

Delta Green: Making Horror Scenarios

By Dennis Detwiller, © 2015

I receive a lot of email about my gaming methods. It's nice to be known as a heartless killing machine when it comes to horror game mastery; I take it as a compliment. Many people have praised or complained about my style of scenario creation as well. In any case people are talking about it, so I figure I must be doing something right.

Let's take a look at how to create horror scenarios for roleplaying games. I may get down into the weeds on some of this stuff with an angle towards *Delta Green*, but everything presented here can be used for *any* game. Game systems can help reinforce horror, but the reactions elicited in players matters more than any dice roll. In horror, it is about *feeling*. If that feeling is not there, not even the most effective horror game system will help.

What makes a scenario a horror scenario? *Uncertainty, risk and a lack of control*. Without these essential elements, any scenario, involving even the most terrible creatures, is simply a bug hunt. In fact, that's what most games are: go here, kill this, and take its stuff.

Horror is not about that. So, at the highest level, as a game master, this is what you must consider. Is your group content with the bug hunt?¹ If they are, then horror, and the possibility of failure, might come as a bitter and unwelcome pill. If they're open-minded or have experience in playing horror games, let's talk.

What Is Different About Horror?

We've said horror scenarios are about uncertainty, risk and lack of control. Let's look at these elements.

- **UNCERTAINTY:** When a thing is understood completely ("Bugbears have 5 hit dice"), it ceases to be frightening and certainly can never be truly horrific. Uncertainty is the essential rule of horror, and of horror scenarios. Players must never feel certain of their situation, what they're facing or why.
- **RISK:** If the game comes down to rote calculations ("I'll do 1D8 damage six times by the second round, therefore I'll average 27 points and the monster only has 16, so..."), it is not a horror game. Horror involves *risk* and the consequences from failing. In most horror games what is risked is the life (or sanity) of the character.
- **LACK OF CONTROL:** Many games are player-driven. The players dictate and the world moves around them. Horror does not operate this way. It is a game master-driven world where the world *occurs* around the players and they must react. There is a fine line to be drawn here. Players in horror games can *alter* but not *dictate* outcomes. Being prepared, making plans, researching, securing backup, these are all healthy things in a horror game that shows the player

¹ Not that there's anything wrong with that.

is *thinking*, and which can alter the outcome within reason. But most of the time, what the player is facing is far out of their scope in a one-on-one battle; hence, lack of control.

Style and Substance

Let's look at some of the types of horror that can exist in roleplaying games.

- **GORE-FEST:** *Evil Dead, The Cabin in the Woods*, etc. This type of horror elicits fear, but allows for over-the-top action on the part of the PCs. It usually involves supernatural elements. Death is a risk, but as long as the player is entertaining, plays along and has good ideas, it's likely the GM will keep the character around. Either the game system should be flexible or the GM should fudge rolls to keep players playing.
- **SLASHER:** *Friday the 13th, A Nightmare on Elm Street*, etc. This type of horror is more realistic and risky for the PCs. It sometimes involves supernatural elements, or at least insane luck. PCs die a lot, but their ingenuity and reason can help them survive even the most deadly risk. If the player struggles to solve the mystery, makes decent rolls and puts two and two together it's likely the GM will keep the character around.
- **MAN'S OWN WORK:** *The Others, The Purge*, etc. This type of horror explores the consequences of a world where there are no monsters, only man—and boy, is that bad enough. Occasionally there are surprise supernatural elements. This is usually about survival: you must outfight and outthink your fellow man who is out to end you. If the player is clever, constructs a plan, and stays one step ahead, it's likely the character will live long enough to see the end of the scenario.

- **THE WORLD PLUS:** *The Resurrected, An American Werewolf in London, Oculus, etc.* The PCs live in the real world, but a secret world of supernatural threats exists and for some reason is after them. This is the world of *Delta Green*. The PCs live in constant fear of something beyond, which might reach out at any time and destroy them. Even the most resilient, clever and well-prepared PC can perish with a single bad roll.

Structure

Let's examine a few of the types of structures of horror scenarios.

- **IN MEDIA RES:** Usually reserved for one-shots², *in media res* games usually dictate location, time-period and even the characters the players can choose. For example: *You're all teenagers staying at the Bremen Estate, waiting for the first train back to Albany once the snow clears.* The players pick characters, play it, and then it's done.
- **THE MYSTERY:** This can be part of an ongoing campaign or self-contained. The players are presented with a mystery which they must solve. For example: *People are disappearing at the Lesner Institute, and the university has hired you to check it out.* A mystery can easily connect to an **Ongoing Threat**, and can give rise to characters that continue, change and grow over time and across multiple scenarios.
- **THE ONGOING THREAT:** A campaign of scenarios (these can be linked or individual "movie of the week" investigations) connected by a skein of repeating

² Scenarios that usually have pre-made characters, and are playable in one session.

player characters. For example: *The Gilchrist Trust is a group of like-minded investigators bent on answering one secret: What comes after death?*

A Note About Control

I've talked to a lot of people who have many different experiences with horror games. Some play horror like a Michael Bay movie or a Marvel comic. It's their game, and they can do what they want—but they're missing out. Horror gaming is about fear.

Fear of the unknown, of losing control, of *losing*. In many ways, control is the opposite of fear, and players yearn for control.

A lot of players don't understand this. For that matter, a lot of *game masters* don't understand this. Player control is not an option in a game that's meant to evoke horror. The spells and creatures and magic and sanity-rending books should be stacked against you from the first moment of the game.

Regarded mechanically, *Delta Green* is a machine that produces agent deaths interspersed with (sometimes miraculous) stories of survival. It is a story of decline—moral, mental and physical—with horror and death on all sides. It is *hardly ever* about winning; and if it is, victories are fleeting and doom is always eventual.

So, players, embrace the fear. It's some of the most fun I've had in gaming: *not knowing what's coming next*. And GM, take the reins, let the dice make the life-and-death calls, and bring more of the battle back to the internal struggle with fear.

Where I'm Most Comfortable

I'm most comfortable in the world of *Delta Green*, of course: **The World Plus** and **An Ongoing Threat**. Now, down to brass tacks: let's create a little horror scenario that fits *Delta Green*.

The Hook

I write scenarios from a single nugget of an idea, a hook (like “a mirror which allows time travel”), and then follow the leads out from that. If it helps, think of the hook as something *solid*, a thing that all the leads attach to. Usually that hook is the supernatural element.

How about:

A janitor is found dead at the county hospital, covered in the fingerprints of a suicide victim who was brought in the day before and is now missing.

It’s a clean start with a nice bit of weirdness. The mark of a good hook is that there are *many ways for PCs to enter the mystery*; a few bits of *spine-tingling strangeness*; and a *clear path forward*. This has all three.

You’ll notice we don’t have an explanation for it, yet. No big deal. We’ll get to that.

I’m Hookless!

Sometimes it’s tough to come up with a hook. When I find myself at an impasse, I turn to the Internet. I search weird news stories, Wikipedia articles and social media feeds. Find something interesting and give it a supernatural or chilling twist. For example:

- The disappearances at Roanoke, Virginia—fascinating. A whole colony vanished with no indication as to where they ended up. Let’s tilt it: What if that happened to a small town today?
- The Texas sniper Charles Whitman and the bizarre aspects of his “brain tumor”. Is that what caused his rampage or was it something else? Something supernatural?

- Judge Crater, who vanished in the 1930s without a trace and was never found. What if he walked in the door of a local police station tonight?

And that was just ten minutes of poking around! There's always a hook available. There are *millions*.

NPCs

Non-player characters are the lifeblood of a good horror scenario. Who are the movers and shakers in your scenario? It's important to cover all the basics when writing them up.

Who are they? What are their motivations, hopes and dreams? Who are they loyal to? What forces do they serve?

For example, if a crime was the inciting event, it's likely the police or federal agents are involved.

Here are the key players I can think of for our dead janitor with the suicide victim's fingerprints. Are there others you can imagine?

- **Hector Sandoval, 39-year-old Haitian-American male (deceased); janitor.** Here's the dead guy. The initial entry point. He's innocent and dead. We'll give him a little weirdness and make him a follower of the Santeria religion; otherwise, he was just a normal guy.
- **Elizabeth Tun, 41-year-old white female; registered nurse.** The woman who discovered Sandoval's body. She's innocent, and horrified by the ordeal, but wants to help.
- **Abigail Vosh, 27-year-old white female; registered nurse.** A nurse who has been sneaking narcotics from the hospital and has a lot to hide (she also

sells them). Tun heard Vosh sneaking up to the roof to take drugs but did not see her. Now the police are looking for the person on the stairwell in possible connection to the crime.

- **John Doe, 30s, white male, identity unknown (deceased); occupation unknown.** The suicide pulled from the river the day before Sandovar's death. The source of the mystery.
- **Dr. Eric Marini, 52-year-old African American male; hospital director.** Bent on controlling the negative spin from a murder on the premises. To him there's no such thing as the supernatural.
- **Deputy Sheriff Ken Deveraugh, 45-year-old white male; local police.** The officer in charge of the murder investigation. He's surprisingly open-minded and might make a good ally if something obviously supernatural occurs. But for now he's operating under the theory that someone killed the janitor and snatched the John Doe body to cover it up. He can call in a lot of backup (potential victims, all) with only a few minutes' notice.

Leads

Leads are chains of causality and action (usually enacted by NPCs or monsters) which leave behind evidence. They emerge from the hook out into the world. Think of them as strings that emit from the hook and which can be tracked back to the central mystery.

To create leads, one must only imagine the hook and place the NPCs *in it*, and work out from it. What did the hook leave behind? What did it cause the NPCs to *do*?

Our hook presents clear leads. Let's flesh some out, adding a creepy detail to each:

- **THE CRIME SCENE:** The janitor is found in the hallway of the basement near the morgue. Clever PCs can find the off-light sheen of nude footprints leading from the morgue door, across the waxed floor the janitor was cleaning (they roughly match the size of John Doe).
- **THE JANITOR'S BODY:** The janitor, Hector Sandoval, was a 39-year-old Haitian American male with no criminal record. He was working alone on the two lower floors of the hospital, mopping and waxing the floors. He was found at 6:35 a.m., face down, neck covered in ligature marks. His lips are covered in saliva as if he had been kissed, deeply. Fingerprints lifted from the neck match the John Doe suicide brought in the day before (now missing).
- **THE SUICIDE VICTIM:** The victim was found in a nearby river the day before the murder, and was determined to have been dead for several days. The body was a "John Doe," an unknown white male in his mid-30s. It had been stored in a slide-rack freezer—which has now been blown open from the inside—and is now missing.

Dead Ends

It's important that those leads are not the *only* leads possible. Otherwise it will be a short mystery! Add one or two diversions. Here are some ideas; try to add your own:

- **THE MAN IN THE STAIRWELL:** The nurse who discovered the janitor's body, Elizabeth Tun, reported hearing someone moving up the staircase towards the roof when she entered it to move downstairs. The "man in the stairwell" is not the murderer, it is another nurse, Abigail Vosch, going up

to the roof to take elicit medicine she routinely steals from the hospital. This is unconnected to the murder.

- **THE JANITOR'S RELIGION:** Sandovar practiced *Santeria*, "the way of the saints," an Afro-Caribbean religion with African and Roman Catholic elements. Though this religion features animal sacrifice and other outré things, it is not related to the mystery.

Moments!

Creepy moments are key in a horror scenario. What do you want the players to *feel*? I do my best to embed two or three memorable moments in a scenario. Each should be something creeptastic and cool which will stick with the players.

- **THE SECURITY VIDEO:** PCs who check the security cameras find strangeness from the night of the murder. The hallway had two cameras, and both begin to go crazy at 1:31 a.m. Careful examination of the static (frame by frame) reveals three clear frames of video. One shows a shadow leaping on the janitor. The second seems to show them caught in some sort of dance-like embrace, locked in a kiss! The third shows the janitor on the ground, dead, with no one else in the hallway.
- **THE DEAD VAGRANT:** Another body turns up in a condition identical to Sandovar. His lips are covered in unknown saliva. The fingerprints match. The chain expands.
- **THE JANITOR COMES BACK:** Exactly 24 hours later, Sandovar wakes. He smashes his way free from the morgue in the same manner as the John Doe and escapes.

Events

Not only the PCs are moving and acting in the world. What are the NPCs and threats up to?

- **JOHN DOE MAKES AN APPEARANCE:** John Doe's on the hunt for something. He turns up at several nearby places concerned with books, burials or both. What is he doing?
- **SPREADING VECTOR:** Two new bodies show up, strangled in a similar manner.

Negative Outcomes and Interruptions

Throwing these in is easy. Look at the NPCs, imagine their motivations and the circumstances, and extrapolate. Here are some examples; try to make some more:

- **DR. MARINI STEPS IN:** The hospital director is tired of the shenanigans; he shuts down access to the hallway and shuts the Agents out of the hospital. He may be forced to cooperate by a search warrant or a court order, but he is very officious about it and requires paperwork for *anything*. He's a giant pain in the ass and brings the hospital's lawyers to the situation.
- **ANOTHER BODY IN A CHAIN:** Yet another body turns up. Strangled in a similar manner as the others, with the same John Doe fingerprints. This can cause the Agents to split up as some rush out to investigate the new death.
- **DEPUTY DEVERAUGH'S TOO SMART:** Deveraugh waits in the morgue the night after Sandoval's death, just because he has a feeling. Will he become the next victim and killer?

Solutions

What is the source of this “infection”? Well, what interests you? Here are some ideas, but it literally could be *anything*. Vampires. Space virus. A complex hoax. Use your imagination:

- **SOLUTION ONE: A DEEPER MYSTERY:** The PCs track John Doe back to an apartment (this can be provided by a witness identifying him, fingerprints getting a hit at NIST, or someone coming forward). The apartment was paid for with cash using a phony name and address. It is packed with dozens of newspaper clippings and Internet printouts all dealing with missing or stolen bodies, and a single, large, handwritten book entitled *THE FINAL DOOR*. There is no author.
- **SOLUTION TWO—A CLOSED LOOP:** Find and kill the janitor and John Doe and they collapse into gray dust, leaving behind a single, spiked-silver cluster of some metallic substance. What this is is unclear, but John Doe’s mote is much larger and more complex than Sandoval’s.
- **SOLUTION THREE—A GREATER THREAT:** Even if the mystery is closed, it begins to propagate. Is this the beginning of an epidemic? How long until other forces in the campaign setting notice?

NEXT!

Is it really that simple? Yep. And from here, it’d be easy to spin this up into a campaign of scenarios, all linked, or to jump into another adventure.

Your turn. Find a hook and take it from there.