

CREATING GOTHIC ADVENTURES FOR HIGH-LEVEL CHARACTERS

RUNNING A GOTHIC horror adventure for high-level characters carries an inherent contradiction. High-level adventures have equally high stakes. The fate of the multiverse is often at stake at the end of long-running campaigns, and the PCs face threats like archdevils and liches with ambitions of godhood. The PCs have learned powerful spells and acquired potent magical items that allow them to traverse the planes with ease or annihilate an entire village on a whim. A Gothic horror adventure is smaller and more personal, but the stakes are no lower.

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Gothic horror has a different mood and sets expectations that differ from those of traditional fantasy: it is an offshoot of Romantic literature that examines themes of the exotic medieval, glorification of the past, decay, and an idealization of the power of the individual.* A Game Master can draw upon those tropes to bring the players into the genre and world. In other words, when designing an adventure, don't be afraid to play to the players' expectations of genre and draw on the clichés of the horror genre. Once you have established those expectations you can then subvert them and introduce twists that surprise the players.

THE VILLAIN

By the time a campaign reaches level 15 or higher, the player characters have fought and defeated dozens of monster types, stopped the machinations of villains, thrown monkey wrenches in the carefully laid plans of evil organizations, and most likely felled a dragon or two. At the core of a Gothic horror adventure is the villain—a powerful yet tortured creature who desires to control all within its grasp and to reclaim something that it lost centuries ago. Perhaps that is a lost love, a lost treasure, or perhaps the villain seeks to undo a curse that not only gives it eternal life but also condemns it to an eternity of misery and torment.

If the villain is the heart of the adventure, then the villain's tragedy is perforce the hook through which players become involved with the story. Three monsters powerful enough to be adversaries for a high level party include the **vampire** (CR 15), **mummy lord** (CR 15 or CR 16 in its lair), and the **lich** (CR 21 or CR 22 in its lair); others appear in the core rulebooks as well. However, an experienced GM knows to look beyond a monster's stat block when crafting a



villain. As with creating a setting and mood for a game, the GM should be unafraid to draw from stereotypes of the Gothic horror genre when creating their villains. For example, Count Dracula is an archetypal Gothic horror villain. The character of Dracula was inspired by Vlad Tepes ("Vlad the Impaler"), a noble who led a crusade against the Turks in the name of Christianity and in the defense of his homeland in the 15th Century. His desire to protect his people against invaders made him heroic, but his reputation for committing horrifying war crimes—in particular, his practice of impalement—tainted his legacy and inspired Bram Stoker to link him to his fictional Count Dracula.

An example of applying Gothic horror tropes to a standard monster is the **mummy lord**, a creature that usually elicits Egyptian or Middle Eastern motifs, even though many cultures mummified their dead, including cultures in South America, China, and more. Note that many classic Gothic horror tropes are rooted in Romantic views of British imperialism, so groups seeking to avoid misleading Orientalist interpretations of non-Western mysticism may find their options limited. For example, the Western view of the mummy's curse can be said to partake of anxieties about colonial uprising. Nonetheless, the mummy's

* For more on these themes, see Brandes Stoddard's "How to Play Gothic Horror," *EN World ENSider*, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/5488213>



curse is an evocative adventure hook that a GM can use following a party's successful looting of a tomb. The characters must not only contend with a powerful curse that robs them of their most powerful abilities but also a mummy lord that follows them, attacking with all its own undead power as well as with the undead legions that serve it.

Another option for creating a villain in the Gothic horror mold is to upgrade a lower CR monster such as the **banshee**. As a Gothic horror villain, a banshee might take the form of the spirit of a woman cursed by the gods. She cannot find peace and now her spirit haunts a sacred site such as a temple or torments her descendents. As the banshee is a CR 4 monster, upgrading it to be an appropriate challenge for a party of 15th-level characters will require increasing the banshee's hit points, attack bonuses, and damage; increasing the saving throw difficulties of features like Wail and Horrifying Visage; and adding the ability to cast spells and use metamagic abilities like a sorcerer. Game Masters can find that information in the core rulebooks.

The most important thing, though, is to make the villain more than the sum of its stat block. A properly executed villain has a history and appropriate motivations; a Gothic horror villain

in particular wants something, and usually that motivation is personal, as explained above. Finally, defeating the villain should require the players to do more than simply reduce the monster's hit points to zero. While that might be enough to banish the creature's spirit to the Astral Plane or stop it temporarily, the PCs can only truly defeat the villain when they discover how to put the creature's spirit to rest, and often that will require the PCs to complete a quest that explores the monster's history.

THE SETTING

Another key component of a Gothic horror adventure is its atmosphere and mood. Gothic horror is not a campaign setting or a set of rules; it's an atmosphere or mood that the Game Master creates. The mood of a Gothic adventure should create dread in the PCs and distrust of even the safest churches and temples. Game Masters can create that mood by choosing an appropriate setting and reminding the players that their



nemesis is always watching in the shadows. Time-worn clichés like the haunted house, the decaying castle, or the ancient ruins are shortcuts that indicate to the players the type of adventure you want to run and the genre’s expectations. Don’t avoid clichés, but use them to your advantage. For example, consider the following description:

A wolf bays at the moon, calling out to its pack. The moon rises full behind the tall spires of a decaying castle. The portcullis rises, and a carriage drawn by spectral horses dashes across the drawbridge, hurtling towards the village below in a thunder of hoofbeats and jingling of harness rings.

The above description is overflowing with clichés. In a novel or short story, that description is in fact so cliché that it should evoke for the reader a scene in a Mel Brooks movie. But in an RPG, that description is wholly appropriate, because an RPG needs to evoke the setting and mood for all players quickly and unambiguously. Clichés in this case are convenient shortcuts that establish mood and atmosphere. In fact, because vampires are the most clichéd villain in Gothic horror, they also make ideal villains for Gothic horror RPGs, because if they know a vampire is present, the players automatically infer mystery and ancient power and terrible curses that resonate. A vampire epitomizes the Gothic horror ideal.

In true Gothic fashion, the power and personality of the villain should permeate the land, the air, the water, and even the essence of magic in the area. The presence of such evil creates a new difficulty for the PCs as the location becomes a hindrance. Magic may become untrustworthy, reducing the ability of spellcasters to access high level spells; fighters may find their weapons no longer carry the full power of enchantments they relied upon in previous encounters. These effects should not be arbitrary; otherwise, the Game Master risks alienating her players. Players resent Game Masters who strip their characters of hard-earned abilities and spells. Therefore, the Game Master should seek to



balance the loss with a gain, and likewise balance despair with hope.

For example, in an area where a powerful lich has long resided, divination spells or conjuration spells may be less effective, but necromancy spells are much more powerful. Animals in the region no longer respond to the ranger’s or druid’s call to friendship. The bard cannot lift the spirits of the grim townspeople. The evil may be so great that the cleric’s rapport with her deity is strained and her prayers to replenish her spells go unheard.

Mechanically, spellcasters may lose access to their highest-level spell slots unless the spellcaster uses it to cast a spell from the necromancy school. Rangers and druids must use higher-level spell slots for *animal friendship* to affect the bests they encounter. Bards, hoping to inspire townsfolk, may find themselves despised as fools. After completing a long rest, clerics might only be able to regain half their spell slots, starting with the lowest-level spells. A raging barbarian may lose control completely and risk attacking party members. A formerly trusty +3 *longsword* may require the wielder to sacrifice some of his own hit points for the enchantment to function.



This loss could also take the form of a curse that gets progressively worse until the characters confront the villain and defeat him or her. The curse should start off as something strange but minor; for example, milk curdles in the presence of the characters. Later it gets worse: townsfolk turn against the PCs and the PCs have disadvantage on Charisma checks whenever they are interact with NPCs. As the curse worsens, magic items start functioning erratically, casting random spells instead of functioning properly. The curse will not only make the final confrontation more dangerous but also will raise the stakes and create a sense of urgency in the players.

SCOPE

The stakes of a Gothic horror are often more personal than those of other high-level adventures. It's a question of consequences. The villain's goal is personal to that villain—the villain wants something, craves it even, but is repeatedly or constantly denied that very thing by a curse or a twist of fate. The goal of the GM should be to make the scope of the threat smaller but risk to the characters greater. The villain may not want to destroy the multiverse, but he is a threat to the player characters and those they hold dear.

Make the story about the characters and how they relate to villain. The villain could be the ghost of a being they had slain early in the campaign. It could be the person that they'd failed to save. The connection between the villain and the heroes need not be obvious at first. Give the characters time to explore the villain's history and understand what created this villain and their connection to the event.

Count Dracula, one of the most famous villains in modern film and literature, is not looking to rule the world, destroy the world, or ascend to godhood. Vlad Tepes wanted to protect his homeland and that desire led him to destroy everything he loved. He still wished to dominate those around him, and his motivation is his own "noble" character. As an aristocrat, he retained the belief that he should control the lives of the peasants in his kingdom and that all things within his domain are his.

When designing a Gothic horror adventure, keep in mind the tropes of the genre and the limited scope of the adventure. Use those to your advantage as you create your villain, give her a backstory and how characters will discover those elements and use them to defeat the villain. When in doubt, steal from *Dracula*. 🧛‍🦇