

The Trajectory of Fear – or How to Use Horror Tropes Effectively in your Game

By Ash Law

THE FOUR FEARS

There are four types of fear; once you learn the four types and their trajectory you will have mastered unsettling your players, fail to learn them and you'll end up with a farce instead of a horror. It's a lesson that the great writers and directors of horror learn, and their imitators fail at.

UNEASE

This is the starting point. It is the knowledge that something is not right in the world.

Effective Horror stories set this up well, poor Horror stories skip Unease entirely. The more time you can devote to building Unease the better the foundation is laid for later types of fear.

Unease is the sense that something is not quite right with the world. In movies this is achieved by using odd camera angles, unusual looking actors that the camera lingers on a bit too long, and odd or discordant music. As a game master you won't have any of that to work with, but you can mention to the players that their characters find something odd.

Unease is noticing that the woods being thick with berries but no paths lead there from the village, and the locals don't look at the woods. Unease is finding a half-burnt doll nailed to a tree. Unease is noticing that everybody in the travelling caravan is missing their right thumb. *Something* is wrong here, but it is not an immediate threat and is nebulously defined. Unease is the eerie knowledge that there is something out of place in the world.

If you are aiming at 'spooky' then unease is the emotion you are actually aiming for.

DREAD

Dread is the suspicion, unconfirmed, that something is not right and is HERE; it is more immediate and focused than unease. Dread is built on the foundation of Unease, and without that foundation can feel hollow. Dread is the uncertain possibility of certain danger: you know that danger exists and what form it might take and that it is close, but it exists in a Schrödinger's jack-in-the-box.

Dread is the characters in their tavern room noticing the villagers scurrying inside at sun-down, and then half an hour later there is a strange sound outside. It is possible that the villagers are superstitious, that the sound is a stray dog rooting about for scraps of food, and that the monster in the woods is not in town ... but the monster might be near the tavern. Dread is the uncertain possibility of certain danger. Dread is finding a mutilated corpse, but not knowing if the killer is nearby or not.

Dread doesn't have to pay off, it can be defused and lapse back into unease. Building and defusing dread is a good way to build up tension ready for the next stage of fear.

If you are going for a thriller style of game then dread is the emotion to aim for.

TERROR

Terror is the most powerful type of fear because of its immediacy. Terror is the sure knowledge that something terrible is imminent, that the danger is here and now but has not yet been revealed.

Terror is used in Horror stories at their scariest point. If the foundations have been properly laid this is the place on the trajectory of fear that is the highest point, the biggest emotional pay-off. It is important to remember that at this point the root of the fear, the cause, is still unseen and a tension exists due to that.

Terror is the characters hearing a gasp cut short from the common room of the tavern, a rasping breath like a wounded oxen, and inhuman footsteps getting closer on the wooden stairs. "The monster is here, and we must run or hide or fight." The monster is all the more terrible for remaining unseen, the player's imaginations doing a better job of scaring them than any description or illustration ever could.

If you are going for a horror-movie feel to your game then you want lots of high points of terror, which means holding off on revealing the monster.

HORROR

Horror is the most immediate and primal type of fear, but paradoxically the weakest. Horror is the revelation, meeting the danger and discovering the boogiemán. Horror is the punch line of fear, the thing that elicits gasps and jumps.

Unfortunately the moment the horrible thing is revealed the tension from the terror is released and we are back to where we started from. Horror in an RPG is the description of the monster, and the rolling of initiative - more even than in literature and movies, in RPGs Horror is weak compared to the other three types of fear. At this point the monster from the woods has burst into the room or the characters have burst out onto the landing and a fight is in progress.

THE TRAJECTORY

Fear done well has a definite arc: Unease, Dread, Terror, and Horror. Think of it as a roller-coaster. Unease is the building excitement getting on the ride. Dread is the cars going up the hill. Terror is that delicious moment before the drop. Horror is the long screaming ride down, a cathartic release of the tension that had been building.

Like a real roller-coaster it is best to have small hills before the main one.

THE GAS PEDAL

If you 'step on the gas' for one type of fear then the game quickly becomes farcical, even if you have built a proper foundation. If you over-do it with unease then you'll end up with something that feels like the Addams Family – because everything is out of place nothing elicits actual dread. Over-do dread and the game becomes a monster-of-the-week show. Over-do terror and the game becomes a farcical pastiche. Over-do horror and the game becomes just a bloody mess of gore.

THE KILLER DOLL

Let's put the trajectory into practice in a sample game. In this scenario a town has suffered attacks from an animated killer doll. To keep their children safe they have sent them away to a neighboring town. The doll has a habit of hiding and spying on people before attacking, so the villagers are constantly fearful and do not mention the doll for fear that it may be listening. To prevent it hiding among regular dolls the villagers have nailed the children's dolls to trees surrounding the village.

The adventurers ride towards a distant town. [normality, no fear]

Something is not right in this town. When the adventurers arrive they notice that the townsfolk seem fearful, and are constantly watching the shadows and glancing at the spaces under chairs. [unease]

A spooky doll is found nailed to a tree, this is something that is out of place and a little psychotic. Maybe the person who did this is dangerous. Maybe the person who did this is still around. [dread]

The dread is defused because there is no doll-nailing-psycho around. The players are told by the GM that there are no children in town, which is odd. Even odder when you consider the doll nailed to a tree. [unease]

The adventurers find a tiny bloody hand-print. Is whatever made this around? Is somebody small in danger? [dread]

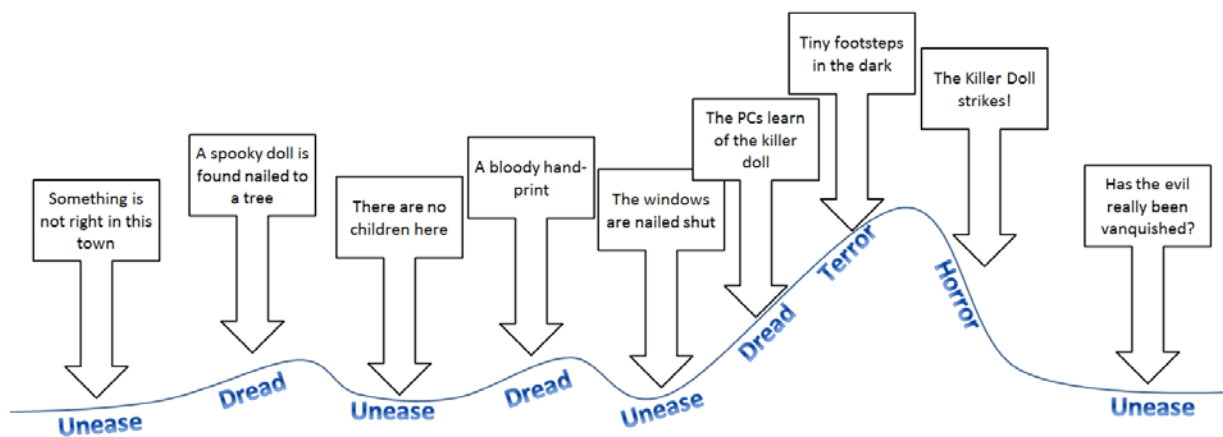
The bloody hand-print is old blood, there is no immediate danger and so the dread is defused. The adventurers notice that all the windows in every home are nailed shut. [unease]

The adventurers finally get a straight answer out of some of the townsfolk. A killer doll is on the loose. The players are uncertain if the killer doll is nearby. [dread]

As the adventurers head to bed they hear tiny footsteps nearby. The doll is here! They do not yet see it, but it certainly sees them. [terror]

The killer doll rushes from the shadows its tiny teeth filed to red points. This is horrific, but once the combat starts it is cathartic. [horror]

The adventurers vanquish the doll but its spirit flees to the nearest vessel, a doll nailed to a nearby tree. The adventurers set about systematically destroying every doll, denying the vile spirit refuge. However, as they ride out of town they find a tree with a nail in it and no doll – did the killer doll find a new body after all? [unease]



CASE STUDIES

DOING IT RIGHT

No Catharsis:

Shot by film Hollywood outsiders on a budget that would not cater for a day of a big shoot, The Blair Witch Project did it right.

From the outset we are told that the world is wrong – that there is a legend of a witch in the woods. Townsfolk tell their tales, fishermen in the back woods tell a different tale. Spooky lost houses, missing children, a witch, a curse. Unease begins to set in.

The hapless film-students hike into the woods, getting lost and stumbling about. They should not be this lost, they should be out of the woods by now. Evidence of strange things, odd noises in the night, stick-men hung from trees. One of them goes missing. Dread sets in.

Finally the house, the house of the witch, or of the child-killer. The characters enter the house that should not be there, called by the cries of their missing friend (or are they?). They find child-sized hand-prints on the wall, and finally we are treated to the sight of one of them stood in the same pose that the long-dead killer was said to make his victim's stand in while he was killing their companions. Terror, the evil is here.

The camera falls, cut to black. We never get the cathartic release of Horror. We see no dead bodies, no witch, no serial killer or ghosts or monsters. The movie made a ton of money because it was scary.

The Slow Burn:

Alien is often referred to as a haunted house in space.

The characters find an alien derelict. Something bad happened here something very bad. The alien pilot is dead, killed by some unknown violence. The architecture of the whole place speaks of some ancient wrongness.

We then run quickly through Dread (the eggs are found), Terror (an egg opens), and Horror (the face-hugger attacks). We jump, we laugh at jumping. The tension is released and we are back on the human ship.

Then we go through the cycle again. Unease-Dread-Terror-Horror.

The face-hugger is examined, the oddness of the biology of the alien and the fact that rather than killing and eating the victim it is attached to him and keeping him alive – we feel Unease.

The crew find their friend recovered and the alien interloper dead. We know that something is wrong. Dread.

Next we see the victim in discomfort, then distress. Terror.

Finally blood splatters, the alien emerges, the crew screams. Horror.

The key here was keeping the Horror brief. A glimpse of the alien as it bursts forth, a moment on screen, then back to Dread. The titular alien of the movie actually looks excellent, but for the rest of the movie we see glimpses, shadows, and until the final show-down our imaginations are more scary than any actor in a rubber suit could ever be.

The key is to the success of alien is effectively managing the levels of fear. Building a solid foundation of Unease and Dread. Maintaining Terror. Minimizing the actual Horror.

DOING IT SO VERY WRONG

I love Sam Rammi's *Army of Darkness*, I really do. It is, however, not a scary movie. It is a fun movie, a funny movie, a gory action comedy with a severed tongue firmly in cheek.

Right from the outset we are treated to screaming witches, gouts of multi-coloured blood, exploding heads – Horror. Schlock Horror. Schlock is from the Yiddish 'shlak' meaning without truth or value. There is no build-up of Unease-Dread-Terror for the Horror to release, we jump (literally) straight into the action with no *ahem* foreplay. As a result of the lack of Unease-Dread-Terror the scenes make us jump and laugh, but we are never scared. If *Alien* is a Horror movie disguised as a sci-fi then *Army of Darkness* is old-style slapstick disguised as a Horror.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

So how do you apply these lessons to an RPG? How indeed?

Firstly avoid reliance on gimmicks. Dim lighting to set the mood can make character sheets hard to see, music can make it harder to hear you (and for you to hear the players), and jumping out at your players with a scary mask on only works once or twice before they come to expect it. Gimmicks can help

enhance what is there already, but as in real life are no substitute for substance. By all means set the mood, but don't rely on that alone.

The first step is to ESTABLISH NORMALITY. If the characters are constantly wading through demons and undead you have nowhere to go to get your scares. Set a baseline.

Lovecraft was a master at setting baselines. When he spent precious words describing the town of Newburyport in his 1931 story *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* he is doing so in order to set a baseline for the decrepitude and wrongness of the neighboring town of Innsmouth. Innsmouth has a wrongness to it, but we only know (and feel that) that because we have started our journey at a normal town.

The next step is to ESTABLISH THREAT. This is where your deviation from the normal comes in, the start of your journey into darkness. In movies this is easy enough to do, before the title rolls you get to see a grisly murder and we find out that the killer is huge and has an axe. Job done. In an RPG you have to rely upon other methods. A local warns the party that a witch that skins the unwary lives in the abandoned mine, or they hear from a traveller that the village they are headed towards has a dark reputation and legends of werewolves. Showing the handiwork of the menace is great too: the brave knight impaled 20" up on a tree, the corpse missing all fingers, the graves of past victims. After normality create Unease by establishing the threat. The movie *The Ring* establishes the threat early: see 'the ring' and 7 days later you die horribly.

Once normality and the threat have been established you can set up your SIGN POSTS. These are ways for you to show the monster without actually showing the monster. In movies you can cut to a monster's point of view as it stalks the victims, in RPGs different signs are needed.

A good example of in-game signposts can be found in the *Silent Hill* series of games. When the monsters are near there is a sign, usually static on electronics. In my games I like having blood-red flies precede and accompany (and infest) the undead. If my players encounter red maggots or flies they know that undead are nearby, a particularly nasty type of demonic undead that will provide them with a very tough fight. Signposts allow you to hint at the possible presence of danger without actually showing the danger, giving you the ability to build Dread.

Once you have your signposts in place and the players are feeling Dread the next step is to DISARM. You build the Dread, but you want to be able to disarm it. The figure in the dark was just the village goodwife fetching water from the well, not werewolves. The flies were regular flies, not red demonic flies. By going as far as Dread and then disarming you break tension and allow players a chance to relax. Just like a rollercoaster has some ups and downs before the final drop you will want some ups and downs too.

You see this disarming maneuver all the time in movies, the music builds – is it the mad axeman? No, it is the friendly cop come to check that the protagonist is all right.

The final step is CLOAK THEN DAGGER. In order to build Terror you need to show your SIGNPOSTS (for werewolves howling in the woods) to get to Dread, then you get to CLOAK. This is where the characters *almost* see the danger, but not quite.

The movie *Aliens* has a great Cloak scene: the marines are counting off the ammo left in the sentry guns, and both guns run down to 0. Then their motion detector shows the threat getting closer, closer, closer. This isn't a mistake, not a false alarm – it is obvious that danger is coming, but is not here yet. This builds the Terror. They KNOW that the aliens are coming.

Another great example is the British movie *Dog Soldiers*. In one scene the wolves are about to attack, and are just outside the range of the light. We can see them in the trees, silhouettes. It is obvious what is about to happen, that an attack is imminent, but not yet. The classic film *Zulu* has a similar scene where the Zulu army lines up, chanting and singing but too far away to see details.

Next comes the *DAGGER*. The attack itself. The Horror. At this point it is best to show, not tell – and better to hint than show. An actual fight will be frenetic, fast, confused. The player characters don't have time to measure the creature they are facing, to see that it has five eyes – they just know it is huge and has a multitude of eyes. Keep descriptions oblique, rather than describe the zombie as having rotting flesh describe the slime that characters feel splash off it as they hack into it with axes, rather than have the character see that its eyes glow red say that the scene is lit with a red glow that seems to come from inside the skull of the zombie. The more you can imply the better. With implied details involving all five senses an encounter with a simple farm animal in the darkness can become the stuff of campfire stories.

REMEMBER... LINES AND VEILS

Before each new game, especially in Horror games, have the chat about lines and veils.

LINES

Some topics are just too upsetting for some players to handle, and they shouldn't have to. We game for fun, not to get hurt. There is a difference between good clean scares, and hurting your players. Sit down and discuss what lines the game will not cross. This is an opportunity for everybody to check in on everybody else's boundaries, and to set boundaries for others. This is an opportunity to not be a dick. Take it. Violating personal boundaries is not mature or edgy, it is just rude and upsetting. Have the chat, set lines, and be adults.

Speak up: Holding back and not speaking up and later being uncomfortable and weird at the table is a disservice to yourself and others at the table. If you know there is something that will upset you or that you will not enjoy at the table it is your duty to yourself and your fellow gamers to mention it. You don't have to give a reason why it is a problem: just that it is.

VEILS

Some things are OK to have in a game, but not for them to be explicit. Most groups are comfortable with graphic violence but not graphic intimacy, so it is OK for that group to describe in great detail how the Cleric and the Wizard smite the undead with brains splattering and blood gushing and bones cracking – but the moment the Cleric and the Wizard get romantically intimate everybody at the table gets uncomfortable. In these cases it is best to have the chat about lines and veils so everybody in the group knows to fade to black.

LANDMINES

You've had your chat and you've decided that everybody in the group likes graphic violence, a couple of members don't want explicit torture scenes so those will be veiled, somebody doesn't like romantic intimacy at the game so that will be veiled too, and somebody has a problem with human sacrifice so that will be a line that the game will not cross. Then the GM introduces a plotline about child kidnapping and you start to get uncomfortable, really uncomfortable. This is a landmine. You didn't know that the plot would make you feel this way so you didn't speak up about it during the lines and veils chat – but here it is. You've hit a land-mine. Speak up NOW. Say "I'm sorry – I've hit a land-mine". Say what the problem is, what you need to be behind a line or a veil. You don't need to say why and if somebody presses you just say "because I find it upsetting and would rather not discuss it". End of story. The GM takes a break,

everybody takes 5, and you come back to the table once you've had a chance to calm down and the GM has had a chance to reformulate their plotline or scene or encounter or NPC.

Sometimes landmines can kill games totally. It happens. Be an adult, accept the fact that a landmine has exploded the game, and move on. If you are going to play on the edge, sometimes the game falls over. It is worth it, playing on the edge is fun.

HOW TO BE A GOOD HORROR GM (THE SIX COMMANDMENTS)

Here are some simple rules for running a Horror game and not having frustrated players but excited and scared players:

I: THOU SHALT ADD TOO, NOT TAKE AWAY FROM

Players spend ages carefully crafting their characters, making their Dwarven Mounted Archer the very best Dwarven Mounted Archer they can be. They want to tell stories about their DMA, which relies upon certain elements, and if you kill the dwarf's horse, steal his magic bow, and blind him ... you are being a douchebag GM. You should never take away from a character that which makes that character live and breathe. Threaten and imperil those things, but never outright snatch them away.

Taking away the player's toys just leads to frustrated players.

Instead of taking things away, add to the character's woes. Inflict the dwarf's foot with a withering disease. A gimpy foot won't stop the dwarf from riding nor from firing a bow – but you can play up the pain that it causes the dwarf, point out the odd looks it earns him.

II: THOU SHALT LOVE THE CONSEQUENCE

Nothing is more frustrating than the gotcha. *"You open the mansion door – rocks fall. You die. Ha ha!"* A gotcha has no weight, no meaning. Sudden unavoidable damnation is just not fun. As a GM you have ultimate power, don't waste it pulling wings off flies.

Instead, learn to love the idea of consequences. Let players know what the outcome of their actions is likely to be. If they leave town now nothing bad will happen, but their characters will never get rich... investigating the old house on the hill might lead to riches, but might also lead to doom. Which action with which likely consequence do they choose?

You can let the players know about consequences directly, or give the players clues through their characters. I find the best road is the middle-ground of the "It is obvious that...", such as *"It is obvious to your character that the locals shun the mansion on Snake Hill. The town grave that you passed had a lot of recent graves, and you saw old snakebite wounds on some of the villagers. The mansion looks to be of solid construction and richly appointed"*. By saying "It is obvious that..." you let the player know what their character knows, and so the player can make an informed in-character choice. Perception rolls are all very well for finding hidden doors or secret treasure or detecting ambushes – but for plot-related decisions you want something a bit more transparent.

Giving the choice over to players lets the players *choose* to put their characters in danger. Players will often willingly walk into a trap if it is a choice. Remember Jaws? The characters decide to put out to sea in a tiny boat to face the shark. The big shark. The VERY big shark that they know lives in the sea and can chew through boats. That was a choice. Freddy Kruger springing up and just killing somebody, a fate that they neither chose nor could have avoided? That is a gotcha. Jaws is far scarier than Nightmare on Elm Street.

Consequence is cooler. Let the players know ahead of time what the consequences of their actions are, and that way when they *choose* to open the door to the haunted mansion or read aloud from the cursed book it is them damning themselves.

III: THOU SHALT RESPECT BOUNDRIES

The Lines and Veils thing? Do it.

People change over time, so check in every so often and have the chat again. Check in after sessions too. *“Hey guys – the thing with the male monk breastfeeding the giant slug – was that cool with everybody or was it too much?”*

When everybody knows that this table is the grown-up table people at the table can tell grown-up stories. Scary grown-up stories.

IV: THOU SHALT RESPECT THE TROPES, BUT NOT APE THEM

Figure out what makes good horror for you, what common elements work well. Then figure out why they work well. In horror fiction you’ll see a great movie that really works, and then a dozen imitators that don’t work. After Alien and Aliens there were a slew of monster-and-people-in-a-place movies and they all fell flat. They had failed to grasp why the Alien movies worked. They failed to create a baseline of normality and had failed to establish a threat, had failed therefore to build Unease. With no Unease there could be no Dread (and often there were no signposts). No Dread lead to no Terror. They were left with just Horror – a series of rubber masks and giant CGI snakes (and actor Dean Cain).

If you see a really scary movie sit down and analyze WHY it was scary. Don’t recycle the set dressing, the monsters, the superficial parts. Recycle the bones under that. Discover the scary bones and use those.

V: THOU SHALT BE UNCANNY

Throw a load of subtle stuff at the players, and watch them. Let them latch on to what seems interesting or unsettling to them. Then build on that. Maybe you have a werewolf game planned but you throw in a village maiden with a withered arm. That arouses the interest of your players. Bench the werewolf plot or perhaps modify it. Now the werewolves transform back to human but their skin no longer quite fits. Perhaps they shed their human skins and when they turn back they are raw and bloody and climb back into their skins. Can the villager werewolves swap skins?

When you use what arouses the player’s interests your players become part of the creative process, allowing you to uncannily zero in on what frightens them.

VI: THOU SHALL REMEMBER THE TRAJECTORY OF FEAR

(establish normality) -> (establish threat) UNEASE -> (sign posts) DREAD -> (disarm) UNEASE -> (sign posts) DREAD -> (cloak) TERROR -> (...then dagger) HORROR