Chapter 2: Briefly, The Rules

At dusk the untended cornfields began to ripple and heave. We expected the creatures to spill into the bare patch of backyard that separated the house from the fields. But they didn't.

Their wheezing howls, that inhuman crescendo, like teeth on chalkboards … We had only a dozen or so shots left and Grant, who had swallowed the last of his medicinals earlier that morning, began to shake. He kept asking, "Why won't they come? Why won't they come?"

I called upstairs to Megan, hoping she could calm the old man the way she calms her kid. It was about that time when the first of those damned things stumbled into the clearing, dragging Megan's exterminator uniform behind it like a child drags a rag doll.

Before you play *Dread*, there are preparations to be made. First, one among the players must host the game. It is the job of the host to provide the framework for the game and to adjudicate the actions of the other players' characters. Just exactly how one provides the framework and adjudicates actions is detailed in the following chapters. For now, let us just say that the host will have to prepare notes before everyone gathers for the game.

To clarify, the host of the game does not have to be the host of the party. You do not need to play at the host's home and the host is not necessarily responsible for refreshments. Those duties are beyond the scope of this rulebook, and players should fight amongst themselves over them.

The other players should create their characters. The next chapter will delve into this more deeply. Essentially, the players will each fill out a questionnaire provided by the host. The questions should deal with what the characters are capable of, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and should help all the players better understand their roles.

more? What was the last fad you embraced? You are legendary for what feat

The Game Proper

Once the host has had time to prepare and the players have finished their character questionnaires, you will be ready to begin the game. Find a flat surface or table somewhere everyone can sit comfortably. Before you begin, each player should introduce their character to the rest of the players. Avoid revealing too much about the character, such as secrets or details that aren't readily apparent. Just discuss what the other characters would know. The exact amount will differ from game to game. Some characters may be old friends who are almost an open book to each other, while others could be complete strangers.

The Metaphor of the Tower

In order to play *Dread*, you will also have to assemble the tower, both metaphorically and physically. As mentioned before, *Dread* is a game of horror and hope. The latter emotion is as vital a part of the formula as the former. Without hope, horror is only despair. To create dread, you must be able to balance that sickening cold swimming in your gut with the glimmering chance of survival lying just at the tip of your out-stretched fingers. Every significant action in *Dread* is resolved through a metaphor of this balance, even if the elements of horror and hope have not yet shown themselves in the story. This is accomplished through the tower.

At the beginning of the game, the physical tower should be placed upon your flat surface in a spot all the players agree on. You will want it easily accessible, but not precarious. Everyone except the host needs to be able to easily reach it. As will be explained in a moment, the tower holds a terrible threat and you should treat it with care.

If you are playing with fewer than five players (not including the host), you should pre-pull three blocks for every player less than five. This is the only time when you are immune to the effects of a collapsed tower (see below). If the tower tumbles during this part, simply rebuild it and try again—you obviously need the practice.

that you never actually performed? What was the last bumper sticker you

The Game Begins

The host sets the scene as if they were telling a story. As the story progresses, the other players should contribute by explaining what their characters are doing and asking questions for clarification. Throughout the game, the host's job will be describing what goes on in the world around the characters and the players will be describing their characters' actions and reactions.

There is no formal structure to this part of the game, which will most likely be the majority of it. The host has complete control over everything in the story except the other players' characters. The players may, and in fact should, interrupt to describe the actions taken by their characters. They have complete control over their own characters, but cannot control anything beyond the actual intention to act. The success, failure, and consequences of the actions are up to the host and the tower (see below).

During the game, all the players, including the host, should try to stay true to their characters. Choices should be made based on what would be appropriate for the character to do, and not necessarily what the players would want to do. There will be times when the player knows something that the character obviously would not know. This is when it is especially important to maintain the differences between player and character. The next chapter will delve deeper into this topic, but for now keep in mind that the players are pretending to be people other than themselves, and should act accordingly.

Preparing for the Game

• Decide who will host.
• The host should prepare their notes for the story.
• The host should create a unique questionnaire for each of the players' characters.
• Players should fill out the character questionnaires.
• The players should introduce their characters to the rest of the players.
  • Do not to reveal any information the other characters wouldn't know.
• Stack the tower and pre-pull 3 blocks for every player you have less than 5.

bought? Why did you save the old woman instead of the child? What cliché

Resolving Conflict

While many of the things the characters do will be clearly possible, some of them may not be. Any time a character attempts something that they may not be able to do, or that the current situation may aggravate, their player must pull a block from the tower.

What does this mean? For the most part, anything that a character would clearly not be in danger of failing would not require a pull. Conversely, anything that the character clearly can't do, would fail. However, frequently a character will be in such a situation where they have to accomplish something they could possibly succeed or fail at. For example, most folks can jump, and would be able to jump forward a few feet without a pull. But could the character make the leap from one rickety beam to the next in a roof of a burning barn? Or, if the character is a well-educated scientist, could they translate an ancient text written in Latin?

In the first example, given enough time and preparation, there really shouldn't be a problem with letting the character make the jump. However, time is not an abundant commodity in a blazing barn, and the beams themselves might not be stable. This particular act requires about as much luck as it does skill from the character. In the second example, the character's questionnaire probably specified the fact that the character was educated, but not all educated people can read Latin. In both these cases, the host can request a pull for success.

What if the jumper had been an acrobat in the circus, or the would-be translator had extensively studied the Latin roots of botanical and biological nomenclature? There may be evidence on the questionnaire that a character stands a better chance of success than normal. Players should help the host along, by bringing up any details about their characters that may influence the situation. However, the decision of whether something is pertinent is up to the host. A circus acrobat is definitely used to working under pressure and in dangerous environs. Such a character might not need a pull to make their leap successful. The majority of the scientific names for plants and

do you hate to see in movies? What injury of yours has never healed quite

animals are in Latin. It is likely that someone studying this naming system could also have studied Latin in a more general fashion, even if the questionnaire does not specifically address this.

Pulling a Block

The act of pulling a block must be done with one hand (although the player is allowed to switch hands mid-pull, only one may be touching the block at any given moment), and the block must be pulled from beneath the topmost complete layer. Then the block must be placed on top of the tower, laying in the opposite direction of the blocks on the row beneath it. If this is done without causing the tower to collapse, then the character's act is successful. For particularly unstable towers, you may want to wait a moment or two before declaring the action a success. At any time during this process the player is allowed to change their mind   and

right? What is your best memory from college? What have you been meaning

abandon the pull. If this happens, the character does not succeed at what they are trying to do. Abandoning the pull, however, does not make you immune to the effects of a collapsed tower (see The Collapsing Tower [p. 16]).

Ultimately, it is up to the host to decide whether or not a pull is required, and just exactly what a successful pull means. For the leap, a single pull may mean making it to the next beam, or it may mean being able to hop from beam to beam until the character reached safety—especially if the character has an acrobatic background. For the Latin, it could mean that the character knew enough to understand some of the text, or even just identify what the text may be about, or it could mean that the character did indeed study Latin and is quite fluent in it.

If the player refuses to pull a block, then the character's attempt fails. This can result in any number of consequences, but none of them may remove the character from the game. The reading character will most likely find the text indecipherable. The leaping character may end up on the barn floor, in the middle of an inferno, with a freshly broken arm.

The exception to this is if the player offers some way to

Pulling

- You must use 1 hand at a time, though you may switch hands at any time.
- The block being pulled must be from beneath the topmost complete layer.
- After it is pulled, the block must be placed atop the tower, aligned in the opposite direction of the blocks in the layer beneath it.
  - Place it within the topmost layer if it is incomplete.
- After placing the block on top, wait a few moments to see if the tower will collapse.
- Players may change their minds about what part of a complex action a particular pull represents at any time during the process.

Abandoning the Pull

- At any time during this process the player is allowed to abandon the pull.
- If the player abandons a pull, the character fails at the action the pull represented.
- If the tower collapses because of a pull that was abandoned, the character is still removed from the game.

to do for months, but never gotten around to? How many times have you

Expanding Characters

As the game progresses, characters will make pulls for abilities the players weren't sure they had. In the Latin translation example [p. 13], there is a good argument for the scientist to be able to read Latin, but nobody will know if he can until after the player either successfully pulls or refuses to pull. In such cases, you may want to make a note of the result on the character's questionnaire. That way, if a similar incident occurs later in the game, or in another game with the same character, you will have more information to work with. Take a look at the section entitled Dealing with the Consequences [p. 25] for more information on this.

change the circumstances surrounding the task at hand so that they are more beneficial. Perhaps they can get other characters to help, take their time to accomplish the task, find a tool that will aid in the endeavor, or use any number of other useful tricks. Essentially, it is as if the character realized the task would be too much, and tried a different approach. Because it represents a change in the character's mind, it may take a little time in the story, and if time is limited during that point in the story, the character may end up failing before their plan is put into action.

The Collapsing Tower

If at any time a player other than the host causes the collapse of the tower, their character is removed from the game. It should be noted that this occurs regardless of who is or isn't pulling, or even if the tower falls accidentally. If they were attempting to pull a block at the time, the character also fails at that action. How this will play out in game is up to the host. Usually, this will result in the death of the character, but may involve any number of events including imprisonment, loss of consciousness, flight of cowardice, insanity, possession, etc. It should not be difficult to dream up various and sundry graphic ways to remove the jumper. However, the translation attempt may cause the host some difficulty. How do you remove this character and still preserve the reality of the game?

For this you may have to look at the surrounding circumstances. What is the book? Is it a loathsome, ancient tome that reveals secrets

failed the bar exam? At which game did you consistently beat your siblings?

Ways For a Character to Leave the Game

- Die,
- Flee in terror,
- Fall into a catatonic state,
- Become imprisoned,
- Be called away to visit a sick loved one,
- Be possessed by a malignant spirit,
- Become monstrously transformed,
- Get knocked unconscious,
- Get trapped in a cave-in,
- Become hospitalized,
- Get called in to work a double shift,
- Become drugged or inebriated,
- Get grounded by over-protective parents,
- Become paralyzed,
- Be prematurely aged by fear,
- Be crippled in a car accident,
- Get chased off by fellow characters because of poor manners,
- Arrive too late for the ship's departure,
- Be ejected from the ball for forging an invitation,
- Leave to find a better career,
- Join a cult,
- Regress to a child-like state,
- Become seized by a paranoia strong enough to cause them to fear the other characters,
- Realize that they are also putting their family in danger,
- Become stricken with grief,
- Become embarrassed to the point of flight,
- Or be consumed with uncontrollable joy.

the human mind was not meant to know? Then the character could have slipped into a fit of supernatural insanity, or fled in terror upon discerning the book's secret. (Note: A strict interpretation of the rules would indicate that, because the character is supposed to have failed, they could not have translated the book and therefore could not have been driven insane. This, however, can be overlooked for the sake of a good story. After all, the character will have still failed to do anything useful with the book's knowledge.)

Perhaps the book is a red herring, nothing more than an ancient cookbook. How, then, can the host remove this character? If there is no environmental danger involved, the host may have to turn to a more mundane way of excusing the character from the game. Take a quick look at the character's questionnaire. Is there a close relative,

How did you discover you were a werewolf? When you were laid off, what

friend, or other loved one listed? The character could receive a phone call with dreadful news about the loved one, forcing the character to leave immediately for an out-of-town hospital.

Sometimes, there really is no readily-available way to remove a character from the game. If this is the case, there are still some options available to the host, and they are detailed in Chapter 4: How to Host a *Dread* Game [p. 48].

Once the tower has collapsed, you will need to set it back up like you did at the beginning of the game, but this time you should pre-pull an additional three blocks for every character that has been removed from the game so far. These pre-pulls should be distributed as evenly as possible between the remaining players, because the tower is live and if it collapses during these pre-pulls, another character will be lost.

The Sacrifice

There will be times when the tower seems too shaky to approach, and the players are loath to try anything that requires a pull. After all, if they try something and the tower falls, not only do they lose their character, but their character will also fail. But it doesn't have to be this way. There is one last, desperate option. If a player deliberately knocks the tower over, their character succeeds in a dramatically appropriate way just before being removed from the game. Just exactly what is dramatically appropriate is dependent on the situation and ultimately up to the host of the game.

Complex and Difficult Tasks

Sometimes when the character is attempting something more complex—or particularly difficult, but still possible—the host may request more than one pull. In this case, each pull should represent a significant portion of the task. The player does not need to make each pull, and may pick and choose which pulls represent which significant portions of the action. The player may even change their mind about what a pull represents at any time. For instance, a character who is not very experienced in first aid or dealing with pain is trying to apply a tourniquet to his own leg. The host could require two pulls for this action: one to correctly apply the bandage and the other to overcome the pain. The character's player starts to pull for the pain first, but soon realizes that the tower may not be stable enough for two pulls. Instead, the player can decide that the first pull is for the first aid attempt and suffer the consequences of not pulling to endure the pain (which could result in yelping loud enough to alert a stalking menace, briefly passing out, etc.).

skills did you use to make ends meet? What won't you even try to do because

During the Game

- The host describes all that happens to and around the characters.
- Players contribute by declaring what their characters are doing.
- The player must pull if their character is attempting to do something the character is conceivably capable of, but that is either:
  - Outside the character's realm of experience, or,
  - Performed under aggravated conditions.
- If the player declines to pull, their character fails at whatever action they are attempting.
  - This failure cannot be so drastic that it would remove the character from the game.
  - Exception: If there is time in the story to do so, the player may avoid the pull by changing the circumstances so they are more beneficial. Their character need not fail outright:
    - If the circumstances change enough to make the task easy to accomplish, the character succeeds.
    - Otherwise, the player may still be asked to pull.
- If the player pulls successfully, the character succeeds.
- If at any time during the game a player causes the tower to collapse, their character is removed from the game. If the character was attempting an action at the time, they fail.
  - Exception: If the player deliberately knocks the tower over, their character succeeds in a dramatically appropriate way, but is still removed from the game.
- Once the tower tumbles, restack it and pre-pull three additional blocks for every character removed from the game so far.

you're certain you will fail? What did the witch woman tell your mother the

When taking on complex or difficult tasks, it is entirely likely that the player may not be aware of the result of each pull. This is especially appropriate when characters take on complex tasks they are untrained in, or when a task is surprisingly more difficult than they would expect.

An example of a character in over their head would be a layperson removing a bullet from a wound with an artery in the way. If the character isn't aware of the artery, the player shouldn't be. In this case the host can ask the player to make another pull to avoid "complications." The player doesn't need to suspect that there are any complications (indeed, there might not be), but it is reasonable to be asked to pull again considering the difficulty of the task and the character's lack of experience. The complications themselves are not detailed, so the player never really learns anything they shouldn't.

Complex and Difficult Tasks

- The host can request more than one pull for a complex or difficult action.
- Each pull should represent a significant step in the task.
- At any time before, during, or immediately after any pull, the player may decide which portion of the action they are pulling for.
- The player does not need to pull for every portion of the action.
- Players need not know what a particular pull is for, if their character would not.

A trained surgeon would know about the artery, but may not know that the patient has a rare allergy to the anesthetic being used. In these cases, asking for another pull will most likely alert the player that there is something wrong. After all, the character should be able to handle the situation with a minimum of pulls. In this case, the host may opt not to offer the pull. This is one of the reasons why players are allowed to make pulls electively (see Elective Pulls [p. 24]). If the player does ask to make an elective pull, the host can assume the character is investigating for further complications. At that point, it may be appropriate to tell the player what the pull is for.

For this reason, the host may occasionally ask for pulls to overcome a vague obstacle. The pull must always accomplish something, but

day you were born? Why does your little sister follow you wherever you go?

it doesn't necessarily have to be something important or life threatening. It just has to be useful. A host may ask the players to pull to "notice anything unusual" when they first enter a library. The players may fear a lurking killer or some other trap, but it may just be the fact that the books are shelved in a random order (indicating it had been ransacked for a secret book and then hastily re-shelved).

Conflict Between Players' Characters

Not all characters get along, nor should they have to. Character conflict is just a natural by-product of the stressful situations *Dread* characters find themselves in. The vast majority of character conflict can be resolved without using the tower—especially debates, heated arguments, and physical posturing. The host, through interpretations of the characters' actions and what is known about the characters from their questionnaires, usually resolves these sorts of conflicts. There are times, however, when things get heated. Usually, the resolutions that don't involve the tower are not entirely decisive – at least not as decisive as it would have been if a character had been removed from the game. One character may

Which of the other characters do you feel you can trust with your secret, and

Conflict between Players' Characters

- It is recommended that this method should not be used for most conflicts between players' characters, especially verbal ones.

- When a character tries to do something rash or violent to another, the other usually can avoid it.

- If a player doesn't want the action to be avoided, they can risk one or more pulls from the tower:

- The player of the first character willing to step up the conflict should pull one or more blocks and declare their intentions toward the other character(s).

  - The intent of the pull cannot be so drastic that it would remove the other character from the game. This is only possible through a collapsed tower.

- The player of the target must either accept the action, or pull to defend.

  - If this player then decides to retaliate, they have the option to pull again and declare their intentions against the other character(s).

- This process continues until one side refuses to pull, or the tower collapses.

- If the tower collapses during this conflict, the character of the player responsible is removed from the game.

be tempted to turn things up and do something rash or violent. If it is appropriate for the character to take the sort of risk that is involved with pulling, then all characters involved have trouble on their hands.

Essentially, if a player says his character does something to another character, the player of the other character can describe how their character avoids it. If both actions are reasonable, given the circumstances, then the aggressor's attempt is avoided. That is, unless the player of the aggressor is willing to pull for it.

The player of the aggressive character, the one willing to up the ante, has the option to pull a block from the tower. Then they may declare exactly what the pull is meant to accomplish. It can be anything as long as it doesn't necessitate the removal of another character from the game. One character can fire a pistol at another character, because there is a chance of the bullet only wounding them. One character

why haven't you told them yet? Why have you forgiven the man who tried to

cannot place a gun against another character's head and pull the trigger, because this would most likely be fatal. However, in the second example, the gun-toting character can *try* to place the gun against the other character's temple and perhaps the gun could go off in the struggle temporarily blinding the other character. That way something has happened, but the character isn't removed from the game.

Just like any other pull, the host may request more than one pull if the action is particularly difficult or complex; and, just like any other pull, each pull represents a portion of the action being completed.

To defend against the action, the targeted character's player can pull. Usually only one pull is needed, no matter how many pulls the aggressor made. However, if the defender is out-matched or caught under bad circumstances, the host may request more pulls. Once again, each pull represents a portion of the defense, which should in some way protect the character, but not completely. The defender is allowed to pick and choose which pulls are which, like normal. If the defender has made their pulls, then the aggression is avoided – or at least lessened, if only a portion of the pulls are made.

If the two players' characters are not on equal footing when it comes to the conflict, the host may reduce the number of pulls required from the player whose character has the advantage. Or the host may increase the number of pulls required from the player whose character is disadvantaged. In both cases, there should be a reason for why each individual pull is either required or removed. For example, if an asylum orderly with experience subduing people is wrestling with a rather non-athletic college professor, the host may decide

Mismatched Opponents and Circumstances

- If one character clearly has an advantage over another, their player may not be required to make some of the pulls.

  - If this character is the aggressor, then their player must make at least one pull.

- Likewise, the disadvantaged character's player may have to pull more than once.

  - Which pulls aren't required depends on the nature of the character's advantage, and should be decided by the host.

flay your son alive? When the world seems against you, what one thing keeps

that the orderly's player has to pull once to grab and pin the professor, but the professor's player needs to pull twice, once to avoid the pin and again to break the orderly's hold. It is important to note that no matter how much of an advantage one player's character has over another, if that character is the aggressor (trying to do something to the other character and not just reacting to something the other character is trying to do to them), at least one pull must be made by their player. There are no free assaults on other players' characters.

The conflict ends when both players decide to back down and cease their dangerous game of chicken. Of course, it can also end with the collapse of the tower, and the usual consequences. Because this can lead to hard feelings between players, it is highly recommended that the players' characters try to reach an understanding before this dire result.

Elective Pulls

Players always have the option to pull a block without being asked to. There are a number of reasons why one may want to do this. It essentially represents the player's character putting forth more effort than they would normally put forth on a given task. The player should indicate just in what way the character's extra effort is being used, but the host ultimately decides how it affects the story.

As an example, if your character were fleeing from room to room in a well-furnished Victorian manor in the late evening, with only a candle to light their way, it might be wise to pull a block to ensure that the character is paying close attention to table corners, open cabinets, chair legs, and other objects likely to cause a stumble or twisted an-

kle. By pulling and telling the host this is the case, you can increase your character's chances of avoiding such pitfalls without slowing down significantly or otherwise hindering your character's progress. You could simply tell the host your character plans to keep an open eye for such things, but the host may rule that such activities can slow your character's flight or distract your character from other important details. Electing to pull always represents an effort above and beyond what the character is normally capable of.

Some Possible Reasons to Electively Pull

- To be extra aware in a situation;
- To accomplish a task swiftly without sacrificing quality;
- To improve the chances of having the drop on someone;
- To exert extra effort while holding a door closed;
- To ask the host for a clue or idea you don't have, but your character might;
- To improve the accuracy or lethality of an attack;
- Or to avoid a hazard you suspect, but your character isn't currently aware of.

Dealing with the Consequences

Throughout the course of a story a great many things will happen to the characters. Many of these things, such as injuries, loss of loved ones, promotions at work, irrational fears or nervous habits born out of traumatic stress, learning the hideous secrets of an ancient cult, etc., will have a lasting effect on the characters' lives. When such things happen, the player should make a note of it on their character's questionnaire. Rather than rely on our memory, especially when a single story could take several nights to tell, it is better to have a written record. There are no rules to govern what should or

Recording the Consequences

When recording consequences on your character's questionnaire, you may want to leave room for the changes. You could create boxes to group related consequences together, so that all the notes that relate to your character's physical health are in one section and all the notes that relate to their mental health are in another, and so forth. This makes things easier to find and can give you a broad understanding of your character's current condition with just a glance.

shouldn't be noted, beyond common sense. However, if you are going to note something, it is recommended that you explain briefly how it happened, so that memories can be jogged if need be.

Many of the consequences noted in this fashion will change over time. People heal from injuries, whether they are social, emotional, or physical. And situations can worsen—a drugged character could slip further into dementia, illness can worsen, debts increase, and so forth. When this happens, it is best to cross out the previous condition or circumstance with a single line so that there is no confusion as to which is currently in effect, but there is still a historical account available.

Chapter 3: A Question of Character

I rode in silence as Mark drove us north through that autumn evening. He refused to turn on the stereo, and I refused to discuss my condition any further. I knew my decision would not set well with his Catholic upbringing, but with all that we had seen, his concern for the hereafter seemed a bit out of place.

Carol dozed off intermittently in the back seat as the first few stars began to twinkle through the charcoal clouds, but she was awake enough to see it first. All she said was "huh," in a half question, but it was enough to make my spine run cold. I shifted in the front seat, and craned my neck to see her bruised face. She was staring out into the dark fields that ran alongside the highway, tracing her finger along the window. Following her gaze, I saw a lone figure dancing in the amber glow of a lit billboard.

It appeared to be a clown.

The players' characters stand at the center of any *Dread* game. Just like the main characters in a novel or movie, the plot revolves around them, and it is what happens to them that is most important. Therefore, the players' characters are often far better defined than any of the other characters involved in the story. It is necessary to create these characters before any game so that the players and host can reach an agreement on what they can do and how they should be played. The host may also find it very useful to know what sorts of roles will be played so that they can tailor the story around these characters.

These characters exist in three forms: as roles the players interpret through play, as characters understood by the host, and as simple lists of questions and answers designed to reconcile the first two forms. This chapter deals mainly with the questionnaire itself. From here, the players should be able to develop their interpretations, and the host an understanding of the characters. It all starts with the questionnaire.

Chapter 7: The Supernatural Game

Little Katie was screaming upstairs. I didn't want the spoiled brat in my house, but she and her mom were a package deal. I've been so lonely since Samantha's mom died. So my Samantha had a play date with her Katie and I was to get to know Linda better. It almost worked.

And not for the lack of trying – but the screaming couldn't be ignored. Eventually, Linda went up to talk some sense into that little shit of hers. While I waited, I whipped together a couple more vodka gimlets.

When Linda screamed, I felt it in my spine. Deep down inside, where the father instinct takes root, the darkest thought surface: what happened to my daughter?

When I reached the room, I saw that they had that stupid game out, the one with the board and all the letters on it. Katie's hand gripped the corner of it while the rest of her screamed and thrashed on the floor. Linda had her around the waist and was trying to pull her away. And Samantha…

Sam sat there, calm as she could be, staring into nothing while her hands flitted with the pointer across the board: "-M-Y-S-E-E-S-Y-O-U-M-O-M-M-Y-S-E-E-S-Y-O-U-M-O-"

A great many horror stories revolve around the supernatural and the unexplained. And why shouldn't they? The unknown is terrifying. Ghosts and the shambling dead freed from the grave, alien intelligences and gibbering horrors from beyond the stars, madmen and their unholy experiments gone awry, ancient rituals and evil words that shift and bend reality, lost prophecies and inescapable century-old curses, missing links and reptilian beasts from black depths—all these and more make up the nightmare worlds of the uncertain and unnatural.

In this chapter we will discuss the presence of the supernatural, in all of its manifestations, in your stories.

The Supernatural and the Host

Keep the unknown hidden as long as possible. The less mysterious your supernatural world becomes, the more difficult it becomes to make it scary. Dragons, by all accounts, should be terrifying creatures to behold. Giant lizards with vast leathery wings and infernal breath—what's not to fear? Yet, it would take a considerable amount of work to make a *Dread* story in which your players confront a dragon and feel anything other than the thrill of battle. This is due in part to how much is understood about these mythical beasts. No matter how dangerous its breath, a creature loses its power to instill fear once it is well known.

That is, unless you pull the rug out from under the players and drastically alter the nature of the beast. This can be an effective way to reinvigorate a classic horror monster that has lost its edge, such as the vampire or werewolf. Keep the suspense chapter in mind; when dealing with the supernatural more than other themes, it is vital to keep the players guessing about what they're dealing with.

Some stories may allow the players' characters to wield supernatural powers of their own. In this case, the players will often want at least a rudimentary understanding of how it works. Indeed, you may even have the players create and govern their own preternatural abilities. Whether they have powers granted by an alien virus or spells purchased via dark pacts with the Devil, you should always develop a secret side to these abilities. As the game progresses, this other side should slowly manifest itself. Enough so that the players will question the wisdom of using their unusual abilities every time it is convenient.

There is no need for these secret sides to be crippling. In some types of games, the characters are expected to be able to do the amazing as if it were routine. However, it should never feel routine. Each time they employ such a power, make sure it is described in a way that invokes the appropriate sense of awe and fear.

of study was your favorite in college, and why didn't you get your degree in

it? What musical instrument do you regret never learning to play? What do

Much as with gore (see Chapter 11: The Gory Game [p. 113]), the supernatural should be described by bringing out the concrete details. If the force of a vampire's will has subdued a player's character to the point where they will lie still as the blood is suckled from their neck, then take a moment to describe what that character hears or smells. Look to senses the players may not initially consider, and then let them paint the picture themselves.

The Supernatural and the Story

Design the nature of your supernatural world as you design your story. Lay out the rules, if any, of how it works. Can a line of salt prevent evil from passing through a doorway? When the beast assumes a human form, does its odor betray it? What is the cost of magic? If man has developed a method for traveling between stars in the blink of an eye, what effect does that have on the travelers? What happens to the mind of a character that sees the impossible angles of the mad architect's masterpiece?

When Reality Isn't

What if your story takes place in the minds or dreams of the characters? In a land where reality itself is not consistent, how do you maintain the sort of reality players need to be grounded in the story?

The mental landscape is an interesting theme in horror fiction and movies. However, it often does not operate in the same manner as our own minds. The reality of these dream worlds is far more resistant to change than the reality of actual dreams. In most of these cases, the characters in the story can change the reality by forcing their will upon it (possibly requiring some pulls). Therein lies the underlying consistency. If you wish to make a story where reality is somewhat fluid, you need to establish what will alter reality up front, and stick with that throughout the story.

By deciding as much as you can about how the supernatural works beforehand, you can remain relatively consistent during the game. This consistency will give your players something to work with. If the supernatural aspects of your story are random, there is nothing for the players to grab on to. This inconsistency will seem far less real, which will erode the suspension of disbelief.

you feel people notice first about you and how do you de-emphasize it? How

The Supernatural and the Questionnaire

When constructing a questionnaire for a story with supernatural elements, you may want to include a question that delves into previous experiences the character has had with the unknown, and how they were affected by it. This should help you determine if extra pulls are necessary to deal with these encounters. It will also help to flavor the character's reactions.

The questionnaire becomes vital in games where the characters themselves have supernatural abilities. "How is it you are able to read the minds of the sleeping?" "What did the elder gods grant you power over?" "What price for your magic are you afraid to pay?"

For the most part, you can let the players define their characters' powers, but don't let them get away with murder. Monitor this with a keener eye than
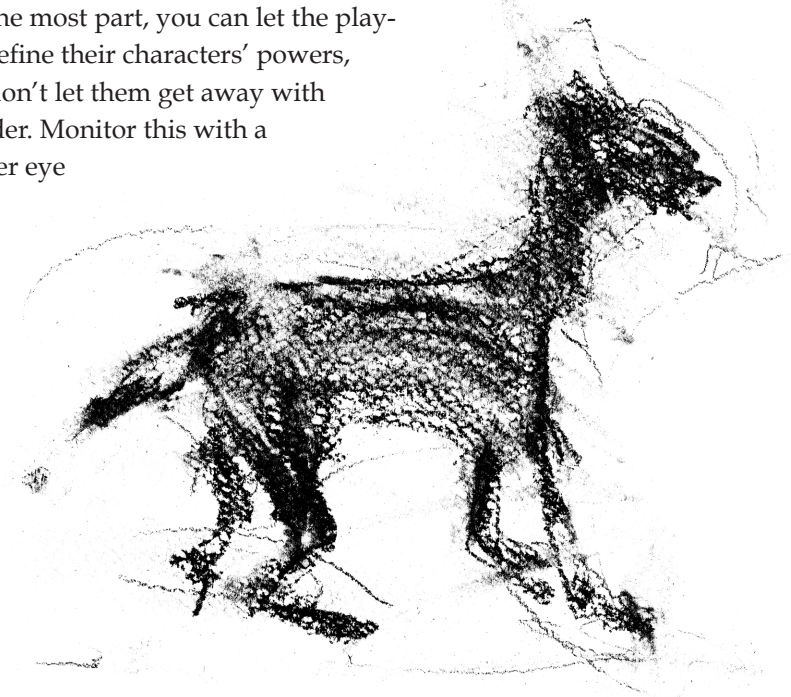
you normally would use on the questionnaires. Make sure that there is a price for whatever they choose. Many horror stories involve protagonists who are well versed in the ways of magic, but few have their heroes toss-

often do you make something up rather than respond "I don't know" to a

ing flashy spells about willy-nilly. Ask questions with a sinister twist: "Who will you never see again now that you have your powers?" "Every time you step through a wall, what do you leave behind?"

Usually, you should try to avoid powers that can short-circuit a plot or break through the isolation you've created. A murder mystery is not much of a mystery if the character can read the mind of the murderer, nor is a story about being lost in a hostile jungle isolating if the character can simply fly out of it. On the other hand, you could try to write your story around the abilities. Even if the character can read the murderer's thoughts, will anyone actually believe him?

The Supernatural and the Tower

Opportunities abound for pulling blocks in a supernatural tale. Characters unaccustomed to the strange and eerie will cause their players to pull when they first witness something beyond their ken. This pull can prevent any number of fear responses, but most likely it will keep a character from freezing or fleeing. For particularly delicate characters, you may require a pull to avoid fainting followed by a pull to avoid running off screaming. Particularly stubborn characters in the vein of Ebenezer Scrooge may cause a pull just to believe what they are seeing.

All of this happens even before you take into account the intent of the supernatural influence. In whatever manner the supernatural interacts with the characters, you can be sure pulls will need to be made. Resisting a demonic possession, extinguishing a pyrokinetic fire, holding the transformation of a lycanthropic infection at bay for just one more night, avoiding the dominating gaze of the nosferatu, or overcoming a voodoo-inflicted palsy long enough to fire a gun—all of these will require at least one pull, and more than that may be necessary.

Keep in mind that every pull has to mean something. If you want the players to have to pull more than once to resist a creature or other supernatural effect, you will have to come up with what each pull

means. Pull once to resist being dominated by the vampire's stare alone. Pull once again to resist her beckoning voice. And, as a last resort, pull once more to escape her taloned hands.

You can also coax quite a few pulls out of the players whose characters have supernatural traits. In many of these cases, a host can ask for a pull just to do the most basic of functions reliably. Simply let the players know up front: if your character can teleport, you can choose where she ends up only by pulling.

question? What are you planning on doing for income if your business fails?

What does your fiancé call you in bed? On what bill are you several months