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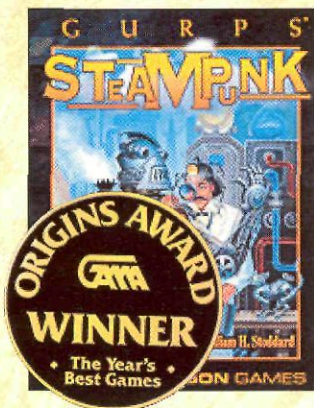
# SCREAM PUNK™



By JO RAMSAY

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

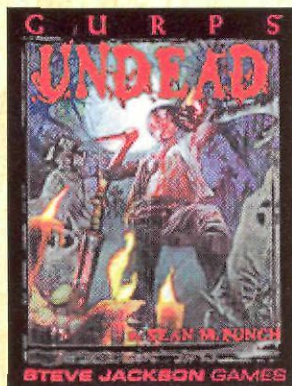
# STEVE JACKSON GAMES



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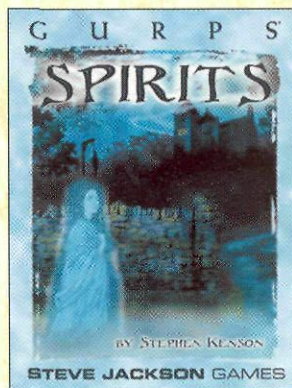
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# GURPS

# SCREAMPUNK

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# STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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The **GURPS Screampunk** web page is at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/screampunk/](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/screampunk/).

### Page References

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition**. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the **GURPS Basic Set** - e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the **GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition**. Page references that begin with CI indicate **GURPS Compendium I**: those that begin with STM refer to **GURPS Steampunk**. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html).

# Introduction

*Do come in and take a seat. I've been waiting for you ... waiting forever.*

Blood will have blood. The shadows of the past loom over the present. Death walks in the midst of life, and corruption in the midst of innocence. The forces of reason form the last barricade against superstition, medieval barbarism, and ancient nightmares. Pray that they will suffice...

Welcome to the rich, dark world of gothic horror. The period of the gothic novel - from pre-Victorian to the first World War - was one of shocking change in the Western world. It was a time when the worst excesses of the 18th century gave way to strict Victorian morality, when romanticism warred with pragmatism, and when nation-states were evolving (sometimes explosively) into modern societies. These books reflected, as the best horror always does, the nightmares of their era. Where the Romantics had idealized nature, gothic stories showed it as terrifying. They were racy, dark, and dangerous. They were overtly sexy, in an age that both repressed sex and was obsessed by it. They were also best-sellers.

*If gothic horror reflects the fear of the past, gothic steampunk reflects the Victorian fears of the future.*

So how does steampunk fit into this milieu? It is contemporary, but is it gothic? To Victorian scientists and writers, it wasn't clear that science had limits beyond which no man may tread. It wasn't obvious to them that raising the dead was a problem fundamentally different from sending a telegram from London to Slough along a wire. With a little application of scientific principles, surely a genius could solve either of those problems. . . So it makes no difference to the gothic story whether the ultimate horror is supernatural or merely technological. Both are equally unnatural, and can taint or corrupt unprepared souls. If gothic horror reflects the fear of the past, gothic steampunk reflects the Victorian fears of the future. Would the price of progress, in terms of the costs to society and the environment, be too high to pay?

**GURPS Screampunk** is intended as a GM's toolbox, offering Gothic and steampunk themes as sources of both darkness and light. Characters, plot hooks, locations, and storytelling techniques can help build an atmosphere of Gothic horror and Victorian melodrama into a game. Examples here feature Victorian England, but since the United States took its cultural lead from Britain until the American Civil War, many social themes apply equally on both sides of the Atlantic.

# GOTHIC CAMPAIGNS

*"One click of the trigger -" I whispered, "and all is over! I shall be at peace - senseless - sightless and painless. Horrors can no longer haunt me.. I shall sleep!"*

*I raised the weapon steadily to my right temple . . . when suddenly my cabin-door opened, and Lucio looked in.*

*"Pardon me!" he said, as he observed my attitude - "I had no idea you were busy! I will go away. I would not disturb you for the world!"*

*His smile had something fiendish in its fine mockery; moved with a quick revulsion of feeling I turned the pistol downwards and held its muzzle firmly against the table near me.*

*"You say that!" I exclaimed in acute anguish - "you say it - seeing me thus! I thought you were my friend!"*

*He looked full at me . . . his eyes grew large and luminous with a splendour of scorn, passion, and sorrow intermingled.*

*"Did you?" and again, the terrific smile lit up his pale features. "You were mistaken! I am your Enemy!"*

*A dreadful silence followed. Something lurid and unearthly in his expression appalled me . . . I trembled and grew cold with fear. Mechanically I replaced the pistol in its case - then I gazed up at him with a vacant wonder and wild piteousness, seeing that his dark and frowning figure seemed to increase in stature, towering above me like the gigantic figure of a storm-cloud!*

- Marie Corelli,

*The Sorrows of Satan* (1894)

## WHAT IS GOTHIC HORROR?

Gothic Horror was born of the Romantic movement, when writers in the 18th and 19th centuries, finding inspiration in medieval buildings, told dark tales of corrupt grandeur and terror, peopled with vivid, melodramatic characters. The genre became so popular that its elements crept into many contemporary best-sellers. Readers in the 19th century adored these tales of passion,

danger, and tradition. The Victorian sensibility claimed that the Queen was in her palace, the Archbishop was in his cathedral, London was the center of the universe, and all was right with the world. Gothic stories expose the fears of the era: what if all was not right? What if all was horribly, terribly wrong?

The horror of these stories lies in the sickening sense that the order of reality itself is being violated. Victorian readers liked to believe theirs was an age of reason, in which Science had conquered Superstition. In the course of gothic romances, protagonists' assumptions are brutally shattered, and the world they live in becomes a darker and less certain place than it had been before. The survivors (if any) are sadder, wiser men whose new-found knowledge separates them forever from the world they love so much.


## THEMES

A game's themes define the atmosphere of the setting. Classic gothic themes include the threat of the unknown, the threat of superstition, and the threat of the past to the present. The dark forces of madness, evil, and corruption threaten to overwhelm unsuspecting heroes and villains alike. Isolated locations take adventurers far from the safety of civilization. The themes presented here are a smorgasbord from which to pick, representing the "laws" of gothic stories; it isn't necessary to use them all.

## THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

Secrets will be revealed, and all debts will be called in, even if this means exacting payment from a child for the wrongdoings of his father.

The clouded past obscures the sun today. History is full of unpaid debts waiting to come due, and anyone who delves too deeply into its secrets may find that he or his friends are forced to pay the piper. Just as the past is immutable, so are its consequences inexorable. More cunning villains manipulate events to force innocents to pay the price of their own misdeeds.



The horror may lie in a hero's knowledge that an innocent loved one is threatened because of his past actions, and he is powerless to interfere. Or the source of the threat may be unknown, until investigation shows that it is of a deeply personal nature. If an antagonist takes a deep interest in someone, it is because of shared history; perhaps they are distant relatives, or some past action had far-reaching effects that could not possibly have been known at the time. Locations may also hide dark histories. Who knows what evils might once have unfolded in the cellars of a mansion, or whether a factory was built on the site of an old plague pit? The owner of such a house will pay for the mysterious crimes committed within it.

### Family Honor

*"What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh."*

- Old English Proverb

Family honor is crucially important to Victorians of all classes. Once that honor is tarnished by taint or a broken taboo, the stain will affect every member, including those not yet born. So there is an overwhelming sense of duty to one's family, over and above any mere affection (or rivalry) between individuals. Scions of tainted ancestry may find that their family has tried to cover up its past by faking records, changing names, or emigrating. But family shame will out; the ties of blood can never be escaped.

A family legacy can be far more dreadful than mere shared history. Inheritance may include diseases, mental illnesses, bargains with infernal entities, and physical deformities. Unacceptable offspring may be hidden away by parents who are ashamed to admit their existence, even to other members of the same family (such as PCs).

## MELODRAMA

Emotions are powerful forces of nature that wrack the souls of great and small alike, and all men are equal before them. Anyone can be driven to the edge of insanity and beyond by the grand passions of jealousy, desire, shame, and despair.

Raw emotions are the strongest and most important motivators of all. Although antagonists may seem cold and unfeeling to their victims, the truth is that even the iciest of gothic villains is tortured by raging torrents of emotions. Given the slightest excuse, melodramatic NPCs will let pent up feelings spill out in rants, weeping confessions, temper tantrums, and moody poetry. These forces may equally drive servants or tradesmen, who must keep their true feelings hidden in front of their "betters."

Not everyone will have felt emotions so strong as to threaten sanity, but because of the hold of the gothic past over the present, such feelings may not die away with time. A woman who lost her love to a "friend" when she was 18 will feel the bitter sense of betrayal and jealousy until the day she dies. A man who vowed in childhood to avenge his father will pursue his quest until the end of his days, regardless of the consequences. These tragedies and their inevitable consequences form the stuff of melodrama. Strong feelings may drive a man or woman beyond the bounds of propriety and reason. In gothic settings, deranging passions may themselves be evidence of taint.

Gothic heroes may be defenders of rationality and order, but even they are allowed to engage in melodramatic exclamations of fear and dread, especially when the virtue of an innocent is at stake. It is a way for them to express their own honor: an honorable person is expected to be shaken and appalled when confronted with the darkness that tries a man's soul.

### Guilt and Shame

Shame and guilt are strongly tied to specific past events, another example of how the past looms over the present. These feelings can drive a man out of his mind over a period of years; if his position in society matters to him, he can do little to stop the slow descent into madness. To avoid this, some seek to escape, leaving behind the familiar people and surroundings that evoke the pain. Others keep their secrets, living a false life until the day they die.

Admitting feelings of guilt is impossible without describing the crime. There can be no release other than confessing and facing the consequences. To a proud man, this is unthinkable. This is the horror of being trapped with no hope of escape, not physically but mentally. Some may resolve the need to confess by telling a trusted friend, a priest, or a servant who speaks no English (or cannot speak at all). But sooner or later, a man's sins are sure to find him out, often when he least expects it.

## NATURAL LAW AND TABOO

There are natural laws which apply to every man and woman on Earth. They are inescapable, immutable, and more fundamental than any human law. Natural justice will deal harshly with violators.

Nature is cruel and all-powerful. Her unwritten laws define the ways in which it is proper for man to act toward his fellow man, as well as toward the natural world. All good and decent human

## ON THE GOTHIC ERA

The classic era of gothic writing was pre-Victorian, stretching from Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1765) to Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). By the end of this period, the genre had developed its familiar conventions: medieval ruins, corrupt church organizations, tormented heroes and innocent heroines, dark mood, and passionate intensity. But with the gothic revival, the style became so popular that many novelists used these themes throughout the 19th century. Books like *Dracula* and *Great Expectations*, though very different in tone from the early gothics, used many of their conventions to comment on society, to satirize elements they despised, and to create a gothic novel more relevant to "modern" audiences.



Since screampunk games are set at some time in a period over a century long, it is difficult to make accurate generalizations about the era. Even the word "Victorian" includes the wildly varied early, high, and late Victorian periods, each with its own attitudes, fears, and literature. The gothic themes discussed here come mostly from the early gothic; technological themes, character types, and plot ideas are lifted from the entire corpus.

## THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC REVIVAL

The Gothic Revival style of architecture came into vogue during the early years of the Victorian period. Erecting new buildings in the style of medieval churches and castles was not a new idea; experiments with such imitations had taken place throughout the 18th century. This resurgence, though, came at the same time as a religious revival, and especially a rising demand that the Anglican Church move toward High Church (Catholic) traditional rituals and theology. Churches in Britain and America were increasingly designed with a nod to the gothic style.

Countless architects studied, and copied, the use of space, light, and darkness in medieval cathedrals, not least because it was more economical on stone than classical designs. The new gothic became a symbol of adherence to older and more traditional ways, and of the influence of the aristocracy and the church on modern life. Queen Victoria approved, and fashionable society followed where the Queen led. The growing middle classes wanted their houses decorated in this style as well. The public adored the romance of the past. Art and design, furnishings, literature, and culture all drew inspiration from the medieval pool.

beings have strong inner guidance to inform them of right and wrong. There is no distinction between scientific "laws" such as "what goes up must come down," and moral "laws" such as strictures against incest, patricide, and cannibalism. In a gothic world, actions are determined to be criminal, not by society's whim, but by the very nature of the universe.

Deliberately breaking one of nature's laws is a sign of unfitness to be numbered among the human race. Such an offender becomes an outcast and a nonperson. If word ever gets out, he and his entire family will be ruined. Gothic stories often deal with the breaking of taboos; crimes that society finds not only unforgivable, but "unnatural," crimes against nature itself.





## Unspeakable Vices

Landowners, aristocrats, and authority figures have a feudal relationship to those under their control; in return for power and loyalty, they have responsibilities to their "vassals." They are expected to be morally able to resist any temptations that this brings. Those who abuse positions of power, breaking this natural law, often engage in unspeakable and unnatural vices, in the form of debauched orgies of perverted sex, depravity, blasphemy, and obscenity.

To early Victorians, it was almost within living memory that the Marquis de Sade had claimed the right to commit sadistic torture and rape on lesser beings as an inalienable perquisite of the aristocracy. Only a truly corrupted soul would consider it to be his *right* to indulge in activities that go beyond the pale, and even he must make his arrangements private. Such vices are often indulged in hidden rooms and require any evidence (such as dead bodies) to be covered up.

## The Abuse of Power

This can involve anyone who betrays a trust or a responsibility. A parent or guardian who abuses a child, a policeman who accepts a bribe, or a cruel aristocrat who misuses his tenants is betraying a natural trust, a responsibility that society has given to them. This betrayal is an act of treachery against society itself, one of the most pernicious crimes against nature imaginable. It strikes to the very heart of "the way things should be."

The abuse of power by an authority figure will visit doom and corruption on his entire house. These unavoidable consequences will bring down the guilty parties - and the innocent as well, if they maintain any misplaced loyalty to the corrupted organization. If something feels "wrong" about an institution, the first suspect is the man in charge. A corrupt abbot could bring a monastery to its knees, an amoral doctor could turn an asylum into a hell-hole, and a corrupt monarch is... unthinkable.

Gothic villains abuse their power over people or places, and over nature, with dreadful consequences. Heroes may come to the slow realization that an institution is being corrupted from within by a cruel leader, but what to do about it?

## FATAL OMENS

Everything is predestined. Signs and portents warn sensitive souls of what the future holds.

Foreshadowing is a common motif in gothic stories. Signs and portents are used to indicate that unnatural forces are at work, and that the future is writ in stone. They can involve repetitive dreams that afflict the sensitive, or events that play on the

magical themes of sympathy or contagion. For example, when a stone statue of a duke falls and breaks, it may be a sign of his impending death. The superstitious will see omens everywhere, and are adept at interpreting them creatively.

As tensions mount, it is easier to see signs and portents where none exist. These omens are terrifying because they imply that the future is fixed, and doomed.

*As tensions mount, it is easier to see signs and portents where none exist.*

## CRIMES AGAINST REASON

The light of reason can penetrate the darkness of corrupt and unnatural practices; those who deliberately blind themselves to it are courting the darkness.

Dark forces are arrayed against the new Age of Reason. Superstition, mysticism, and religion are shadows from the past that would cripple this new rationality and everything it has accomplished. Pernicious superstitions or very traditional priests are signs that reason is weakening its hold over an area. If an antagonist deliberately turns aside from rational thought and trusts instead to the occult to gain power or knowledge, he risks losing touch with civilization. The powers of unreason can drive a man insane, reducing him to a primitive, almost animal state.

The gothic hero is a modern creature, with modern sensibilities. He believes that it is by reason alone that man can hope to find out where and why nature's laws have been broken, and only an open mind, uncorrupted by the darkness, can bring these powers of reason to bear. A strange report may turn out to have a rational explanation, but there is always a moment when investigators are not entirely sure of reason's reign.

Crimes against sensibility are horrific because they strike at the heart of everything in which rational Victorians believe. If they cannot trust their logical thought processes, then perhaps the world is truly insane. Supernatural creatures are terrifying because reason says that they cannot exist.

## RELIGIOUS THEMES

If God's in His heaven, then why is all not right with the world?

Religion is another area in which old traditions struggle alongside the modern ones. Only the

uneducated or foreigners (that is, Catholics) get overexcited about their religion; a "proper" Englishman attends church on Sundays and is on speaking terms with his vicar, but more would be unnecessary. Although atheism and pantheism are no longer the dangerously revolutionary concepts they had been a century ago, open enthusiasts still carry the whiff of scandal about them.

The medieval church embodies religion as an enemy of reason, ripe with laws and taboos that no longer apply to modern times. Its institutions are secretive and corrupt, its icons smack of ritualistic paganism, and senior figures abuse their positions to engage in forbidden Gnostic rites. The church is also a hoarder of ancient knowledge, with many books locked away never to be used again. Traditional rituals hold spine-tingling power; they are awe-inspiring, rich, and strange. But are they the tendrils of a superstitious Church that wants to drag modern humanity back into the dark ages? Non-Christian religions are viewed as primitive cults, especially if most worshippers are foreign.

In comparison, the modern church looks increasingly powerless, fractured, and irrelevant. Although evangelical movements are strong, especially among the working class, most rational people believe in a rational, passive God. A vicar (or priest) may well be a rationalist, constantly forced to balance the demands of faith and reason. When confronted with the darkness ahead, no one could be blamed for losing his religion .. .

## CORRUPTION OF THE INNOCENT

Innocents are both guiltless and naive. The weight and darkness of life has spared them, even if they were raised in desperately squalid surroundings. Naturally, they are prime targets for any gothic villain. The antagonist needs to seduce the victim, to tempt him slowly but surely into the pits of moral depravity and corruption. Only when it is too late to escape does the captive realize that he has bartered away the most precious thing he had, and gotten nothing in return. If temptation fails, imprisonment and torture may break the victim's spirit. The classic gothic heroine, eyes shining with innocence, is imprisoned in an ancient building with her tormentor. The horror is that purity of soul alone may not protect her, and that even after her descent into screaming insanity, just enough of the victim's mind may be left to remember what she once was.

Tragically, an innocent may also fall by associating with debauched friends, or a debased institution. The loss of innocence is a terrible, primal tragedy. Like a fragile flower, once the bloom has gone it is lost forever.

## THE CHURCH IN SHADOW

Anti-Catholic sentiment runs strongly in gothic stories. Church institutions are depicted as malevolent hives of depravity, relying on the simple faith of peasants to hide the wickedness that lurks behind their (medieval) walls. They are oppressive, conspiratorial, and morally bankrupt

The specter of the corrupted Church provides rich possibilities for plot twists. The anti-Catholic movement, though, was also



a political reality. England was almost entirely Anglican in this era; Catholic mainland Europe had been recently wracked by violence and bloody revolution. Anti-French and continental prejudices of the English writers explain why so many early gothic novels were set on the European mainland, and why Catholicism became such an easy target, a symbol of all things foreign, irrational, and destructive.

In addition, there was an English backlash against the Catholic Emancipation Acts that Parliament had passed to avoid riots in Ireland. Anti-Irish feeling crystallized in violent demonstrations such as the Gordon Riots (1780), when 40,000 people carrying banners that read "NO POPERY" marched to the House of Commons, and then rioted in London, attacking Catholic chapels. The next Catholic Emancipation Act, in 1829, allowed the great Irish Nationalist leader Daniel O'Connell to sit in Parliament. Along with increased Irish immigration, and the conversion of Cardinal Newman (a prominent Anglican theologian) to Catholicism in 1847, this caused yet more waves of anti-Catholic protest.

In America, there was also a long history of anti-Catholic sentiment. Lurid pamphlets describing debauchery amongst Catholic monks and nuns were commonplace. Presented as "true tales," these included best sellers such as *Awful Disclosure of Maria Monk, as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Suffering during a Residence of Five Years as a Novice, and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal.* (1836)

## THE TAINT OF SOCIAL DISORDER

Social disorder is a plague upon normal society (in which everyone knows his place).

Society dictates what a man is and how he lives, and it embodies what is right and wrong in the form of etiquette and taboos. The Victorians are proud of their civic institutions. Someone who is deliberately antisocial or tries to isolate himself from the rest of society is automatically suspicious, because "normal" people don't act this way. Threats to the fabric of society, such as political scandals, agitation among the working classes, or riots on the streets, are strong thematic indicators that there is a darkness at work in the land.

### The Mob Has Spoken!

If the uneducated masses' terror and hatred reaches fever pitch, they succumb to a mass insanity and form mindless mobs, whose only desire is to destroy what they do not understand. This is society's last resort, as normal social structures break down under the strain.

Anyone who becomes involved in doings that might rouse the suspicions of the uneducated hordes must be cautious, and ensure that rumors don't get out. Political agitation in this era often leads to public demonstrations and masses rioting in the streets. Political candidates hire mobs to cause unrest around election times, and the French Revolution is recent history; no one needs to wonder what a mob might do if given its head.

## POWERLESSNESS AND IMPRISONMENT

*All is lost!* There is no horror like that of being utterly powerless. A man of action feels powerless when it isn't clear that any actions will help: perhaps an opponent is unknown, or unassailable. A man of science feels powerless when facing the forces of unreason: none of his knowledge will be any use. A man of faith feels powerless in the face of untold horrors that no just God would allow. In such a scenario, the skills on which the protagonist has relied are suddenly irrelevant and useless. Gentlemen and ladies can also be prostrate before their own emotions. Impending insanity or grand passions are external forces that can take tyrannical control of a man's soul, so that he can only watch in horror as events unfold.

In gothic stories, protagonists feel utterly powerless in the face of dark forces as they investigate. Kidnappings and imprisonment are commonplace. No matter how bleak the outlook, there must always be a way forward, whether from outside help or a change in dynamics within the prison.

## FRIGHT CHECKS FROM SOCIAL DISORDER

Players normally make Fright Checks (p. B93) to see how their PCs respond to horrifying, traumatic events. This includes any event that threatens or shatters a character's worldview, such as exposure to undeniably supernatural forces or events, discovering that an ancestor committed vile crimes, mobs storming the houses of Parliament, or learning that the local vicar does not believe in God- all events that could have traumatized and scandalized Victorians. Being blackmailed, suffering pangs of high guilt, and losing a loved one unexpectedly are other events that might require a Fright Check.

When a character in a screampunk game fails a Fright Check due to social disorder, roll 3 dice. Add the amount by which the Fright Check was missed and consult the following table. If the table calls for the victim to acquire a disadvantage he already has, make any resistance rolls at -2 while the effect lasts.

### SHOCKING REVELATIONS TABLE

The effect of swooning is identical to being stunned (p. B99), but includes dizziness and breathing difficulties. Hysteria has a similar effect in game terms. Traditional treatments involve sweet tea, wafting smelling salts around the nose, loosening the collar or corset, or a slap to the face (in the case of hysteria). Any of these allow the victim to make a recovery roll at +2.

- 4 Swoon decorously for one turn, then recover automatically.
- 5 **Scream!** Snap into hysteria; the victim can only scream at the top of his lungs for 1dturns.
- 6-8 The vapors. Victim is stricken with a ghastly pallor as the blood rushes from his head. Swoon for one turn. Every turn after that, roll vs. unmodified IQ to snap out of it.
- 9 Uncontrollable shaking. Swoon for one turn, then roll vs. modified IQ every turn after that to snap out of it. The victim feels icy cold and is wracked by shivers while the effect lasts (-2 to DX).
- 10 Prostrate with shock. Faint clean away for 1d turns. Every turn after that, roll vs. modified Will to come around.

## SHOCKING REVELATIONS TABLE - CONTINUED

- 11-12** Wild hysteria. Uncontrollable laughter or weeping for 2d turns. Every turn after that, roll vs. modified IQ to recover.
- 13** Grim understanding. Past events play out in the victim's mind, and suddenly everything becomes clear! Treat as 2d seconds of Flashbacks (p. CI90). The GM should describe the content in detail.
- 14-15** Horrid dreams. Oh, stiff upper lip and all that by day - but such visions at night! Treat as 1d nights of Nightmares (p. CI92).
- 16** Sleepwalking. 1d nights of Nightmares (p. CI92) and the victim also walks in his sleep, a wraithly figure who moves under a volition not of his own. Treat as Sleepwalker (p. CI84).
- 17** Blanch. A lock of the victim's hair turns white with shock.
- 18-19** Moment of weakness. No immediate effect, but if alcohol, dings, sex, etc. are offered as solace during the next 1d days, the victim must make a Will roll or succumb as if he suffered from Alcoholism, Addiction, Lecherousness, etc.
- 20** Fit of rage. The victim flies into a violent frenzy, smashing things and foaming at the mouth. Treat as 1d seconds of the Berserk disadvantage (p. B31).
- 21** Overwhelmed. It is all too much; even the slightest stimulation interferes with rational thought. The victim just wants to be left alone. Treat as 1d hours of the Confused disadvantage (p. CI88).
- 22** Rats in the walls. Low-level hallucinations convince the victim that someone or something is constantly threatening him. Acquire a Minor Delusion (p. B32), and 1d hours of the Paranoia disadvantage (p. B35).
- 23** Shut out the world. The traumatized victim retreats into himself, losing both the desire and the ability to interact with others. Treat as 1d hours of the Crippling Shyness disadvantage (p. B37).
- 24** Numb. In his shocked state, the victim ceases to care whether he lives or dies. Treat as 1d hours of the On the Edge disadvantage (p. CI93).
- 25** Acquire a Mild Phobia (p. B35).
- 26** Discouraged. Just as the victim's confidence in the world has been shaken, so too has his confidence in himself. The victim suffers from Low Self-image (p. CI92) for 1d hours.
- 27** Hysterical blindness. Faint for 1d minutes, and lose either the sense of sight or the ability to speak for 1d hours; treat as either Blindness (p. B27) or Mute (p. B29).
- 28** Regression. Faint for 1d minutes. When he comes round, the victim has retreated for 1d hours into a happier, childlike state as a temporary respite from the horrors around him. Treat as -5 to IQ and a Major Delusion (p. B32).
- 29-30** Acquire an unhealthy, ghoulish Obsession (p. CI93).
- 31** Depressed. The victim goes into a dark funk of incessant suicidal thoughts. Treat as 1d days of Chronic Depression (p. CI87).
- 32-33** Dark side revealed. Once the world has revealed its secrets, the stressed mind is bound to do the same. Treat as 1d days of Split Personality (p. B37), with the GM creating a personality that embodies the victim's "darkest urges."



- 34** Loss of identity. Identity is your place in the world. Once that is turned upside down, who are you really? Treat as 1d days of Amnesia (p. CI86).
- 35-36** Dark revelation. The traumatic experience is a sign from the Lord! The victim has had a conversion on the road to Damascus and just found God... or something. Treat as 1d days of religious Fanaticism (p. B33).
- 37-38** Devastated. What does anything matter now? The victim becomes a shuffling husk of his former self. Treat as 1d days of Slave Mentality (p. CI94).
- 39+** Acquire a Severe Phobia or other mental disadvantage(s) worth -15 points.



## LOCATION IN GOTHIC NOVELS

Outer space mirrors inner space. Ancient buildings and wild landscapes isolate people from the protection of society.

The dominating presence of the great medieval churches was an important inspiration for early gothic writers; the landscapes of these stories provide an essential part of their atmosphere. What would the gothic novel be without its lonely towers, haunted graveyards, mist-shrouded swamps and moors, and claustrophobic secret chambers?

These are all places that evoke a sense of isolation and oppression. Ancient buildings form a tangible link between the past and the present, surviving longer than any living being; these edifices are solidified history. While the building stands, the past can never be entirely forgotten. Isolated wilderness areas emphasize the power of nature and one's distance from the order and protection of civilization.

## CRUMBLING RUINS

A ruin is the remnant of a place that has been overwhelmed by history. Such locations can include abandoned buildings, or even ruined wings of existing mansions. Ruins could be found in archaeological digs, or hidden far below the foundations of much newer buildings, unknown to the owner. They may house artifacts that should have remained undisturbed, skeletons that uncover dreadful crimes, or exotic antiques bearing curses for those who desecrate them.

Ruins carry a sense of fatalism. Visiting these places encourages reflection on death and the futility of life. Mortal concerns are nothing in comparison to forces that grind stonework into dust, leaving nothing but piecemeal remains of ancient buildings and the people who once lived in them. These long-departed souls, whose lives and secrets and nightmares have been lost, may yet hold the key to travails faced by the party.

## GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

Medieval gothic churches and religious buildings were deliberately built to a scale that would dwarf humanity in the face of the divine. Awe and terror are invoked by use of space, light, stained glass, and heightened echoes. This use of scale (with fewer religious connotations) also applies to castles, which may have been designed as fortifications, and later found use as jails, schools, or simply living quarters,

These places often include secret rooms and stairwells, ruined wings, or deep dungeons in which the slow drip of water on stone has worn away sections of the walls over centuries. They are rich in history, and in medieval secrets. High towers with few windows make excellent prisons (especially for innocent young women), and maintain a lonely, tyrannical vigil over the surrounding countryside. Castles are usually built to be defensible, and use surrounding landscape such as bare cliffs, rivers, and mountains to support this.

## WILDERNESS

The wilderness is inhospitable, and far removed from the comforting security of human civilization. These places have a heightened sense of isolation, remote from everything familiar and reassuring. Creeping greenery covering old ruins is a poignant reminder that nature prevails over the past. Deserted moors, jagged cliffs and mountains, crashing waterfalls, and ancient, silent forests raise nature's banner in the face of an unnatural darkness, threatening guilty and innocent alike. Wild animals and other natural hazards add to the dangers of venturing out alone.

## DREAMSCAPES

Dreams in gothic stories can hold portents for the future or amplify existing terrors, reflecting conscious fears and highlighting clues that went unnoticed while awake. Dreams can become terrifying prisons, or offer such welcome refuge from the waking world that dreamers never wish to leave. Insomnia or dark nightmares are a sign that a victim has a guilty conscience, or is sensitive to local forces of evil. Supernatural (or unnatural) creatures might even stalk a man in his dreams, where he is always alone, and least able to resist.

## HIDDEN ROOMS

Secret chambers, stairways, or corridors may have been built for a purpose completely different from the one they now serve. They may be private mysteries known only to a sinister servant or the building's tyrant lord, or passed on as hidden lore from father to son. Or perhaps the knowledge of the building's secrets has been erased by time, and these places could only be discovered by accident. If the entrance was deliberately concealed, the operating mechanism may be hidden in plain sight, as part of a carving, or a bookcase.

A secret chamber was originally hidden for a reason: for dark rituals, or to hold prisoners, laboratories, or artifacts that needed to be kept from the world. Alternatively, a cruel villain may have built the hidden room as a trap or private torture cham-

her. Often, the villain or his minions spy on the heroes through holes in the wall, cunningly worked into the decorations — if the protagonists discover these spy holes, they can look through them in the other direction, perhaps uncovering blood-chilling evidence of perversity or corruption, hi crumbling gothic mansions, some portraits have eyes that seem to follow you around the room . . . and some portraits have eyes that actually *do* ...

## SUBTERRANEAN LOCALES

Being trapped underground plays on the terror of entombment. Subterranean locations include labyrinths, crypts, and torturous underground passages. These places are often perpetually dark, and lit by flickering torches in place of sunlight. The air in some sections may be foul, and other passages may have been flooded. Sounds travel eerily down stone corridors: screams, echoing footsteps, breathing of a large creature, all giving a deceptive indication of where the originator may be. With no landmarks or sun by which to navigate, directions are easily confused.

This is a natural setting for dungeons, private laboratories, or monster pens. The deeper a builder digs under the earth, the further he is removed from surface-dwelling humanity, spiritually as well as physically.

## GRAVEYARDS, CATACOMBS, AND CRYPTS

Gothic stories are preoccupied with mortality, in all its forms. Death itself rules the places where people have died and been buried. Any attempt at disturbing their rest meets with terrible consequences.

Even well-kept graveyards are silent and gloomy, with gothic statues of angels and gargoyles in place of more cheery ornamentation, but a graveyard that has run to ruin is still more terrible. These dead have been left to rot, and rats scabble among the mined headstones, chewing clean the old bones. Old headstones can hold crucial information about the names and dates of significant people, especially if such people were so infamous that records have been deleted in all other archives. Perhaps in a graveyard where their memories are honored with a formal burial, victims cut down before their time can finally be laid to rest.

## LUNATIC ASYLUMS

Victorian lunatic asylums are (rightly) infamous for the cruelty and inhumanity of the treatments applied to hapless inmates, who had fewer rights than prisoners and were often imprisoned at the mercy of experimental doctors and thuggish

assistants for the rest of their natural lives. Any amount of torture of an inmate can be done for his own good, and drugs and (toward the end of the century) shock therapy are commonplace. Screams in the night arouse little curiosity. The threat of mob violence would literally mean that the lunatics had taken over the asylum. Since violent criminals are housed safely far from civilized society, such a revolution might go unnoticed . . . indefinitely.

## GOthic WINDOW-DRESSING

Decor can add to the gothic sensibility of these stories. Colors are dark and rich (often featuring black and red for death and blood), fabrics are plush (heavy velvet drapes and tapestries), and furniture is heavy and intimidating. Even these minor details can add to the oppressive feeling of a building. Beds will be four-posters, waiting to trap unwary victims and eat them. Monstrous wardrobes lurk in shadows, and loud clocks tick inexorably throughout day and night. Describing ominous, fright-film settings is a quick way to set the players' mood for the horrors to come.

## A DISMAL METONYMY

Metonymy is a literary device in which one word or idea replaces another to which it is closely related. In films and literature, metonymy is used to put a specific image to an abstract notion (for example, it's very common in films to see rain falling at funerals, as a concrete symbol of gloom and grief).

Scattering metonymy into a scenario as background detail offers simple shorthand ways to telegraph a mood of mystery and threatening gloom to players.

- Hammering rain
- Howling wind
- Heavy roiling thunderclouds
- Electric storms
- Crashing ocean
- Echoing footsteps
- A picture or mirror suddenly falling off a wall
- Lights in abandoned rooms
- Cold drafts of air (possibly blowing out candles)
- Doors suddenly slamming shut
- Howling of dogs or wolves

# IN STEAM WE TRUST

STEAMPUNK AND HORROR

As steampunk moves to a dark setting, its guiding question is no longer the "What if?" of scientific romance, but "What is the worst that could happen?" Society is still in upheaval from the industrial revolution; what if the revolution continues? What if inventions run crazily out of control? What if inventors abuse their new power? Or, worst of all, what if the machines really could have made the world a better place, but are destroyed due to fear and ignorance?

The genius-driven lunacy of steampunk is an amoral mistress. In the rush to industrialize and exploit marvelous new inventions, ethical considerations may be left by the wayside. Do the great steampunk inventors stop to ask themselves, "Is it right to create life?" "Is humanity ready for immortality?" or, "Is it right for private individuals of dubious mental balance to possess weapons of mass destruction?" Pollution and smog are symbolic of crimes by technology against the natural order. Those who place their dust in steam to the exclusion of all else will be forcefully reminded that the God of Abraham (and of Queen Victoria!) is a jealous god . . .

Victorian horror hinges on protagonists' approaching a problem in a rational way, only to find their assumptions breaking down. Screampunk stories explore the price that technology's progress and efficiency demands from humanity's very soul.

## STEAMPUNK AS A SOURCE OF TAINT

Technology is power. Power corrupts. Therefore absolute technology corrupts absolutely.

Victorian society is still in the throes of the Industrial Revolution. Cities are swollen with the influx of immigrants and rural workers, and power is shifting from the landed gentry to the new breed of capitalists and industrialists. To a traditionalist, the age of invention is a waking nightmare. Social commentators find poverty and deprivation in the bowels of the new cities; the tragedy is not that technology has changed human nature, but that it hasn't.

Machines offer power without responsibility: power over self, power over others, and power over nature itself. Such power is intoxicating. Many of the steampunk engineers who pledge themselves to the great god Progress seek to override the dictates of history. For crazed inventors who feel that the Establishment has rejected them, every success is a personal triumph over society. The moral corruption of technology is more insidious when a man is sure that his invention will save humanity, even if he must force society to accept it. Susceptible souls are lured into hubris, believing themselves infallible supermen. One thing is certain: all power has its price, and that price will be exacted.

*As steampunk moves to a dark setting, its guiding question is no longer the "What if?" of scientific romance, but "What is the worst that could happen?"*

## AGAINST THE NATURAL ORDER

What is technology but man's attempt to change the world that God and society have given to him?

Technological innovations raise difficult ethical questions. Even today, debate continues over such thorny issues as euthanasia, test-tube babies, cloning, embryo research, and animal experimentation. As technology advances, there will be more debates about the boundaries between humans and machines, and about the value and quality of life. If the wonders of steampunk allow brilliant inventors to solve these technical problems in the 19th century, the ethical issues involved may arise before society is ready even to debate them, let alone reach any conclusions.

In a dark world, there may be forbidden avenues of research that should never have been pursued. Some inventions might truly embody crimes



## BUILDING A BETTER HUMANITY

*"Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men?"*

- H. G. Wells,

### *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

In the 19th century, understanding of the human body and mind was undergoing a brutal revolution. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) startled orthodox public opinion with its assertions: that the human species was no more special than any evolved animal, and that the living world obeyed physical laws which could be tabulated. Steampunk doctors and chemists dabble in eugenics, mesmerism, opiates, and electroshock, driven by the dream of creating a stronger, brighter, longer-lived humanity.

Less ethical researchers use their talents to create monsters, engineer terrible new diseases, or reanimate the dead. Novel forms of mind control, or ways to induce irreparable insanity, may be the fruits of research of villainous doctors who choose to study the human mind. Most disturbing of all, such scientists may experiment on themselves or their own families, voluntarily surrendering their own humanity in the name of Progress.

A researcher who coldly uses human stock for breeding or experimentation must believe either that his ends will justify the means, or that he is a superior being. Disturbing themes call into question what happens when man plays God, and whether there are truly fines that should never be crossed.

## SIDE EFFECTS AND FAILED EXPERIMENTS

Even with the best will in the world, experiments can backfire, and the unfortunate scientist may not even realize in advance that his work has unexpected consequences. Side effects of mass production may involve pollution of local air, water, and soil. Medical experiments carry risks of disturbing, fatal complications. Mechanical or biological creatures may turn against their creators, or run amok.

A noble inventor, when he discovers his errors, takes responsibility for them. Acts of self-sacrifice to protect the rest of humanity against the rampaging steampunk doom that might otherwise be unleashed are the only honorable way for a scientist to deal with his most damning failures. A mercenary villain cares only that his mistakes should never be discovered; perhaps he finds a way to use them to his own advantage, or simply locks them away where they will never be found.

against natural law. Perhaps the scientific principles used to empower a device are so unnatural (using occult principles, or weird science) that reason alone cannot explain them. A steampunk engineer who tampers with life and death, breathing life into the inanimate, or mutating animals (God's creatures) into new forms, is playing with fire.

Experimentalists who push back the boundaries of human knowledge in these areas know that they are on dangerous ground. Public opinion will destroy the scientist who uses human beings as his experimental subjects, dabbling in grave robbery, murder, or kidnapping. This work must be carried out privately, in hidden laboratories. Alternatively, such dubious research may be sponsored by a sinister patron who demands absolute secrecy from his researchers, blackmailing them into silence.

## CRUSHED BY THE WHEELS OF INDUSTRY

The factories that lurk along the hills and valleys of Victorian industrial heartlands are soulless, threatening places. They belch flame and smoke, like outposts of hell, symbolizing the inhuman side of technology. The factory worker suffers a slow, soul-crushing, living death, chained to a bench and working his fingers to the bone for a pittance. Women and children, being cheaper and more manually dexterous than grown men, are worked to their limits. Exploitation and cruelty are rife; though some factory owners do treat their workers well, many shrug off fatal accidents as byproducts of the process. Although in our world, the dehumanizing production line was not introduced until the early 20th century, a steampunk alternate history might involve a speedier industrialization during the Victorian era.

Steampunk societies may have mass access to weird and wondrous inventions. When such a device is converted from a prototype in a private laboratory to an object of mass production, manufacturing issues must be solved. Unskilled workers (or machines) must duplicate the invention. Raw materials required for manufacture must be available and affordable. A steampunk factory might require more disturbing raw materials than mere coal, iron, or wool. Corpses, live animals, or even human souls may be gathered in bulk and fed into the waiting metal maws.

If these factories produce essential resources, then society may turn a blind eye to these "necessary sacrifices." It is the patriotic thing to do. People should be proud of their homeland's industrial capability . . . , shouldn't they? Or it may be that the true nature of the manufacturing process is a terrible secret, known only to a few.





## FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Not all knowledge is beneficial. Those who abandon reason, or delve into forbidden lore, will inevitably be punished.

The Victorian era saw flowerings in the fields of archaeology and anthropology, as well as in hard science. Decryption of the Rosetta Stone allowed new insights into the cultures of ancient Egypt, and sparked a new interest in the field among the public and researchers alike. In an alternate history, these mysteries of the ancients might answer age-old questions that plague humanity: immortality, contact with the dead, and unthinkable powers of mass destruction. Steampunk inventors are likely to combine this ancient knowledge with the scientific method, poring over ancient stone tablets and musty books, and then encapsulating their results in polished metal casings. But using this information is perilous. A theme in steampunk horror is that inventions can easily get out of control and destroy the societies they were devised to help.

For knowledge to be truly forbidden, there must be no way for an honest researcher to carry out the necessary experiments or reach the same conclusions. That information is available only from questionable sources. Such knowledge could make a man famous and rich, it could change the world ... and it could damn his very soul.

### SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Assuming that all 19th-century engineers and scientists were amoral visionaries would be unfair to the many pioneers who broke that mold. Notables such as Humphrey Davy (whose safety lamp saved countless lives among miners) and Isebard Kingdom Brunel (whose legendary concern for safety led him to overengineer all his designs) paved the way for modern engineering practice with their professional attitudes. However, there was little government regulation on private laboratories and factories. Workers had few rights and little recourse to the law in cases of maltreatment and dangerous working conditions. In a land where labor was cheap and easily replaced, the possible gains of introducing-expensive, new-fangled safety measures would rarely tempt mercenary captains of industry.

## O LUCIFER, PLEASE LET ME GO BEYOND GOD'S LAW ...

A traditional way to acquire power and knowledge beyond mortal ken is to bargain with demons. These dark spirits are potent symbols of inhuman evil and corruption. Lucifer himself is the archetypal gothic villain: seductive, brutally cruel, and the ultimate rebel against God and nature. He and his minions offer power without responsibility, and reward without risk. The price of such aid? Merely a man's immortal soul, or the souls of his descendants yet unborn. And who in this age of reason still believes in souls and damnation?

The scientist whose thirst for knowledge drives him to these depths must be prepared to carry out horrible sacrifices in hidden ritual rooms, and to deal with fanatical occultists in his quest. Alternatively, minor demons may roam the Earth in human form, seeking susceptible victims to corrupt. A demonic industrialist with bulging pockets may smile cruelly as he offers patronage to ambitious young engineers. Other fiends destroy particularly good (or divinely inspired) research, or teach the secrets of summoning the great demon princes: Mephistopheles, Belial, and Lucifer himself.

Infernal entities will not inevitably destroy a bargainer. Steampunk engineers are pragmatists, and may take care to bind the forces of hell securely into their machines. An antagonist whose knowledge is secretly drawn from such sources may control legions of fiends to drive his perpetual motion machines, or guide airships through the outer atmosphere to foreign lands and planets.

### MISGUIDED VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY

Using steampunk technology, adventurers can travel to distant, otherwise unreachable lands. Such locations are often protected by terrible physical barriers. There explorers may encounter new cities or even new species, as well as the ruins of ancient civilizations, just as some knowledge was never intended for humanity, some places should also remain undisturbed. Explorers may inadvertently awaken forces that should have been left to sleep, invoke ancient curses, or be afflicted with exotic infections. Decent men may become corrupt from being worshipped as gods!

As well as physical voyages, travel into the psychic realm of dreams or even more exotic

occult planes may be possible through drugs or mesmerism. Explorers who dare to travel through time can innocently cause inescapable doom, or learn too much about possible horrific futures.

Travelers who leave the safety of the known world to venture to any of these wondrous locales may commit terrible crimes without realizing what they do. In the gothic story, the only certainty is that such crimes will eventually be called to account with brutal exactitude.

## THE PRICE OF POWER

Power, even granted through reason, never comes without a price.

Steampunk represents the force of reason triumphant. Humanity has risen above the need for mindless superstitions, and the scientific method has been shown to work unimagined marvels. Mankind now has power over many age-old terrors. But is reason a more terrible master than ignorance? Technology is only the beginning of society's problems in a very dark steampunk world. Motifs are shared with cyberpunk: the looming threats of environmental catastrophe, mercenary capitalists, social chaos, and technology out of control. Industrialists become the new feudal barons, abusing their power over the masses. Their headquarters and factories become isolated strongholds, ornamented with mementos of past ages or even located in old castles and cathedrals. The innocents drawn into their webs of corruption are talented young engineers who strive fruitlessly towards truth and hope, even in the face of impossible odds. The status quo, itself corrupted, may no longer be a force against the darkness.

## HUBRIS AND IDOLATRY

The engineer who begins to believe himself a superior being takes the first steps down a dangerous road. It begins innocently; the scientist suspects that he is more intelligent than the majority of humanity. He rarely associates with anyone except other scientists who can hold coherent conversations on his own level. It is a short step from here to the understanding that lesser mortals (especially foreigners and the underclasses) are worthless, except inasmuch as they can aid the progress of science by taking part in experimental work. If galloping megalomania takes hold, the (mad) scientist comes to believe that his creations rival those of God Himself. A villain who harbors such hubris and insanity seeks no justification from society for his actions. If he isolates himself from humanity, it is because he no longer considers himself one of them.

## STEAMPUNK CASTLES

In addition to the typical gothic locations (pp. 10-11), steampunk technology allows both villains and heroes alike access to strongholds in more hostile climates. Prisoners may find themselves taken beneath the ocean, to space, deep below the Earth's crust, or to the Antarctic. A stronghold reflects the mindset of the adversary who designed or inhabits it. Megalomania leads antagonists to build vast and impressive edifices, designed to give the owner power over visitors. In a fantastic setting, the laws of physics never interfere with a villain's desire to impress his captives.

Inventors who follow Victorian trends will include gothic elements in their designs\*. A floating metal castle can include the inhuman scale and religious icons that typify medieval architecture. Application of weird technology to old problems provides villains with frighteningly effective prisons and torture techniques. Being trapped inside someone else's body is as terrifying a loss of control as any medieval torture, and threats of whirling mechanical blades are as inexorable as any oubliette.



# THE MOB'S RISE AGAINST TECHNOLOGY

Mob violence (p. 8) was widespread throughout the 19th century, and aching poverty among rural workers provoked many groups to focus their aggression on industrialists. The examples here are English; these groups or others like them form the angry mobs who attack factories and whose leaders speak against the new machines. Avant-garde scientists or industrialists know them, and fear their might.

## AGAINST THE UNNATURAL

Instead of highlighting the sinister side of steampunk, technology could become a force of light and hope in a dimly gothic world, symbolizing the triumph of the future over the past! Brave engineers and adventurers, equipped with the best human ingenuity can devise, venture forth into the darkness to combat the powers of ignorance and unreason. Old superstitions are debunked by proper application of steam and rational thinking; cruel authorities are exposed and arrested. Antagonists include corrupt institutions and churches, morally bankrupt Establishment figures, other scientists with differing goals, or even supernatural entities.

These stories turn horrific when the rationalists' best efforts are doomed, and ancient forces of unreason prove more powerful than any modern steampunk. Alternatively, steampunk idealists may be forced to use a solution as cruel as the feudal terrors that they have destroyed. Everyone must be allowed to live the happy and productive life that new technology will provide, whether they want to or not. Submit to the machine...



## LUDDITES

The Luddite revolt began in 1811 in Nottinghamshire. For hundreds of years, weaving had been a well-respected cottage industry, before the introduction of stocking frames and automated looms. Weavers saw the machines as a symbol of their new oppressors, and organized into a semi-guerrilla movement. Members appeared at factories in disguise to hand over their demands (reasonable compensation for workers, better conditions, and quality control) to the owners, claiming to be under the orders of "General" Ned Ludd. (The name was taken from an anecdote about a feeble-minded boy who accidentally broke a couple of looms.) Mill owners who didn't comply found their expensive machines wrecked.

## CHARTISTS

*"We shall destroy their abodes of guilt, which they have, reared to violate all law and God's Book. We shall wrap in one awful sheet of devouring flame, which no army can resist, the factories of the cotton tyrants."*

- Joseph Rayner Stephens  
(Chartist Preacher)

The Chartist movement (1836-49) was one of the first to unite the urban and rural working classes across the breadth of Britain. Their Charter (named after the Magna Carta or Great Charter of 1215) was a demand for universal suffrage. Charismatic leaders gathered support, promising that parliamentary representation would end worker exploitation and remove the hated workhouses. Chartism was a desperate response to grinding poverty and despair.

Chartists divided themselves between those who believed in Moral Force and those who believed in Physical Force. Neither succeeded. Parliament ignored more than three million signatures on their petitions, while policemen and soldiers clashed with protesters in the streets.

## SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES

For most of the 19th century, there is little notion of the professional scientist or researcher. Universities teach courses in traditional subjects, which don't include applied science (although they do include medicine and anatomy), and the rare technical colleges that exist are accessible to few. Those who pursue "pure" scientific research support themselves through inheritances, business exploits, or patronage; laboratory space and equipment are expensive luxuries. At the same time, the public has a thirst for all things scientific, and interest in public lectures on technical topics is intense.

Most sizable towns house a learned society that organizes meetings, maintains a library, and provides a congenial atmosphere for subscribers to discuss their common interest. National societies, the most famous being London's Royal Society, have increasing difficulty keeping up with multiple disciplines of scientific endeavor. Professional groups also spring up during the course of the century, limiting membership to practitioners in their fields. A steampunk world may have additional popular clubs and institutions to celebrate weird technologies that didn't exist in the real world.

Although on the surface, these scientific organizations have purely altruistic intentions, in a darker setting where conspiracy is rife, they may be fronts for far more sinister machinations.

## THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

SPR was formed in 1882 by a group of Cambridge scholars, to examine allegedly supernatural phenomena in a scientific manner. Subjects included ghosts, life after death, and telepathy. The interdisciplinary society attracted prominent scientists with an interest in the field and interested members of the general public. SPR gathered a private library on paranormal topics (available to members only), scheduled guest speakers, and published a monthly newsletter. Gentlemen with an interest in psychical phenomena are likely to be enthusiastic members.

## THE ROYAL SOCIETY

The Royal Society for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge is the oldest learned society in Britain, and one of the oldest in Europe. It was formed in 1660, incorporating the "Invisible College" of Oxford and Cambridge with other, smaller academies. The Society was (and is) independent of government or crown influence, and attracted famous members including Newton, Darwin, and Christopher Wren (who wrote the preamble to its charter). Life members were elected by peer review of existing fellows, and by the end of the 18th century, the Society and its publication, *Philosophical Transactions*, the world's first professional learned journal, were internationally renowned. As well as maintaining a vast library and organizing public lectures within its imposing London home, the Royal Society actively sponsored research and expeditions. Notable scientists from around the world were regularly invited to lecture, making this an ideal place to encounter the most famous researchers of the age. And, of course, having one's theories laughed at by the Royal Society is a de rigeur rite of passage for every mad scientist.

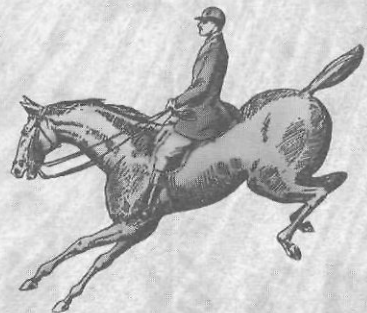
## THE TEDDINGTON HUNT CLUB

Founded in 1787 by Robert, Earl of Bicester, the club had enjoyed a terrible notoriety for debauched parties, degrading "experiments" involving members of the fair sex, and the infamous midnight London-Brighton phaeton races that coined the phrase "hell-for-leather." After scandal upon scandal, the club was formally closed and reorganized along the lines of an informal learned society, and eventually discovered a quiet respectability in the early years of the 19th century.

In this private gentlemen's club, scions of the aristocracy and the Establishment meet to socialize and share their experimental results. Many club members have influential contacts, and the Hunt Club itself is best known for the variety of contests and "sporting wagers" that it supports, with the aim of encouraging advancement of British scientific knowledge. The most famous of these is the biannual London-Brighton race, which traditionally begins at midnight on Boxing Day from the society's clubhouse in Teddington.

Whilst lay members find the Hunt Club to be an altruistic and amenable social facility, the club's secretive inner circle maintain traditions other than the midnight races. Paupers are regularly "purchased" from workhouse authorities, lunatic asylums, and debtors' prisons to be used in private experimental research. Such hapless souls are methodically tortured for purposes of entertainment and education. The inner circle is also rumored to take a dreadful revenge on members who reveal club secrets (although most members know nothing of these despicable private researches).

(The Teddington Hunt Club is a fictitious organization, suitable for use in any steampunk game.)



# CHARACTERS

Gothic heroes and heroines are rational and pragmatic, while villains are twisted and isolated from society. These stories are populated as well with a host of minor figures, familiar through countless novels and films; the nefarious foreign schemer, the sinister servant, the debauched aristocrat, and the vengeful scientist.

Player characters can be built on a base of 100-125 points, which allows them to be tougher and smarter than ordinary folks. They will commonly be men (and women) of science, who battle grim and unnatural forces with the power of reason. If the steampunk aspects of a campaign support it, higher-point characters may also have access to psionic powers (via mesmerism), or magical abilities. Villains are likely to be more powerful, or at least more resourceful, posing a serious threat even to a large party.



The GM may find discussions of class and society in Victorian England, and templates for many archetypes, in *GURPS Steampunk*.

## VILLAINS AND ANTIHEROES

Gothic villains refuse to be bound by the rules of society. They may consider themselves above the rules, below them, or simply outside them. They are ruled by insanity and uncontrolled passions, and are often brutal and seductive, as well as fiendishly intelligent. These qualities aren't inevitable; many villains, such as Dracula or Professor Moriarty, are not particularly seductive, and others (such as Dorian Grey) are not especially intelligent.

Madness comes upon these antagonists, who might have become heroes in their own right if they had not been corrupted, either as a result of their own actions, or in the form of an affliction by God, supernatural forces, or foreign curses. Servants or allied groups composed of equally villainous subordinates, perhaps of foreign origin, are common.

Strong, sexual women appear as brutally seductive figures. Freed from the constraints of a society that considered animal passion to be unfeminine, they represent female as well as male fantasies. Toward the end of the gothic period, villains also become more debauched; this reflects prevailing concerns in *fin de siècle* society, when the decadent movement used art to mock typical Victorian values, and New Women were widely seen as a threat to traditional gender roles.

The tortured antihero is more likely to be an antagonist than a protagonist. He serves as a powerful reminder to the party of how goodness can be corrupted, and may even make them question their own assumptions about good and evil.

## HEROES AND HEROINES

Gothic heroes may be upstanding and manly or sensitive and intellectual, but in either case, they stand for everything that is right about "modern" Victorian society. Protagonists in the early gothic stories were romantic heroes, who might weep over the wonders of nature or suffer terrible night-

mares when their loved ones were in danger. Later heroes are more likely to fit the brave adventurer mode, and to fight corruption with physical or intellectual force.

Since many gothic authors were women, it's no surprise that the genre also features strong female presences. While the stereotyped innocent pursued by a cruel male authority figure is common, she is a reflection of the very real fears of Victorian women, still legally considered chattel of their husbands or fathers. Within these constraints, many heroines are intelligent and pragmatic, and often modern in their attitudes. They come in two main types: the foolhardy ("I took up my candle and ventured alone into the catacombs to investigate the strange footsteps"), and vapid ("At the first sound of strange footsteps, a chill came over me so powerfully that I fell moved to hide behind the curtains"). Players may encounter NPCs of either type. A timid PC may rise to the challenge of an adventure and discover hidden strengths.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

*GURPS Steampunk* and *GURPS Horror* list common advantages and disadvantages that fit the genres, and *Steampunk* also includes interpretations of skills appropriate to the Victorian era. Advantages and disadvantages common in the literature of the lime are listed here.

### ADVANTAGES

#### **Empathy** sec p. B20

The strongly empathic are likely to suffer terrible nightmares when their friends or family are in danger, as well as being quick to spot clues as to unnatural influences on a situation because "it feels wrong."<sup>1</sup>

#### **Sanctity** sec p. CI21

A true innocent is usually obvious to anyone with any sensibility at all. Villainous elements will seek to corrupt him, and noble elements will seek to defend Mm. It is less common, although not unknown, for evildoers to appear saintly. Innocence in this era requires observing certain proprieties, so acting in a wildly improper way may temporarily negate this advantage. Paupers with this advantage will generally be accepted as members of the "deserving poor."

#### **Other Common Advantages**

Claim to Hospitality (p. CI21), Pious (p. CI29), and Strong Will (p. B23).

## NEW DISADVANTAGE

### **The Vapors** -5 or -10 points

You must make a Will roll whenever confronted with an emotional upset, however minor. If you fail, then you suffer an attack of "the vapors."

At the -5-point level, you simply turn pale and catch your breath in a suitably melodramatic manner as soon as it is safe to do so, requiring care and attention from less sensitive companions. In game-terms, you suffer 1d of fatigue and are mentally stunned for 2d seconds, after which you may attempt a Will roll each second to snap out of it.

At the -10-point level, you faint clean away (but still decorously). The faint lasts 1d minutes, after which you may attempt a HT roll each minute to recover.

### DISADVANTAGES

#### **Duty (Involuntary)** sec p. CI77

Nefarious villains may blackmail either party members, their families, or their allies.

#### **Megalomania** see p. B34

Other forms of insanity are common among gothic villains, but Megalomania describes those who truly believe that they are so far above the common herd that normal ethics simply do not apply to them.

#### **Odious Personal Habit (Wildly Melodramatic)** sec p. B20

Common in both villains and "drama queens" of either gender, this disadvantage allows the holder to take any opportunity to rant, declaim his woes to the heavens, or burst into a flood of melodramatic tears. This -5-point disadvantage can be taken at -10 points if the intensity with which the melodrama is pursued is completely unrelated to the gravity of the current situation.

#### **Reputation** sec p. B27

This reflects the notion that a family can gain a bad reputation through being associated with past scandals, or through more sinister rumors of a curse on the entire bloodline. If there truly is insanity in (he family, then the reputation is more than justified. A Decadent or Eccentric might also have a bad personal Reputation in polite society, due to scandals.

## Quirk (Quotes Gilbert and Sullivan)

see p. B41

This is the Victorian equivalent of people who quote Monty Python endlessly (and still find it as funny as they did the first time). A player who takes this quirk should be encouraged to roleplay it mercilessly.

### Other Common Disadvantages

Addiction (p. B30), Disturbing Voice (p. CI81), Evil Twin (p. CI77), Lecherous ness (p. B34), Nightmares (p. CI92), and Secret (p. B238).

## CHARACTER TYPES

### THE ANARCHIST

Anarchists are political activists who favor physical force over moral force, and have been persuaded (possibly by charismatic leaders) or deluded into believing that violence and revolutionary actions will shake up society enough to dislodge the corrupt and decadent elements that are destroying it from above.

Use the *Reformer* template (p. STM39). However, where the standard reformer is an activist whose skills are mainly social and intellectual, an anarchist will either be capable of bomb-making (via Chemistry and Demolitions skill) or have friends who are. Allies and Reputation are suitable advantages/disadvantages.

**Most likely to say:** "If we wait to subvert them, we will be waiting forever! Destroy authority!"

### THE DEFROCKED PRIEST

A man (or woman) who has broken his solemn vows to his religion and been forcefully thrown out of the church by the religious authorities. Although this penalty might be incurred for blasphemy or preaching heresies, a gothic villain is more likely to have succumbed to the temptation of being ruled by his own passions. This includes priests who have not actually been defrocked, but would be if their secrets were ever discovered.

Use either the *Aesthete* (p. STM31) or *Clergyman* (p. STM33) template. Common disadvantages are Secret (the sin for which he was defrocked), Reputation (among upstanding members of his previous church), and even Excommunicated (in extreme circumstances). An ex-Catholic priest might also have learned many secrets through the confessional in his previous life. !

**Most likely to say:** "All that abstention is bad for one's social life." Or, "Religious precepts are to keep the proletariat in line. They don't apply to me."

### THE SINISTER SERVANT

The Sinister Servant has a presence that invites suspicion. Devoted utterly to his true master (a person, family, place, or god) he may be privy to secrets and mysteries. Often unfriendly to visitors (intruders), or of foreign extraction, the sinister servant has an agenda of his own, over and above that of a "normal" servant.

Use the *Servant* template (p. STM41). Common skills include Stealth, Intimidation, and Hidden Lore. Disadvantages may include Fanaticism, Disturbing Voice, or Unnatural Feature; if the sinister servant is involved in blackmail, he may also have Unwilling Allies. Social Stigma may apply to foreigners.

**Most likely to say:** "The master is ... in."

### THE ECCENTRIC ARISTOCRAT

Just as paupers can be divided into the deserving poor and the undeserving poor, the upper classes include both noble scions of the aristocracy, and their less respectable counterparts. It is only because of his class and social connections that the eccentric is tolerated; he may pursue minor yet harmless obsessions (such as growing prize vegetables, or inventing explosives), or be subject to raging insanity, but he is considered by his peers to be "a little odd." Eccentrics often acquire Sinister Servants.

Most aristocrats use the *Aesthete* template (p. STM41); however, this may vary, depending on the nobleman's specific background. Status and Very Wealthy (to support a large private estate) are common. If the eccentricity really is due to insanity then appropriate mental disadvantages should be included; Compulsive Behavior, Addiction, Odious Personal Habits, Reputation (Eccentric), and multiple quirks (potentially more than five) are also common.

**Most likely to say:** "My goodness, the common people have brought London to its knees with their poverty and squalor. I shall be off to Sussex, where such waste need not trouble me."

### THE FAILED SCIENTIST

Not all inventors are destined for greatness. The failed scientist has become a laughingstock of the learned community, either because he is truly incompetent, or because his ideas are so far from the mainstream (even for steampunk). Villainous failed scientists will stop at nothing to vindicate

their ideas, their inventions, and their quest for knowledge.

Use the *Scientist* template (p. STM40). Common disadvantages are Reputation (Failure) in the scientific community. Enemy (Rival Scientist), Obsession (Vindicate his theories), and Megalomania. Skills could include Weird Science or various occult and magical abilities, if the scientist's theories were so far from the norm that these are appropriate.

**Most likely to say:** "They laughed at my theories in the Royal Society, but they won't laugh now!"

## THE FAMILY LAWYER

Lawyers and bankers cultivate long-term relationships with their clients, and it is common for one firm to have handled all the legal work for generations of the same family. The family lawyer has an intimate knowledge of all wills, property deeds, and business contracts associated with his clients, and is often one of the most trusted members of the extended household. Safety deposit boxes holding vital documents may be kept on his premises.

### SAMPLE CHARACTER: DOCTOR KOPPELIUS

125 POINTS

Age 61; 5'9" (stooped); 145 lbs. A thin Pole with a jeweler's glass, wearing formal dress of a style that is 30 years behind the times.

**Attributes:** ST 10 [0]; DX 13 [30]; IQ 15 [60]; HT 10 [0].

**Advantages:** Invention (Clockwork Soulsucker) [10]; Invention (Copplia) [10]; Language Talent 4 [8]; Lightning Calculator [5]; Mathematical Ability [10]; Strong Will +1 [4]; Very Wealthy [30].

**Disadvantages:** Age (61) [-33]; Bad Sight (Nearsighted) [-10]; Bad Temper [-10]; Jealousy [-10]; No Sense of Humor [-10]; Reputation (As a bad-tempered recluse who makes wonderful toys, -4 from local residents, recognized sometimes) [-5].

**Quirks:** Arrogant; Dresses 30 years behind the fashion; Intolerant of young people; Paranoid; Talks to his creations. [-5]

**Skills:** Area Knowledge (Local Village)-11 [0]; Chemistry-15 [1]; Detect Lies-14 [2]; Engineer (Clockwork)-17 [4]; Hypnotism-14 [2]; Intimidation-16 [4]; Jeweller-16 [6]; Mathematics-12 [0]; Mechanic (Clockwork)-15 [2]; Occultism-16 [4]; Philosophy (Mad Science)-13 [1]; Psychology-14 [2]; Research-17 [6]; Weird Science (Marvellous - Clockwork)-14 [4].

**Languages:** Polish (native)-19 [0]; Czech-18 [1]; French-17 [0.5]; German-17 [0.5]; Latin-17 [1].


The old inventor has cared nothing for humanity since he was a young man, when he lost

his heart to his own half-sister, Elena. But she would have nothing to do with the pale, obsessive apprentice who stalked her every move. At length, she married a sea captain and moved away from the family holdings in the Tatra Mountains. She died of a fever soon afterwards. Koppelius inherited their father's house and made a name for himself with his marvelous mechanical toys, but after Elena's death he closeted himself away from society. It has taken over 30 years for Koppelius to complete his greatest work. Copplia is a mechanical doll who bears a startling resemblance to Elena, and is so lifelike that she can pass for human! The old man adores his creation and shows her off by letting her parade on a balcony, but he also harbors unhealthy jealousies of anyone who takes too close an interest. He wears the sorts of clothes that Elena would have admired, and speaks to the doll as if he were courting her.

Like a modern-day Pygmalion, he is consumed by the desire to bring Copplia to life. This obsession has led him to collect a large arcane library, and to participate irregularly in a group of occultists who meet in Krakow. The inventor has had some minor successes with his new schemes, sacrificing animals and using their spirits to animate his smaller toys. But it is very clear that if he wishes to animate Copplia, no mere animal will suffice ...

Doctor Koppelius and his creation were inspired by a ballet by Delibes (1836-1891), based on a short story by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822).





As well as the required skills of Law, Language (Latin), Administration, Accounting, and Research, a family lawyer (or banker) is often also skilled at Diplomacy and Savoir-Faire. Common advantages are Charisma, Sanctity (in the sense of appearing trustworthy), and Sense of Duty (Employer and his family).

*Most likely to say:* "Yes, I do have the documents you requested in my strongbox. Your grandfather left instructions before his death that they be released to you on demand."

## THE CRUEL GUARDIAN

The guardian has been given power over someone - power which he abuses. He may be a relative, legal guardian, or head of an appropriate institution (such as an orphanage, jail, or a boarding school); in any case, he should be responsible for the victim's moral, mental, and physical well-being. In practice, he has become corrupt and is using his power and influence for purely selfish purposes. This can also include jailers and torturers who have come to enjoy their work.

Often based on the eccentric aristocrat, or family lawyer gone bad, the cruel guardian is likely to be Very Wealthy. Common disadvantages are Sadism, various other mental disadvantages as appropriate. Secret (abuses his ward), Jealousy, Lecherous ness, and No Sense of Humor.

*Most likely to say:* "Your friends may complain as they like, my dear. I am your legal guardian; I shall dispose of the estate as I see fit. And as for you ..."

## THE INGENUE

A wealthy and educated young person (usually female) who is largely ignorant of the depths to which human nature can sink, because her experience with the "real world" has been strictly limited. She is an innocent abroad, who has no idea of the darkness she may be about to encounter.

As well as Heir and Sanctity (true innocent), the ingenue often has Charisma, Empathy, and Attractiveness. Pragmatic heroines also have Common Sense. Disadvantages may include Sense of Duty (To family), Truthfulness, Overconfidence, Intolerance (Poor people), and Odious Personal Habits (Pollyanna Complex, or Wildly Melodramatic.)

*Most likely to say:* "Dear God! What suffering is this? Give the poor man a penny for some bread and tell him to go away, Mr. Carruthers!"

## THE DEBAUCHED SEDUCTRESS

A femme fatale in a pre-Noir era, she revels in all forms of delightful wickedness, and actively

solicits others to join her in these vices. Seducing unsuspecting males (or females) is likely to be the very least of her sins; such decadents often tend to excesses that later destroy them. She may have a scandalous reputation, or hide behind a blameless mask (such as a nun's habit), but if society knew the true depths of her iniquity, she would be punished with the full force of the law. In a fantastic setting, she may be a succubus, or have access to hypnotic powers that drive men out of their minds with desire.

She will have the *Demimondaine* template (p. STM34). Common advantages include Wealth, Charisma, and Attractiveness, and she may have Allies (other lovers). Disadvantages may include Reputation (Hedonist), Lecherous ness, Secret (the true depths of her depravity), Enemies (former jilted lovers), and Addiction.

*Most likely to say:* "What can your fair Rosalyn give you that I cannot offer a hundred-fold ... ?"

## THE MOB LEADER

A charismatic leader, probably self-educated, who can inflame the masses with his rhetoric and work them up into a riot. He is a working-class man himself, and may harbor strong vengeful feelings against other levels of society who have wronged him in the past. He may not be able to control the mob he gathers, but when initial fervors die down, he is the man to whom they will look for guidance.

Charisma, Voice, and Allies are common, as are Strong Will and Reputation (man of the people) among local workers or peasants. Disadvantages may include Poverty, Uneducated, Fanaticism, and Intolerance. Often has skills in Public Speaking, Literacy (in an environment where this is uncommon), Streetwise, Area Knowledge (local town), and Tactics.

*Most likely to say:* "All who value your lives and liberties, gather your weapons and follow me to the factory! We will suffer this indignity no longer!"

## THE OPIUM FIEND

The opium fiend might once have been a great adventurer, man of science, or noble aristocrat, but now he is completely within the sway of his drugs, thinking of little except his next visit to the opium den. The substance to which he is addicted clouds his mind, but may also help him to think in unconventional ways that assist occult researches or weird science. He may be completely in the sway of the dealer who feeds his addiction, who is probably of sinister foreign origin.

The main disadvantages associated with the opium fiend are Addiction (not necessarily limited to opium), and Reputation (Decadent) among friends who knew him before he discovered the drugs. He may have Allies, Duties (Involuntary), and Laziness or Compulsive Carousing. Mental disadvantages such as Manic-Depressive and Odious Personal Habits are also not uncommon.

**Most likely to say:** "Leave me alone, I need to ... think."

## THE SWARTHY FOREIGNER

Although many foreigners have been taught how to live in a Civilized Fashion by western nations that take on the White Man's Burden, they are all primitives at heart. While some of these people may be decent and hard-working, others seek nothing more than to subvert the empire, and everyone in it! Swarthy foreigners may possess

forbidden knowledge, follow barbaric religions, or peddle drugs to the upper classes; they are likely to be party to nefarious conspiracies, and to seduce innocents to their corrupt ways,

Social Stigma (Swarthy foreigner) may be negated by Status in the case of Indian or African princes, especially if well-educated at English institutions. Voice, Charisma, and skill at Hypnosis is common in tricksters who seek to subvert by force of personality, as is Sex Appeal. They may be owed several Favors from important people. Duty (Deity) motivates priests of secret foreign religions, who also often have Fanaticism and No Sense of Humor, while Duty (Involuntary) is likely in those under exotic foreign curses. Allies amongst other swarthy foreigners are common.

**Most likely to say:** "Memsahib, I have your best wishes at heart, if you will only be listening to my words for one moment."

## FEAR OF THE FOREIGNER

The humanist mood of the enlightenment, with its ideas that all men were born equal, encouraged many Jews, Africans, and members of Europe's lower classes to hope for better treatment. Anthropologists of the 18th century instead sought scientific backup for social prejudices via theories of racial superiority. "Independently of all political institutions," William Smellie wrote in his 1790 *Philosophy of Natural History*, "Nature herself has formed the human species into castes and ranks." By this time, European naturalists had decided that the ape was the "closest animal to man, and that the black man was closer to the ape than was the white man.

Victorians also drew a sense of moral superiority from England's status as a great world power. Imperialism and colonialism became closely entwined with patriotism in their eyes; the path to greatness lay through world domination. Many truly believed that lesser nations should be grateful for the chance to live under the British yoke, and to be introduced to democracy and civilization. Victorian fear of their sexuality and their "bestial appetites" led them to compare themselves constantly to "those beneath us," the uneducated working classes with their mobs and drunkenness, or the uncivilized foreigners with their lewd pagan religions. The new "science" of phrenology even showed conclusively that the skulls of members of different races (for example,

the Irish), were less developed than their English cousins.

Within Europe, men and women of different races rarely mixed. Unless born in the colonies or serving in the armed forces, most Europeans would *never* meet a non-European, relying on print or word-of-mouth for information about these "swarthy foreign devils." This information was often sensationalist, dwelling on rituals such as suttee (the Hindu custom of a wife being cremated on her husband's funeral pyre), lewd sexual customs of the "Hottentot Venus" (as reported by licentious European anthropologists), and barbaric acts of warfare. Savage native uprisings such as the Indian Mutiny (1857), the Opium Wars (1839-1858), and Gordon's defeat at Khartoum (1884) drove home the lesson that the foreigner was an untrustworthy ally and a dangerous foe.

Although Victorians accepted in principle that all men were brothers, regardless of race, creed, or nationality, many doubted secretly whether this could be true. However, toward the end of the 19th century, attitudes began to change. The first nonwhite MP (Dadabhai Naoraji) was elected to parliament in 1892, and even Queen Victoria developed a close friendship with Munshi Abdul Karim, her Indian secretary, during her declining years, much to the fury of her other courtiers.

## THE VENGEFUL CREATION

Someone or something seeks revenge upon its creator. This may be an actual physical creation, such as a robot or monster that has escaped from a laboratory, but could also be someone who was molded (possibly via mesmerism or brainwashing) by a careful patron, who seeks revenge now that he has his freedom. The monster may be capable of listening to reason, but he will not be satisfied until his thirst for revenge has been quenched.

Use the *Creation* template (p. STM33) for this character type. Fanaticism, Obsession (Revenge), On the Edge, and Bloodlust are likely in the more aggressive creatures. Social Stigma (creation), Unnatural Feature, and various physical disadvantages may also apply. A creature's skills are likely to be primitive, such as Tracking, Stealth, and Intimidation, but he may also be self-educated, if his intellect is at least human.

**Most likely to say:** Nothing articulate; most creations are incapable of speech.



## PLOT SEEDS

### The Infernal Combustion Engine

Members of the company are contacted by a friend who has wagered large amounts of money on a great steampunk vehicle race, and is concerned by reports that another entrant has built an unstoppable engine. The suspect inventor's laboratory, deep under the streets of London, is an old temple to Mithras. Investigation proves that he has made a pact with the devil, and that the fire-box of his steam engine (made of sealed lead, imprinted with pentagrams) is powered by the force of the inferno itself!

### The Black Veil

The adventurers are forced to seek shelter in Schloss Drachenberg, home of the infamous Prussian industrialist Clara von Meissen, when their airship crashes in an electrical storm. Von Meissen, whose veil is said to hide the ghastly ravages of a terrible wasting disease, accepts their presence with a bad grace, setting strict limits on which parts of the house are out of bounds. But the Schloss has other visitors too, including various prominent European statesmen.

Von Meissen's patronage of archaeologists and researchers in pursuit of the secrets of longevity has finally paid off, and she plots to bribe world leaders with immortality to grant her

trade agreements, making her the, de facto leader of a world capitalist cartel. Behind locked doors lurk her private laboratories, and the cages where experimental failures are left to die. But the true side effects of the treatment (megalomania, rotting flesh, and a terrible lust for life) are beginning to show on the dark lady herself.

### Legacy of the Cannon

The Cannon is the nickname given to a violin that once belonged to Paganini, the infamous virtuoso who claimed to have sold his soul to the devil. After being cloistered in Genoa for years, it has been lent to a brilliant young English musician who grew up in British India. The PCs, attending one of his private concerts at a friend's country house, are struck by the intensity of the performance. Later that night, he is murdered in a locked room. All signs are that the instrument is possessed, and that the murder was supernatural in nature. In fact, the sinister head footman (of Indian origin) has used his knowledge of the house's secret passages to destroy the violinist due to family enmities from their time in the subcontinent. The violin is gorgeous, and innocent . . . probably . . . and there will be a diplomatic incident if it is not promptly returned to Italy.

# ATMOSPHERE AND PLOTTING

Gothic stories are the popular literature of the 19th century, so a gothic game is the Victorian equivalent to a modern-day cinematic scenario: conventions owe more to fiction than to gritty historical realism. It is useful to bear this in mind when resolving actions "on the fly." Including familiar clichés helps to orient players to the cinematic tone. More than horror, these stories thrive on *terror*, that primal fear of the dark and the unknown which builds in layers of suspicion and spine-chilling mystery, drawing investigators into a web of darkness. Horror is more immediate, relying on shocking revelations instead of uncertainties.

As well as growing terror, melodrama plays an important part in gothic horror. Stories are emotional, so any possible encouragement of players' emotional involvement with the setting will help to set the tone. This is a genre in which wild overdramatics not only work but are encouraged! High-strung investigators are expected to declaim their woes to the heavens, clutch at their fevered brows, threaten evildoers with the full force of the law, and verbalize their inner fears! This applies equally to NPCs.

The challenge for a horror GM is to communicate the atmosphere and get the players to buy in. If they are to feel intrigued and threatened, the mysteries must be compelling. This chapter offers concrete ways to build a sense of sinister mystery, and highlights common plot twists. It also discusses how a GM can cooperate with players to create a creepy, gothic atmosphere, building tension through a scenario.

## HOOKING THE CHARACTERS

Gothic writers were often subtle and eager to cut to the chase, so the conventions include plot hooks that can seem contrived. As a twist, it may be an NPC who receives the odd letter, has the terrible dream, or is employed to travel to the distant location, so that only after something terrible happens to him do the PCs, his friends, begin to investigate.

## COINCIDENCE

The party are all in the same place when something terrible occurs, which gives them a common interest in investigating. If companions are not of a similar social class, lower classes might be in service to other party members, because it is still scandalous for upper and lower classes to mix socially in this era. Or perhaps it wasn't such a coincidence that they were all in the same place. What if an antagonist deliberately invited adventurers to the event... because he has *plans* for them?

### Disaster!

Not only has coincidence collected the company, but a terrible accident forces them to stumble into the plot. Perhaps their ship is wrecked on the rocks of a brooding mist-shrouded island, or their carriage crashes on a mountain trail, leaving them no option but to seek help at the ruined castle ...

## LETTERS FROM OLD FRIENDS

In this era of epistolary elegance, people frequently wrote long and detailed letters to acquaintances. Receiving a letter from an old friend or family member who asks for help or informs of a new discovery is grounds to go and investigate. Immediately, the plot becomes personal. Suspicion might also be ignited by an old family journal or a friend's diary, forwarded to one of the party after the writer's untimely demise.

## STRANGE DREAMS

Sensitives may suffer bad dreams when a close friend or relative is in terrible trouble. Such intense, uncontrolled attacks of clairvoyance are not unusual, and it is commonly believed that people who have very strong emotional links may be able, *in extremis*, to pick up on each other's circumstances. If the nightmare is especially vivid, dreamers will be motivated to investigate, even if only to check that the subject of the dreams is well.



## PROFESSIONAL CIRCUMSTANCE

The unusual investigation or mission to the strange location may be connected with professional obligations. A doctor or lawyer might be asked to pay a "house visit" to a friend of a friend who recommended him. As happened in *Dracula*, a mysterious foreigner might employ a protagonist, requiring him to travel to a distant (and isolated) location.

### TAKING THE HORROR OUT OF THE GOTHIC

Ladies and gentlemen, we present for your viewing pleasure a popular entertainment quite untouched by the dark and dismal dolor of the lurid and licentious leaflets of shocking revelation (that you can buy for tuppence ha'penny on your way out of the door this evening.) So please offer a warm welcome to those quintessential paradigms of thrilling and brilliant spectacles ... the penny dreadfuls!

#### The Gothic Detective

You will believe that one man can make a difference. Prepare to be Astounded as men and women, using only their native powers of reason and rationality, uncover foul Criminal Elements and foil devious plots against queen and country.

#### The Gothic Adventure

Gasp at the brave deeds of those men of action who dare Take Arms against supernatural monsters and villainous scoundrels! Undeterred by fear or Common-Sense, where innocence is threatened, these True Gentlemen will stop at nothing to do the decent thing.

#### The Historical Gothic

Enter into the Terrible secrets of the past, and learn of the Hideous and Barbaric cruelty of wicked barons and bloodthirsty Papist inquisitors. Cower from the uncouth evils of the Ravening specters and goblins that lurk in ancient forests.

#### The Gothic Fairy Story

Gentlemen! A novel entertainment for your wives and daughters is also presented. Watch them smile at the gay antics of delightful Fairy Creatures (as depicted by Mr. Richard Dadd) who bring cheer and solace to good children everywhere, and visit terror on the undeserving!

## UNCANNY COINCIDENCES

After adventurers have swallowed the initial plot hook, they need suspicious occurrences to investigate. The more they learn, the closer they are to appreciating the true horror of the situation. In gothic melodramas, signature events may telegraph that all is not well in a seemingly tranquil location. Minor events eventually form a trail of evidence indicating that something unnatural has occurred.

### NATURE REACTS IN AN UNNATURAL WAY

Animals, children, and innocents are often held to be sensitive to spiritual purity or corruption. If natural elements, such as plants, animals, or the weather, are acting oddly, then there must be a reason. Local people, especially those who live close to the land, will be the first to notice such oddities and may have their own (superstitious) explanations. Or they might have lived in the area for so long that they believe it is normal, and only outsiders (the party) who can compare with their own experiences will know that it is not.

### ASTONISHING SIMILARITIES

Two people unexpectedly bear a striking similarity. This indicates that (however improbably) they are somehow related, possibly as a result of secret scandals in the past which are only now coming to light. Alternatively, the people might be quite aware of their relationship, but trying to hide it from anyone else. Does the cook remind someone of the escaped convict? Does the corpse of the man-wolf have a facial structure similar to that of the quiet lecturer? Or perhaps an old portrait strongly resembles someone previously encountered. If it depicts a known ancestor, it may imply that the correspondence is more than skin-deep: if a man looks like his great-grandfather who was notoriously cruel and corrupt, perhaps he shares that trait.

### Doubles

The most extreme form of similarity is the presence of an actual double. This might be an identical twin (not uncommon in stage-magicians or villains in detective stories), or perhaps the result of something far more sinister: actions of a supernatural entity, or a consequence of terrible scientific experiments. Alternatively, patchy memory loss or suppressed split personalities could make it seem as though there were two separate people where really there is one.

## THE LADY VANISHES

Someone disappears, with no explanation. Perhaps a traveler never reaches his destination, a servant is mysteriously replaced one morning, or the flickering light in the tower room goes out and the eerie laugh is never heard again. Secret doorways and passages in an old house can make it possible for people to vanish from apparently sealed rooms, or travel across the house much more quickly than would be normally possible.

## UNEXPLAINED CHANGES

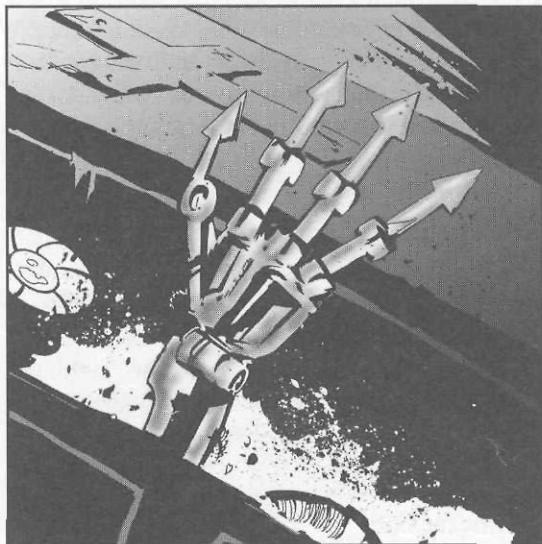
Something changes for no apparent reason. Perhaps an urn in a hallway is facing in the opposite direction from the previous day, all the mirrors in a house are turned to face the wall, or a person known to the party does something completely out of character. The unexplained change is a sign that something secret and sinister is going on behind the facade. There has been movement and action "off-screen" while party members were not around, and someone is trying to hide it.

## PERMISSION TO BE TERRIFIED

Classic Victorian ghost stories evoke precisely the spine-tingling chills the screampunk GM seeks. Creating this atmosphere requires players' willingness to let their characters show distress. Heroes in gothic stories are often afraid, so players should feel invited to allow characters to react

with fear and horror to the darkness they uncover. Scaring the players is useful only if it increases their enjoyment of the campaign.

A good ghost story comes alive when it is read aloud. A spooky mood comes from storytelling technique: a lowered voice; a careful pause to make eye contact with each listener just before reaching a critical point in the plot; descriptions that emphasise senses other than sight, heightening the sense of isolation and mystery. This mode is difficult to sustain throughout a scenario, but it can heighten the tension of mysterious dreams or visions, or climactic confrontations. Some GMs also find other ways to evoke ghost stories and horror films, such as keeping the lighting low, playing atmospheric music, or using candles.



## GETTING PERSONAL WITH PCs

Players are drawn into a game when their characters have strong personal motivations to dive into an investigation. Plot hooks and scenarios can be tailored closely to the party. Perhaps one member's ancestors have left him a more mysterious inheritance than mere worldly goods, the villain is secretly blackmailing another, or a close friend writes to a third with a desperate plea for help based on past associations.

With personal stakes leading the party onward (for example: "Why is my ancestry involved in this?" "How does the villain know so much about me?" or "Who is leaving me these strange notes, and what do they mean?") players will find it easier to invest emotionally in the game. Slowly and inevitably, adventurers

reach the conclusion that their involvement is no coincidence ...

### Skeletons in the Closet

One source of plot hooks is to generate dark secrets as part of all backgrounds. As this is so appropriate for the genre, a GM might require screampunk PCs to be generated with at least one Secret (p. B238) or Enemy (p. B39), or give more points for these disadvantages to make them attractive to players. Has someone gotten his position, wealth, or contacts through lies? How many rivals has he broken on his way to power? Has he been guilty of plagiarism? Has he ever caused someone's death, even accidentally? Has he broken a solemn agreement (especially one made in his youth, in a foreign country)?

## WELCOME TO NORMALITY, HERE'S YOUR PARASOL

As well as calling for Fright Checks, a GM can help players to sense when their characters might be horrified at atrocities by providing some everyday moments for comparison. It's useful to let a group settle into a game with a few scenes representing the party's normal daily lives (as part of the sane, stable society of which they will become the defenders). This is especially true in a new campaign, in which players have not yet acquired a sense of the setting. Normality also represents safety, so interspersing a mundane scene between more tense moments will slow a game's pace and give players a chance to think over what their characters have seen, in a less threatening environment. The tension between the known and the unknown, and between normality and strangeness, provides much of the basis for gothic horror.

## DREAMS, MADNESS, AND DRUG-INDUCED RAMBLINGS

Dreams and visions can be used to pass information to adventurers that is not available through rational avenues of investigation. Party members (or susceptible NPCs) may undergo mesmerism or experiment with hallucinogens in order to recover crucial information. Others may deliberately dose themselves with opiates or alcohol, to feed an addiction or simply to block out a horrific memory.

Both dreams and hallucinations often have surreal qualities, revealing emotional truths about both the situation and the dreamer. Describing these altered states of mind provides opportunities for a GM to use rich and evocative language, building atmosphere by sketching out subconscious fears.

## MAKING AN EXAMPLE OF NPCs

Another hook for involvement is empathy with NPCs, possibly as romantic interests. If the protagonists are chivalrous, adorable victims may need their protection; if they are wide-eyed innocents, noble figures may offer to protect their honor. Another possibility is to have the NPC be deliberately rude, obnoxious, or obstructive, or to "steal" a party member's betrothed. (GM note: it is easier to predict whom players will dislike than when they will take a shine to someone.) Don't kill off players' favorite NPCs lightly (that will destroy their link to the game world), but hints of potential threats may inspire action to protect loved ones.

Throwaway NPCs are also a way for a GM to show that a villain is dangerous without needing to harm party members. If they see a young maid-servant being slapped across the face by a housekeeper for a minor infraction, then they don't need to be told that the housekeeper harbors psychopathic qualities. When a well-respected NPC does or says something, it is a way for the GM to telegraph to players that the party would also consider it socially acceptable.

## TOWARD A CLIMACTIC CONFRONTATION!

In order for a game session to feel satisfying for players, there needs to be a dramatic resolution. Not every aspect of the background story has to come out, but all threats should be either realized or thwarted. Villains must be accounted for, whether they emerge triumphant, perish in the web of their own deceit, or are successfully foiled by the party. A few unresolved plot lines or a cliffhanger ending can lead into new adventures for future sessions, but a melodrama eventually needs closure.

## PACING

Deciding which scenes to abstract and which to roleplay in detail controls the pace of a game. When pacing is slow, every minor event in a scene is given on-screen time, including detailed reports of separate adventures or a painstaking account of a journey across London by hansom cab. Combat, with its second-by-second description of events, is highly detailed. By contrast, other actions or journeys could abstract days of traveling into one sentence. ("Are we there yet?")

Highlight the scenes that emphasize the themes of the genre most strongly. This could mean encouraging players to roleplay at least one "mundane" scene, and then other scenes during which tension mounts slowly. Slow pacing is often more atmospheric, allowing observers to drink in details and respond to everything they see. Faster pacing is useful in moving players on from one significant scene to the next, so as not to spend too long in descriptions that will break the mood.

A well-paced game moves smoothly from the initial plot hook to the resolution without boring anyone, and within the allotted time. This should be a cooperative effort. Other than checking to see if people are enjoying themselves, there are no hard and fast rules for how to do this. If players are moving too quickly toward a conclusion (the game might finish too soon), extra scenes or

encounters can be added to slow the pace down. If the pace is moving too slowly, encounters can be abstracted (or dropped), or the game can be continued in another session. It's common for initial scenes to be slow-paced and conclusions to be much faster (partly because players are tired after several hours of gaming), but the midgame is largely under GM control.

## EXAMPLE SCENARIO LAYOUTS

These are three scenario layouts (the plot hook, pattern of tension buildup, and final resolution) for horror games. In each case, tension looms larger and larger, leading to a climactic confrontation, after which any survivors are irrevocably scarred from their experiences.

### From the Merely Uncanny to the Horrific Truth

The game starts with the players rooted in normality. Gradually they are drawn into an investigation, and tension mounts slowly as clues are found that point to unnatural forces at work. Adventurers are isolated, with few resources to help them combat the unknown. The reality they thought they understood is inexorably undermined, and finally a shocking final revelation confirms their worst fears!

This type of scenario relies on tension building step-by-step to a fever pitch. By the end of the game, hysterical overreactions will seem the only appropriate response.

### Bait and Switch

This scenario ends with a shocking twist: it isn't the climax that the players expected. The game starts much as the uncanny investigation above, but with stronger hints about where the plot line might lead. Clues are duly found and tension built up, but players are encouraged to feel that they know what will happen and it will be manageable. But when the end does come, it is unexpectedly traumatic! Their assumptions were wrong from the beginning.

### Beginning With a Dark Revelation

This is a much darker plot pattern than either of those above. The game begins with a shocking revelation, to which the party is witness. Tension mounts as they try to come to terms with their knowledge, but find only that the horror is as bad as they had imagined, if not worse. There is a desperate struggle against time, and against fate. After terrible trials, they are led to believe that they have suppressed the threat. Then in one final, wrenching climax, they find that all their efforts were in vain.

## FOUR RANDOM QUESTIONS: A GMING TECHNIQUE

As the tension in a game mounts, players are inclined to find sinister mysteries or connections in the most mundane of places. This increasing paranoia reflects how characters' heightened disquiet is affecting their mental balance.

The random question technique helps to generate a sense of uncanny secrets within a game. It's very simple. Instead of starting with the explanation and working out what clues might be found, instead the GM puts himself in the position of the campaigners and asks, "What are the questions they could be asking themselves?" The aim is to brainstorm four simple questions based on these motifs of mystery, "Who," "What," "Where," and "Why?" These random questions are generated without considering the rest of the scenario, giving extra details that may need to be added to the background. Of course, some (or even ah!) of the uncanny effects may have purely mundane causes, and others will remain unanswered forever. Others may inspire the GM to embellish the main plot so as to include them.

Players, being suspicious types, often suspect that any detail, even a seemingly minor one, that the GM specifically highlights is bound to be significant to the plot. It is entirely possible that some of these random mysteries won't be connected; perhaps the lazy new maid really does turn the mirror to the wall because it gathers less dust that way, or someone disappears for mundane reasons.

For example, here are four randomly scribbled questions, with the relevant motifs/themes/character types labeled beside them.

"Who is the strange librarian?" (Sinister servants)

"Why are there no swans on the lake today?" (Animals acting strangely)

"Where have all the mirrors gone?" (Something missing that should be present)

"What was the noise in the crypt last night?" (Prisons and crypts)

In order to work the elements in this example into an existing story, extra props are required: a librarian, a lake (with or without waterfowl), rooms where mirrors might hang, and a crypt. If any of these is implausible, substitute a replacement that uses the same motif.



## OTHER GURPS RESOURCES

### ***GURPS Steampunk* and *GURPS Horror***

both contain plenty of useful information that can be plumbed to flesh out and expand games of gothic horror with a steampunk component. But it isn't absolutely necessary to place all gothic games in a "straight" Victorian setting.

### **VICTORIAN & REGENCY CROSSOVERS**

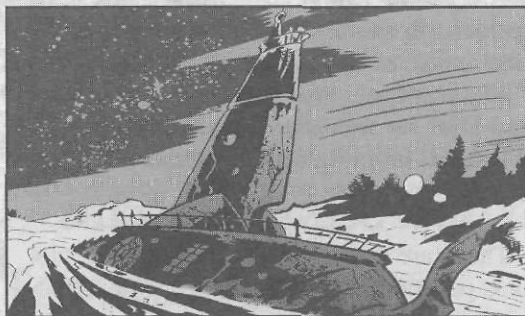
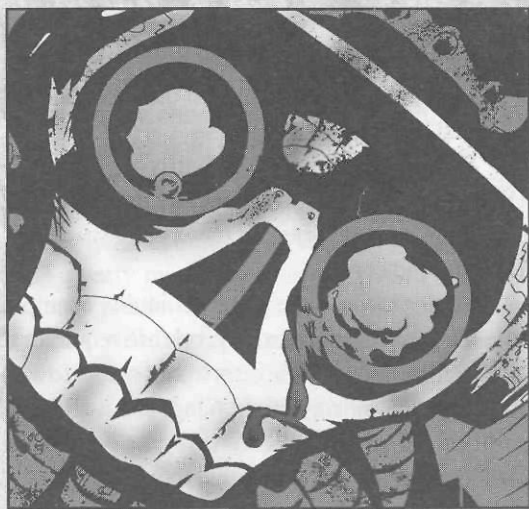
These sourcebooks use historical sellings that cover the same ground as the gothic age. Scenarios with a touch of gothic horror (and even steampunk) will fit like a glove.

#### **GURPS Scarlet Pimpernel**

According to the Marquis de Sade (that well-known literary critic), the gothic movement was a direct response to the turmoil which had been erupting across Europe. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the bravest and best that an industrializing England has to offer, ventures into the medieval strongholds of Catholic Europe to free innocents from both the embrace of Madame la Guillotine and from the high turrets of cruel continental aristocrats. (This would work well with the Cabal as antagonists.)

#### **GURPS Goblins**

*GURPS Goblins* is a grimy and satirical portrait of Regency London. It is the cusp of the 18th and 19th centuries and Europe is poised between revolutions, and on the brink of the Victorian age. Goblin engineers and inventors are gleefully polluting the atmosphere, and producing great fire-breathing mechanical wonders ...



#### **GURPS Castle Falkenstein**

A late Victorian setting with magic, faeries, and dragons, Gothic adventures in Castle Falkenstein's wondrous world will often include supernatural entities. Bom evil forces and power-hungry Steam Lords seek to bring the world under their sway unless upright men, women, and faeries can prevent it.

#### **GURPS Old West**

The villainous industrialists (railroad barons), innocent heroines, and brave investigators are as comfortable in the wild west as in the slums of London. Dark supernatural forces may be Native American spirits, but the struggle between barbarism and civilization continues in the New World.

#### **GURPS Who's Who 1 and 2**

Character statistics, biographies, and plot ideas are included for prominent Victorians, as well as notables from other periods of history.

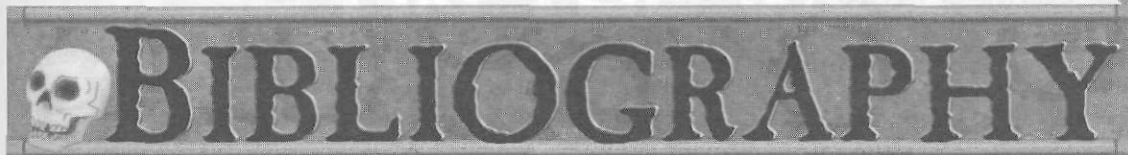
## HORROR RESOURCES

#### **GURPS Voodoo & GURPS Cabal**

Nefarious conspiracies, disturbing foreign magics of ancient origin, and forbidden knowledge abound. Horror campaigns featuring organized magical antagonists with terrifying supernatural powers might draw from the Cabal (which thrives in the Victorian era), or from the Voodoo lodges (possibly the *eminences grises* behind foreign plans for world domination).

#### **GURPS Undead, GURPS Spirits, GURPS Creatures of the Night, GURPS Blood Types**

Useful resources for GMs who choose to use supernatural entities, especially ghosts, demons, and vampires, in their gothic horror.



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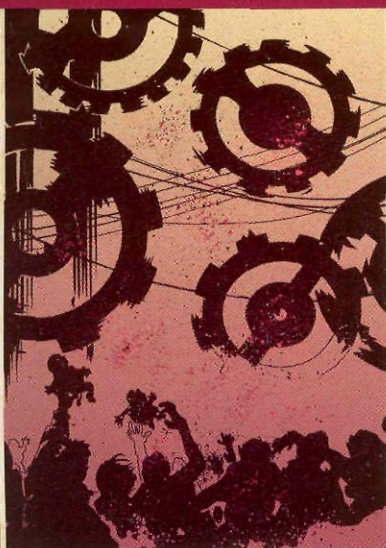
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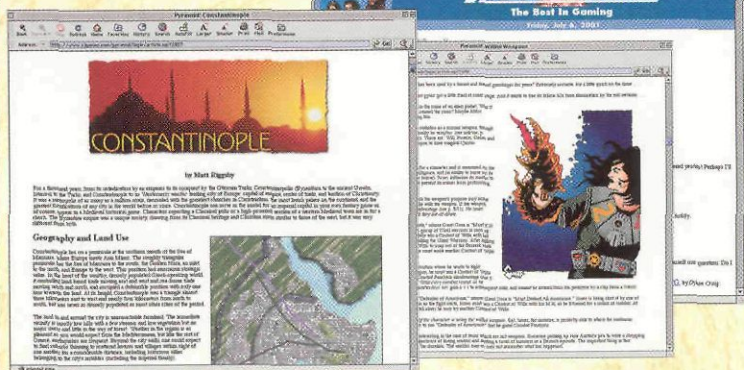
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TOM BIONDOLILLO

### WARNING:

Contained in this slender volume are Horrors so great that Unmarried Women, or those in Delicate Condition, should read with Great Caution, and Protective Eye Wear if available.

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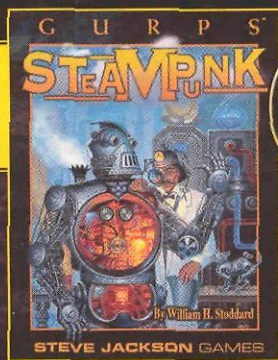
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