

THE MANY

FACES OF HORROR

TEXT PETE NASH
BILD LUKAS THELIN

“In the centre was Phobos (Fear) worked in adamant, unspeakable, staring backwards with eyes that glowed with fire. His mouth was full of teeth in a white row, fearful and daunting, and upon his grim brow hovered frightful Eris (Strife) who arrays the throng of men... Upon the shield Proioxis (Pursuit) and Palioxis (Flight) were wrought, and Homados (Tumult), and Phobos (Panic), and Androktasie (Slaughter).”

A description of the shield of Heracles, Hesiod

One of the most useful tools for a Game Master to entertain players is the application of fear. Despite being used as the descriptive word for its own genre of entertainment, *horror* (the god Phrike to the ancient Greeks) has many disparate forms, something realised by polytheistic civilisations that had separate deities for each nuance of the emotion. Technically horror is more than just the simplistic shock and revulsion which has spawned an entire generation of low budget movies. It also includes the slow realisation of impending doom, emotional consequences of a misjudged actions and understanding that we ourselves can be the worst sort of monster.

Although a Sword & Sorcery system at its heart, introducing horror into a *RuneQuest* campaign is easy, no matter what the genre or setting. There are three main methods of supporting horror tropes using the core rules, in addition to the usual skills a Game Master should develop in setting an atmosphere.

THE DREAD CAP OF HADES

One of the most potent items forged by Hephaestus, the dread cap wove shadows about its wearer to render them hidden. As a game mastering technique, using the unseen can plant the seeds of fear in even the bravest. An invisible monster for example is a frightening thing to face for characters in *RuneQuest*, since locating, let alone fighting such creatures is near impossible. Striking or defending against an invisible attacker should be treated the same as being Blinded.

To replicate such science-fiction and fantasy tropes, *RuneQuest* offers the theism miracle *Chameleon* and similarly named

Creature Ability *Camouflaged*; both of which are intentionally limited in scope so as to not make them unbeatable, although some creatures such as spirits are completely unobservable without the right skills or magic.

However there are many other ways to use the unseen to unsettle players. One example might be for characters to hear the screams of a brutal murder in an adjoining chamber, only to discover freshly mutilated bodies laying about a room with no observable exit other than that entered by. There need not be any invisible foe; merely a secret passageway or some unobvious means of transportation used to depart the scene, such as climbing a pre-prepared rope quickly pulled out of sight... or if a more magical method is required, teleportation or shape-shifting.

Of course unsettling events need not embrace or even threaten death. Simply hearing a cup fall to the floor with no clear explanation of why it toppled can be enough to set the atmosphere. Other examples include statues that seem to weep (caused by a drop of water which leaked through the floor above), an unrecognised howl (a strangely echoing gust of wind), hair standing up on end (entering a naturally cold place or static electrical build up), a building seemingly abandoned moments before (the occupants fled or in hiding), or a diary opened at the last page, its last entry unfinished mid-sentence, can be enough to plant doubt and wariness in the minds of players.

The art of utilising the unseen in this manner is to allow tension to build by never directly confronting the characters with the thing or natural explanation behind such apparently supernatural occurrences, until the very climax of the adventure.

THE SNAKE TRESSED MOTHER

Another type of horror which can be used to scare characters is the fear of powers against which they are helpless. The classical example of this is the head of Medusa, whose gaze “No one of mortal kind shall look upon and still draw breath”. There are plenty of strange effects which cause a visceral dread in players.

Whilst instant death is rather passé, it does tend to induce caution. More feared however are exotic powers that trigger atavistic terror, such as growing older; becoming helplessly paralysed; slowly transmogrifying into slime or sand; turning into a mindless zombie servitor of some plant or insect, and so on.

Since these types of powers often tend to terminally remove a character from play, they must not be over-utilised. In addition it should be remembered that *RuneQuest* always offers a chance to resist terrible effects, usually in the form of an opposed roll of the ability’s skill value versus an appropriate common character skill like Endurance, Evade or Willpower, although other more applicable skills could readily be substituted.

Worse still are those abhorrent abilities which don’t kill characters but merely cripple them. For example, a creature which permanently drained skill points is terrifying to players, who would likely flee the next time they met such an encounter, rather than face erosion of their hard won expertise. A creature ability named *Consume Knowledge* could take the form of draining a character’s highest skill by 1d6+4 points each time they were touched, appending it to the monster’s own skill if theirs was lower!

Other versions of the same idea are fiends which irreversibly drain or consume *Characteristic Points*, *Magic Points* or *Hit Points*, unless reversed by extremely potent magic – assuming it was available. Such unwholesome effects are not just limited to creatures either, but can be inflicted by disease, poison and even magic as exemplified by the list of conditions such as *Maiming* or *Sapping* on page 113 of the core rules; the *Diminish* and *Tap* spells on pages 241 and 254; and the creature ability *Characteristic Drain* on page 313 in *RuneQuest*.



THE PROPHECIES OF CASSANDRA

Third and perhaps closest to the core meaning of horror, is the discovery of unsettling knowledge which undermines the preconceptions (or possibly the delusions) of player characters. Traditionally in literature this is conveyed via uncovering a forbidden book, ancient tomb inscription or some drug-addled nightmares that hint at some imminent doom; whether it be a prophesy of cataclysm, the existence of mythical beings of antagonistic power or even that some aspect of reality has been warped to disguise the horror which lurks beneath. Unavoidable fate was the horror imposed on both Cassandra and Oedipus in Greek literature.

Yet this type of horror does not need to be gruesome per se. For instance, there is an awfulness to know that you are personally and directly responsible for some disaster. More mature players will perhaps understand the depths of tragedy losing an in-character wife or child due the actions of their alter-ego. Again these consequences need not be supernatural in nature. They could easily be the result of an enemy who sought out a vicarious revenge on friends and relatives of their nemesis, or by the character's themselves carrying back a deadly disease to their own settlement.

Better still can be the revelation that a long standing ally or mentor of the player characters actually turns out to be a sickeningly depraved psychotic who has been performing evil acts under their very noses. Practices that induce a primitive gut response include cannibalism, child sacrifice, using people as incubators for other life forms, even performing experimental vivisections on living victims. In such cases it is as much the *performer* of the act, rather than revulsion associated with it which induces the horror.

On the other hand opening a bottle that imprisoned an ancient evil, which then rampages across the world causing genocide, brings its own psychological horror, especially if repeatedly warned against doing so. In this way the players' own curiosity, greed or belligerence can be used to set up a horrifyingly traumatic experience.

Some of the best slow-burning horror can be implemented by undermining the established world view of the characters. Discovering a flower whose sap transforms its picker into another flower of the same type can be chilling, but only briefly so unless further unsettling discoveries are made which erode the character's presumptions how science or reality work.

More revolutionary implementations of the same concept can be created by starting a campaign in an ostensibly 'normal' game

THE VENGEFUL ONES – THE STATS

Characteristics	Action Points: 2
STR: 2d6+9 (16)	Damage Modifier: +1d6
CON: 3d6 (11)	Magic Points: 7
SIZ: 2d6+15 (22)	Movement: 8 metres, 15 metres flying
DEX: 2d6 (7)	Strike Rank: +11
INS: 2d6+7 (14)	Armour: Demonic Skin
POW: 2d6 (7)	Abilities: Adhering, Formidable Natural Weapons, Terrifying
	Magic: The Phrike can turn invisible at the cost of 1 Magic Point, long enough to play a trick or whisper into an ear

1d20	Hit Location	AP/HP
1-2	Right Leg	4/7
3-4	Left Leg	4/7
5-8	Body	4/9
9-10	Right Wing	4/8
11-12	Left Wing	4/8
13-15	Right Arm	4/6
16-18	Left Arm	4/6
19-20	Head	4/7

Weapons				
Combat Style: Hooked Horror (Claw) 73%				
Weapons	Type	Size	Force Reach	Damage
Scything Claw		L	L	1d8+1d6
				AP/HP As for Arm

Skills	
Athletics	43%
Brawn	58%
Endurance	66%
Evade	44%
Fly	53%
Mimicry	81%
Perception	61%
Stealth	71%
Willpower	64%

world, then applying elements of the supernatural or otherworldly in incremental instalments. This is more the realm of works influenced by Lord Dunsany or H. P. Lovecraft whose protagonists begin to experience the truth that gods, demons or sorcery truly exist, and worse still, that these paranormal powers influence the world in terrible ways unnoticed by common folk.

Psychological horror needs no rules to back it up, but the *Cults and Brotherhoods* chapter of *RuneQuest* can be used to create the supplicants of such alien beings, or fiendish abusers of corrupting powers. Player characters never need to discover the truth of what lies behind the veil, it is *not knowing* which is the true horror of such knowledge!

We conclude with the following creature loosely based upon the Erinyes, the divine punishers of dreadful crimes. Rather than adhering to their Classical nature, these horrifying monsters are designed to be inserted into any type of fantasy or science fiction campaign.

THE VENGEFUL ONES

Created long ago by an insane sorcerer or summoned from another dimension, Phrike are terrifying demons which, rather than mindlessly slay living creatures, feast off psychic emanations of fear and horror. To instil such emotions the Phrike undertake a reign of psychological persecution, so that its victims slowly descend into paranoia and madness prior to the demon revealing itself.

Such enterprises begin with simple little acts of trickery, aided by the demon's natural ability to turn invisible. They pull at cloaks or topple nearby objects, startlinging their victim who must make an opposed Perception roll at *Herculean* penalty against the Phrike's Stealth to detect its presence. Once suitably disconcerted, the demon whispers into the ears of the victim, mimicking sounds and voices as if from a long dead enemy or crying child. This is normally enough to instil nightmares so that Fatigue levels begin to accumulate (1/day) from lack of rest.

Finally the Phrike will manipulate the victim into suspecting they are responsible for horrific acts of treachery, betrayal or murder during their brief periods of exhausted sleep; by turning friends and allies against them. Their voice is heard from afar as if revealing a hard kept secret to another, or gloating just prior to attacking an associate from behind. Ultimately the Phrike will slay an innocent with the victim's weapon and return the bloody evidence to their own hand whilst unconscious. If this does not work, the demon will concoct ever more terrible crimes till the victim is driven to suicide from despair, at which point it visibly manifests to harvest the last dregs of horror.

At first sight Phrike appear to be winged hags of ugly countenance, with large bronze-coloured wings, snakes wrapped around their limbs and holding sickle shaped swords. On closer investigation the serpents are revealed as tubular worms which writhe in place of actual hands and feet, with a single bony claw extending from their mass. The head is in fact a tri-partite orifice, which splits open to exhibit a mass of snake-like tentacles and eye stalks within, no mouth being needed due to the Phrike's psychic feeding. Those that observe the head splitting suffer the demon's Terrifying ability.



ZOMBIES SOM AFFÄRSIDÉ

När vi var mitt i förberedelserna för detta skräcknummer kontaktade Pontus Jonasson oss. Han hade startat Slackjaw (slackjaw.se), en renodlad zombieshop, där han bl. a. säljer zombiespel ingen annan tagit in ännu (se Olas recensioner längre bak i tidningen). Vi träffades över en fika om zombies och ambitionsnivån bakom en udda satsning.

Varför tror du att zombies blivit så populära?

För att det är lätt att ta till sig. I fantasy eller sci-fi måste det till en helt ny värld som man ska kunna leva sig in i. Med en zombieapokalyps är det ens vardag vänd upp och ner, det är bara att grabba tag i nåt stort klubbliknande föremål och svinga på. Alla kan bli hjältar, delvis på grund av att det är ett scenario som sätter alla sociala regler ur spel. Jag tror att det tilltalar många.

Berätta gärna vilka dina zombie-favoriter är i

Film: *Dawn of the dead* (2004), *Shaun of the Dead*, *Undead* (2003)

Spel: *Zombies!!!*-serien, *Zombie Munchkins* och *Zombies vs Plants*.

Böcker: *Zombie Survival Guide*,

Serier: *Death Troopers* och *The Goon*

Webbplatser: zombieapocalypseacademy.org

Vilken är din inställning till långsamma jämfört med snabba zombies?

Jag kan se att båda finns i en berättelse. Att dom är snabba i början men blir långsammare allt eftersom förruttnelsen sätter in.

Varför startade du Slackjaw?

Jag hade nyligen avslutat ett mycket frustrerande arbete och kände att "ja det är kanske nu jag ska starta eget". Jag har alltid haft den ambitionen eftersom mina föräldrar är egenföretagare. Men jag hade först ingen aning om vad jag skulle välja att jobba med! Jag visste att jag ville sälja saker och en natt när såna grubblerier höll mig vaken så slog det mig: kanske borde jag sälja zombiepyrlar, det verkar ju folk aldrig få nog av? Jag förstod det inte då men efter att ha hållt på med det här ett tag och pratat med andra om ämnet insåg jag att jag visste mer om zombies än vad jag först trodde.

Är ambitionen att ha allt relaterat till zombies eller ett mer nischat utbud?

Ambitionen är precis som det står på hemsidan att kunna förse hela landet med spel, tygmärken, affischer och andra godsaker som kan sätta en odöd guldkant på alla zombiefantasters tillvaro. Målet är att successivt bredda sortimentet och så småningom ta in kläder, accessoarer, fler spel, och specialgjorda zombie-pyrlar. Jag kan även tänka mig att Slackjaw i framtiden kan bli ett eget varumärke inom alternativ kultur. Jag skulle också vilja ha all produktion i Sverige, dels för att skapa arbetstillfällen i Sverige och dels för att lättare garantera att varorna produceras under shcyssta arbetsförhållanden.