

VICTORIAN HORROR CAMPAIGN

I've wanted to run a Victorian-era horror campaign for some time, and I will finally have the opportunity to do so. (I am drawing to a close my 2- year long Lord of the Rings campaign.) I wanted to run a game using Masque of the Red Death, but at this point I am unable to afford it. Instead of MotRD, I will be using D20 Modern/Past and cherrypicking the best elements of Call of Cthulhu d20 and OGL Horror by Mongoose Publishing.

The best way to describe my campaign idea is to imagine X-Files set in the 1890's instead of the modern day. I will have Victorian snobbery, hideous supernatural creatures, whacky Jules Verne/H.G. Wells style inventions wreaking havoc on an unsuspecting world, and all sorts of other fun.

The only thing I haven't really decided yet is where to have the campaign set. I was angling in on using Philadelphia, because it's a good hub – within a short ride by rail you have Boston, New York, Washington, etc. But while exploring a map site on line I found a map of my own home town of Staunton, VA, from 1891. Now I am in a quandary...I think it would be fun for my players to go monster-hunting 115 years ago on our own turf.

PLAYERS' INFORMATION

Bringing The Characters Together

Each of the characters has had an encounter with something supernatural that has had a profound affect on them. Each will be contacted by the owner and proprietor of The Elysian House, a boarding house that is an old English manor house that the owner had dismantled and shipped to the US. For nostalgia's sake, the floor plan of the Elysian House will be none other than that of the haunted house from the old D&D module *The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh*.

I thought for a while about using the House on Gryphon Hill as the floorplan for the Elysian House, but I don't like the isometric map style that the module uses. The old top-down map style makes it easier to put onto a grid if I want to have....I don't know.....zombie surround and attack the boarding house some day.....

The inspiration for Elysian Boarding house itself is a webcomic called The Grand Blue Door. That comic is set just after the turn of the century at a resort in Cape May, NJ called the Grand Blue Door hotel. There are strange visitors and staff at the GBD, such as The Archduke (a vampire), rat-like people as maids and cooks, a mysterious black cat, and a pair of anthropomorphic elephants from India. The comic has a sort of "Harry Potter" feel to it, given that the setting is a strange and fantastic place and there is a great mystery to be solved that (apparently) only the children can solve.

The biggest problem the webcomic has is that is not updated nearly often enough ... it seems to have on set schedule for updates, and you can have three updates one week then nothing for a month or two.

Ah well ... here is a link to the comic if anyone wants to check it out:

<http://www.grandbluedoor.com/archiv...te=20030501.jpg>

The core NPCs

The owner of the Elysian House, one Mister Sergeus Smith, is fascinated by the world of the arcane and supernatural, and has *somehow* heard of the characters' experiences. He invites them all to a mummy-unraveling party and, during the festivities, will ask them to enter his employ as investigators of the bizarre. Mister Sergeus Smith will provide them room and board (rather, his wife Minerva will, as she is the one who runs the boarding house) and a suitable stipend, and they will look into tales of mystery and imagination to see what truth can be found of phenomena both mundane and arcane.

Dramatis Personae

I have already received character ideas from eager players. For your amusement they were:

A scientist and inventor who once saw a man transform into a wolf. (Can't wait to show this player the Pulp Scientist advanced class!)

A crewman from a whaling ship who saw an adult sperm whale *eaten* by something that dwarfed the ship he was on. He swore off whaling and the sea and moved inland. He is currently addicted to opium – it helps him forget that ... monstrous thing ... he saw out on the rolling sea.

A former government man of some kind. He was talking about modeling the character after James West from the Wild Wild West tv show. (Actually....probably from the movie, since he is so young I doubt very seriously that he knew there was a tv show....)

GM'S INFORMATION

The *Truth* About The Core NPCs

“Mister Sergeus Smith” is an anagram of Hermes Trismegistus (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trismegistus>). In this incarnation he is “just” a human ... but he is also somehow more than human, and has a greater motive for sending these hapless folks into their outré adventures. He wants to awaken the world to the existence of the supernatural, since he fears that the increasing dependence on science and technology is a detriment to the old beliefs. In the closing days of the 19th century, staring the 20th century in the face, he feels that the world needs its magic, good or bad, and he wants people to know that it's really out there ... sometimes WAYYYY out there ...

I might eventually have them find out who “Mister Sergeus Smith” really is. As for my players understanding the significance of the name Hermes Trismegistus, they might notice that every member of his family is named after a Greek god, but other than that, the deeper meanings will be lost to them

The staff of the Elysian house itself will be good background characters as well. There is something....unusual...about each one of them. So far I have thought up:

1. Minerva, the portly wife of Trismegistus who runs the place.
2. Their daughter Eris, who is shockingly and improperly flirtatious (for the Victorian era, that is)
3. And Mister Sergeus Smith's personal manservant the eerie and cadaverous Mr. Charles Ronald Ferriman. (Note that the first three letters of his first and second name spell CHARON).

Magic

For magic, I will not be using the magic advanced classes in D20 Modern. I will instead be using the spell system from Call of Cthulhu d20 – converting SAN Loss for spell casting to my homebrewed Fear save system and OGL Horror Shock points. I will also be using the ritual magic rules from OGL Horror.

Wonky Victorian Science Fantasy

D20 Past has an interesting Advanced Class called the Pulp Scientist. They get a certain number of “discoveries” per level, which is similar to the spell slot system. Rather than spells, of course, the Pulp Scientist picks a spell and is able to design a device that duplicates that spells effect. I.e. If you pick the *daze* spell, that could be a gun that fires a beanbag round, or even a very primitive form of taser. A device that duplicates *burning hands*? Congratulations, your inventor just created the world's first flame thrower ... I like that class and even though it is “meant” for the pulp era of the 30s and 40s will allow my Victorian-era characters access to it. It seems like a rules-light, “quick and dirty” way to bring in those wild inventions everyone wants in Victorian science fantasy.

What is “Shadow”?

In the D20 Modern “Shadow Chasers” campaign model there is a mysterious demiplane called only “Shadow,” which for whatever reason is sending monsters into the world. The characters, i.e. the Shadow Chasers, are the only ones who can see them clearly. Almost everyone else in the world is oblivious. For the purposes of my campaign, the Realm of Shadow is actually the goddess Gaia, mother of the Titans who birthed horrid monsters into the world at the dawn of time. Not really a goddess, per se, but the Greeks thought of “her” as such, and certainly not the benevolent mother earth we think of today. (That role was filled by Demeter for the ancient Greeks anyway, rather than Gaia, which we think of today as “Mother Earth”.)

Shadow is a ghastly demiplane that spontaneously generates and consumes creatures of nightmare and fantasy.

“She” is part Gaia, part Shub-Niggurath, and part nightmare (for you Masque of the Red Death fans, she could just as easily be the Red Death.) “She” has always been around, sending monsters into the Material Plane, but throughout time there have always been people who knew of her and stood against her spawn. These are the Shadow Chasers.

Of course, it’s likely that none of the PCs will ever get to know any of what I revealed in the GM’s Information – that is just for my own edification to explain how and why all the monsters are spilling into the world. This is all stuff that exists only behind the GM’s screen. I’m not sure the players would ever figure out the whole story without me leading them around by the nose. Mister Sergeus Smith and his relatives, staff, and other guests that come and go at the Elysian Boarding House will be sort of like good-guy versions of the “Smoking Man” in the X-Files. There is a greater plot going on, but the main characters will likely never know what it is.

Adventure Style

At first, it will be sort of an episodic, "monster of the week" kind of thing in the vein of Kolchak: The Nightstalker or X-Files or Scooby Doo. In short:

1. Something weird happens.
2. Mr. Smith hears of it ... *somehow*
3. He informs the PCs what he knows and dispatches them to investigate.
4. They go check it out, and hopefully do enough research to figure out what is going on.
5. Then they take appropriate action: record the phenomena, fight the monster, make peace with the supernatural but friendly visitor, or recover the evil artefact, whatever.

If the game catches on, I plan to introduce recurring NPCs, regular visitors to the boarding house -- some benevolent, some malignant -- and flesh out more of the background of the "Smith" family and their servants.

ADVENTURE IDEAS

The Electric Ghost

William Klemmer was the first man to die in the electric chair in Auburn Prison, New York, in August of 1890. Later that year, grisly murders in Auburn have stumped the police. The victims appear to have been burned to death, and a local engineer has claimed that the victims were electrocuted.

The Real Story: The strange energies of Klemmer's execution somehow unleashed a lightning quasi-elemental. Klemmer was executed by Edison's direct current (DC), rather than Westinghouse's alternating current (AC). The high voltage direct current created a lightning quasi-elemental when a human life was "sacrificed" by it.

The Great Ghost Cats

Livestock is disappearing at a startling rate from local farms. No one is sure why, but the mutilated corpses of sheep and cattle have been found with no obvious cause of death.

The Real Story: A wealthy man has imported dangerous big cats and one (or more) have escaped... figure not all "monsters" have to really be supernatural if I play up the suspense!

A Soul as Black as Soot

Chimney sweeps are going on strike, afraid to work ever since a series of strange deaths by fire have claimed many of their comrades. They claim someone is specifically targeting them with flaming arrows, but no evidence of such attacks has been discovered.

The Real Story: The culprit is the ghost of a crooked chimney sweep. He robbed wealthy families by sneaking into their houses through the chimney, and has hidden his ill-gotten gain in random chimneys throughout the city. The ghost is able to cast the burning hands spell and is protecting his stash by killing those who get too close to his treasures.

A Dangerous Crossing

More livestock woes. A farmer is losing sheep after sheep at a river crossing. He has never seen any animal take the sheep -- one moment it is there, the next he hears it cry out and it's gone. The farmer says he once saw a drawing of a crocodile taking an antelope, and wonders if somehow one of those things has gotten into the river that winds through his farm.

The Real Story: The culprit here is an avanc, a water-beastie from British folklore. An avanc is a large, rat-like creature that lives in rivers near shallow fords. It can generate whirlpools to capture prey, which it tears apart with its claws and consumes. The PCs not only have to figure out what this thing is, but how to destroy it. They somehow have to get it out of the water where it is vulnerable, for in water it is invulnerable to physical attack.

The Dead Live!

A local cemetery has been the scene of some horrible sights of late. Graves have been opened -- seemingly from the inside! A constable was posted on guard, and he was found the next day clubbed on the head and doesn't recall what happened. All he can remember of the night's events is seeing a figure in white sheets like a burial shroud moving towards him.

The Real Story: The truth is, only one of the exhumed coffins shows signs of activity from the *inside*. All the others were broken into from the outside. A local doctor, desperate for anatomical study, has hired some

ne'er do wells to acquire bodies for him. The constable's recollection of a white-sheeted figure is accurate -- but his memory of it stalking up to him is not. That is a side effect of a gravedigger's shovel to the head. And the coffin clawed from the inside? Some poor soul was mistakenly buried alive and died, only to be exhumed days later by the grave robbers. Again ... this one is not supernatural, but could be played up as such as the players run around gathering stakes, mallets, and garlic.

The Hounds of Hell

The wife of a wealthy man hires the PCs to act as bodyguards for her precious son. She explains to them that her son is being stalked by...believe it or not!...spectral hounds. Although she knows how insane this sounds she is absolutely certain of this for she has seen them herself: large, wolf-hound like curs that *actually float several inches above the ground!*

The Real Story: A wealthy but insane man has hired a magician to summon yeth hounds to kill off the sons of his enemies. His wife knows of the plan and she is as mad as he is and rather likes the idea of spectral hounds doing the dirty work. She hires the PCs to guard her son because he is *actually* the son of one of her husband's enemies! Should her husband's wicked plan be fully carried out, her own child would be at risk! Not only that, but her husband, a wicked and cruel man, would find out about her adultery with his hated rival. This could be doubly bad for her. To try having the best of both worlds, she hires the PCs to be her son's body guard, telling them about the hounds but not revealing the whole story. That way, the killings of the rival sons could go on, and her own son could be protected.

Down in the Dirt

Something is attacking people near the openings of the city's new sewer system. The only evidence left behind is a sickening pool of filth and slime. Police suspect squatters hiding away in the tunnels, but even they have abandoned tunnels for fear of the gruesome killer.

The Real Story: A lazy city sewer worker somehow managed to capture an otyugh he found living deep in a dank pit far below the city. He set it free in the city's massive sewer system, thinking it would save him a lot of work catching rats and cleaning clogged pipes. Unfortunately, it found a way to the surface and has discovered that human flesh is much tastier than human waste.