

G U R P S[®]



SCREAMPUNK™

By JO RAMSAY

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

TECHNOLOGY IS POWER.

Power corrupts. Therefore absolute technology corrupts absolutely.

It is an Age of Revolution; the world has been cruelly purged . . . in fire, and blood, and steam. From the past, untold horrors wait to clutch at men's souls.

It is an Age of Invention; even the Laws of Nature must fall before the power of Progress! Sinister villains plot to use their newfound inventions against society, nature, and even God Himself!

It is an Age of Steam; the most brilliant minds of the age experiment with novel, wondrous ideas – but is mankind ready for such power?

GURPS Screampunk presents a toolkit for incorporating Victorian steampunk into games of gothic horror.

Included are:

- A guide to gothic horror themes, locations, and plots, with suggestions on how to add a doom-laden atmosphere to your games.
- The use of weird technology as a corrupting influence.
- Real-world Victorian scientific institutions – and the mobs that opposed them.
- Character archetypes including the cruel guardian, the sinister servant, the ingenue, and the swarthy foreigner.
- Adventure seeds, plot hooks, and guidance for running gothic horror scenarios.

The ominous shadows of the past loom over the present. The forces of reason man the last barricade against superstition, medieval barbarism, and ancient nightmares.

Will you stand against the darkness?



For use with
GURPS SteamPunk
2000 Origins Award Winner
Best Roleplaying Supplement



STEVE JACKSON GAMES
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GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition Revised and **GURPS Compendium I: Character Creation** are required to use this supplement in a **GURPS** campaign. The historical and technological material and the campaign seeds can be used with any rules system.

THE UNCLEAN:

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WARNING:

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

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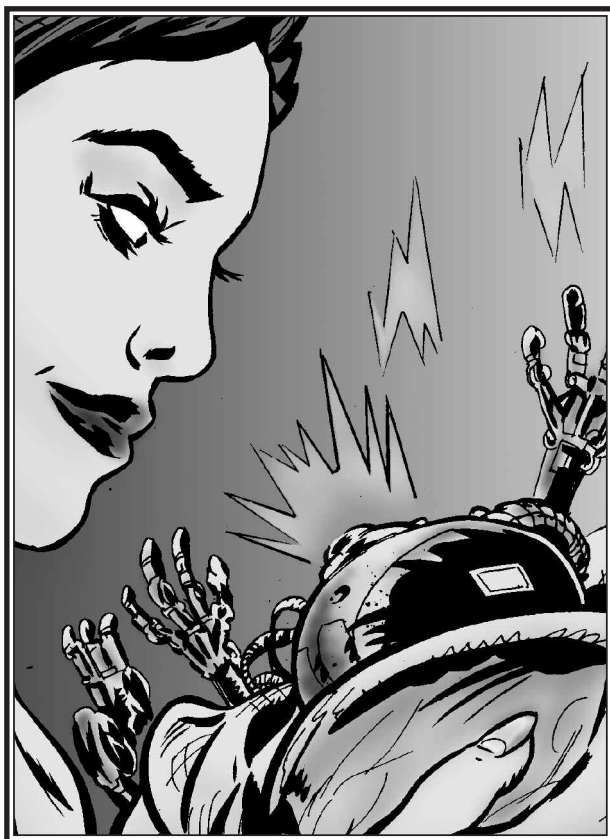
SCREAMPUNK

By Jo Ramsay

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ABOUT GURPS

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Pyramid (www.sjgames.com/pyramid/). Our online magazine includes new *GURPS* rules and articles. It also covers *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Traveller*, *World of Darkness*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like *In Nomine*, *INWO*, *Car Wars*, *Toon*, *Ogre Miniatures*, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also have access to playtest files online!

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GURPSnet. This e-mail list hosts much of the online discussion of *GURPS*. To join, e-mail majordomo@io.com with “subscribe GURPSnet-L” in the body, or point your web browser to gurpsnet.sjgames.com.

The *GURPS Screampunk* web page is at www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/screampunk/.

Page References

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

by it. They were also best-sellers.

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

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

ON THE GOTHIC ERA

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



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

THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC REVIVAL

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

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

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

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

OTHER *GURPS* RESOURCES

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

VICTORIAN & REGENCY CROSSOVERS

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

GURPS Scarlet Pimpernel

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

GURPS Goblins

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



GURPS Castle Falkenstein

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

GURPS Old West

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

GURPS Who's Who 1 and 2

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


HORROR RESOURCES

GURPS Voodoo & GURPS Cabal

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

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

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



Stoker, Bram. *Dracula* (Archibald Constable and Company, 1897). Classic vampire tale whose protagonists band together to fight an ancient, supernatural evil.

Thomson, James. *The City of Dreadful Night* (The National Reformer, 1880). The title verse is a paragon of rich, somber, awe-inspiring gothic atmosphere.

Wells, H.G. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Time Machine* (1895), *War of the Worlds* (1898). Quintessential dark scientific romances, bordering on horror.

Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (M. J. Ivers, James Sullivan, 1890). The story of a man who is given a license to indulge all imaginable vices, but who pays a terrible price.

MODERN GOTHIC

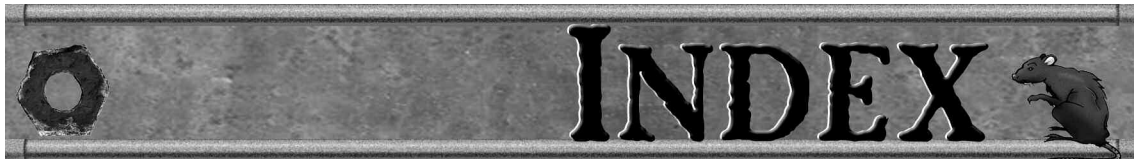
Ligotti, Thomas. *The Nightmare Factory* (Carroll and Graf, 1996). A collection of short stories, by a master of contemporary horror. Ligotti's stories are filled with gloom and despair that evokes earlier gothic writings, and with fantastic leaps of imagination.

Lovecraft, Howard. *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1951). This represents Lovecraft's closest brush with "traditional" gothic story structures and certainly one of his best tales. A young sorcerer delves into his forbidden past and resurrects an evil from beyond the grave.

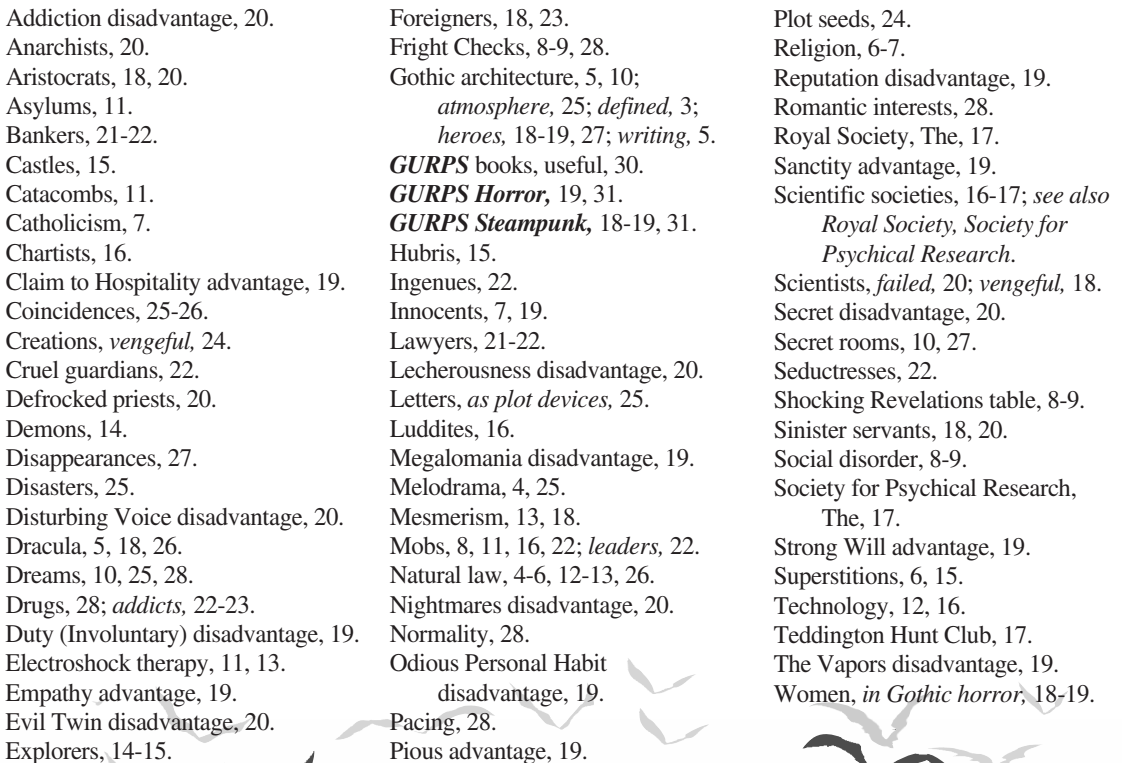
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* (Knopf, 1987). Winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize, this book relates the story of Sethe, a black girl who escaped from slavery and is haunted by the vengeful ghost of the daughter that she murdered.

Peake, Mervyn. *Titus Groan* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1946). A gothic fantasy epic, and one of the seminal writings of the 20th century. The first of a trilogy in which the eponymous hero is born and brought up in an impossibly large, old, and stagnant gothic castle.

Rice, Anne. *Interview with the Vampire* (Knopf, 1976). A journalist sits down at night with his tapes to interview a man who claims to be a vampire, in a darkened room in New Orleans. This book single-handedly resurrected the gothic vampire genre, and influenced many other modern novels, games, and films on the topic.



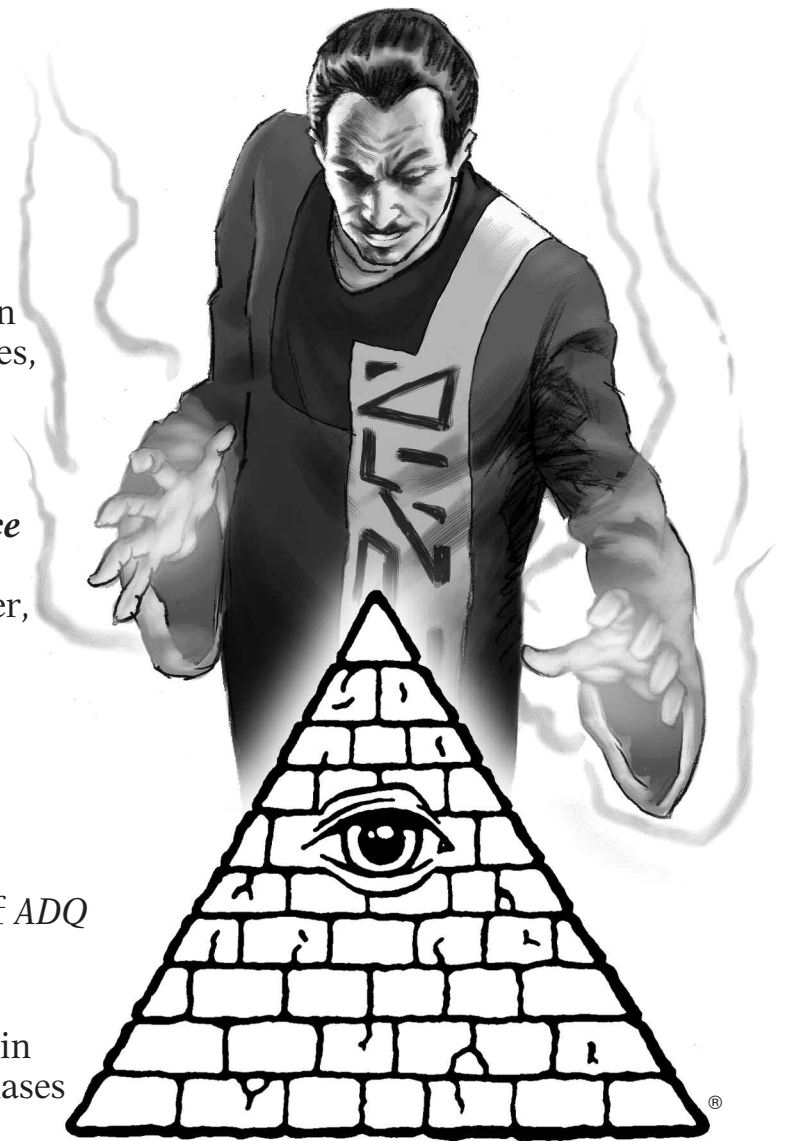
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