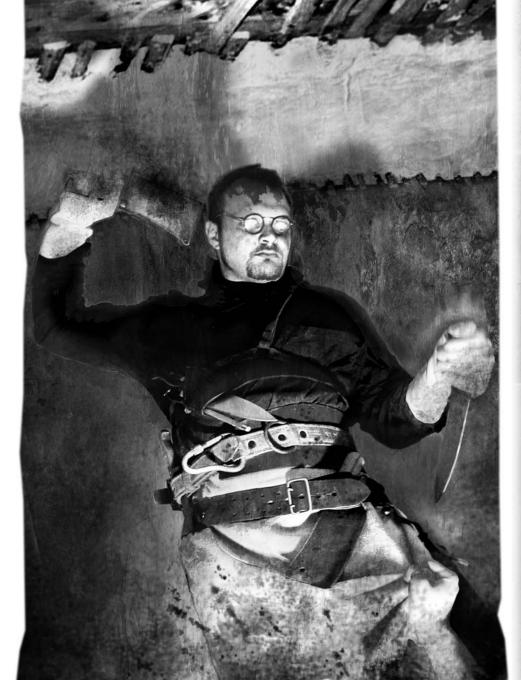
In a world of unremitting horror, safety is an illusion, so you might as well do *something*.

# WHEN STUCK, LOOK FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you are legitimately stuck, and not just rejecting perfectly viable courses of action, don't just stick close to home hashing over your options. Go out and find more information. Ask yourself what you need to know in order to formulate a plan. Then figure out how to get that information, and go out and get it.

#### TALK TO PEOPLE

Many groups are reluctant to use their Interpersonal abilities, figuring that they can get into less trouble by sticking purely to physical clues, or hacking into their subjects' computers from afar. This is a disastrous Talking mistake. witnesses, experts, and informants is by far the best way of gaining information about your situation. With information, you can find that coveted least worst plan that will lead you to the grim final confrontation.



#### KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Expect to find only one major clue per scene. Although you shouldn't be too quick to abandon a scene for the next one, most groups make the opposite mistake, returning endlessly to the same few places or witnesses, hoping to scrape more info out

of them. If you find a clue that leads you somewhere else—go there! Chances are, once you're there, you'll find another clue, that will in turn lead you to a new scene, with a further clue that takes you to a third scene, and so on. Unsuccessful groups



endlessly re-plough the same ground. Successful ones follow a trail, just like in a kid's game of treasure hunt.

#### DEPUTIZE YOURSELF

An ordinary person might be reluctant to go out and involve themselves personally in investigations best handled by the professionals. But you've stumbled into a world of unearthly menace where, as far as you know, there are no professionals. You may feel cosmically ill-prepared to face the threat in front of you, but you know that no one else is up to it, either. As improbable as it may seem, you must take on the mantle of unofficial investigators.

Rely on your Interpersonal abilities to gain entrance to situations that would normally be closed to regular folks. Come up with suitable cover stories if need be.

Passively playing the good citizen won't save you. You must carry the ball into the enemy's court, and part the dark veil of the unknown. A few moments of reluctance is understandable and realistic. More than that is boring. Accept your weird new role in life, and make the most of it.

#### RISK FACTORS MAKE YOU ACTIVE

If you ever find yourself looking to your risk factor as an excuse for not taking interesting action, stop right there, back up, and remember what risk factors are for. They're to push you forward into the plot, not to give you an excuse to cower and shoot down each others' plans. If you're Skeptical, you're not skeptical of a decent plan. You're Skeptical of the existence of the supernatural, which motivates you to get out there and poke the gooey things with a stick. Look to your Risk Factors as sources of inspiration, reminding you of the sort of action your character favors.

#### EMBRACE FLASHBACKS AND DIRECTED SCENES

You may take to directed scenes and flashbacks like a duck to water, or find them confounding. If you're having trouble with them, remember their purpose: to make the characters come alive, by dramatizing their personalities and backstories. Don't be afraid that you can lose anything during a flashback. As long as you reveal something entertaining about your character, you've won.

Maybe you think that your GM is trying to take your

character in an unwanted direction by posing certain situations to you. The way to get around this is not to resist, or to retreat into inaction. This will just force your GM to put your character under even greater pressure. Instead, look for a way to pivot the scene in an active, interesting way, to make the point about the character that you want. Don't avoid conflict—change the terms of the conflict to suit your own objectives.

These scenes are not really about winning or losing, but if you want to think of them in those terms, you win when they expose your character, and lose when you fail to reveal anything.

They improve your characters' chance of survival by making them seem more human, sympathetic, and real. When your GM is confronted by the necessity of gruesomely dispatching a player character, she will, consciously or otherwise, tend to favor the three-dimensional characters and write off the cardboard cut-outs. If all you allow your character to be is a tight-lipped, enigmatic bad-ass, your GM can easily bump you off, knowing you'll probably create a brand new tight-lipped, enigmatic bad-ass to replace him. Interchangeable characters are always first on the chopping block. A unique character everyone in the group cares about is not so easily replaced.

Genre fans have a term called "script immunity", which supposedly explains why cherished iconic characters survive situations that would doom extras and walkons. Think of flashbacks and directed scenes as a tools for creating your own script immunity.

#### Premise

The premise for this scenario is that all of the characters are members of a regular gaming group. They've all decided to participate in *Eldarak*, the debut live action roleplaying event hosted by LiveGame, a wellfinanced company that aims to take LARPing from a homegrown activity to a highly publicized sport with hefty cash prizes. Its inaugural event takes place in the characters'

To kick off their schedule, LiveGame is hosting events throughout North America and the UK, with a \$10,000 cash prize for every participant in each winning team. (These do not occur simultaneously, but as part of a tour.) Each team also gets an allexpenses paid trip to the final round. This is held in the UK if your game is set in North America, or in the US if your series is set in Britain.

(If you're setting the game elsewhere, juggle the details as needed, so that they'll get a trip from Australia to the UK, or whatever.)

When creating their characters, the players must specify why they're desperate to win their round, get the cash prize, and/or win the trip. It's their responsibility to create characters who'll credibly stick around even when things start to go awry.

# OCEAN IN THE FOREST

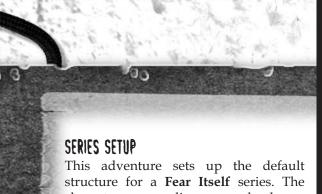
In this scenario, the cast of characters comes to the attention of a Mystery Man, ushering them into a world of surreal menace and persecution. As such, it can serve as the opening installment of a *Fear Itself* series. Their first brushes with him take place during a live action roleplaying game, held in a secluded camping area. By investigating a road accident they passed on the way to the retreat, the characters can learn a bit about the Mystery Man and his inexplicable Ocean Game. They may come to believe that they've vanquished the Mystery Man, but when they get back to their ordinary lives, they discover that the horrors they face are, shall we say, unremitting...

This scenario takes more than one session to run, and uses the common horror device of the false ending. However, in this case, the false ending occurs halfway through, leaving the PCs momentarily adrift until they realize that their worries are far from over.

# INTRODUCTION

The Spine of this scenario is as follows:

- The long drive. The characters, driving together in a rented van, make a bored, bleary trip to a company camping trip. Flashbacks establish their personal relationships and personal goals.
- Wreck On the Highway. The group witnesses a horrific van accident in which every passenger gets killed. One of them catches a fleeting glimpse of the supernatural, which will assume greater importance as the scenario continues.
- **The game.** The fun, silly trappings of a live action fantasy roleplaying game slowly give way to horror, as the Mystery Man manipulates other participants in hopes of turning its new playthings, the player characters, into crazy killers.
- The bust-out. The characters flee the game site in order to learn more about the passengers of the wrecked van. By following their lives, they learn more about the Mystery Man as their nemesis continues to harry them.
- The ritual. Armed with knowledge supplied to them by a helpful informant, the PCs return to the site of the accident, and apparently banish the Mystery Man back to the Outer Black.
- **Dread epilogue.** Defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory, as the PCs learn that they only strengthened the Mystery Man, whose laughing presence can be sensed all around them.



This adventure sets up the default structure for a **Fear Itself** series. The characters are ordinary people drawn into a web of horror by a Mystery Man. At its conclusion, they realize that, if they ever hope to permanently destroy their nemesis, that they'll have to educate themselves on the occult and the secret workings of the Outer Black.

In this way you set up a series structure in which the group, out of personal survival, becomes a team of amateur occult investigators. Their need to learn more about the Mystery Man leads them to probe into any other supernatural events they might stumble across. They may not have noticed the twilight world of the occult before, but now that they know where to look, it's everywhere. Contacts they make during one investigation steer them toward later cases.

What you eventually wind up with is a structure like that of the *X-Files* TV series, where the PCs mostly investigate standalone cases. Every so often, they stumble back into the main plot—in this case, their struggle with the Mystery Man. Sometimes apparently standalone cases turn out to involve the Mystery Man. In other instances, apparent Mystery Man manifestations turn out to be something else.

# THE LONG DRIVE

Before you begin, compile master lists of the characters' personal goals, enmities and affinities, sources of stability, and the worst things they ever did.

Open by asking who's driving, and what their vehicle is like. If no one is likely to have a vehicle big enough to cram everyone in, suggest that they've all chipped in for a rental minivan. Participants in the game have been

A Note On Tone Expect bountiful helpings of humor, especially of the nerd-culture and self-referential varieties, during the scenario's opening sequences. The device of having gamers players playing gamer player characters may on occasion seem like an invitation to tonewrecking trouble. For example, it means that every nerdy verbal digression the players would normally embark on can now take place in character.

In practice, you'll find that this device sharpens the horror, when it finally does come. First, the humor of early scenes provides a greater emotional height to fall from when events spiral into madness. Secondly, your cast of PCs will seem more real, relatable and down-to-earth than the usual crop of RPG super-characters. When bad things happen to believable comic characters, the horror becomes especially intense.

A Note On Location Horror always packs ore punch when juxtaposed with the familiar. The location of this scenario is left vague so you can situate it a place known to you and your players. Place the characters in your own hometown. For the location of the LARP event, find a large, relatively isolated wilderness campground several hours' drive away from you. Depending on where you live, this might be a national, state or provincial park, or a privately

owned resort.

provided with some basic information about the event, but the company organizing it is clearly using mystery as a marketing tool, leaving many of the details unspecified until players arrive.

OCEAN IN THE FOREST

Here's what they know:

- This is isn't one of those events where you hang out in a hotel conference room, wear goth clothes, and pretend to be invisible. The group will be going at it old school, roughing it in the forest and doing some serious camping, barbarian style.
- The Livegames founder and CEO, 34-year-old wunderkind Cory Sluman, is a former executive at one of the hobby's largest companies. He's known for his enthusiasm, his almost poetic use of business jargon, and his wild ideas, half of which change the industry and half of which ignominiously fizzle. He's a controversial figure in gaming circles—people either think he's obnoxious, or an indispensable visionary. The game itself is called *Eldarak*.
- The event will last three days. It's now Friday night; group members had to (assuming they're employed) leave straight from work to head to the event, without a chance to check in on family members.

Start your series by asking the players to describe their characters and their various reasons for desperately wanting to win.

Now have the players enumerate their affinities and enmities toward one another.

Tell them that they're bleary-eyed from the long, seemingly endless drive. Describe the way that the flashing lights and continual whoosh of traffic coming the other way have lulled them all into a bored, trance-like state. All the radio stations in this remote part of the state or province are

# Fear Helf

crap, and the car's CD player, if it had one, gave up the ghost hours ago.

Group members have been retreading the same conversational topics for what feels like an eternity. Take the goofiest, nerdiest point of conversation that came up during the player's real-life pre-game socializing phase (you know this won't be hard) and specify that the characters are discussing this now, as the ride up wears on. Give them an assigned scene in which they carry on the argument in-character. Let this go on until it runs out of comic steam.

Go through the list of enmities, looking for two characters who dislike each other mutually. If you can't find it, pick a combination of players whose characters have tended to clash in past games. If neither condition applies, pick the most interesting-seeming enmity. For example, you might find a case where character A is character B's enmity, but character B is character A's affinity—a situation that calls for highlighting, if not a dramatic explanation. Then run a directed flashback involving these two PCs, dramatizing either the origins of their mutual dislike, or their most recent run-in.

When that scene has finished, cut to one involving another player, picking the dodgiest or most anti-social risk factor. Have the player run a scene in which his character betrayed a trust to follow his risk factor.

Next examine the list of reasons to desperately want to win the LARPing event. After making a suitable choice, provide the player with a premise for a flashback scene in which the character must confront issues of trust or aggression in pursuit of that goal.

Then consult your sources of stability list. Choose a relationship to a person and flash the character back to a scene in which the character had to disappoint that person in order to go to this gaming event.

Now pick a character who hasn't been introduced yet, and do so by flashing back to a scene where that PC suffers guilt or other consequences over the worst thing he or she ever did. If possible, frame the premise of the scene so that the bad act itself is alluded to, but not specifically revealed. (That way it will provoke curiosity in the other players, and seem more powerful when it is finally explained.)

Continue with the flashbacks until each character has been featured once. Select remaining flashback

types for maximum interest and variety. Wherever possible, frame the scenes to heighten contrasts between the characters. Keep uninvolved players interested by allowing them to play other supporting characters during the flashbacks.

Between each flashback, conjure the hypnotic tedium of the drive into darkness with more whooshing tires and oncoming headlights. Don't let your haste to move from scene to scene stop the players from engaging in in-character banter, should they wish to do so.

It's likely that players taking part in others' directed scenes will create supporting characters, probably obnoxious, who are part of the local gaming scene. Make note of these characters, fitting them into the action of the LARPing event to come.

# THE ACCIDENT

The PC'S vehicle (let's say it's a van) reaches an appointed turnoff. Now the characters are on a two-lane highway that snakes through seemingly uninhabited countryside. They see no other traffic, not even the expected convoy of fellow gamers. Are they behind everyone else? Did they jump ahead? Their headlights throw ghostly light onto the rows of dead trees lining the narrow roadway.

(Adapt descriptions as necessary to the local terrain.)

Suddenly the PC behind the wheel starts in surprise as a vehicle breaks through the median barrier and crosses into their lane. The vehicle is a dead ringer for theirs<sup>1</sup>.

Call for a Difficulty 5 Driving roll. On a success, the driver swerves in time, missing the oncoming van. On a failure, the oncoming van clips theirs, smashing off the left headlight and sending the vehicle into a 360 degree spin. Each PC must make a Difficulty 2 Athletics roll, or lose a single Health point. Lost points represent minor contusions and lacerations.

Clipped or not, the PC driver manages to bring the van to a screeching halt. By the time it's stopped, the other van has run off the road and collided with a tree, about forty yards away. The smell of gas assails them; from the sounds of it, the stuff is showering out of the vehicle's gas tank.

Every person in the other vehicle is dead, killed instantly on impact. Although all are



obviously unconscious, their exact status is unclear at first glance, except to a character making a Difficulty 6 Medic roll. If three or more of the PCs make a concerted effort, they can drag all of the bodies out of the van before it explodes. If fewer than three participate, the van goes up during the rescue attempt. However, they're able to get clear in time: they see a spark from the shorting vehicle hit the dry weeds beside the gushing gas tank and can make a run for it.

Whether they leave the van to burn up, and then smell the unmistakable stench of cooking flesh, or drag some or all of the bodies onto the pavement, this sudden incident of shocking carnage requires a round of Stability tests, with a possible loss of 4. This is a non-supernatural event, posing a risk of post-traumatic stress.

Thanks to a recent rainfall, the surrounding vegetation is damp, so the van burns itself out without becoming the catalyst for a major forest fire.

The PCs will probably try to call for help. For a troubling moment, it looks like there is no cell phone coverage in the area. Then signal bars appear on one of the group's phones gets through, allowing them to call the authorities.

If a PC with Investigative Procedure looks for the place where the other van suddenly left the road, he finds a set of tire marks which suddenly appear, as if the driver deliberately swerved into the opposite lane.

At this point, some groups may behave in a slightly dodgy fashion and choose to rifle the bodies for identification. Most groups won't ID them until later. Here are their names, ages, professions, and areas of residence, in case the PCs show procedure-evading initiative:

**Tim Peacock**, age 42, sales rep for photocopier company. (Middle class bedroom community.)

**Anthea Puls**, age 20, college student. (University neighborhood.)

**Vivica Burton**, age 36, socialite. (Ultra-wealthy enclave.)

**Sean Gauthier**, age 27, self-employed IT

consultant. (Down and out neighborhood.)

**Doug McKim**, age 56, animal welfare officer. (Corridor of oppressive apartment towers.)

Caryn Gardy, age 24, dancer. (Grungy downtown area in major city.)

If you want to leave a couple of victims alive but in critical condition, feel free to do so. None should be in any condition to provide premature clues—although one might whisper Hungerwood's name. They die in the hospital while the PCs are off at the LARP.

The Theme The themes of this story are trust and aggression. Are the PCs able to trust one another enough to band together for mutual survival? Can they trust their colleagues, their loved ones, even their very senses? When pressed, do they respond with only the aggression necessary to survive, or do they spiral into irrecoverably into madness and violence? Whenever possible, weave these themes into improvised sequences, taking special care to reference them in directed scenes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> If the group is driving a rental vehicle, it will later transpire that the wrecked van was rented from the same company.

The wait for police and fire crews to appear at this remote location seems like forever. During this time, the characters with the lowest and second-lowest Stability pools (after the results of the Stability tests, above) feel a strong sense of free-floating frustration and disappointment. It feels weird, like it's descended on them from some outside source. They certainly have no reason to feel either emotion—freaked out and traumatized, sure, but frustrated and disappointed? (If a character with the psychic power Sensitive is present, that character, and the one with the lowest Stability pool, is affected.)

About twenty-five minutes after the emergency call, the character with Sensitive or the lowest Stability pool spots something hovering near either the burning vehicle, or the bodies laid out on the roadway. He or she perceives the silhouette of a oversized human figure as a sort of rippling distortion in the black night air. For a bone-chilling instant, the witness sees a pair of tiny glowing eyes, lit up in the spooky, silvery way that a cat's retinas can reflect incoming light. The apparition is visible for only a split second before the emergency responders show up, flashing their lights and blooping their sirens. The disturbance seems to dispel the image.

Whether the character chooses the share this experience with the others at this point is of course up to the player. If not, the other players know, but their characters don't.

Officer John Belden takes charge of the accident scene. (Change his rank as necessary to fit the appropriate police official for a rural jurisdiction in your chosen location.) He's a young, no-nonsense officer with a reassuringly commanding demeanor. Fire crews also show up to douse the smoldering van. Multiple ambulance crews begin to pack away the dead. One of the paramedics walks away to quietly sob by the side of the road.

Belden requests statements from all of the PCs. He finds the tire marks, if not shown them by a PC. If asked, he shares his assumption with the group: "Must have swerved to avoid an animal. Rabbit or raccoon or whatnot. Happens all the time. Seems stupid, endangering human lives to save an animal. But it's a reflex action. What can you do?"

If asked if it could have been murder-suicide, he shrugs. "No way to prove it if it was. So better we treat it like the accident it was. For the families' sake. You understand."

## LIVE ACTION

After taking their statements and gathering contact information, Officer Belden frees the group to continue on to their destination.

In the following sequence the characters:

- arrive at the event
- find themselves already behind in the orientation exercise
- either win an advantage or gain a reason to move against another team
- participate in a survival-oriented exercise in which they become the object of increasingly disturbing attacks from their fellow teams
- have their collective sense of reality undermined by an escalating series of supernatural events
- decide to look more thoroughly into the accident

As long as you cover the above, the rest is detail, to be improvised around as player input demands.

#### LATE ARRIVAL

The group pulls up half an hour late into the gravel parking lot marked on their maps of the park.

**Tsk-tsk.** Before they can so much as get out of their van, they're confronted by a familiar local gamer decked out in a brown cape, plaid shirt, corduroy pants, and rubber elf ears. He holds a clipboard and clucks unhappily. If the flashbacks introduced a suitably officious and annoying gamer character, use him for this scene.

If not, this is Marty Moran, a local volunteer working for the LiveGames operation. He rushes around fretting about how they're late and they're already missing the orientation and maybe they should just turn around and go home because Cory Sluman was very specific about people getting here on time and it reflects poorly on him if local gamers who he personally knows fail to follow simple instructions...

In other words, he yammers on and gets himself into a lather, personifying the chicken-with-head- cut-off event organizer. He talks a mile a minute and never allows his sentences to end so that no one else can ever get a word in edgewise.

A 1-point Reassurance spend gets him to calm down and lead the group into the orientation center. The spend also makes him calmer and more collected if they interact with him later. Otherwise the group has to push their way past him over his protests to get into the hall, as he frets and protests and urges them to turn around and go back.

Welcome: A large cabin serving as a mess hall and activity center. Once inside, they see LiveGames CEO Cory Sluman, standing on a raised platform, giving a speech while wearing a headset microphone. He's dressed in khaki pants, dock shoes, and a rose-colored polo shirt bearing the LiveGames logo. He's in the middle of delivering a pep talk to the assembled gamers.

Almost all of the gamers are wearing elaborate fantasy costumes. It occurs to the character with the highest Investigative Procedure pool that many of these costumes are too delicately constructed to last long in a camping and hiking environment.

Sluman grins with the beatific, over-energetic enthusiasm of a children's TV host, psyching up the troops for the transformational gaming event to come. He reveals the following:

- Participants in this weekend's event have an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of the most exciting project in gaming. LiveGames will be ramping up its operations quickly, and as it expands it will need experienced gamers to run and organize events. Today's event winner may be tomorrow's highly compensated LiveGames employee, with stock options and an exciting profit participation plan.
- Players advance in the rankings according to a points system. Showing up gets you points. Winning gets you lots of points. And recruiting new players gets you super bonus points.
- LiveGames is going to be the new

poker. Once people discover that there's a competitive element to it, and money to be won, they'll flock to it in droves. But the gamers present tonight, and those attending follow-up events all around the continent and the UK, will have a leg up. Somewhere in this crowd tonight, there may be the Tiger Woods or Barry Bonds of live action roleplaying.

"But enough reality!" Sluman proclaims.
"It's time for *Eldarak*!"

He steps aside, curtains part, and an ingenious, well-made dragon puppet stands revealed. In a booming, prerecorded, echoing voice, it speaks to the crowd, as smoke whooshes out from dry ice machines.

Convey the following points of information in your best high-faluting, pseudo-medieval, draconic fantasy voice:

- The players represent the greatest heroes of the Silver Kingdoms, a beautiful land that has known peace and prosperity for a thousand years.
- But now, as the prophecy has foretold, a horde of orcs is soon to descend upon the land, threatening to tear it to pieces.
- With war looming, the Silver Kingdoms must rename themselves, adopting their dark and ancient battle-name. Until peace reigns again, the land must become... Eldarak!
- The player groups must stand in the way of this advancing menace, driving back the foul orcs for another thousand years. Each of them will be assigned a territory within the area of the park reserved for the game, which they must defend.
- Each of the teams was to be equipped with one of the Great Tokens, an amulet which will give them power against the orcs. But alas, the forces of evil broke into the royal chamber and stole one of the two chests where the seals were stored. Thus only half of the great heroes will be able to wield these precious artifacts.

#### SURVIVAL OF THE GLIBBEST

Each group has half an hour to write, learn, and rehearse a presentation, in which they, in character, introduce themselves and demonstrate their worthiness to carry one of the Great Tokens. They will then perform these skits in front of the entire group. The dragon of the Silver Kingdoms will judge the winners, and award them the seals, which will give them a considerable advantage in the game to come. Players are reminded to come up with names for their group.

After presenting a heavily scripted sequence, you now get to sit back while the players work together to create their performance. Give them half an hour of real time to prepare. Stare noticeably at your watch if they appear to be wasting time.

They may have questions about LiveGame and the setting they need answered to prepare their skit. Make up the answers as you see fit, using the fretful, concentration-challenged Marty Moran as your informational conduit. Mostly it seems as if an important part of the game is figuring out the rules during play, so specifics are in short supply.

PCs ready to fully embrace the competitive spirit of Eldarak may decide to sabotage other groups' presentation preparations.

If they look around for potential victims, describe to them a group of problem gamers from past LARPS they've been in. If they've already created annoying gamer characters during their flashback sequences, use them. Otherwise, they see, dressed identically as vampire albinos, the following rivals:

Charles Minot (pronounced "minnow"), the group's alpha nerd. He's prissy, superior, and in love with his character, a dark and tortured soul doomed to eternal suffering—and righteous psychic ass-kicking.

Athletics 4, Driving 2, Filch 6, Fleeing 8, Health 5, Infiltration 3, Preparedness 2, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 2, Stability 3.

**Jorge Salinas**, his ultra-shy whipping boy.

Athletics 3, Driving 1, Fleeing 6, Health 5, Medic 1, Preparedness 4, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 1, Stability 2.

**Rick "Ringo" Starewicz**, a gun nut and explosives enthusiast rarely seen without his dog-eared copy of *The Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Athletics 6, Driving 4, Filch 4, Fleeing 2, Health 8, Infiltration 4, Mechanics 12, Medic 4, Preparedness 6, Scuffling 6, Sense Trouble 2, Shooting 8, Stability 1.

Sally Callow, Charles' ambiguous maybe-maybe not girlfriend, who wears a perpetually sullen expression and rarely says anything—except when someone picks on Charles, in which case she flies into a vituperative rage. Her albino vampire make-up actually makes her appear more healthy than normal.

Athletics 3, Fleeing 6, Health 4, Preparedness 4, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 1, Stability 3.

**Tim Hassan**, the group's resident trivia-spouting know-it-all.

Athletics 2, Fleeing 2, Health 4, Scuffling 2, Stability 5.

Charles' group calls itself the Rosegloom Knights.

There should be as many nemesis characters as there are PCs. Don't hesitate to replace these characters with slanderous portrayals of your own real-life gamer nemeses.

Sabotage attempts undertaken during this rehearsal phase may involve some tricky time management. You have to keep track of how much game time their actions against other participants might take. Subtract this game time from the allotment of real time the PCs have to prepare their petition to the dragon lord.

Whether a sabotage attempt succeeds depends on what the PCs do and how well they do it. The effect of their efforts will probably be obvious from context. If not, the attempt does not particularly hamper the targeted team.

If the PCs get caught engaging in sabotage, they lose the challenge. They're supposed to be epic heroes of a shining land, not a pack of underhanded weasels. More likely than not, the players will deliver an entertaining skit. However, Charles' group has an ingame way to sabotage them. In the middle of the PC's presentation, they point their fake red fingernails at the group and cry out: "Psychic drain!"

Over the PA system, the sound of a clattering die is heard. An authoritative voice calls, "Psychic drain successful. Each [fill in name of PC group] loses fifteen per cent. Their presentation is disrupted and fails."

Charles and company rub in their victory by smugly grinning. They go on to stage an effective presentation and are awarded one of the Great Tokens.

If the PCs come up with a clever and entertaining way to contest this ruling by the unseen refs, or otherwise reclaim the amulet from the Rosegloom Knights, allow it. Possession of the amulet does not affect the outcome of the scenario. The amulets are McGuffins, giving you a chance to foment conflict between the LARP players. This incident is also meant to set up Charles and friends as annoying rivals to the PCs. As long as you accomplish these two things, the above moment can be resolved in any manner. On the other hand, Eldarak is supposed to seem somewhat arbitrary, unfair, and poorly designed, so if you leave the players feeling that their PCs are being railroaded by the organizers, that works, too.

#### FOOD RAID

Sluman makes a show of awarding coolers full of food to the winning contestants in the commercial contest. He also has his other burly assistants search the vans and persons of the losers for any food items they might have brought with them. These are confiscated and divided up among the winners, in full, mocking view of the losers. The dragon explains that the holders of the Great Tokens are worthy of such largesse, and that the others are deprived as a reminder to work harder for the survival of Eldarak. The losers are then provided with porridge, trail mix, and a barely adequate quantity of other depressing foodstuffs, described by the dragon as "iron rations."

If the players wonder what food the PCs might have picked up along the way, have them detail their desired list. Then assign a Difficulty to it, with Difficulty 1 being a bag of trail mix, Difficulty 3 a few slices of leftover convenience-store pizza, and Difficulty 8 a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Have them designate one player to make a Preparedness roll. On a success, they still have

The Ocean Game Begins

The Mystery Man's objective is to play the Ocean Game with the PCs - that is, to drive the PCs slowly and exquisitely insane. The extra-dimensional entity, who is known as Hungerwood, was driving the people in the other van insane, but now that they're dead, he's made the PCs his new target. He followed the PCs from the accident scene and now spectrally observes them as they participate in the game. Hungerwood has nothing to do with Livegames and has never heard of them until tonight, but sees in their project a monstrously delicious opportunity. Their game, a silly exercise in trust and aggression, can become the vehicle for his real and deadly one. By manipulating matters only slightly, he can drive the participants to increasingly outrageous acts. He prefers to awaken the beasts inside his targets, but even if they remain righteous observers of their colleagues' leap into madness, their own psyches are due for certain damage.

That's the Ocean Game for you – however events unfold, the Mystery Man always wins.

Whenever the PCs act in a selfish, spiteful or aggressive manner, especially when they betray others' trust, they may feel the eyes of Hungerwood upon them.

The first time it happens, the character who saw Hungerwood back at the crash site, receives a vivid flashback image of his ghostly visage. This requires a Stability roll with a possible loss of 2.

The second time it happens, the word 'Hungerwood" comes unbidden into the same character's mind.

The third time, the same character feels a wet slurping at the back of his or her neck, as if being licked by a large, invisible animal. This experience triggers a Stability roll (possible loss: 2.)

#### Team Size

This adventure assumes a group of roughly six player characters. The sizes of the teams at the retreat should be modified to suit your group size. So if you're running for only three characters, teams might be three to four strong. If your group is small, have supporting characters travel with them in the van and take part in their team exercises. (During the commercial presentation, they take a back seat. Tell the players that they help with the writing and props but don't actually perform.) These characters can be the proverbial weak links who get them into trouble and go gibberingly insane at a horrifically opportune moment.

Invent your own supporting characters to act as foils to the group, or use the following filler gamers:

- Damon Bacon, graphic designer. He's newly joined the straight workforce as in-house designer for a fancy ad agency and is struggling to fit his punk/goth persona into a set of more mature expectations. Lately he's seemed increasingly distant from the group, who are surprised he showed up at all. He seems cool and helpful until the remotest bit of pressure is applied to him, at which point he becomes a chronic complainer, thinking only of the moment when he will escape from all of this to write a hilariously scabrous locked entry in his Livejournal. Risk factor: Skeptical. If needed, use the same game statistics as Jorge Salinas, above.

- Sarah Apple, web developer. An petite blond woman used to skating by on her chirpy and outgoing personality. She becomes hysterically spiteful when attacked, urging the group's menfolk to go out and wreak righteous havoc on "enemy" players. Risk factor: Dismissive. Use same stats as Sally Callow.

significant quantities of the specified food. On a failure, they ate it already. If they lose the presentation contest and have it taken away from them, having had higher quality food items will only intensify their sense of deprivation.

During the food search, LiveGames teams also confiscate any of the following items, on the grounds that they are "focus stealers":

- Cellphones and other wireless devices
- Laptops, PDAs and other computing devices
- Maps, compasses, GPS devices
- Reading material, including books, newspapers and magazines
- Weapons, excluding padded "boffer" weapons
- Cash, credit cards, and valuable items that might substitute for currency

While the staff search their things, a single character may make a Filch roll (base Difficulty 4, modified by exact circumstances) to withhold a single item from them.

Confiscated items are sealed in plastic bags and placed in a locked strongbox in a black SUV marked with the LiveGames logo. LiveGames gives each participant a proper receipt and takes full responsibility for any losses. None of these items can be reacquired via a Preparedness roll.

Once the food is handed out, the staff supplies each team with:

- a pair of tents
- a flashlight
- a cigarette lighter
- a propane-fueled miniature camping stove (whether the group has food or not)
- one sleeping bag and small pillow per person
- a rudimentary first-aid kit
- a map with a hex grid showing the portion of the camping area reserved for LiveGames

Finally, each participant is fitted with a watch-like plastic wristband. Sluman explains that each contains an RFID

chip, which will be triggered if the wearer leaves the park boundaries. Anyone who leaves the park without his permission forfeits the game.

The animatronic dragon announces the other rules of the extended weekend:

- No communication with the outside world is permitted.
- Enticing other campers to enter the LiveGames area is strictly forbidden.
- No one may touch or consume food items introduced into the park by others.
- Other rules may be announced by LiveGames staff, as they become necessary.
- Participants may not interfere with LiveGames staff, or attempt to remove property from their possession.
- The goal of the game is to prove yourself the strongest team against the orc invaders. Players must determine for themselves how points are to be scored.
- LiveGames staff have created game stats for the characters based on each participant's pre-submitted prose description.
- Each team is supplied with a walkietalkie. When you want to do something in your game that is not physically possible, like cast a spell or execute a high-flying feat, use the walkie-talkie to call in the action. A die roll will be made remotely, and you'll be told whether you succeeded or not.
- Padded "boffer" weapons are used to adjudicate combat. Judges watching by remote video will use the PA system to announce who's dead or defeated. Use or possession of unapproved weapons will result in immediate disqualification. (To resolve boffer combats, use the contest rules rather than the fighting rules. The loser of the contest is judged by LiveGames staffers to have lost the boffer fight. Unless they have an emotional stake in the outcome,

players will be disinclined, quite sensibly, to spend perfectly good Scuffling points on these fake combats. No Health points are ever lost in an ordinary boffer fight. Later, when fake combat turns to real violence, revert to the fighting rules.)

The dragon then tells the teams to get out into the woods, set up their camps in their appointed places on the hex grid, and prepare for action.

The rest of this section of the adventure is open-ended, depending on the actions taken by the players.

Your task here is to slowly escalate a sense of menace and horror, while keeping the game-within-a-game going in the foreground. The details of the game don't really matter; it will wind up getting cancelled after a frenzy of violence. However, the more invested the players are in it, the more grounded the horror will seem.

The game is supposed to go like this:

- After a night of camping, the players are attacked by orcs during the early morning hours. The orcs are, of course, LiveGames staffers in costume.
- Players killed in the initial battle are knocked out of play. They can go back to the lodge to participate in various tournaments and pick-up games, including tabletop roleplaying, collectible card, and board games. When all members of a team are disqualified, they can stick around and keep playing or drive back home.
- Teams who lose members can amalgamate or incorporate orphaned players.
- Clues are left on the battlefield by the orcs. These point to other areas of the campground where exploration will yield smaller combats and rewards.
- The PCs gain one of these clues, a map to a demon's lair. They can fight the demon, sacrifice enemies to it, send it off against the orcs, or engage in whatever other schemes strike their collective fancy. The demon is an incredibly

elaborate puppet operated by a threeperson team.

- Before the players have a chance to compare the things they've found in their various small-team explorations, a second orc attack thins the player herd even more.
- A third set piece battle occurs later, after the players have had a chance to pool their treasures — and their Great Tokens — into an uber-artifact allowing them victory against the orcs. The surviving team with the highest point score then wins the game. (The game will probably never get to this point, though.)

The game-within-a-game is left loose so you can improvise as needed. Make whatever changes you require to keep escalating the horror.

Game statistics for possible combatants are as follows.

#### **Cory Sluman**

Athletics 6, Driving 8, Health 6, Scuffling 6, Sense Trouble 8, Shooting 2, Shrink 15, Stability 6.

#### **Marty Moran**

Athletics 2, Health 4, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 4, Stability 6.

#### Other LiveGames Staffer

Athletics 6, Driving 8, Health 10, Scuffling 4, Sense Trouble 12, Shooting 4, Stability 6, .

## SUITABLE HORRORS

Hungerwood can take over the minds of any non-PC, up to and including instilling new memories and perceptions in them. Remember that he isn't actually trying to kill any of the group: that would spoil his fun. However, making them *think* their lives are in jeopardy is well within his game plan. Ideally, he wants to provoke the PCs to kill others. If they kill in self-defense, that's perfectly delicious and destabilizing. If they panic and commit manslaughter for no good reason, so much the better.

Like a horror writer or director, Hungerwood

doles out the horror in slowly escalating fashion.

There are limits on what he can do. He's only been at the LARP site as long as the players have, so any schemes requiring advance preparation are right out. He has only the props and human puppets fate has delivered to him.

A baseline series of creepy incidents might look like this:

- Other participants behave with weirdly exaggerated aggression.
- A fight breaks out for no good reason between members of two other teams.
- PCs find a freshly mutilated animal on the trail.
- They trigger an apparently lethal booby trap (though one carefully set to scare or wound one of them, not to kill.)
- The PCs stumble across a cache of deadly weapons a revolver with a few bullets in it, and a flare gun, along with a couple of flares.
- Another player, probably a Rosegloom Knight, is caught running away after laying a dangerous trap. (A squirt gun full of gasoline and a match might prove appropriately unnerving. -—in part because this is a dangerous and crazy weapon to use, as likely to injure the assailant as the attacker.)
- When in a mock battle against orcs, PCs discover that several of them are using real weapons or fighting to do genuine harm. When confronted, they deny it with all due sincerity, having had their memories of the incident wiped by Hungerwood. Bullshit Detector shows that they believe what they're saying, even though it flies in the face of the PC's own direct observations.
- If a mere single victim is killed relatively early in the proceedings, Sluman, his mind under powerful Hungerwood influence, won't be thinking quite straight. Hoping to protect his

business from scandal, he tries to conceal the body and continue the event. The PCs might then stumble across it.

- Groups of players spontaneously head off into the forest to conduct a weird ritual, climaxing in nudity and maddened, orgiastic sex.
- The PCs stumble across a freshly-severed human hand or foot.
- LiveGames staffers are oddly blasé about the PC's reports of orgiastic sex or severed feet. Early on, this seems like mere denial, but as the evidence piles up, it appears to be its own form of madness.
- Disqualified players stage a group assault on those still in the game, using improvised clubs, wrenches, tire irons, and other deadly weapons. When confronted, the riot intensifies. They set fire to the clubhouse and try to kill Sluman and his staffers. If the PCs interfere, they get beat on, but Hungerwood's control ensures that none of them are murdered.

Use the PCs' desperation to win the event to draw out the slow slide into craziness. As things start to get bad, they'll probably act like realistic ordinary people and consider calling on the LiveGames crew for assistance. Interrupt to remind them that they really want to win, and that their report might result in the event's premature cancellation. They know from their sign-up packs that no winner is declared if the game has to be called off for safety reasons.

If someone is badly hurt and in need of hospitalization, Sluman calls emergency services. If this happens early in the exercise, before things get all *Lord Of the Flies*, the responders notice nothing untoward, and the event continues. If things are slightly weird, Hungerwood messes with their minds to make sure they carry on as if everything's normal. However, if the event has spiraled completely out of control by the time emergency services arrives, Hungerwood savors the psychic residue as they perceive it in all of its blood-spattered horror.

## VOICES IN THE FOREST

As the ordinary craziness of a disorganized, overambitious LARP game ratchets up into supernatural madness, the characters begin to sense Hungerwood's presence. These sensations escalate in tandem with the crazy events themselves. At first, only the PC who glimpsed Hungerwood feels them. Gradually the others share the perception, until they realize that, as unbelievable as it is, they're being toyed with by some uncanny force or entity.

Improvise the details as needed. A sequence of sensations might go like this:

- During an incident, the first PC witness smells spilled gasoline and/or burning flesh.
- During the next incident, the PC glimpses Hungerwood's eyes shining from the forest.
- Next, all of the PCs sense that they're being watched by something ancient and mocking.
- During an episode of Risk Factor temptation, the PC involved hears a raspy voice whispering in his ear, urging him onward.
- During a physical confrontation, the PCs' rivals take on impossible physical strength and resilience, even when badly injured.
- The group observes freakish spatial distortions around their rivals, or LiveGames staffers.

Their enemies begin talking in croaking, demonic voices.

#### RISK FACTORS

If, as you run the above improvised sequences, the PCs aren't in enough trouble, use Risk Factors to pull them in deeper.

Curious PCs may walk into an obvious trap set by their rival players, to find out who's

behind it and what will happen. After all, they're co-workers. How bad could it really be?

Dismissive characters may refuse to believe that their colleagues have become dangerously violent.

No self-respecting Drug Fiend goes on a four-day camping trip without bringing a stash along. During the belongings search, Drug Fiends may panic. If the stash is discovered, a LiveGames staff member approaches the PC, demanding bribes in exchange for silence and the return of the substance in question. This interaction may or may not proceed smoothly. If the Drug Fiend is deprived of his stash, he may focus on a fellow player who is a known user and undoubtedly holding.

Greedy sorts may be tempted to break into the strongbox containing everyone's valuables, risking crazed retaliation from co-workers or LiveGames types.

Gung Ho characters will want to escalate the warfare between them and their rivals, or the orcs, just when others realize it's getting out of hand.

Horny PCs can be led into trouble by attractive LiveGames staffers, who lure them into the woods with the promise of a tryst, but are really separating the PC from teammates in preparation for an ambush.

Oblivious characters can walk into traps, snares and ambushes.

Protective types can plunge deeper into danger by trying to shield fellow participants supporting characters from attacks by others.

Skeptical characters may refuse to accept that an occult influence is at work, dangerously delaying the group's exit from the

Investigating LiveGames Players may continue to suspect a nonexistent connection between Cory Sluman's LiveGames program and their supernatural tormentor. Investigation turns up no links whatsoever.

As they're ruling him out, they learn the following: Research: LiveGames is funded under a complicated scheme taking advantage of various tax benefits offered to foreign investors sinking money into job-intensive companies in the US, Canada, and UK. Taking the tax breaks into account, the investors make more money as LiveGames burns through more capital. Sluman's apparent plan is to bootstrap himself into a successful company before these crazy tax advantages expire, and then sell it to a bigger entertainment firm.

Law: Sluman has already been sued a number of times by ex-employees, who were hurt during their rigorous training to appear as orcs. All cases were settled out of court by his insurance company, which took skillful advantage of the liability waivers Sluman persuaded his employees to sign.

If players spend too much time on this dead end, remind them that Cory Sluman's statements never triggered their Bullshit Detectors. His scheme might be doomed to failure, but he believes in it fervently — which you wouldn't expect if he were a human front for some kind of supernatural nemesis.

seminar.

Thrill-seekers can get themselves hurt early in the proceedings, before the stakes become apparent, by jumping out of trees, leaping into deceptively shallow waters, or otherwise flouting basic camping safety.

Vengeful types should want to attack the Rosegloom Knights from the presentation onwards, caution be damned.

#### QUIZZING SLUMAN

The PCs may seek out Cory Sluman to determine if his program has anything to do with the eerie events they seem to be entangled in. As we've already established, he has nothing to do with Hungerwood. It's the PCs, by witnessing the car wreck, who brought the Mystery Man in contact with the *Eldarak* event.

Sluman, intending to maintain between players distance and game-runners, is standoffish approached. If asked directly about the supernatural, he concludes that the PCs have cracked under the strain. However, he's afraid to acknowledge this, since he might have to take legal responsibility for inflicting mental distress. He urges the participants to take some time to sit in the orientation hall and regain their bearings.

His perfectly honest denials of occult involvement do not trigger the PCs' Bullshit Detectors.

#### MOVING ON

There are two likely ways for this sequence to end.

One, the PCs can bolt from the scene, their desire to win the game be damned. Their RFID bracelets, if still intact, hum lowly as they cross into the parking lot to the rows of rental vans. A Difficulty 4 Infiltration roll gets the PCs into Sluman's vehicle and the strongbox inside, to rescue their IDs, cash, and other confiscated possessions.

Two, a final scene of apocalyptic rioting forces the event's cancellation. A panicked Sluman declares that there is no winner, and calls in the authorities. If Sluman's entrails have been festooned across the forest floor, his surviving next-in-command makes the same call.

If police show up to discover a forest full of raging paranoids clad in gore-soaked rags, they shut the whole thing down. Hungerwood, having wrung maximum madness from the game, does not interfere with their minds. It's time for the cold light of day to come, and, by contrast, intensify the trauma of the group's experiences playing *Eldarak*.

Depending on how it all goes down, police may take Sluman and company into custody, as the definitely do to anyone who's obviously committed a crime of violence. (If the PCs fit this description, some judicious fleeing may be in order.) Police take the contact info of other participants so they can give statements later. In this rural jurisdiction, the cops just don't have the immediate manpower and vehicles to haul the entire assemblage of players down to HQ.

## BACKSTORY

Hungerwood's previous victims all came to his attention through kennel owner Alex Ibragimbekov. He's been preying on Ibragimbekov's mind for over a decade, ever since he came over from Russia. The Mystery Man finds Alex's madness and depravity inexhaustibly enjoyable, and, to keep him from permanently wearing out, periodically fixes on other victims. These unfortunate souls never last for very long, not compared to Alex. Until he latched onto the PCs, Hungerwood always found these secondary victims through his connection to Ibragimbekov.

Tim Peacock purchased a dog from Ibragimbekov for his 8-year-old daughter, Katie, who was dying of leukemia. Peacock's grief over the imminent death of his daughter made him an obvious choice for Hungerwood's attentions.

So was Anthea Puls, a college student who bought a pooch from Alex's kennel while undergoing therapy in the wake of a date rape.

The worst thing Vivica Burton ever did was drown her infant sister when she herself was four years old. She recently married a wealthy businessman, and lodged her pampered teacup poodle with Ibragimbekov during her frequent travels.

Sean Gauthier's violent temper sent him on near-nightly missions to get himself into bloody bar fights. He designed Alex's web site and database.

Doug McKim is an animal welfare inspector who took regular bribes from Alex to finance his gambling habit.

Heroin addict and amateur porn star Caryn Gardy sought out Alex for advice on convincingly shooting a fake bestiality video. They dated briefly until she discovered what he does his kennel basement.

Each suffered a full course of reality-bending torment at the spectral hands of the Mystery Man, similar to that described in the Unremitting Horror supplement.

It was Sean Gauthier who figured it out. Visiting Ibragimbekov to replace a fried hard drive, he recognized the whimper of the man's dogs from his nightmares of Hungerwood. When he dropped a few hints about their possibly shared experience, Alex clammed up, a guilty look etched unmistakably across his face. Sean took home the hard drive, recovered its scrambled data, and mined its contact list for email addresses. Using a dummy email account, he mass-mailed everyone on the list, asking if anyone else had noticed anything strange after a visit to Alex's kennel.

The other five contacted him back. After much hesitation, they got together to compare notes, then confronted Ibragimbekov. He told them as little as possible about Hungerwood. After several inconclusive encounters with the Mystery Man, they began to investigate other supernatural occurrences, hoping to find a weapon to use against him.

They were returning to the city in their vented van after discovering that a supposed creature sighting was just a drunken hoax when Peacock, who was driving, experienced a psychotic break and tried to drive the car into a head-on collision with the PC's vehicle.

## AFTER THE FOREST

By now the PCs should know that the thing haunting them has something to do with the van accident. Prod them, if necessary, to reconsider the chain of events.

The next stage of the scenario is an investigation into the victims. Finding the connection between this disparate group leads them to another Hungerwood victim, Alex Ibragimbekov. He provides them with basic information on the Mystery Man, and steers them toward a ritual which will supposedly banish him from their lives.

#### THE DEAD

This is the point in the scenario when the PCs are most likely to learn the identities of the accident victims.

Research turns up multiple newspaper accounts. These provide names, occupations, and cities of residence for the victims. Provide appropriate cities and neighborhoods for the area you've selected as your setting.

For ease of reference, their information is repeated here:

**Tim Peacock**, age 42, sales rep for photocopier company. (Middle class bedroom community.)

**Anthea Puls**, age 20, college student. (University neighborhood.)

**Vivica Burton**, age 36, socialite. (Ultrawealthy enclave.)

**Sean Gauthier**, age 27, self-employed IT consultant. (Down and out neighborhood.)

**Doug McKim**, age 56, animal welfare officer. (Corridor of oppressive apartment towers.)

**Caryn Gardy**, age 24, dancer. (Grungy downtown area in major city.)

Cop Talk with Officer Jim Belden nets the victims' home addresses. Reassurance works, too, if the character explains that, as witnesses to the crash, the PCs wish to send condolences to the families.

The PCs decide in which order they investigate the six victims. Any of these six investigations might yield the crucial connection to Alex Ibragimbekov. This adventure uses the Floating Core Clue mechanic, so it's up to you to decide which actually gets them the core clue. This is a matter of pacing. If your group is impossibly thorough and likes to get all the info they can possibly scrape up before moving on to another stage, see to it that the core clue only appears in the sixth interview. If your group tends to leap aggressively forward into the storyline, and you want to collapse this section of the story, have the core clue appear during the third or fourth interview.

To remind you that you can provide it during any one of the interviews, the core Ibragimbekov clue appears in shaded text each time.

Aside from the core clue, each interview should:

- intensify the sense of personal horror by making the PCs identify with their doomed predecessors
- plant the idea of fighting Hungerwood by becoming amateur occult investigators, thus learning more about the Outer Black

Even without the core clue, interviews reveal dogs as a common motif in the victims' lives.

Sifting through the lives of six people will kick up a lot of information. Based on the sketches below, invent whatever extraneous background details you require in response to player questions. To prevent excessive chasing of red herrings, deliver these answers in a bored or subtly offhand way which implicitly suggests they aren't of primary interest.

#### TIM PEACOCK

After losing her young daughter to cancer and now her husband, Tim's wife Trish is a complete wreck. She's barricaded herself inside their comfortable exurban home and finds it hard to get off the couch, let alone answer the door to talk to strangers interested in her spouse's death. Although Officer Belden tried to protect her from the exact details of the accident, Trish has nonetheless concluded that Tim killed himself, along with his fellow passengers. She feels a crushing sense of guilt over this additional tragedy. Now that Tim is gone, she feels she could have done more to keep him

on the rails if she hadn't been so withdrawn after Katie's death.

Reassurance gets Trish to open up. A 2-point spend leaves the group feeling that they've given Trish some lasting solace, qualifying the PC to regain a die of lost Stability.

Trish briefly tells the story of Katie's sickness and death, and of Tim's spiral into depression afterwards. Over the past few months, Tim spent increasing amounts of time away from home. She didn't want to talk or do anything, and she thought he was just giving her space. Tim took up biking after Katie died, so she assumed that he was spending time with his bike club.

(A trip to the garage, plus Investigative Procedure, reveals that Tim's new bike is in pristine condition — as if he never touched it.)

As Trish talks, a skittish, sad-looking German shepherd briefly appears, then runs yelping away from the group. Any PC attempts to approach it are met with snaps and snarls.

If this is the core clue scene, Trish says that Tim bought the dog, Scout, for Katie. The guy from the kennel called several times afterwards. Tim always took the calls and seemed somewhat secretive about them. After some hunting, she produces Ibragimbekov's business card.

If this is not the core clue scene, all she knows is that Tim bought the dog for Katie.

#### ANTHEA PULS

Anthea's address is that of a run-down house in the heart of a university district, rented by various students on a room-by-room basis. Only one of Anthea's roommates is present when they come calling. She's Madison Posey, whose severe glasses and neo-beatnik wardrobe mark her as a fine arts student. Madison assumes that the PCs are reporters hoping to write an exploitative piece on Anthea's death. She takes a hardboiled approach, asking why anyone should help them. She warns them not to bother Anthea's grieving parents: "They never knew what was going on in her life anyway."

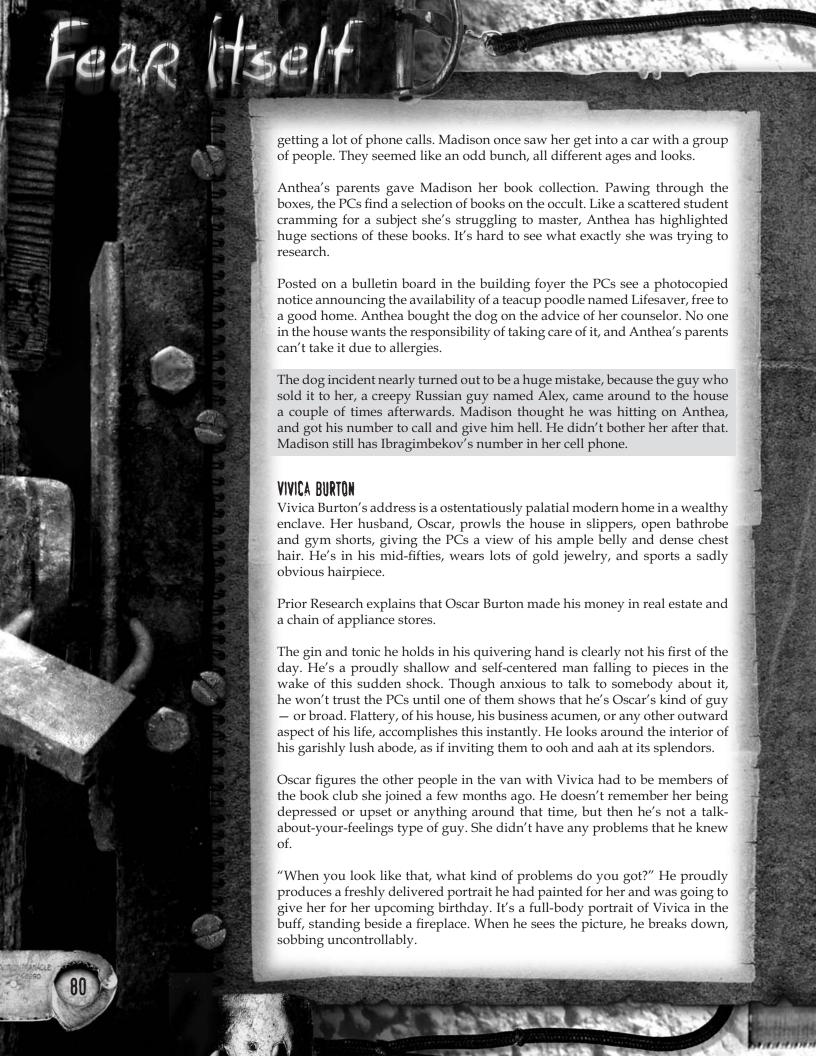
Negotiation, in the form of a donation to a charity Anthea would have supported, secures Madison's grudging cooperation.

She suggests the campus rape crisis center, because that's what was going on in her life. At the beginning of the school year, Anthea was raped by a fellow student. She went to the crisis center but refused to identify the rapist or press charges against him. Madison tried to cheer her up, but she seemed extremely troubled. She hugely medicated herself in the months immediately after the incident, but then underwent a shift of mood and became more active, though still very secretive.

For the last few months Anthea had been blowing off her classes and

What If They Don't Investigate the Van? The breakpoint between the LARP portion of the scenario and what follows is a little tricky to navigate. It's a classic false ending, meant to evoke that sense of unease you get in a horror movie when the horrors have seemingly been dispatched...but the movie keeps on going! Ideally, you can time the flow of clues so that the players will know there's still something funny going on, even after they leave the LARP, and that it concerns the van and apparition. However, if they skip this point entirely and go back to their normal lives, that's okay, too. You can keep adding nasty Hungerwood moments into their lives—along with visions of the accident — until they realize that nothing is really resolved, and they have to keep going. It is possible that, while they make this transition, the players will feel confused and uneasy. They may feel they're advancing poorly, even as they're efficiently following the clue trail. This is not a problem. It's the aforementioned "Hey, why won't this movie end already?" effect, splendidly realized. As ordinary people without police powers, they may

As ordinary people without police powers, they may be reluctant to kickstart a personal investigation or talk to witnesses. If so, ramp up the horrors until they come to the conclusion that, to preserve their sanity, they have no other choice.



Oscar's maid, hearing his anguished groans, slips quietly into the room. She's Lupita Ruiz, a matronly woman old enough to have been Vivica's mother.

If taken aside, Lupita admits that Vivica confided in her. Flattery works on her, too, if couched in terms of how understanding and nurturing a woman she obviously is, and how much Vivica obviously depended on her.

Vivica had a terrible secret, and it made her hate herself. As a child, she drowned her infant sister. Lupita always told her she couldn't blame herself for what she did as little more than a baby herself, but Vivica never agreed.

A few months ago, right after she and Oscar came back from a vacation in the Bahamas, Vivica changed. She jumped at odd noises, had extra locks added to the doors, and started drinking as heavily as Oscar did. Then she started going out at all hours with this odd group of people she was killed with. One night she claimed that all these other folks were as broken as she was, and that's what was being used against them. Then she shut herself up and refused to elaborate. On other occasions, she asked Lupita about the occult, as if she was some kind of expert on Santeria and voodoo just because she's originally from Guatemala.

During the discussion of the trip to the Bahamas, Vivica's teacup poodle, Mr. Binks, comes bounding and yapping into the room. "She was very upset she couldn't take the dog with her, and had to leave it in a dirty old kennel."

Oscar has the kennel address in his date book.

#### SEAN GAUTHIER

Pugnacious troublemaker Sean Gauthier lived alone and kept no contact with his family. That lives the landlord of his crumbling low-rise apartment building as the best witness to his activities. Alfie Ferron, a weaselly, scrawny character wracked with nervous tics, is emptying Gauthier's apartment of possessions when the PCs arrive.

Not seeing what's in it for him, he refuses to give the PCs the time of day when they start asking questions. "If you're looking for Sean Gauthier, that means you must be one of his creepy low-life friends. And I got no truck with creepy low-lives." He seems jumpy, though, so any sort of Intimidation secures his frightened cooperation.

If asked the right questions, he reveals the following:

- Sean was often late with the rent.
- He barely scraped by in his computer business, because he had a knack for pissing people off.
- Anyone who stuck with him was highly likely to be a creep, too. Drug dealers, criminals and the like.
- Sean supplied and repaired hardware, designed web sites, and did databases and so on.
- Gauthier had no family Alfie had ever heard of, so he's appointed himself executor of the man's stuff. He's already sold off most of the computer equipment.
- However, there's a pile of discarded hard drives he hasn't been able to unload. One, left conspicuously out in the open on a work table, bears a masking tape label reading "Alex I." The drive is fried, but the data is recoverable via Computer Science. It belongs to an Alex Ibragimbekov. Moreover, the names of all six crash victims are in its email address book.
- Alfie also found a pile of spiral notebooks filled with weird writing that gave him the creeps. Gauthier turned weird a few months ago, and started talking about Satan and the occult. Alfie don't have no truck with that. So he burned them all. (These comprised the group's investigative case files.)
- Shown photos of the other victims, Alfie attests that they used to gather in Gauthier's apartment. It figures that the skanky blond would hang out with him. Why the others, who all seemed halfway respectable, would ever come to a craphole building like this is beyond him.
- The meetings happened irregularly, sometimes many times in a single week. Unlike most gatherings in this place, there were no loud

partying sounds or anything.

- Gauthier would sometimes wake other tenants with loud shrieking in the middle of the night. Nightmares, he claimed. "Drug withdrawal, or kinky sex, was maybe more like it," Alfie grumbles.
- Everybody else in the building was afraid of Sean, on account of he was a sick, violent puppy. They won't be able to tell you much, except that they're glad he's gone.

#### DOUG MCKIM

Cleaning out Doug McKim's stuff is his blowsy sister, Eileen. Though scarcely equipped with a gymhardened body, she wears a low-cut top, skin tight pink track pants, and lots of makeup. Her hair is dyed a brassy blond.

Any halfway handsome male PC can win her immediate trust by Flirting with her. Her useful answers to pertinent questions are as follows:

- Poor old Doug was a degenerate gambler. Horses, sports book, cards, whatever. He always needed money for another bet.
- He worked for the government as an animal welfare inspector. He'd check out stables, kennels, farms, pet stores—anywhere animals were kept professionally. If he found bad conditions, he could shut places down, even get the cops to lay criminal charges.

 His new friends, the ones in the van, had to be degenerate gamblers, like all of his other friends. People from all walks of life have the gambling bug, you

The Bigfoot Story
The Bigfoot story recounts of
a report by cottager Damon
Lang that he saw a hairy,
red-eyed entity lurking near
a boathouse. He advanced
on the creature, it shrieked at
him, then ran with surprising
speed into the nearby woods.
Lang claims to have captured
an image of the creature on
video captured by his mobile
phone.

If the PCs head up to talk to Damon Lang, he confirms that he spoke to the dead investigators on the night of their accident. He got worried partway through the conversation and confessed that it was a hoax he staged with a buddy. The whole point was to get a cool video onto YouTube, as a prank. But that Sean Gauthier guy scared him, he was so intense. And the suburban dad looking guy, he kept asking all these questions about something called the Outer Black, and describing all these really peculiar creatures, much creepier than a Bigfoot. He asked about the name Hungerwood, which Damon didn't know. They seemed to be looking for something, like a weapon or artifact to use against this Hungerwood. So to shut them up and get rid of them he confessed to the hoax. The dad guy seemed especially crushed that Damon couldn't help him find the thing he wanted.

know.

- Doug kept a diary of his wins and losses. Mostly losses. They can have it, if they want.
- It also contains a record of payments from Alex, and a business card for his dog kennel.

Eileen doesn't notice it until the PCs point it out, but Doug has an entire section of his wall devoted to newspaper clippings referring to possibly paranormal events in the area: a UFO sighting, a historical house that's supposed to be haunted, and a supposed Bigfoot sighting. This last incident took place in a [insert name of appropriate small town] a couple of weeks ago, north of the campground where the retreat was held. The group could easily have been coming from there when they had their accident.

#### CARYN GARDY

When they arrive at Caryn Gardy's studio apartment in a grungy bohemian downtown neighborhood, the PCs find the door open, and a skinny dude dressed like a 70s rock star frantically searching the place. This emaciated, prematurely aged man is Caryn's boyfriend, Brian "T-Gunn" Willetts. Unable to access Caryn's bank accounts, he's jonesing for a fix, as any Streetwise character will instantly realize.

Like most junkies, Brian is afraid of the cops. If the PCs Impersonate police authorities, he'll tell them whatever they want to know, hoping to avoid arrest and a painful in-custody withdrawal.

- Caryn was his old lady. She ran a porn site where she posted videos and did cam shows. The

money rolls into her business account automatically from an online credit card processor, but she set it up so she can't get at it.

- He doesn't want to have to hock her computer and server, because that money's sweet and maybe he can convince the online payment company to put it in an account he can access. Maybe if he posts a message saying she's dead, the pervs will get really excited and join up even faster.
- Caryn shared his heroin habit until a few months ago. She said something bad was going down, and she had to get straight if she wanted to be alert enough to live through it. He kept at her to explain, but she wouldn't. She said if he knew, that he could be in trouble, too.
- Sometimes she would scream in her sleep, or curse out some dude named Hungerwood. Brian figures it was the name of a cop shaking her down, or something like that.
- Her freakout came not long after she bumped into this skeevy dog kennel guy, Alexei Ibragimbekov. See, she'd been thinking of creating a second, extra-secret site and selling fake girl/dog scenes on it. She went to him for technical advice, but then got cold feet. Which is good. T-Gunn might be a stone freak, but even he has his limits.
- These new friends she got killed with, they arrived on the scene just before she got the bright idea to kick heroin. Caryn wouldn't introduce them to him. At first he was offended, like she was ashamed of him or whatever, but she said it was to protect him.
- Once she sort of indicated that she and the others were searching for knowledge to use against this Detective Hungerwood. When Brian pressed her for details, she shut up.

## THE RITUAL

When the PCs realize that Ibragimbekov is the link that originally brought the group together, they'll want to talk to him. He fills them in on his role in the Ocean Game, then sends them off to ritually banish Hungerwood from their lives. Through this gambit, he plans his own ultimate escape.

#### IBRAGIMBEKOV

The PCs get an eerie feeling the minute they set eyes on Alex Ibragimbekov's business, Kozy Kennel. It's located in an upscale rural area of hobby farms and horse stables, and looks perfectly well kept on the outside. Its prefab white walls are clean, its lawn and rock garden sumptuously manicured. But something feels wrong about the place.

Use of the Sensitive ability hits the psychic with a disorienting wave of profound terror and agony. It seems to come from a nonhuman source. The feeling is so disturbing that it calls for a Stability roll, with a potential loss of 3. (When the psychic discovers what goes on here, he or she puts it together, realizing that the vibrations of suffering were imprinted on the place by hundreds of tortured dogs, alive and dead.)

When Ibragimbekov first sees the PCs, he reacts as if suffering a sudden electrical shock. He immediately senses that they're marked by Hungerwood.

A nervous wreck, Alex puts up only a token resistance. At first, his story is as follows. Sure, he knew all of the people killed in that wreck. But they knew each other before he ever met any of them. They must have referred him to each other or something. Alex claims to know nothing about Hungerwood, the occult, or the crash victims' probing into the occult. These statements set off the PCs' Bullshit Detectors, big time.

Ibragimbekov is beyond reassurance of any kind, but responds to Intimidation. He reveals the following, though only in answer to specific, and sometimes repeated questions. He wants to seem like they're dragging information out of him, when he's really leading them into a trap which will distract Hungerwood long enough to complete his own plans. So he makes them work for his secrets. Most of what he says is true.

- Yes, Hungerwood found the others through him.
- Hungerwood's been haunting him ever since he was a boy.
- Sometimes he gets bored driving Alex crazy and seeks out others. He can sniff out people with dark secrets and bad thoughts. They're his favorites.
- Each of the six had a dark spot in their souls. Alex was never sure what it was, most of the time. Sean Gauthier was an angry guy spoiling for a fight, and Doug McKim was a degenerate gambler.
- He had no idea that Hungerwood had taken an interest in them until Sean confronted him. By that time he'd already found the others. Sean beat the crap out of him. He's still got soft tissue damage from that.
- He had little help for them. He's never thought it possible to escape from Hungerwood. But they were fresh to the experience, and figured there had to be a way out. So they started investigating the occult, to find a way to destroy him.
- Alex didn't want to know the details of their cases, but they shared a few conclusions: that Hungerwood hailed from a place called the Outer Black, and that other creatures come from there, too.
- He's never heard of Cory Sluman or LiveGames. It was surely a coincidence that the PCs were headed to play *Eldarak* when they encountered Hungerwood. But that's just the kind of thing he'd love to pieces, and do his best to manipulate to horrific

He tells these truths to draw the PCs into the following falsehoods:

- Tim Peacock had this theory. He developed it after their inquiries into the Outer Black. Alex doesn't know the details behind it and certainly

isn't vouching for it. He suspects that it won't work. "Maybe I shouldn't even tell you, because I don't want you to get yourselves killed..."

- He'd found about this artifact called the Silent Howl. Supposedly if you go to the place where Hungerwood first sensed your sin, you can summon his presence by reenacting the worst thing you ever did. The more real the reenactment, the greater the chance of success. Hungerwood will be momentarily sated by your dark emotions, and at that time you can activate the Silent Howl and, taking advantage of his greater physical connection to the real world, destroy him.
- Or banish him permanently to the Outer Black. Or maybe it doesn't work at all. Probably something unexpectedly nasty happens.

Throughout the conversation, Ibragimbekov keeps looking nervously back at his computer monitor.

Computer Science reveals that he's working on a sound editing program.

Science (core clue): spots something odd about the sound file: its content is all in the high frequencies, inaudible to human ears.

Putting two and two together, the PCs can figure out that he's working on the Silent Howl and wants to save if for himself.

Ibragimbekov tearfully confesses. Yes, it's a frequency people can't hear. He burns them a CD containing the sound file.

If asked how he compiled the file, he refuses to answer.

The PCs can find out how by barging into his kennel area and then down into a basement below it. There they behold a scene of appalling horror.

Ibragimbekov has been torturing dogs, German shepherds mostly, in a variety of hideous jury-rigged devices. Many of them have pieces of their anatomies torn away, and are kept alive with IV drips leading

into bizarre life-support machinery. The dogs whine and bawl pitifully. Microphones dangle in front of their trembling snouts. Alex then takes their whimpers and electronically modifies them to create the Silent Howl.

Confronted with this scene, Ibragimbekov breaks down and sobs, begging for forgiveness. Really he's hoping that the PCs kill him. He wanted Gauthier and company to do it, but this replacement crop of Hungerwood victims could fit the bill equally well. If they seem to be too forgiving, he lays on the sniveling, doing whatever he can to provoke a fatal beating.

#### THE RITUAL

PCs distrusting Ibragimbekov might decide to trash his place, even kill him, and then save the possibility of the Silent Howl ritual for later. In this case, try to give as much weight as possible to what then becomes the end of the scenario. Balance a sense of closure with the idea that the series premise is now in motion—that the PCs have to find a real way to dispose of Hungerwood.

It's entirely possible that the PCs leave the ritual as an option for later and try it several scenarios down the road. Whether they do it immediately or postpone it, this is a reactive scene in which you'll be responding to what they choose to do. They design a ritual, figuring out which of them is to re-enact the worst thing they ever did, and what form this takes. Obviously, it must take place at the accident site.

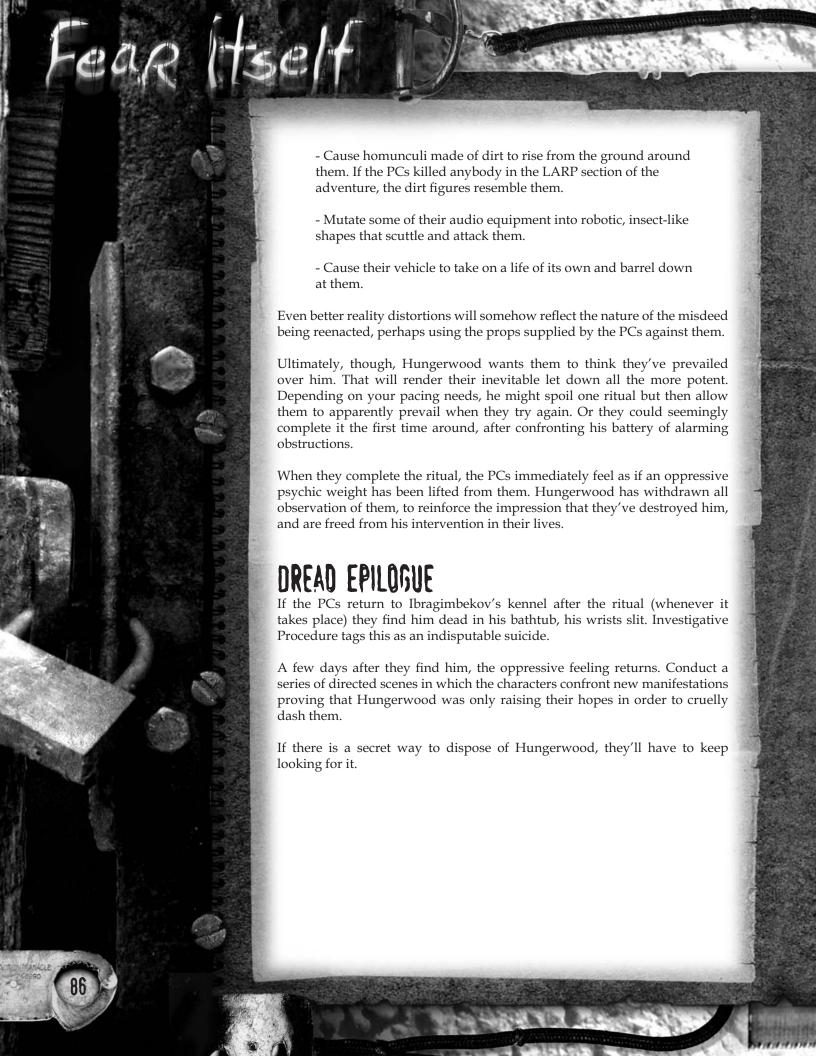
Hungerwood takes incredible delight in this performance. It's the best gift Ibragimbekov has ever given him. He plays along, creating a hallucination of his own spectacular destruction at the ritual's climax, when the Silent Howl is played.

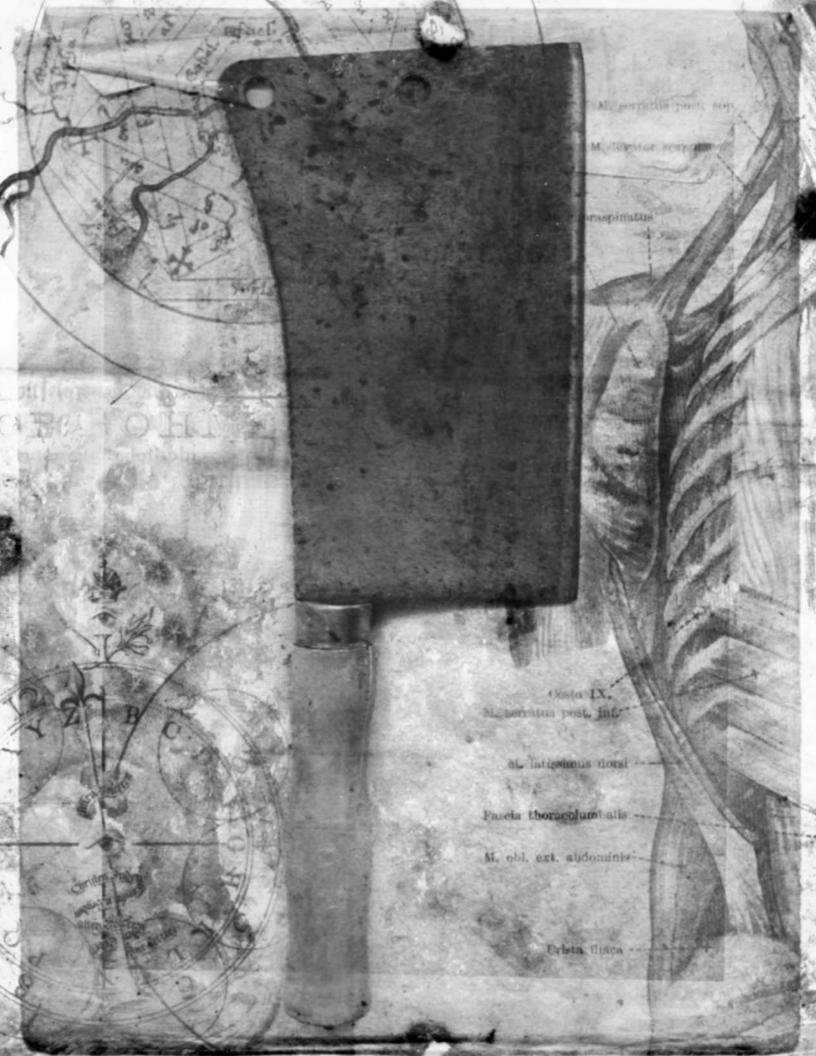
As the ritual unfolds, he uses his reality distortion power to manipulate the landscape around them, presenting them with an ever-escalating series of obstacles which threaten to stop them from performing the ritual. If he can drive somebody mad, so much the better. This sequence might serve as the climax of the story, so build these incidents up to create a sense of resolution.

For example, Hungerwood might:

- Whip up winds to buffet them.
- Send bushels of razor-sharp leaves to cut their flesh.







PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME :

CHARACTER CONCEPT:

SOURCES OF STABILITY:

### ABILITIES :

### **ACADEMIC**

Architecture History Humanities .... Langages Law .... Natural History Occult Studies .... Research Social Sciences

....

....

....

....

.....

Trivia

### INTERPERSONAL

**Bullshit Detector** Bureaucracy . . . . . Cop Talk .... Flaterry .... Flirting Impersonate .... Interrogation Intimidation .... Negotiation Reassurance .... Streetwise ...... ....

### TECHNICAL

Computer Science Investigative Procedure . . . . . Photography .... Science ..... ....

GENERAL

.....

**Athletics** Driving .... Filch Fleeing Health Infiltration Mechanics .... Medic Sense Trouble .... Preparedness Scuffing ..... Shooting Shrink Stability • • • • • ......

### PSYCHIC POWERS

.....

Medium .... Messenger Premonitions Remote Viewing .... Sensitive Synchronicity ....

....

### CHARACTER SHEET

RISK FACTOR :

THE WORST THING I EVER DID :

WHAT I WANT :

AFFINITY :

ENMITY :



1 4 2 0					
PLAYER/ CHARACTER					
CONCEPT					
RISK FACTOR					
WORSE THING THAT					
IN SERIES THI					
THIS SCENARIO		100			
ENMITY					
FRIEND					
PLAYER'S BUTTON					
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STABILITY SOURCES  PERSONALITY					

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