

HOW TO PLAY GOTHIC HORROR



THE HORROR GENRE, AND GOTHIC horror in particular, is an extraordinary challenge for a GM, since sitting around a table with friends is not inherently frightening. More than other kinds of tabletop gaming, horror needs its protagonists to react in ways appropriate to the genre. As a prospective player, it is up to you to make the GM's job possible; here are some things you can do.

WRITING BRANDES STODDARD
COLOR ART MELISSA TILLERY
EDITING JAMES J. HAECK
LAYOUT ERIC LIFE-PUTNAM

LET YOURSELF FEEL FEAR

It is easy to laugh off the GM's efforts to establish the mood—to make a joke and burst the bubble. This is a universal way to release tension and discomfort. If you are doing this, though, you may not really want to play Gothic horror, and you are spoiling things for everyone else. In other contexts, it would be called heckling. If someone else at the table does this, politely ask them to stop, because that player is spoiling your effort to engage with the game's mood.

This is hard to accept. Allowing yourself to be afraid does not feel "cool" or heroic at the time. On the other hand, if you never let yourself feel threatened by a foe, the victory does not feel as rich. If you meet the GM halfway and let yourself feel fear now, you will improve the game for

everyone and feel like much more of a hero (or much more of a tragedy) in the end.

This does not mean that your character is or should be a coward, only that courage is not an absolute. As the saying goes, courage not the absence of fear, but action in spite of it. Therefore, be afraid and desperate, so that you can be valorous. Do not back down from undertaking adventures, but do not laugh off the trepidation your character should feel.

ACCEPT A TRAGIC OUTCOME FROM THE START

Gothic horror loves nothing so well as a tragic end. All horror is about the protagonists facing the punishment for their personal or communal sins, and this is particularly true in the Gothic mode. The exception is that of the innocent, a role that appears in horror, and suffers terrible things in order to showcase the awful truth of the antagonist's power and the depth of the antagonist's depravity.

You might lose control of your character. Depending on the setting, this might involve your character becoming a monster like a vampire or werewolf under the GM's control. Your character might die horribly. In traditional gaming modes, many players find this upsetting, but Gothic horror calls for a different approach. Accept and embrace dark outcomes, even if it means you have to start a new character. Your character might be one of the eggs that goes into this Gothic-horror omelet. That metaphor is, appropriately, horrifying.

Between game sessions, spend some time thinking about your character as an author would, rather than assuming the character's view directly. Come up with at least one tragic ending suitable to what has happened in the story, and that feels honest to your vision of the character. Discuss it with the GM. The GM gains insight into your perception of the character and the story; it might also be a direction that the GM chooses to steer the campaign.



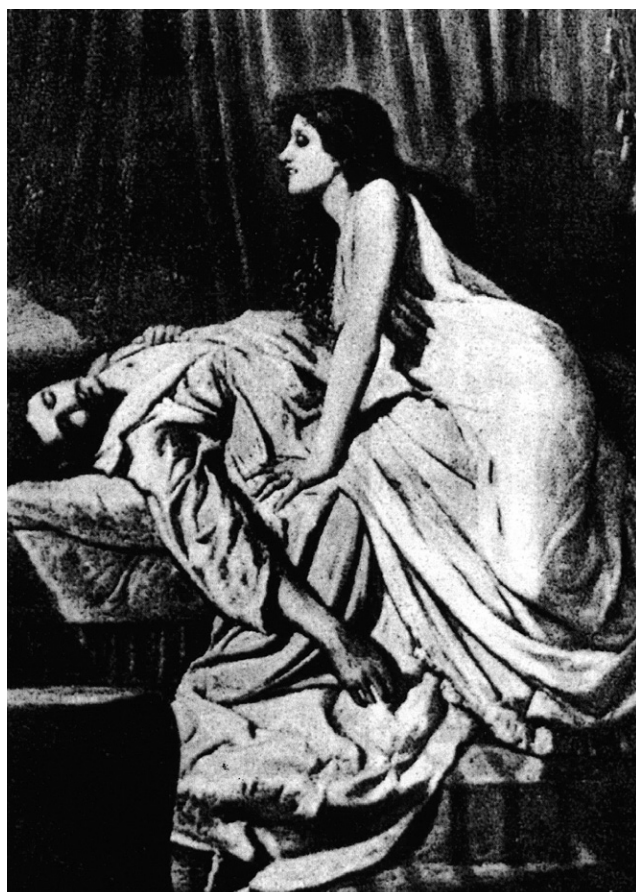
Need help coming up with a tragic outcome? Choose from or roll 1d12 on the table below. Let me reiterate: always communicate with your GM.

1. A fiend offers me something I truly want more than my own soul. (All the better if it is for someone else's benefit.)
2. I finally meet my nemesis in a duel, slay him, and afterward discover his true, heroic nature.
3. As my family's manor burns, I try to save so many people or things that I burn with it.
4. The ritual to bind our nemesis consumes one crucial component: me.
5. As I try to master ever greater spells, I learn too late that my reach exceeds my grasp.
6. My nemesis distracts me at a crucial moment with a shocking revelation. As I am reeling in shock, she runs me through.
7. While I am under a curse or in disguise as an enemy, I encounter a loved one. I suffer a mortal wound while trying not to hurt someone I care about.

8. Our nemesis is too powerful to defeat with force of arms. As he steps onto a bridge over a deep ravine to pursue us, I go forth to face him, so that my allies can cut the ropes.
9. I learn to listen to dire warnings of cursed gems, statuary, or artifacts only after it is much too late.
10. My fear of impending mortality drives me to dreadful experiments that turn the common folk against me.
11. In trying to subvert the prophecy of my loved one's demise, I inadvertently fulfil it and ruin us both.
12. Rash words lead to a rift between an ally and me, pride stops me from making amends, and our duel is my undoing.

PASSION IS GOTHIC

The vehicle of tragedy and horror, within Gothic horror, are the passions of the heroes and villains. Those passions also drive the heroes to heights of



virtue. As a player in a Gothic horror game, your character is rarely, if ever, indifferent or lukewarm. Love, hatred, joy, fear, even icy self-control: why have drama when you can have melodrama? Display as much intensity as you can without making the other players uncomfortable. If you need help coming up with passions to drive your character, look up the Seven Deadly Sins. Never pick Sloth, and only pick Lust if you know that it is acceptable to the whole group. Playing Gothic horror does not change your obligations to other players at the table.

Think of your Ideal, your Bond, and your Flaw as three lenses through which to view anything that happens. You do not need to protect the safety and security of your character; those were lost from the moment the campaign started. Risk everything, because you have already embraced a possible tragedy.

This may mean surrendering some control over your character's actions. Heroes in Gothic horror can be deceived, intimidated, and persuaded by NPCs, even without overt magic. Be prepared to go along with the outcomes of Charisma checks used against you, even if they are not what you want to do. This suggestion may be unusually abhorrent to players, and should probably be discussed with the entire group before assuming PCs can be swayed by Charisma checks.

EVERYONE HAS A SECRET

Unless your character is a true innocent, you should have a secret that you need to protect. Maybe you need to protect it from everyone, or maybe just from people other than your adventuring companions. Remember, though, that you have already embraced a tragic outcome, so enjoy the possible fall into ruin when your secret comes to light, and the challenging constraint that the secret presents until then.

Need help coming up with a dark secret? Choose from or roll 1d12 on the table below. Talk to your GM to make sure that your secret represents a serious violation in the game's setting.

1. I killed a romantic rival and lied to my romantic interest about it.
2. When a monster attacked a family member, I fled in terror rather than fighting back.
3. I once possessed true faith in a divine power, but now I am only paying lip service to the religion.
4. I was apprenticed to a cruel master. Everything I have now, I stole when I fled.
5. I used to serve a vampire, bringing victims to sate her awful thirst, because she paid well.
6. I defiled a graveyard, robbing its graves out of simple greed. The restless dead took their revenge on the nearby village rather than me.
7. Everything about me is a lie—I claimed the persona of a dying person I met in the wilds.
8. I had a flash of a prescient vision; I know how a close friend will die.
9. I let someone else go to the gallows for a crime I committed.
10. I bear a terrible curse, which can spread to anyone who gets close to me.
11. My family tree has given rise to vicious monsters—and their wickedness earned the wealth and status we now enjoy.
12. My creative muse demands a price in blood and tears.

Optional Rule: Innocence

If your GM likes, Innocence might have a mechanical impact as well. This option does not cost a feat; it cannot be gained in the course of play, and definitely might be lost. It also carries some drawbacks.

- ▶ Whenever an Innocent and one or more allies would roll a saving throw against the charmed or frightened condition, the Innocent rolls first, with advantage. On a success, the Innocent's allies also gain advantage on their saving throws against that effect.
- ▶ Further, when an effect would cause an Innocent's ally to harm her, the Innocent may call the ally back to his senses. As a reaction, the Innocent rolls a Charisma (Persuasion) check against the saving throw DC of the original effect. On a success, the effect on the ally ends.
- ▶ The Innocent is less aware of the darker parts of human nature, and makes Wisdom (Insight) checks contested against Charisma (Deception) checks with disadvantage.
- ▶ The most reprehensible villains recognize the Innocent's moral clarity as a threat, and seek to undermine or destroy the Innocent before any other target.

In a setting of Gothic horror, the world wants to destroy purity by luring Innocents into corruption. Lost innocence cannot be regained. Make sure you and your GM have a clear understanding of what kinds of actions can bring Innocence to an end. If there is no real danger of losing Innocence, there is no struggle or interest in sustaining it.





SO YOU WANT TO BE AN INNOCENT

As I've suggested, there are sometimes true innocents in horror fiction. The most common form of this is the Final Girl of slasher movies, but in tabletop games this can be any sort of character. Clerics and paladins are the clearest candidates for the role, as Gothic horror embraces sincere faith as a weapon and a shield against the things that go bump in the night. Those who use arcane magic have typically lost innocence from first principles, though this trend does not have to be true—as always, discuss it with your GM.

Before declaring that you want to play an innocent, you should discuss the matter with the rest of the group—having more than one such character in a party misses and dilutes the point. There's no implied promise that being an innocent protects you from any kind of danger, except possibly temptation; you are still just as subject to knives, fangs, and foul sorcery as anyone else. Your role in the party and in the setting is to inspire others to valor and indirectly remind them of what their flaws have cost them. The innocent is the group's heart and moral center, and should always push to aid those in need, regardless of the risk or cost. All Gothic horror characters suffer for their passions—the innocent's is Altruism.

FINAL WORDS

Gothic horror is an exciting, romantic genre, with a long history as both an inspiration and subject for tabletop gaming. It is easy and practical to violate genre conventions, but the game won't be the kind of fun you signed up for if you do that. Support the tone and mood of the shared fiction, from basic table manners to how you imagine your character, and make the game experience better for everyone.

INSPIRATIONAL MATERIAL

There is a huge wealth of existing material available to guide you in the genre conventions of Gothic horror. At minimum, pick up the following.

- ▶ Hammer Horror films, especially *Dracula* (1958) and *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957). Beware falling into camp depictions of the genre ... though sometimes a little levity can go a long way.
- ▶ Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "The Raven."
- ▶ Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*.
- ▶ Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 📖