Horror in Roleplaying

"Present fears are less than horrible imaginings."

- Shakespeare

What is horror?

Many people have written many pages on the topic, "What is horror?" Is it fear? Is it revulsion? Is it suspense? Does it have to incorporate an element of the supernatural? Does there have to be blood or brutal violence depicted to qualify?

It's obvious that simply sticking the trappings of horror into a story - zombies, old castles, buckets of blood, et cetera - do not transform it into "horror" automatically. I've laughed through many a zombie movie, and have seen teams of adventurers sweep through the vampire lord Strahd's castle in the classic AD&D module I6: Ravenloft like special ops anti-vampire squads without feeling a quiver of fright.

For role-playing purposes, I am going to contend that horror is simply a genre whose goal is the evocation of any of several different varieties of fear in its participants, ranging from the basic and primal to the esoteric and cerebral. A mood of tension, or suspense, is generated by the participants' emotional investment in the story and their personal dread of what will be revealed therein. The object of this fear is something that is somehow "bad" or "not normal." A work that produces this fear is defined as horror.

Horror can also be usefully defined in how it differs from other genres. Mystery, for example, depends on the unknown nature of its antagonists and events to spur its plot along. A thriller relies on creating a mood of suspense surrounding its unfolding events. Many an action movie deals with evil monsters besetting the protagonists, who are sometimes fighting against hopeless odds. Some dramas linger on the evils or insanities of man. None of these elements *in and of themselves* create a sense of horror. Horror, to put it simply, scares you. Not just with the momentary surprise of an opponent jumping out to attack, or with the suspense of "Will he get off the mountain alive?" or with the question of "Who is the killer?"
Horror lies not just in the unanswered questions of a mystery, but also in fearing to learn the answers. Horror does not lie in the suspense sparked by any surprise or unrevealed plot twist of a suspense thriller, but in the heartfelt dread of what the plot will reveal next. It lies not in the prospect of losing a fight with monsters, but in the prospect of losing one's humanity during that fight. It lies not in our knowledge of the insanity or evil of men – but in experiencing it close up and in recognizing its trace in our own minds.

What is fear?

Fear has two components – an object (what you're afraid of) and a motive (the reason why you're afraid).

"Not baked goods, professor… Baked bads!!!"

- The Tick vs. The
Breadmaster

The Things That Should Not Be

The objects that generate the fear that horror thrives upon can be thought of, roughly, as "The Things That Should Not Be." This includes anything that people consider outside the range of normality. Obviously malign supernatural entities qualify, as do scary but more mundane threats like serial killers. On a less physical level, insanity and revelations of evil deeds that men do are examples of things that strike us as "wrong" as well. Anything "unnatural," "uncanny," "unknown," "evil," "mysterious," "corrupted," "immoral," "inhuman," or otherwise hostile to our bodies, minds, souls, or sense of propriety can be an object of fear and thus be used to evoke a mood of horror. For the rest of this essay I will use the terms "evil" and "evils" to refer to The Things That Should Not Be, even though this is an imprecise term – insanity, for example, is not really evil in a moral or theological sense. But it is evil in the sense of being something we consider undesirable or not normal – what the Tick might call "a bad."

What We're Afraid Of

There are five major motives for fear that are dealt with in horror media. When we say that "we're afraid of" a monster, that's not really what we mean – the monster is a bad thing, true, but why are we afraid of it? We're really afraid because it will hurt us, or hurt people we care about, or because its existence means that the world isn't how we like to see it. Below are the real things that we are afraid of. I have listed them in rough order, from least to most deeply horrifying.

1. Evil Threatening Us
   The fear of evil befalling oneself – including the fear of danger, death, dying horribly, injury, torture, mutilation, suffering, isolation, being unloved, being betrayed, or anything else one can imagine. This basic terror is utilized by a wide variety of horror movies – the Friday the 13th and Halloween series being prototypical examples, as the protagonists are threatened with death by the evil creature stalking them. There are plenty of non-supernatural examples of this kind of horror as well – from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre to Seven.

2. Evil Threatening Others
   The fear of evil befalling one's loved ones – or, alternately, all humanity, the helpless, the social order, or another higher-level abstraction of other people. The Exorcist is an example of a work in this vein, showing an innocent girl being possessed and corrupted by an evil force, as is Poltergeist, in which supernatural forces threaten the protagonist's family. On a non-supernatural note, the movie Cape Fear triggers this type of horror in its watcher. The additional feeling of helplessness that a threat to another person, not ourselves, whose actions and feelings we care about but are outside our control, engenders in us additional terror.

3. Creating Evil Ourselves
   The fear of creating something evil or of participating in something evil. Movies like Rosemary's Baby are examples of this level of horror, which depends on both the terror of deep personal psychic violation and of the fear of harboring or creating something evil yourself (literally or figuratively). Frankenstein, the classic novel, is another example of facing the horror of your own evil creation. Examples of this kind of horror that do not use a supernatural element are common – the horror of discovering one of your children is evil, or that something you created is being used for evil (Dr. Dyson in Terminator 2 has to face this kind of horror, when he discovers his seemingly innocent experiments lead in the future to the near-extinction of the human race). This level is where fear takes a turn inward, and is no longer completely the fear of something "other" – since you are a willing or unwilling accomplice in the evil, you find reason to fear yourself as well.

4. Being Evil Ourselves
The fear of being evil and performing evils – or of becoming evil, or of losing one's humanity or sanity. At their heart, the various vampire stories address this level of fear – the fear of becoming something evil yourself (or, alternately, discovering that you are already a base and twisted creature and didn't know it – several of H.P. Lovecraft's short stories address this fear, as does the movie Angel Heart). A work that details a person's violation and abuse, and then explores their discovery that they were themselves such an offender, would be a non-supernatural example of this type of horror. It is less fundamentally horrifying to think of foul acts being perpetrated upon you that to think of yourself perpetrating those horrible acts.

5. Living in an Evil World
The fear that the world, God, reality, the social order, or something else is evil, hostile, or horrible. There are good examples of horror based on questioning the entire nature of one's reality – the movie Dark City is one, along with "cosmic" horror like H.P. Lovecraft's writings. The movie The Matrix, though not made as a horror movie, has an example of this type of revelation – the movie's protagonist finds out that his entire world is false and that he and everyone he knows are just pieces of meat in huge organic batteries. If the movie had stretched out its first section into a full story, and had the climax of the movie be that revelation, it would have been a very effective horror movie. Works in which the protagonist discovers that yes, indeed, they ARE insane and the world is not the way they thought it was fit into this category as well. We derive an especial dread from the concept that the entire universe is evil, or that there is no such thing as good – that we are all doomed to pointless suffering and everything is touched by the all-permeating evil.

These motives are found in many different variations and combinations in more specific themes. The Nightmare on Elm Street movies, for example, revolve around the evil Freddy Krueger invading the dreams of kids to kill them, to extract vengeance for his murder by those children's parents. The characters feel the fear of the direct threat (Evil Threatening Us), but also some culpability by proxy for their parent's actions in making Freddy what he is (Creating Evil Ourselves), and his method of revenge leaves them often wondering if they are awake or asleep and dreaming, or just going insane (a variation on Living in an Evil World).

These different types of horror are well illustrated by the movie Alien and its sequels. This series does a very good job, in my opinion, of elevating the level of horror to a slightly deeper and more esoteric level with each film. Interestingly enough, these movies are usually classified as science fiction, not horror, though if you replace the alien antagonists with a supernatural threat instead you can draw direct parallels between each of the movies and other extant "horror" films.

Alien: This movie's tension revolves around the fear of being eaten (or killed in a more gruesome way) by a monster. This is a simple but effective play upon a basic fight-or-flight human fear. Ripley, the protagonist, is stalked by a creature that she's not capable of harming, and is terrorized as it picks off her shipmates one by one. Its horror depends on the fear of *evil threatening us*.

Aliens: The film initially operates on the same level as the first, but then the filmmakers develop a more subtle form of horror when they threaten the little survivor girl Newt, who acts as Ripley's surrogate "daughter." This triggers Ripley's motherhood instinct and touches something much more terrifying to her than the prospect of losing her own life – it is the threat of death (or worse) happening to a loved one. Thus this movie takes the horror beyond the simple threat-to-self theme of the first to the fear of *evil threatening others*.

Alien 3: Ripley is faced with an even deeper violation in this film - she is "penetrated" by an alien and at the end "gives birth" to a monster herself. This is still fear, but a more

"horrifying" fear – and not just a fear of personal violation (though this kind of ongoing or developing violation is additionally horrifying; "I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream" is a very chilling Harlan Ellison short story that depends on the horror of profound physical and mental violation). The core horror of this movie is Ripley's fear of what she will have created. Ripley knows that the Company is going to want to take and use the alien she births, visiting its evil upon others. Her sense of horror thus revolves around a fear of being a part of this evil, of furthering its cause against her will. This taps into our fear of *creating evil ourselves*.

Alien 4: Resurrection: Ripley herself is reborn in this film as a half-alien monster. This is the ultimate level of horror - the fear of the present truth and reality, and doubting the goodness and validity of one's own self and being. When she is confronted with other twisted, subhuman clones of herself, the movie is saying to her directly "You, Ripley, are a monster. You are hideous like these creatures, and evil like the aliens you hate." She is no more sure than the other characters are that this is not indeed the case. This is a clear appeal to we viewers' fear of *being evil ourselves*.

Unfortunately, there's not an Alien 5 to illustrate the fear of living in an evil world, although we can certainly imagine such a plotline (the aliens and the Company are both leading candidates for making the fictional world pretty darn full of all-encompassing evil).

Of course, it is the delivery of these themes that turn them into horror. Neither monsters nor the evil that lurks in men's souls automatically evoke horror upon their discovery – it is instead the suspense, fear, and revulsion that their careful revelation engenders in us. We will talk more about the techniques of horror later.

True horror also results in a fear that is taken with the participant from the viewing, and causes them to experience dread. "What if that monster really existed? What if that happened to me? What if I found out that I was a monster?" These fears are the ones that make you jumpy even after you've left the movie theater, and that cause you to think back on the story with a feeling of apprehension.

Provoking an emotional response of this sort is a difficult task and bears some more in-depth investigation. Take a moment to think about what movies, books, or TV shows you have personally found the most horrifying. Try to establish what exactly about them you found horrifying and the technique that they used to elicit that fear from you.

Why try to create horror in a role-playing game?

Because it's enjoyable. Horror has existed from the earliest times; fairy tales and ghost stories and epic tales like Beowulf all properly belong to the realm of horror. People have enjoyed being scared vicariously for as long as they've been creating fiction. Just as the call of romance or heroism is a universal component of humanity's stories, the call of horror is one as well.

It should go without saying that anyone playing in a horror game should be willing to be scared. If they just don't like horror, or if they feel the need to not cooperate with the mood of fear in the story to show the other players how "tough" they are, you're not going to get very far. The point is for all the participants to want to create and experience the frights that horror offers.

How do I create horror in a role-playing game?

The Characters' Role - Personal Investment

Much of what it takes to create horror in a role-playing setting is the same personal investment that changes the game from a tabletop wargame to an experience of in-character role-play in

any genre. If neither player nor character finds the situation they are placed in personally and emotionally compelling, horror is not generated – you can kill a character gruesomely, but you haven't created a horrifying experience.

Generating personal investment has to begin before you start a horror adventure. Players need to be comfortable with in-character play, feel attachment to their characters, and generally be invested in the alternate reality of the game world to some degree. Otherwise there is not enough relation of the player to the game to feel horror. This is similar to the characters, settings, and situations in a horror story or movie. If they are not believable and compelling then the audience does not "feel" the story. We have all seen B horror movies where the characters are so stupid and so poorly motivated that we root for their horrid demise rather than feeling pathos on their behalf.

You can help promote this investment at the time of play with the following practices that promote all kinds of good in-character role-play:

a) Have believable, engaging characters. Obviously the players largely determine this factor, but the GM and the rest of the group can do a lot to promote this. Staying in character is important – and that goes doubly so for the GM. Nothing ruins in-character play more than the GM "flat-out telling" the players something. All sensory input to the characters should come through the game world. Metagaming should be discouraged. NPCs should be interesting and three-dimensional. The depiction of NPCs and their reaction to the events of the story is one of the most powerful tools the GM has in their arsenal of terror. Freakish extras, "normal" people to be threatened, and other foils allow the PCs a view onto the terror at hand.

b) Create realistic settings. The GM has almost complete control over this aspect of the game. Horror and fear of the unknown work best in contrast to the safe and the familiar. When describing the mundane or the supernatural, do not skimp on detail. Once things get freaky, don't hesitate to describe what's going on at length – special effects are free when they're being created by your mind and voice. Use all five of the players' senses (and the sixth when feasible). They need to viscerally feel the "reality" of the setting, and the players' suspension of disbelief should be more jealously guarded than in any other genre.

c) Use uncontrived and interesting situations. In horror scenarios especially, the GM can be tempted to "railroad" the plot and force players into certain directions. This may get 'the plot' moving but ruins the mood that is the goal of the plot. If your players trust your game mastering enough to role-play their characters and their motivations fully, you have to be able to create situations in which those characters are genuinely interested and willingly follow to generate the plot.

Descriptions

The same scene can be either strongly evoke a sense of horror, or not do so at all, based on the GM's and players' attitudes to the events depicted in the game as determined by these factors.

As an example, I recently read a short horror adventure in which one puzzle in a haunted house required a character to eat a plate of bugs. In a casual role-playing environment it's pretty easy for the exchange to go like this:

GM: "There's a ghost in this room, he says you have to eat a plate of bugs to get out of the house."
Player: "OK, my character puts on a little soy sauce and shotguns those puppies!"
GM: "You can go on."

This is pretty weak and certainly not at all horrifying. Think to yourself how this scene would be staged in a horror movie, and how you would personally react to this situation. The GM

should have laid the room (and ghost) description on thick, down to the clicking of the fat beetles' legs as they scurry across the scarred, dull pewter plate. Describe the eating process to the willing player (the crunching, the oozing, the bits of chitin sticking between his teeth); require CON checks of the character to see if he can handle this task without giving up his lunch. Once the task is completed, just have the ghost, smiling wickedly, shimmer and disappear – can they really get out of the house now? Or was it just a cruel trick? What about the player who ate the bugs, is anything weird going to happen to him as a result? Pass him some notes about how he feels strangely afterwards – neither he nor the other players will be quite sure if there will be further repercussions.

Props and Activities

Feel free and use props and drawings as visual aids or other tricks to make the experience more sensory for the players and aid them in having the "you are there" feeling. Darken the room, and maybe put on spooky ambient music. Give the players handouts or even constructed props when possible. Get the players physically involved – horror is one genre where inserting a little bit of live-action influence is very effective. Have them move around. If the party is separated, make the players separate into two rooms. Make them "show you how" they are opening the door. Involving the physical body is a good way to get the mind engaged. You will need to clamp down somewhat on out-of-game distractions (TV, reading at the table, cutting up) as well. There is an essay by horror veteran John Tynes at http://johntynes.com/revland2000/rl_mofo.html that deals primarily with interpersonal tactics to keep players on edge while horror role-playing. It's a little extreme but can give you some inspiration on the subject.

I have played in the Cthulhu Masters Tournament held yearly at Gen Con, and they take great care to get a separate room, set the mood, use props, and otherwise create a very immersive horror gaming experience, and I have always found it to be very effective and enjoyable. There's nothing like being in a dark, oppressive room for four hours, wondering if the strangers you're with are really allies or cultists that would like to fillet you, and then typing occult codes into a computer terminal and seeing the "screen" projected on the wall resolve from digital gibberish into the words "UPLOAD SACRIFICE" to send chills up your spine.

Compartmentalization

It is very important in horror gaming for players to be linked strongly to their character's in-game experience. They should be restricted to knowing what their character knows in every respect. Use written notes and take players aside and speak to them privately to inform them of things that only their character has learned or sensed. Making characters actually speak to one another to share information plays an important role in transforming the PC interaction into something more realistic (and something more like you'd find in a horror movie). Use of perception mechanics (e.g. d20's Spot and Listen) is very important as well; it allows different characters to perceive different things – and not know whether they can trust everyone else's perceptions.
In most RPGs there is the concept of player vs. character knowledge, and usually in sake of expediency the players are trusted to know things and not let their characters act on that knowledge. In horror, however, the point is to scare the *players* – and it is thus of paramount importance that players not have access to knowledge that their characters do not.

Dissension

Also, sow a lack of confidence and dissension in the group of players. They should not be able to trust each other all the time. You can use mind control, hallucinations, and the like to control PCs, but even better is giving them reasons to not cooperate with the rest of the party. This is extremely genre appropriate – nearly every modern horror movie with a group of protagonists suffers from extreme dissension in the group – <u>Aliens</u>, <u>Deep Rising</u>, <u>John </u>

<u>Carpenter's Vampires</u>, <u>Night of the Living Dead</u>… Allow players to play "bad guys" in the party to betray the others, or better yet tempt their "good" characters with reasons to keep things to themselves (or not to trust other party members). Players should feel isolation, not security or comfort in their comrades, whenever possible.

Blurring the Lines

You may have noticed that the things I've described here elevate the sense of horror in the player, not the character. Since horror is a feeling, that is necessary - for a character to be horrified, all you have to do is have a player say, "my character's horrified!" Transferring that feeling to the *player* is the real goal of a horror scenario. So the final thing you need to do is to blur the lines a little between the player and character. This is an advanced topic in role-playing. Naturally, a lot of what we do in an RPG is to come up with a character different from ourselves and play them. We strive to keep a distinct line drawn between the players of the game and the characters in the game, and for good reason.

The nature of story-generated emotion, however, is such that the greater investment you have in the story, and the more you identify with the characters, the more deeply you partake in the adventure. And though players can get emotionally invested in any character, the nature of that investment in an RPG is that there are always elements of the player in the character. The character is their mind's creation, after all, and while the character might have different powers and appearance from the player, their core psychology is mostly the same. Once you have the standard techniques of horror down and want to take the game to the next level, you can deliberately make use of the tactic of using player psychology against them. To use a simple example, if a certain player really fears spiders, nothing will creep them out like spiders on their character in the game. On a more subtle level, you can learn over time what affects the players – not just the individuals, but also the group dynamic (for example, some groups are more prone to fear and mistrust among their members, others are less so). Find the weaknesses, the places where the players are affected and where they can be most effectively horrified. You should always use this tactic carefully, infrequently, and subtly - but it works very well.

Caveat Arbiter

Needless to say, you should engage in this practice with discretion and compassion. Your players should *want* to be scared, and you should be sensitive to people's real world issues – a real world victim of abuse, for example, would probably have a strong negative reaction to in-character abuse. Be aware of your player group and back off if anyone's having a problem with the subject matter.

<u>The Story's Role - The Fear of the Unknown</u>

So now that they are "into" the game, what will truly horrify your players?

Terror and Revulsion

Two of the primary building blocks of horror are terror and revulsion. Terror is the feeling generated by a scary event happening, especially in a surprising or shocking manner. A sudden scare! Adrenalin floods into us, making us jittery. Well-timed shocks help you to elevate the players' suggestibility and make them more susceptible to fear. Revulsion is the "gross-out" feeling created by gore or other viscerally unpleasant images (bugs, rats, demon ichor, vomiting up a tequila-worm demon, a little girl's head spinning around as she utters horrific curses and stabs herself in the vagina with a crucifix, et cetera). Yuck! Nausea strikes us and we want to turn away. Gore or other "disgusting" sights point indirectly to the Things That Should Not Be and creep out the players on a gut level.

Surprise and revulsion can both be useful tools in generating an atmosphere of unease among the players, but should be used with care (they grow old with overuse) and must be backed up with a more deeply fearful to concept to generate a true feeling of horror in an adventure. These are successful tactics, however - there are entire subgenres of horror that use suspense or splatter nearly exclusively to generate their desired mood. Use them in your horror scenarios to make them more effective. Both are direct links between a person's mind and their physical reactions, which make them useful to manipulate the participant's feeling of unease.

Established Horror Conventions
Using established horror conventions known by your players - like the spooky old house, the creepy old man, or the grisly ghoul - can work for or against you. On the one hand, commonly recognized horror conventions can work for you and generate the appropriate tone in the game, insofar as the players associate those things with the feelings of horror and trepidation. On the other hand, these things are so common that they risk becoming clichéd and eliciting laughter or familiarity, not fear. Use them only so far as they are effective.

Dread

The true goal of horror is the feeling known as "dread" – the worry or anticipation, or one might even say the surety, that bad things are going to happen. The cold shocks of terror and gut-wrenching morbidity of revulsion are but means to this end. In the course of someone's normal day, they generally have the expectation that things are going to turn out all right. They are going to go through their daily routine, and some good or bad things might happen, but in the end things will continue on as usual and be OK. Properly applied horror reverses this expectation and removes one's default sense of security. It turns a person's default setting into a nearly-certain fear that things will *not* be OK - that the next door that is opened, or next person that is encountered, or next revelation that is uncovered will be *very bad* and will make the situation even worse. Your goal as GM is to work the players into a state where they are beginning to experience this feeling (but ideally not so far that they give in to hopelessness, which is the endgame result of fulfilled dread).

Terror and revulsion are unpleasant at the time. But dread is lasting. It causes a person to fear the future – and to an extent, is retained even after the initial experience is over.

Gaming Anecdote – Terror and Dread

I once GMed an episode in a long-running D&D campaign where two of the PCs, Orado and Mikhail, had separated from the rest of the group and were traveling across country to perform a specific errand. They were taking a break from the main campaign plot, which involved horrid Lovecraftian creatures trying to emerge from the deep Underdark. While they were traveling, they came across a gnomish burrow; its occupants offered to let them spend the night. The players were quite serious types, as the campaign was extremely dark in tone, and they talked with the gnomish leader at some length, inquiring if he knew anything about threats from the Underdark. With a completely straight face, I (as the gnomish leader) related a tale of evil dark elves coming from the depths below, concluding with an aside about how the drow warrens had extended, at one time, to underneath *this very burrow*. So the players went to their reserved bedchamber, ill at ease. Well, the gnomes had told this story to just about every traveler that came through, and had a special practical joke prepared. All the walls in the burrow were of packed earth, and in the middle of the night the PCs awoke to some noise and the cracking of the far wall of their bedchamber! They could see a dark humanoid form pushing through the wall – really just a mannequin painted black, sealed into the dirt wall beforehand and then pushed in from an

adjacent room via an attached broom-handle. Well, the players were *scared*. The combination of their fear of the Underdark threats in the campaign and the gnomish story had them so on edge that the wizard, Orado, just panicked and fired off a Color Spray in the close quarters of the room, knocking his warrior comrade Mikhail unconscious but not seeming to stop the emergence of the dark form. Mikhail's player was scared and so mad he could spit, fearing that his character would be slain without the opportunity to even defend himself. Orado was freaking out and preparing to immolate the whole room in a Fireball when he heard the gnomes' laughter through the walls. This unexpected scare certainly terrified them at the time, and even though it turned out to be just a prank, it heightened their overall level of unease as they returned to the "real" adventure. They felt additional dread about the prospect of venturing into the cold vastness of the Underdark, even though the scare they had was not truly related to that task at all.

This experiment in terror was a slightly more complex version of the classic "cat scare" in a horror movie, where a character hears something moving, creeps hesitantly towards it, and ROWR! It's just a cat. The immediate tension releases, but the underlying level of tension in the protagonist and audience has been increased, and thus we experience enhanced anticipation of bad things to come and jump twice as high when the monster really appears.

> "*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.*"
>
> - H.P. Lovecraft

The Known vs. The Unknown

The elements of the horror story fall into two major categories – those which are known to and understood by the characters, and those that are unknown, incompletely known, or not understood by the characters. This distinction is very important for game scenario-based horror.

The Known

Even though, as I will discuss below, the unknown is the primary element that generates horror, it needs bits of known information to be its catalyst in order to allow fear to form in the players. Terror and revulsion, as discussed above, are examples of known information. Something jumped out and scared you, or you found the pools of blood in the cellar. Bits of information like this are what allow participants to detect and be involved in the plot.

You must beware of too much falling into the known category in a horror story, however. When the players know too much about what's going on, and they know what's threatening them and its capabilities, and they generally have enough information that they feel in control of the situation, horror is a lost cause. Known information must simply be used in moderation.

Take the example of the PCs being stalked by a monster. Once the player characters know exactly what the threat they are facing consists of, it ceases to become scary and instead becomes a tactical exercise. Generally "spooky" monsters in RPGs tend to fall into the known category because many players have their statistics memorized and so the creatures, no matter how gruesome, become known quantities – dangerous, but predictable; a vampire becomes like a rabid wolverine, just more powerful. In real life and in more visual media like the movies, the threat of the known can be more keenly felt, but in games and fiction you tend to have to rely on the unknown for horror's effect.

Direct threats to the characters are likewise not tremendously effective in an RPG. There is only so much fear you can generate by directly threatening the characters with death or other

physical punishment. The division between player and character kicks in sharply, and though the character may be squealing in pain the player is sitting there thinking, "I wonder if the cleric will be able to heal this?" Most RPG campaigns have a high degree of bodily threat to their characters as an ongoing theme. As a result, characters tend to not be as afraid of threats to their life as players are in the real world, and this means that horror based simply on those kinds of direct threats is quite difficult to generate.

An interesting facet of the gaming medium is that it (usually) lacks an audience. In most media – books, film, plays – the audience can be shown things that heighten their horror without the protagonists seeing it themselves – like the numerous scenes of Michael Myers stalking Jamie Lee Curtis' character in Halloween. This allows the audience to have a bit more "known" information to enhance their anticipation while keeping the protagonists in the dark to keep the plot on track. You can't do that in an RPG – the protagonists *are* the audience. So you have to try to show the characters these things, but indirectly enough that they don't immediately find out what's going on. You can show them clues (like footprints outside their windows) and use NPCs to convey information about what they saw, as if they were the virtual audience ("Hey man, I saw some creepy dude near your car yesterday…").

Information should be carefully parceled out to the players in a way that increases their suspense and keeps them in the dark about the really fundamental questions about what is going on.

The Unknown
The thing that discomfits players the most is the unknown. Games, even more so than real life, have defined rules and standard conventions. Things outside these conventions cause stress and fear in the players. Whenever players do not know what evil forces are at work, they fear them – and their imaginations conjure up specters of the unimaginable for you.

To have a fear of the unknown, characters and players alike must at least know that there is an "unknown" to fear. The most compelling horror stories introduce the idea that something is not quite right very slowly. The first duty of the GM is to decide what in the story is going to be unknown and therefore able to generate horror in the characters. It can be something basic, like being hunted by a creature too powerful to overcome, with unknown capabilities and weaknesses – in this case the burden of generating horror rather than a tactical exercise by using mood and setting falls upon the GM. It can be something much more esoteric – imagine that one of the players discovers that their family, or the god they worship, or even they themselves are something monstrous and inhuman. In any event, the GM should plan out the unknown factors and construct the sequence of revelations in order to heighten the players' fear – each new revelation should make the players feel like things are getting worse, not better. Characters should be shown only hints of what is going on, just enough to build up their feeling of dread, and no farther. Of course, additional information should be divulged over time or the players will have no sense of progress. But what they discover should be increasingly unnatural and disturbing.

How do we generate fear of the unknown, also known as "dread," in a RPG? It seems to me that one thing that contributes to our fear of the unknown is that our sensory input, ability, and knowledge is limited. In the movie The Blair Witch Project, unexplained and threatening phenomena (the rock piles, the noises, the hanging effigies) appear without any known cause or agent. The characters suffer from an inability to see or confront possible attacker(s) and the inability to escape. They do not know where they are, how to get away, who or what is harassing them, what the harasser's agenda is, where they are, or what they will do next. They also don't know if they can trust their fellows. This placed them (and us, on their behalf) into an extremely excitable, suggestive state extremely conducive to horror.

It would have been more difficult to make the same movie about three experienced woodsmen. Characters in role-playing games are often highly competent heroic personalities, with magic or technology at their fingertips ready to deal with such problems. For horror to work the gamemaster has to come up with ways to make things still unknowable and

mysterious despite the characters' body of abilities. In high-powered games (fantasy or science fiction especially) it can be difficult to keep the answers to certain questions from the characters. If the players can detect whether something is magical/supernatural or not, can speak with dead victims, and can consult their god on where the "bad guys" are hiding out, then it is a bit more of a challenge to generate horror – but not impossible. The key is to concentrate on questions the PCs can't answer.

The story should, at some point, come after the PCs specifically. There's only so long that they can investigate or otherwise mess with the unknown forces at the heart of the story without being noticed by those forces. Forcing the players into a reactive mode, and forcing them to defend themselves instead of being on the offensive, will help throw them off balance and make them worry more.

Let's say that you have a storyline in which an evil wizard is kidnapping people and using them to create twisted clone servants for himself. This storyline could be handled in the traditional D&D way – the PCs quickly find clues leading them to the wizard's keep; they sweep and clear the "dungeon" and kill the wizard. But the same storyline can be used to generate a very convincing horror scenario if played differently. People begin to disappear, and the PCs can't stop it from happening. But they disappear gradually, while the PCs are involved in other plots. At first, unknown people disappear, but then the victims grow closer and closer to the PCs. First, it's that cleric that they bought healing from last month. Next, it's the bar wench they always flirt with. Suddenly this isn't a random adventure hook, but it's something that the players feel personally invested in. They investigate, and you let them get closer only gradually. They come upon a house right after a kidnapping; the place is trashed and there's blood all around. Maybe the corpse of one of the victims shows up – and it's clearly been professionally dissected. Unknown to the party, it's not really the victim's corpse, but that of a test clone; it was dissected because the wizard wanted to make sure it was a good copy. Speak with Dead therefore reveals only somewhat bizarre information. Eventually, a victim shows up at the PCs' doorstep and says, "Oh, I escaped from this horrible place! Come see!" When the PCs arrive at the wizard's mansion, it turns out that the "victim" lured them there to be trapped… This can be done in such a way that Detect Magic, Evil, or Lie reveals nothing wrong. Do what you can to make the PCs feel like they don't know what is going on, that the dark forces at work are always a step ahead of them, and that they are at risk of doing the wrong thing themselves. In this particular scenario, it's difficult to know who to kill –the wizard might Charm the real victims and send them after the PCs along with clones, the PCs might kill the victims they hope to save – of course, they find out too late what is going on... Separate the party when possible. Take PCs aside and talk to them privately. Bring the group back together. Are any of the PCs clones now? Keep as much unknown as possible. If the PCs know they are heading out to kill an evil clone-making wizard, it's harder to make the experience horrifying. If, however, the PCs don't know there's a wizard behind it, don't know if they are dealing with doppelgangers or necromancy or a conspiracy or what, and don't know who they can trust – then you're cooking.

Related to this theme of limited knowledge is the use of familiar, safe things which are then somehow corrupted into instruments of horror - this is a special case of limited knowledge, where the players think they "know" something but are sadly mistaken. Horror stories involving children, clowns, the family house, etc. use this particular tactic. Stephen King makes use of common items and feelings to generate horror in many of his novels - for example, the family pet in Cujo and Pet Sematary, or common human experiences like inability to sleep or adolescence in Insomnia and Carrie.

Once you have a strong sense of the unknown in play, and have set an appropriate mood, the characters' imaginations begin to work in your favor. Imagination is the hallmark of RPG players in general, and is a useful tool in the hands of a horror GM. Players begin trying to put together reasons "why this is happening." They will develop a number of options on their own, and with some prompting those options can be pretty terrifying (sometimes more terrifying than the original story calls for).

Gaming Anecdote

In the same long-running D&D horror campaign, one of the PCs (Mikhail the warrior) was hired by a local notable to go find his long-lost younger brother. The whole setup was very suspicious, as the boy's mother had fled with the baby many years ago, for reasons that the man was unwilling or unable to divulge. Mikhail sought after the boy, eventually tracking the twenty-year-old trail north to a small village – his home village, that he had left long ago and, according to his character's background write-up, wasn't even sure exactly where it was located. He found out that indeed, his parents had taken him in from the terrified woman, who died soon after.

As the campaign progressed and the PCs went deeper into the Underdark, fighting kuo-toa and other aquatic creatures, Mikhail started to exhibit some odd traits and have disturbing dreams about swimming with fish-men in the depths. He hid this from the rest of the party, suspecting that it was a curse or a side effect of some of the magic they were using – but then he discovered, much to his horror, that the transformation was perfectly *natural* – given his heritage…

The other PCs certainly didn't trust him much once they found out, and he had reason to mistrust himself – he was a monster, after all, with increasingly strange urges. The player in question had read Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth" and should have known what was coming, but it was introduced so gradually that he didn't make the connection until it was too late. This experience turned into a very strong horror element in the campaign, which affected all the players, giving them the desired sense of unease and horror.

Pacing

As the game progresses, whether it is a one-shot scenario or a multiyear campaign, there is a critical need for good dramatic timing. The sense of fear should be heightened, then released - but each time only a partial release, building into more horror. Then it should be heightened to a fever pitch, brought to some kind of direct conflict, and then and only then released. The general rules of dramatic tension and the same tools that create suspense in any genre apply here, although unexpected plot twists and deviations from "standard" plot timings are also important to maintain the sense of unease in the player characters. There are no hard and fast rules to follow to develop good timing. You as a GM have an advantage that no author, playwright, or director does, however – you are experiencing direct feedback from your participants as the plot unfolds. This is your most valuable tool. You can see when they are scared and want more, or when they are overloaded and need a respite, or when they are truly uncomfortable and horrified. Luckily, the plot is never fixed until it happens – you are free to adapt anything you want in order to maintain the mood. Speed up, slow down, cut out, add to as needed. Don't adhere mindlessly to "your plan."

Gaming Anecdote

In one session early in my example campaign, we had an entire very successful horror episode that was conducted entirely off the cuff. With a careful eye on the players, appropriate timing was not that hard to create. The PCs were wandering interminably through some abandoned farmland, searching for clues germane to the plot at hand. I was just throwing local color and wandering monsters at them, getting them into the mood and letting them role-play with each other. The group took cover in an abandoned barn during a thunderstorm and began poking around, as bored adventurers are wont to do. One of them was rooting around in the stale straw covering the floor, and found a human skull, and then the rest of the skeleton. I just threw it in there to see how they'd react. Well, the mood was right, and all

the players perked up. For whatever reason, it had given them a brief chill. After an investigation, they determined that whoever it was must have hung himself on the main rafter long ago. When they left the barn, they had a telltale air of unease about them that signaled to me that they were ready for some horror. But even I wasn't sure what from yet.

Next, they passed by an old abandoned house, which without thinking I described as being a two-story plantation style house. One of the PCs took note, and said, "Hey, that's weird, a two-story house is for rich people, all the farmers' houses we've found out here so far are one-story three-bay hovels." So the party, suddenly interested, decided to investigate that house. They were fully in character, and invested in what was going on (as you'll recall, two of the building blocks that enable horror to really work in a game).

I needed no further prompting, and during a brief food and bathroom break I threw together a quickie house floor plan and some ideas as to what could happen.

The party began to investigate the house. At first, it was just a moderately creepy abandoned house, with patches of mildew and layers of dust on every available surface. But then some small oddities appeared. One character heard a dripping sound in one room and was unable to locate its source. Another saw something odd in a mirror, just for a second… Just enough to elevate their level of tension, but still very subtle, not providing any proof that there was anything really odd going on. And then they got into a locked room on the first floor that was completely painted black and decked out with a large ritually inscribed summoning circle. One particularly brave party member stepped into the circle, and clearly heard the dripping sound – but no one outside the circle could hear it. Needless to say, this discovery was of great concern to them and they moved into high gear in investigating. They started to split up, much to my delight – it was a small house, and they weren't out of earshot of each other, so they felt it was safe. I gave a lot of information to the subgroups in the form of notes, so that the other PCs wouldn't know what was going on in other parts of the house. There was some scratching in the walls, as if from rats moving about. They found some other spooky clues, like an abandoned girl's room with a notepad that had all the writing torn out; a rubbing of the first blank page revealed some strange ranting about 'rituals' from the seemingly innocent but willing writer. And a master bedroom that had a series of portrait paintings in it that had been slashed and deliberately made completely unrecognizable. Some of the party found a room on the second floor that was covered, walls ceiling and floor, with chalk lines in strange geometric patterns. They took care not to break any of the lines, and found a trap door in the ceiling and opened it. The person being lifted up to climb up into the attic had a nasty shock as they found a dead body lying right there next to the trap door. It was in an advanced state of decay, but oddly had not been chewed on by the rats (the PC could hear some rats skittering about in the dark recesses of the attic). Meanwhile, a liquid started to slowly form in the bottom of the summoning circle and drip upwards to the ceiling. The PCs downstairs took notice and looked on with some concern. At this point everyone was really, really nervous. They had discovered more than enough clearly unnatural but completely inexplicable things, and what with the dripping and the dead body and all, they had reached a very high level of tension and had seen most (but not all) of the house – and thus I chose my opportunity to strike.

The PC in the attic was looking about, and coming around the chimney was confronted with – I didn't tell him what. He made a Sanity check and failed. I told the characters waiting below the trap door that they heard a horrible scream, and the next thing they knew the PC came tumbling out of the trap door to the ground below, breaking the chalk lines on the floor (and immediately scrambling to his feet and fleeing as quickly as he could).

At that instant, the liquid dripping upwards in the summoning circle downstairs (immediately below the room with the chalk lines) became a torrent. The PCs downstairs started to scream to warn the PCs upstairs. All hell broke loose, as the chalk lines started to ooze, then gush liquid, turning into a flood washing the upstairs PCs down the hallway and then down the stairs. The rat-scrabbling in the walls immediately recommenced, very loudly and seemingly throughout the house.

As the house went into full scale Amityville Horror mode, the already creeped-out party freaked. Many of the PCs on the first floor fled the house immediately. Within short order, all the PCs had decided that they just wanted OUT. One character, in a panic, actually threw himself out a second story window in order to escape. The second all the PCs were outside the house disappeared, leaving a blackened mark in the grass where the summoning circle had been. Out back, they found a small enclosure built into the ground, with a heavy door and manacles inside – obviously used to keep someone prisoner. And in the cell, water (from the frequent rain) was dripping to its floor, making the exact sound they had heard in the house.

The players had an extremely enjoyable bout of horror that day. They kept pressing me to tell them "what was up with that house!" (I refused, of course, only adding to their enjoyment of the story.) It had started out as a throwaway scenario, and I made most of it up as I went along, but it became one of the group's most memorable experiences from early in the campaign. Naturally, I just had to bring the house back later – in fact, they liked it so much that I decided to make its secret a very integral part of the campaign. By cueing off what the PCs were responding to and enjoying, I managed to evoke a great deal of horror quickly and without any preliminary planning.

And if it's just not working – try again later. You need a specific chemistry to enable a group experience of horror, and you can't force it if it's not going to happen. A good sense of pacing includes the knowledge of when to do something else for a game session.

Revelation

Some horror stories end with the realization that what was unknown is now all known – "Ah, it was Old Man Jenkins all along!" This is a legitimate tactic. However, the more that is fundamentally unknown about a situation, the greater the sense of horror you can generate. Even if the primary threat of the adventure is dealt with, if the players are left still unsure about what exactly was going on their imagination continues to work for you. Resist the urge to explain everything. "We stopped the takeover of the town – but we still don't know who was behind it in the first place!" Of course, having the players think they know what happened when they really don't is great if it can come back to haunt them – a crude example of this is the frequently exaggerated demise of Jason in the Friday the 13th movies. If, even once a horror episode is over, you refuse to explain it (in character or out), then the continuation of the players "not knowing for sure" causes the episode to retain its hold over their imaginations, and gives them a take-away feeling of dread that is the hallmark of true horror.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.
            - Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, Mar. 4, 1933

Fear and Insanity

In my analysis of <u>Alien 4: Resurrection</u>, I described Ripley as having a fear of her own self. That fear came from not knowing what she might do or whether she would have control over her own actions. Poe took this type of "fear of the unknown part of the self" to its highest pitch. Several characters in Poe's writing seem to gradually realize the capacity for evil in themselves and eventually go mad as a result – for example, in the short story "The Tell-Tale Heart." Interestingly enough, madness (at least in Poe's universe) is the ultimate un-knowledge of one's self – a complete loss of control and sense of reality. The cause of our fear of the unknown would seem to be based on fear of our own physical/mental/psychological weaknesses - plain old human fallibility. Similarly, in Lovecraft's writings, insanity is often generated by the realization of the vastness of great, alien cosmic power and the irrelevance and impotence of all humanity in the universe.

Many horror games (Call of Cthulhu, Ravenloft, Unknown Armies) have a game mechanic designed to model PC fear, insanity, or other form of mental imbalance. These rules are useful but without adequate in-game justification their use can be unconvincing and flat. I have had success using dreams, voices, etc. with characters and using those to generate a feeling of insanity or loss of mental faculty. In general, it's best to have the player really feel like their character may be going mad, rather than to just tell them "you're going mad." However, having such a mechanic around does awaken players to the possibility that PCs might be acting erratically, which helps to generate the mood of unease important to a horror scenario.

You can get a lot of mileage out of implication. For example, you can describe the movement of a person towards a character in a way that makes it seem threatening or non-threatening. Insanity is all about distorted perception, so if a PC who's getting paranoid is in a given situation, you can always describe it as being more threatening that it is – they might see "A man moving towards you, eyes fixed balefully on you with hateful recognition in his eyes." Another more sane character might see "A man wandering over towards you, looking at you hesitantly like he wants to ask you a question."

Whenever you want a character to go insane, the best way to go about it is to discuss it with the player. They agree to start playing the character 'a little crazy'. You then try to give the character plausible in-story reasons for acting oddly – the combination of the player understanding that their character is unstable combined with the stimuli you provide should provide a fairly realistic (to the other players) picture of someone suffering mental problems. Of course, if you are doing your job right, the players might be wrong about who is going crazy and who is going sane in a crazy world…

> *Gaming Anecdote*
> In the same campaign from the other examples, there was a female character named Damia. I was using the Call of Cthulhu Sanity tracking mechanic in the game, but tried to not enforce it directly, but to instead have the players feel like their character's erratic actions were a natural outgrowth of their situation. Anyway, as background, Damia was an orphan and was generally unwanted as a child (a half-elf who grew up among the gypsies, and the gypsies pawned her off on the player characters at the first opportunity). She had come into conflict with some of the party, as they tended to take the "destroy anything in our path" approach and Damia took the "don't kill if you can help it, and hug trees whenever possible" approach. While the party was traveling through the Underdark, Damia was kidnapped from the party by a bunch of hideous tentacled monsters (grell, but as a good horror GM I *never* used that term with the players). The rest of the party was left behind, paralyzed. They took her to a place where a huge, foul, tentacled creature out of a Lovecraft story (a deepspawn) waited. According to the dice, she took a really big Sanity hit about this time. The deepspawn telepathically contacted her, showing her how it wanted to devour her and then reproduce her as its "children" (all the grell were spawn as well). After a brief consultation with the player, I decided to cast this psionic image in a light as favorable to her mind as possible – a chance to be a part of a "family," to be one with

someone/thing and to produce "children" of her own. She didn't buy it totally, but it was a benevolent enough image that her "love critters, don't kill them" instincts were activated.

So when the party came to her rescue and slew the thing, she was not grateful (as they expected) but instead chided them and wept for the dead "mother." The party thought that she was completely insane. She wasn't – well, just a little. As Damia suffered from more sanity problems later on, she tended to over-empathize with monsters and other evil folks, even to the point of letting them attack her or colluding with the enemy. But her behavior, from the player's point of view, was a logical (if a little skewed) consequence of her experiences. From the rest of the party's perspective, she was crazy and a danger to herself and others.

What game system should I use?

There are a number of games or game supplements out there that are specifically directed towards horror, and often contain good information on how to conduct horror role-playing - Call of Cthulhu, Ravenloft, Deadlands, Dark Conspiracy, Chill, Whispering Vault, Unknown Armies, Kult, Don't Look Back, Little Fears, the White Wolf games… I hope this essay demonstrates, however, that horror can be worked into any game regardless of genre. I often find that horror can be actually inhibited by playing a pure "horror game" - in Call of Cthulhu tournament scenarios, for example, everyone knows what to expect, and the question becomes simply a tactical one of "How do we kill/escape from the zombies/aliens/sorcerers/Great Old Ones?" Playing a game in this fashion, even an allegedly horror-oriented game system, is self-defeating because it goes against the primary fear of the unknown that is instrumental in generating horror.

In a role-playing context you have two primary options as to format – you can run a single horror scenario, or use horror as a campaign theme. In a single scenario, like in a horror movie, you are required to develop the horror quite quickly and at times violently. Real and immediate threat to the characters is usually required, and this is dangerous in a long-term game with established characters. Of course, the benefit of this is that you can treat characters as badly as you wish in a single scenario, and the players don't suspect that you will hesitate to kill all of them off. A campaign, like a TV show, requires a lighter hand – the cast of characters can't all die off every episode or the series suffers. In this longer format, you can make use of foreshadowing and prefigure horrific events to come, and develop the themes of the campaign and knowledge that there is an unknown to fear quite gradually. This gradual development allows for a more deeply affecting horror experience.

I like to run pure horror game systems as one-shot adventures, but for campaigns I tend to use more "value neutral" games like D&D, and then insert the horror gradually - this violation of convention and turning slowly from the known to the unknown is more effective in generating true horror in the long run.

Bibliography/Other Resources

Here are some horror gaming resources that I personally have found to be helpful.

Nightmares of Mine is a 171-page RPG sourcebook from I.C.E./Chaosium about horror in role-playing in particular. Includes extensive bibliographies on horror films, books, RPGs, etc. It is available from http://www.ironcrown.com/ (see the "The Standard System" area).

Supernatural Horror in Literature, an essay by H.P. Lovecraft, is a treasure trove of information on horror writers and a discussion of the fundamentals of horror literature. It is available from Amazon and other book vendors.

Writer's Digest Books has several lines of factual resources designed for authors that can give you some valuable "realism" help – besides a book on "Writing Horror," their "Howdunit" series has entire books on forensics, poisons, investigative techniques, and other helpful things, and their "Everyday Life" series has all kinds of great info on everyday life in a number of time periods and places. http://www.writersdigest.com/

RPG.net has a column dedicated to horror gaming at http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/collists/phobia.html - it's not all that great, but does have some things to think about.

DEMONGROUND: Reflections of a Darker Future (http://www.demonground.org/) is a fanzine dedicated to supporting the genre of modern horror in role-playing games.

Google - if you just want a bunch of horror gaming links to check out, try http://directory.google.com/Top/Games/Roleplaying/Genres/Horror/.

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