

SDC 2009 – SPIRIT OF THE TENTACLE

INTRODUCTION

The Silent Dragon paused upon the rooftop. The object of his gaze was obscured, not only by the unpierced night, but by mortar binding bricks, wrapping the safe into which the bowl had been placed. It burned in his imagination all the brighter for its apparent unavailability. Its location was a mystery not in fact, but origin: how had the dark work come to rest in the hands of a simple bootlegger? What use has a criminal lowlife for creatures beyond the veil?

The Dragon motioned to his companion, a gesture of inquiry and implicit mutual understanding. The Green Gargoyle nodded, and as they melted into the night, to gather their allies, the stakes were clear in both their minds. Not, this time, would a failure result in merely the destruction of a neighbourhood, or the loss of a pure virgin... New York City, in all its splendid squalor would pay the price for failure this night: the ultimate price.

This is a game focusing on one moment when the lives of 6 great individuals intersect in the cause of saving 1920s New York City from a terrible fate: the summoning of a sleeping Elder God. It is a game of heroism, of gallantry in the face of unspeakable horrors. It is also a game of spectacular action, pithy one liners, and epic grandstanding: it is pulp.

Spirit of the Tentacle is an adventure for Spirit of the Century and takes about 3 hours to run from handing out character sheets to the final thrilling climax. It is intended for 6 characters, though it will work with the right 4 characters. Everything needed to play is included, except the rulebook and dice.

At its simplest, this adventure is fairly linear, as the characters move from one clue to the next at break-neck speed. It is best to think of it as series of timed tasks whose completion or non-completion make the final encounter easier or harder.

Because of this largely linear structure, the adventure is presented as a likely sequence of scenes, but it may work out that some scenes occur out of the order given here; the text will indicate likely points of divergence. Following the main description of scenes are the vital details of the NPCs and other entities. Next is some advice on briefing the players and a discussion of guiding the players to the best experience of playing their particular PC. Finally, there is a discussion of expanding or contracting the adventure depending on the game length, some suggestions as to other characters that might work for the game. The character sheets and briefings are included in an appendix.

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RUNNING THE GAME

All of the promotional material for this game sells it as a fast and easy game. The suggestion is made again and again in the GM advice that after some initial brainstorming about Aspects, this game pretty much runs itself. Unfortunately, this is not really true. As written, this game is as dice-heavy as the old World of Darkness or Shadowrun, or any other traditional game. The attack cycle of initiative-attack-defend-damage-soak is tedious and with 6 characters will be very time consuming. And there is little rules-support for truly improvisational play. In this game, the GM really has all the responsibilities and tasks of the traditional GM. They do get some assistance from things like Aspects, and the pulpy nature of the setting means people will be more forgiving of GM fiat, Gordian knots of logic and general fudging, but essentially this is a traditional game with traditional GMing demands.

To improve the speed and excitement, I have not given the PCs stunts. In play testing I found that most of the stunt functionality was really handled just as well by picking good Aspects.

I also recommend using the various statistics of the NPCs as averages, so that the GM never actually rolls any dice. This more than doubles the speed of combat rounds.

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PLOT SUMMARY

TEASER

Hand out the characters sheets and go through the basics of Pulp and *Spirit of the Century*. This is not an information-delivery exercise! It is the start of warming up the players and getting the game rolling. You should be cracking jokes, telling very short and action filled anecdotes (invent these if necessary), and getting people used to the idea of being larger than life action heroes.

Act I

The player characters (PCs) have learned that a powerful occult artefact has fallen into the hands of racketeer and bootlegger Jim Cotton in the New York's Lower East Side. They infiltrate what is effectively his hideout where it is stored, only to have a giant tentacle emerge from the sewer outside the building and demolish the building in search of the item.

Some of them chase the tentacle through the sewers to the lake in Central park, into which the tentacle has retreated.

Some of the party will doubtless wish to remain and question Cotton. Things are even simpler than they seem, the artefact was intended as a gift-cum-bribe for a wealthy businessman on long island: Bill Cunningham, who is having a party to unveil it.

Act II

Short on facts, the PCs will doubtless hit the books, the pavement, the rooftops. They'll call in favours, crash parties, and generally make a nuisance of themselves until they get to the bottom of this. The GM's job in Act II is to make this as quick and painless as possible.

The PCs will develop a strategy for defeating the cultist horde gathered and hence either ending the ritual or destroying the gate. There is no set method for this, but the group will be lead either into an Occult Solution by the Three-Fisted Midget, the Silent Dragon or the Green Gargoyle or will be lead to a Super Science Solution by the Ideas Man.

Any appropriately implausible and over the top solution should be allowed to work.

Act II will fire the imagination of some groups, and others will really struggle with it. If it is falling flat, you can delete it entirely and either have Dr Tenebrous gift them the solution, or lead them into a straight-up two-fisted fight with the Cultists (skipping to Act IV or V). Boring in comparison to the full range of options, but it'll prevent the game from bogging down.

Act III

The PCs will need to gather the bits and pieces they need for either the spell or the Super Science Device.

Act I was an action-heroic mission to get the MacGuffin – to gather the ingredients for the anti-Tentacle, they need to enlist the aid of an expert, Dr Tenebrous, who will provide the finishing ingredient.

Act IV

Fight!!! Or, at the very least Deploy Superscience Device!!!

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THE MAIN ACTORS

Refer to their character sheets for the best capsule summary of each important NPC.

JIM COTTON

Jim is the bootlegger that starts off with the artefact.

VAL CARLOTA

Val is connected to the wider world of illegal activities. He can't easily be intimidated, but he is for sale.

TENTACLE CULT

The cult is a large, well connected and well financed apocalypse cult. They are basically insane and seek to destroy the world by bringing an Old One from its home dimension to wreak havoc. None of the cultists expect to survive, so fight to the death and give no quarter.

DR TENEBROUS

Bluntly: is included in the mission to give the talking characters an opportunity to shine. He is a nefarious character, who could be coerced into giving up the final piece the PCs need to save the day, but could also be talked round in a number of ways.

BILL CUNNINGHAM

Millionaire collector of the weird and unusual, Bill is the originally intended owner of the Bowl, and host of the party where the PCs encounter the ambiguous Dr Tenebrous.

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Act I

The opening of the game needs to do two things:

- Introduced the McGuffin
- Introduce the All Action Spectacular feel of the pulps

The game can either open with the characters already in amongst the thick of things, or with the characters poised outside the illegal casino and speak easy ready to leap into action. It can't start back at the heroes' lair, or some other safe location – no play group in the world will be extracted from a safe planning location with sufficient rapidity for a 3 hour convention game.

Either way the PCs will ask a range of questions about the house, the location, what the options are for the plan. Don't let this go on too long; given free reign, most groups will spend the entire 3 hours trying to figure out a perfectly safe and foolproof way of getting in and getting the artefact.

THE MCGUFFIN

The McGuffin is a shallow bowl. On the outside of the bowl is a crude representation of a squid, which is surrounded by arcane writing. The player characters probably won't have possession of the bowl until after the adventure is over.

The McGuffin is intended as a bribe for Bill Cunningham, who is a collector of weird Object d'Art. He's planning to take collection the next day, and has organized a party at his Long Island home to display the most recent additions to his collection. (See Act III)

LOCATION

The artefact is being held at a speak easy and gambling house owned by Jim Cotton. It's the end building in a row of a tenement buildings in the Lower East Side. The streets in this part of town are relatively narrow, and an alley runs behind the row.

The bottom floor is tenement housing, left in place to give the place a veneer of normalcy. The family living here are paid a stipend out of the profits from the gambling house and speak easy. Their names are Jenny and Alexander Baker, with their four children Harry, Franklin, Alice and Trevor. Alexander is unemployed, other than fronting for Jim's operation.

The middle floor is largely a bar, but also has a roulette wheel and a blackjack table for colour. At the time of the adventure it should be reasonably busy, but not crowded. The patrons are intended to curb any excessive plans of explosions and so on: while alcohol is illegal, most of the PCs are from places where it's quite common and they shouldn't view the drunks inside as acceptable collateral damage. The rear part of the middle storey is a kitchen, but it's basically disused. Aside from the flappers and dandies, there are the barman and his three waiters, three croupiers and two obvious toughs to keep everything in order.

The top storey is Cotton's private office. It's basically a single room with a dumb waiter from the kitchen below, and a brick false wall at one end which conceals his safe and his collections of various minor valuable items. Cotton is having a strategy meeting with Val Carlota, a racketeer and general low-life. Val's brought along two of his toughs to ensure that negotiations go his way.

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THE ACTION

INITIALLY APPROACHING THE MCGUFFIN

There are three main courses the PCs could take:

1. Go in like action heroes, firing guns, blowing up doors and kicking ass
2. Sneak in, infiltrating the lair and hoping to steal the bowl
3. Try and negotiate with Jim

All the test groups debated all three approaches, and all settled on stealth as their best bet. Other options were discussed, from using magic to steal the bowl to waiting for Jim to leave and ambush him. It is imperative for the tone and feel of a pulp adventure that the opening be characterized by action and excitement so if at all possible, lead them to taking some distinct course of action. Their plan should be as activity oriented as possible – those plans involving much waiting around or detailed set-up and contingencies should be discouraged.

Almost any plan at all should work, allowing the PCs to get into the upper apartment. If possible, try to arrange things so that the racketeer is still there, but not all the PCs. Most plans they devise will involve splitting up; stall people infiltrating the casino/bar while allowing the entry of rooftops or what-have-you to move at full speed or vice versa.

THE TENTACLE

Once the heroes have made it to Jim's office, allow them a few minutes of banter or fighting, and then introduce Baby Tentacle. Jim has no reason to hide his possession of the bowl: his intended purpose is innocuous, and he lacks any more detailed information. Val, however, will be less friendly. Depending upon the way the PCs enter the room, he will either be hostile, or violent.

The first sign of the Tentacle's presence is a brief ground shudder, after which it bursts out of the sewer and begins to demolish the upper storey of the tenement looking for the bowl.

Baby Tentacle is effectively impervious: it is simply out of scale with anything that the PCs can bring to bear in this timeframe. That won't stop them from trying, and you should let them always feel they are hurting and hindering it. If they simply attempt to attack the tentacle, it will flail around doing incidental damage until it finds the safe containing the bowl and then rip it out of the wall and drag it back into the sewers. If the heroes try to beat it to the safe, allow the tentacle to be distracted while a suitably skilled PC attempts to break into the safe.

To spice things up, and to reflect that it is a Creature from the Beyond, each round, any PC interacting with the Tentacle must make a Resolve test against difficulty 3 (it's "skill" with Impossible) or suffer mental damage based on how far below 3 they get.

Once it has the safe, Baby Tentacle withdraws into the sewers. If the PCs retrieved the bowl before the safe was stolen, it makes life quicker and easier in Act II.

AFTERMATH

In the aftermath most groups will virtually forget about Val and Jim: let them.

There is a slim chance that they'll want to hold them for questioning: let them. Jim will spill all he

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knows without much prompting – that will make it easier for the PCs to track down Dr Tenebrous in Act III.

Val will be reticent and somewhat difficult; but these two characters have largely played out their utility in the adventure and should be as swiftly discarded as possible. If the PCs think of some ingenious way to keep them on ice and use them later, that's fine, but discourage them from wasting too much time trying to crack Val.

THROUGH THE SEWERS

The tentacle can squeeze down to an unbelievable extent – it has no bones and its insides are basically constituted by slime. It also oozes slime – leaving a slippery and treacherous surface for its pursuers. Allow players to spend a Fate point to avoid the consequences, or impose a -1 on their tests for catching the tentacle.

The tentacle eventually reaches the crack that it came through – a 2 inch opening in the sewer walls that connect to its habitat of the lakes in Central Park. When it reaches this with the safe, it smashes a safe-sized hole in the mortar, flooding the tunnel. This takes the form of an initial rush of water with a difficulty of 4 to resist – those who fail are swept away and flushed into the Hudson river – this has no harmful effect, but some groups will enjoy dice rolling here to give that illusion.

It is possible for the more physically robust PCs to forge past the flood and make it to the gap. Those who aren't washed away by the initial surge will make it if they choose to, but too late to do much.

Once they reach the gaping hole, they need to swim to the surface of the lake. Unless they try to engage the tentacle in combat under water – in which case the tentacle should have no real difficulty forcibly ejecting them onto the bank and retreating to the depths to wait.

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Act II

Act II provides the characters with the information they need to prevent the Tentacle Cult from summoning the Tentacle. This Act is all exposition, and as such needs to be handled swiftly and with the minimum of distraction.

The key facts are:

- The tentacle they've seen is just a pre-cursor to an even more unbelievably huge monster that will destroy New York
- If the ritual is aborted, the summoning will cease, but the Tentacle already summoned will remain
- If the ritual is allowed to finish, but the portal closed, both Tentacles will be destroyed
- They require an ingredient from Dr Tenebrous: a mighty occult expert with a somewhat shady reputation.
- The Ritual will begin the next night at Midnight, and be completed in less than an hour!

STAYING ON TRACK

Most groups will now try and find out about the creature they've seen – entering research mode. But some groups will rather obstinately put their minds simply to destroying the tentacle using depth charges or whaling harpoons or some other implement of mass destruction. Let them.

They should gird their loins and prepare for war. If they opt for an Aerial Assault try to dissuade them – torpedo technology is very much in its infancy, and they will need to release whatever weapons they use from within rifle range. If they persist, feel free to have them shot out of the air with the attendant “consequence” aspects.

Any land approach will meet the gang of Cultists who are charged with feeding the Tentacle. The Cultists will immediately summon the Tentacle to its own defence. If so, its Fate points have refreshed. The Cult Lieutenant leading the defence party should taunt the heroes. They believe that whether Baby Tentacle is destroyed or not they will be able to use the bowl to summon the larger monster. How specific they are in their claims will depend on the intelligence of your players and on the timing. They will most readily learn that

- The tentacle they've seen is just a pre-cursor to an even more unbelievably huge monster that will destroy New York
- That the cult have a powerful ally or have received aid from a powerful psychic expert – tell either the Green Gargoyle, the Silent Dragon, or both, that this is almost certainly Dr Tenebrous.

Once the last cultist is killed, the psychic imperative on the Tentacle will be released and it will sink back into the depths. If they PCs proceed with their bombing campaign, describe a bubbling pool of slime rising from the depths and covering the lake. Both the Silent Dragon and Green Gargoyle will observe this, and know in their souls that the matter is not at an end.

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If they take this side-trek, you will need to really keep them on track for the remaining adventure parts. Generally they will skip any further research and go visit Dr Tenebrous. This is just fine: refer to Act III.

RESEARCH

There are a number of learned institutions that can be of help. Most players will suggest a possible location for information in their question. Past candidates have included:

- One of the University Librarys (Columbia or New York State)
- The Central Library
- An Occult Bookstore
- Secret associates/contacts of the Green Gargoyle and/or the Silent Dragon

Any of these should deliver up the essential facts – how much colour they have depends a lot on how much time has elapsed.

If they managed to get the McGuffin out of the safe before it was whipped away, the PCs can obtain most of the information, certainly the information related to the tentacles themselves. This requires a “Mysteries” check with difficulty 5 – between the three Occultist characters and some fate points.

PLANS

As mentioned in the capsule summary: any plan that sounds even vaguely plausible should be allowed to succeed, subject to a couple of restrictions:

- The plan must be effected at close range – within melee range of the key participants of the Ritual.
- An ingredient must be obtained by fair or foul means from Dr Tenebrous. This ingredient will be wholly consumed by the attempt to end the summoning; no second chances.
- The timing on the plan must be tight. In game terms, it can be started one combat round and will “go off” between one and three rounds later.

It is best if the ritual requires only one or two PCs to implement because the others should all be more than adequately occupied with Cultists and Baby Tentacle.

Most groups will happily devise their own solution without any real effort on your part. However, some lame duck groups will lack the spark of imagination and need a prompt. I suggest using a Super Science device. This should be a two-man portable oscilloscope which emits a psychic wave that runs counter to the ripples in reality caused by the Ritual – and co-incidentally acts as a repellent for Baby Tentacle.

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Act III

Act I is used by most groups to showcase their Secret Agent abilities – there's plenty of skulking, sneaking, and other roguish activities to be done. Act II generally highlights the brainy characters, albeit in a way that may end up not being overly dramatic. Act III is intended to give the two talking characters their share of the limelight: Tempered Steel and the British Bulldog should be the key players in the meeting with Dr Tenebrous.

The PCs catch up with Dr Tenebrous at a rich and exclusive party being held by millionaire Bill Cunningham. The party is being held to showcase his most recent acquisitions of ancient art of various kinds - the bowl involved in the Tentacle Summoning is not a major part of the show, but rumours of its existence have brought Dr Tenebrous out of his cave to the party. As an honoured guest and expert, he was a small part of the billing himself.

The British Bulldog or Tempered Steel will have heard of the party and know of his attendance. If the PCs are flush with fate points still, you can charge them a FP for this information.

The hardest part of this scene will probably be how it's sold to the players. If pitched wrong, it could become a very quick and rather dull smash-and-grab encounter, denying the talking characters their due. The intent is that they arrive on the scene with the desire to talk to him, but not certain that he will be on their side. He should be presented as cultured, but eccentric. He is a collector and occultist, but also a *bon vivant* who enjoys the finer things in life.

LOCATION

The scene should take place at the Long Island home of millionaire Bill Cunningham – a self-made magnate of shipping and finance. If the PCs greased Val's palm in Act I, they could potentially arrive with backup in various mundane forms, or might know that there is illegal alcohol being served at the party (which they could use to gather some police assistance.) Otherwise, the Ideas Man is sufficiently rich that he is an acquaintance of Bill's, and probably many of the other guests, though they likely regard him as a weirdo.

Cunningham's house is on the ocean and has a small dock where an biplane is tethered alongside a speedboat. The house is a huge sprawling manor. The party, and most of the action, will go on in one wing, which is essentially an open hall with a mezzanine floor running along one side, and high Gothic windows on the other.

The party should already be in progress when the PCs make their entrance. There are a large number of guests, many of whom are locally notable, but nobody of vast importance.

THE ACTION

Let the ambience of the party sink in – booze, jazz and mink stoles. It's a high-class affair, with numerous important people in attendance. If the PCs think of a violent solution, by all means let them: provide chauffeur body guards for them to rapidly deal with. But on the whole try to pitch this as a crowd that won't respond well to violence, and where any “collateral damage” is likely to lead to serious repercussions down the line.

Dr Tenebrous will be easily located, in conversation with the host, or with some other notables.

This is the main “character part” for the GM. Dr Tenebrous can give the the PCs what they need, all

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they must do is persuade him. Whatever line they take should eventually be successful, but he is a character that will revel in playing Devil's Advocate and trying to outflank the PCs. He is happy to engage in discourse on any level: moral, physical, ethical, economic, geographic or historical.

If, at the last, your players are floundering without making headway, reveal Dr Tenebrous as the Green Gargoyle's "Mysterious Patron", and give over the ingredient.

COMPLICATION

If the PCs got the bowl, the Cult will assume that it made its way to the party, and will Gate-crash to get it. Be careful with the timing – another fight at this stage should only happen if you have lots of available time.

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Act IV

In Act IV the PCs do battle with the Cultists. At the opening they should have a plan, all the ingredients they need and be ready for some rough-and-tumble.

LOCATION

The scene takes place at the largest lake in Central Park, where a mass of cultists are gathered at the water's edge, chanting. It will not be obvious from most angles, but one mass of cultists are on a barge, that is intending to go to the middle of the lake, to be consumed by the tentacles. It is there that the Cult Leader waits.

The barge will leave the shore once the PCs make their presence felt – from here the PCs have 10 rounds to do whatever they plan to do. 7 rounds of the Barge getting into position, and 3 of them enacting the final bit of the chant to summon the tentacle.

THE ACTION

This scene should play absolutely straight-forward. Some of the PCs busy themselves tying up Cultists while the one or two people needed for their scheme make their way onto the barge. Baby Tentacle should make an appearance, but only in the last three rounds – all the people with psychic energy are busy summoning its Daddy so can't instruct it to attack PCs.

On the barge will just be the Cult Leader, and his retinue of helpers. I suggest five or six – but the intent here is just that he's a final nuisance obstacle for deploying their solution, not that he's really capable of stopping the PCs.

RESOLUTION

If the PCs succeed at disrupting the summoning in the last three rounds, the portal opens: the Baby Tentacle and a large quantity of water is sucked up into the sky. Give any PCs on the Barge an “Athletics” check at difficulty 5 to avoid going with the water.

If the PCs succeed at disrupting the summoning with their device before the final three rounds, the Cultists will disband at their maximum speed: Baby Tentacle will provide some cover. I suggest skipping to a cut-scene of the Airforce arriving to bomb the lake and destroy the monster. Too late to have stopped the ritual, but just in time to save the PCs from Baby Tentacle.

If the PCs fail... then Baby Tentacle and a quantity of water is sucked into the sky (with the same chance of PC fatality), but instead of disappearing, it is consumed by a giant maw, which is the last thing any PC sees.

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RUNNING THE CHARACTERS

Spirit of the Century is a game that is really powered by “Aspects”. Each aspect is intended to be both a carrot and a stick – something the player can use to advance their goals and something the GM can use to thwart them.

Most aspects are very short, and are suggestive rather than explanatory. They are open to interpretation, and you should interpret them in whatever way seems dramatically suitable. Below are a selection of PC aspects and some possible uses for them within the context of the adventure.

THE IDEAS MAN

IM is a character that in play-testing was either the life of the party, or a complete wall-flower. Many players will look at his lack of “action” skills and struggle to see what else can go on in this adventure. Others will see him more as a Pulp era MacGuyver – which is a much more useful way of seeing him.

“THERE'S ALWAYS A RATIONAL EXPLANATION”

The most obvious use for this aspect is to distract IM in the middle of the initial contact with Baby Tentacle – it is after all, not rational in the least. Actually, the whole idea of an apocalypse cult doesn't really make that much sense. Cruel GMs can reasonably readily get IM chasing his own tale trying to implicate Val and Jim in a wider conspiracy that's entirely fictitious, and doesn't quite make sense, but is nevertheless more rational than wanting to be eaten by an Old One.

INSTANT EXPERT

Perhaps the most fun way of messing with the IM is to compel him to get involved in all the other characters' bailiwicks. By compelling this aspect, you can get him intruding into the discussions of cults, or personalities, or trying to lend a hand with the Ritual. In essence, this aspect can make him be a know-it all.

This is a two-edged sword, to be used sparingly. Some players will struggle to find much for the IM to do and this can give them a handy comic entrance into any scene. However, if over-used, it will not only annoy the player, but the whole group.

THE THREE FISTED MIDGET

Look around at the group: the maddest extrovert is the right player for this character. He's a manic ball of entertaining fun. He's been consistently loved by all the groups as a character that just doesn't know when to quit.

However, if you're playing with fewer than 6 characters, 3FM is a promising candidate to be cut – he really doesn't bring much story power to the table, just a vast amount of bizarre Mexican midget charisma.

SHOWMAN

Whether saving lives, or discussing politics, 3FM is a character that plays to the crowd. Any time he gets the upper hand in a fight, you can compel this aspect to say “hey, the crowd wants more before you win”. But actually, the best time to compel this aspect is when he's taking a beating... the crowd never loves anything more than a hero taking a beating then coming back for a flourish at the finish. So if you compel him to take another punch, let the baddies “overwhelm” him that little bit, he can then be compelled again, but this time to victory.

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SUBTLE... LIKE A FIST

Fists are, fundamentally, not subtle. This aspect was intended to play on the notion that 3FM thinks he's subtle, worldly, sophisticated. Whereas he's a Masked Wrestler in NYC. Incongruous and out of place – and he's never going to fit in. You can compel this aspect whenever he tries to shy away from being over the top and obvious.

TEMPERED STEEL

Tempered Steel is more than a masked vigilante. She's a paragon of the western ideal of Justice. Yet, she's also a female with considerable wiles at her disposal.

No female ever played Tempered Steel in the play-testing, indeed, nobody has yet played this character to her full potential as a mover and shaker in the team and a pretty persuasive agent of justice.

DAUGHTER OF DISSEMBLING

This is intended to be used by the PC to enable a silver tongue when dealing with the variety of NPCs. But if the player is trying to be straight and too earnest, you can compel this aspect to make them spice their narrative up a bit. Truth needn't necessarily go hand in hand with justice.

JUSTICE, NOT REVENGE

Amongst other things, Tempered Steel is virtually the voice of reason in the party. She's almost unarguably the least crazy PC. Whenever the other players are looking a bit too bloodthirsty, you can compel this aspect to try and reign things in.

THE BRITISH BULLDOG

Like Tempered Steel, players seem to struggle with BB. He's really intended to be a kind of Jekyll and Hyde character, if Jekyll were Bertie Worchester and Hyde were Zorro. Like Tempered Steel, he's a character mostly useful in this adventure for his ability to persuade NPCs, though he does have a healthy dose of fighting ability.

ALWAYS PREPARED

At first glance this looks like a win-win for the player: they invoke the aspect and get to have prepared. But it can easily go the other way. If they want to go off and do something, you can ask them: are they really prepared? This can easily reduce the number of people going into the sewers chasing the tentacle.

UNEXPECTED FRIENDS

So... you went to school with this Cult Lieutenant eh? Let's see you talk your way out of that.

THE SILENT DRAGON

In real terms, SD is not any better at fighting than BB, but every group so far has interpreted them in those roles – BB as a talker, SD as a fighter. Perhaps this is because BB has a very useful secondary skill, talking, whereas being stealthy is largely just useful as a prelude to being deadly in pulps.

The Silent Dragon is best given to a player that's content to be an observer. It was originally created by one of my mainstay plot players, who is never short of things to do or say in any given scene – they used this character as the lynch-pin of the adventure, the de facto party leader. However, in play-testing, most people tend to focus on SD as a background character pulled out for fights.

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AT HOME IN DARK PLACES

Act III takes place at a brightly lit party – there's a lot of opportunity to compel this aspect as effectively meaning “not at home in bright places”. More generally, this should generally be used to direct the character away from the public eye. He is a character that works in secret and mysterious ways.

HARBINGER OF THE APOCALYPSE

This is the aspect that is the GM's “get out of gaol free” card. You can invoke this aspect to “guide” the SD's actions to aid plot movement. This is an aspect that really must only be used in the most desperate of circumstances as it robs the players of their ability to make meaningful choices. However, if the group is a particularly lame duck, you may need it for this purpose.

THE GREEN GARGOYLE

GG is a character that's mostly about atmosphere and embodied history – it can be very difficult for a player to bring that to the game. There's little that directly suggests a course of action, or even a style of action. Moreover, the “investigation” that the PCs will undertake is more or less a foregone conclusion, and once the exposition is finished there may not be much for GG to do if the Ideas Man has a technological solution.

So when looking at your potential players, try and pick a dramatic character actor. Give the player chances for dramatic entrances, and dire prophesies, let them spin out tales of the Dagon kin-folk – that kind of thing.

NO MAN WILL EVER BETRAY ME AGAIN & HORROR DOES NOT ALWAYS WEAR AN UGLY FACE

These aspects can be used to develop a strand of paranoia in the character. Compel to prevent them from allowing other PCs to hold key information, or to prevent GG from revealing everything he knows to them.

As with IM's “Instant Expert”, be careful how much use you give to this to.

INSMOUTH LOOK

One of the temptations that an active player will have as GG is to become the voice of the party, and try to handle all of the NPC interactions – particularly those at the party in Act III. The simple, but effective counter is to compel this aspect.

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WRITING THE GAME

This was written as a series of 5 posts on the group-blog Gametime (<http://community.livejournal.com/Gametime>) where I discussed my experience writing and running *Spirit of the Century* at KapCon 2008.

CONVENTION GAMING

Running games at conventions can be a very rewarding experience, or it can be fraught with difficulties. Usually it will be a mix of both depending on the group and the day. I have run only a few, half dozen or so, adventures at multiple conventions, or in multiple convention-like settings, and I'm perpetually amazed at the gulf that exists between each run.

No game has been more different in successive runs for me than a TORG-inspired scenario where the characters wake up from their holiday and find themselves in a medieval kingdom instead of Scotland. The first convention group explored the details of their characters, had fun trying to explore the world, and had a moving mass death, trying to return to reality. The second group fished around a bit for an obvious story, and eventually just drifted into some kind of ending. Totally unsatisfying.

The key lesson I took from this was that any old game can be great if the group really pushes themselves to find entertainment, but that unless there is an obvious "way forward" of some kind, other groups will stall. The "way forward" is often characterized as the "tunnel of fun" but I think that multiple-divergent routes work too, provided that there is some or other clear set of options at every stage.

Providing a "way forward" is usually easy in adventure-style games. It's a lot harder in other kinds of games. In *The Storm Breaks*, my desire for a character-exploration adventure meant that I wanted all of the available "ways forward" to be: talk to one of the other characters. Which is difficult for the GM to prompt, and so I realized that it was naturally a difficult approach unless you can clearly signpost your desire in the game pitch, so people arrive at the game looking for that kind of entertainment.

The other thing you need, I've discovered, is a tolerance for "silliest way forward." I've noticed that, more-or-less irrespective of the game, people like playing characters that are "cool". They want to be better than the average person, more likeable, more powerful. When put into situations where it isn't obvious that they will be "cooler", people will usually resort to the backup of "funny." People can, and will, joke about anything at all, under the grimmest of circumstances. As a convention GM, you need to build your scenario so that it's humour-proof: that the scenario still works at some basic level if the PCs aren't taking it too seriously.

I think perhaps these two forces combine in a weird way to ensure that Horror remains popular, yet frustrating. The monsters powering your Horror story aren't affected by humour, and nor will they be derailed by PC apathy. The discordance between a happy-go-lucky PC and their inevitable doom reduces the enjoyment of the purists, but isn't harmful to story completion.

CONVENTIONAL PULP

Given the discussion above, Pulp seems like they should be a sure-fire genre to offer at a convention. They are inherently non-serious, eschewing the moral angst that is the hallmark of their younger brothers: the super heroes, while utilizing their numerous traits of over achievement and pith.

But, I've come to realize, the "way forward" in Pulp is often a little random. I always interpreted this as meaning that whatever you try eventually works: you just have to try. But I think that many first-time pulpsters don't know what to try and so do nothing.

Adventure! tried to get around this by using "dramatic editing", undoubtedly my first brush with "shared narration." In practical terms, when I was running it, I don't think it was ever used. And *Adventure!* leads me

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on to the basic problem which plagues both pulps and supers: the Super System. Almost universally clunky, detailed, and mechanic heavy... these behemoths really suck the free-flowing and insane action out of the game.

Of course, Supers have been saved by wonderful games like *Truth and Justice* and *With Great Power*, and when I finally got around to reading it, I hoped *Spirit of the Century* was that game for pulps.

PREPARING THE MONSTER

I've written a reasonable number of convention games. A really quick tally sets it at 10. It's a difficult thing to do. You might have some ideas, but I've typically found that I've got only the barest germ, often no more than one line. And from this, I coax and cajole my story. It's all me in the writing process. In a campaign game, you've got 4 or 5 very able collaborators.

For this reason, I've tentatively, delicately, serenely and with all due charisma, tried to entice others into writing with me. For one or other reason, seldom to do with my picante humour I'm sure, it hasn't ever really worked out. And so, like many before me, I've grown to place great reliance on the kindness of play-testers to iron out any little bugs in my games. Usually when they arrive I've got 5 characters that nobody likes, and a story that wouldn't be convincing to a stoned supermodel. And generally they leave me with an adventure that meets the basic requirement of not sucking.

This background put into my mind the crazy idea of just not writing my *Spirit of the Century* adventure at all. The character generation is a wholly enjoyable experience in itself, and if I just put in the 20 minutes of preparation promised me by the game authors, I could just turn up at KapCon with an awesome game and zero effort.

When I put it like that, I can see why I went for it. I put out my tendrils, looking to dip into the enormous talent I see casually scattered all over the Wellington gaming scene. Unfortunately, I only got four people brave enough to contribute, but not greedy enough to try and claim any credit¹. I consoled myself with the thought that amongst the group were two of the most talented GMs (other than me) to be offering games at the con. Quality, they say, not quantity.

Four players meant though, that I was going to have to create at least two characters myself, and ultimately that of my 8 or 10 theorized and desired characters to choose from for the final game, I'd have to take what was generated that night.

My brief was just the game blurb: Occult Stuff would happen in 1920s New York, and characters should be generally interested in it, and able to deal with it.

There were several slightly unfortunate side-effects stemming from my participation in the character generation. The worst of these was that I was not as readily available to offer advice and assistance to the rest of the players. I had become so accustomed to talking about and thinking about Aspects that it was a complete surprise to me that none of my 4 play-testers had much exposure to the concept. It took a long time to get across the basic concepts behind aspects, much of which was me back-peddalling from an inadequate earlier explanation tossed off too quickly in an attempt to move swiftly to the nectar of their creative juices.

Another problem was that because I had intended to allow the scenario to be heavily dictated by the players, I didn't give them much guidance on the kinds of stories that might be told. Consequently, while some of the characters dovetailed perfectly into my notions of what kind of adventures were appealing to me, some emphatically did not, while being quite interesting in their own right.

The unavoidable problems with the system, however, were what perplexed me most. The interlocking of backgrounds is intended to have, I think, two outcomes. The first is that the characters are inextricably linked,

¹Ivan Towilson (the Green Gargoyle), Sam King (the Silent Dragon), Sam Burke (Tempered Steel) and Michael Foster (The British Bulldog and more than half of the Three Fisted Midget)

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so a healthy group dynamic is formed right from the outset. The other intent, I think, is to ensure a thematic compatibility between them. They are characters that, having appeared in the same adventures, should naturally suggest future appearances together.

I also think that in effect the system requires the players to know their character in a holistic and total sense right from the outset. The successive selection of aspects based on novels is intended to ease that, but I suspect that it actually complicates it, because you need to try and balance a generation mechanism with a holistic outcome. In effect, my group spent just as much time trying to juggle how their desired aspects fitted into a third-party novel as I've seen many a group spend juggling Merit Points or trying to get the best bang for their nuyen.

You can't jot down a few numbers and let the character work itself out over time, as most games allow. Or, if you do, you're constantly faced with the temptation to meta-game your skills and aspects for the quick and dirty pay off of instant victory. No: your vision of the character must be fairly complete from the outset, while having to mesh with everyone else's too. I suppose that is due to the expectation that characters won't change much over the course of the "campaign". As you'd expect for a pick-up game, or super hero games generally. My basic conclusion is that *Traveller* type character generation systems which move the character through a theoretical unplayed history... are not as intuitive or easy as they sound like they should be.

The 6 characters finally generated were:

- The Silent Dragon (American born, but trained in an Eastern Mountain Fastness)
- The Green Gargoyle (Distantly related to Deep Ones, and their implacable enemy, a gum shoe of old)
- The Three Fisted Midget (Mexican-style Masked Wrestling Hero... and midget)
- Tempered Steel (Temperance Lady and War-zone Nurse)
- The British Bulldog (Masked British Vigilante and amusingly PG Wodehousian alter ego)
- The Ideas Man (Wizard of SCIENCE)

Looking at these characters and their stories and aspects, I liked all of them. They've all got a pulpy feel, especially The Green Gargoyle and, if I do say so, the Three Fisted Midget (whose other father was, I hope, just as proud).

But they are not all equally suited to adventures in the sewers of NYC fighting tentacled monsters or cultists seeking the end of the world. They do not share that binding thematic unity, or any major commonality, while complying to the best of our ability with the nebulous pitch, and novels of the others.

In particular, it seems like the Three Fisted Midget and Tempered Steel are in the wrong sub-genre of pulps. Tempered Steel fits perfectly into a late 30s game in which combating the rise of Nazism is a key feature, less so in the rather more familiar and understated environment of the NYC sub-world. The British Bulldog and The Silent Dragon are equally strong characters more suited to larger-than-life adventures on the continent, but seemed like they would serve well enough in NYC.

And so, with the most important part (the characters) fully sorted by a group of talented gamers, and yet, feeling some early misgivings, I set out to run the first version of *Spirit of the Tentacle*, and here's how it went...

SCRIPTING DOOM

Spirit of the Century is sold, and sells itself, as a "pick-up game." The pervading sense in the text is that the game's intended to be low-prep for the GM: a game which writes itself. There are a number of tools included in the game for this, but the two most important are the basic story grammar, and the notes on utilizing

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character backgrounds.

At the risk of sparking yet another round of contentious debate on this, I see these two as being basically orthogonal, one powered by the story and one by the character. They can act in concert but they don't necessarily.

For the story grammar, the details of the characters are not relevant. There is a threat, there is a villain, there are some manoeuvres and at the end of the day good triumphs over evil. The basic story shape as laid out is not affected by the characters: they merely provide the detail and colour. Using the grammar means that, in theory, all you need to worry about are those details.

The aspect-driven method pays no real regard to the story. At each juncture the GM reviews the aspects of the PCs and inserts something related to an aspect into the adventure. The notion is that because something inherently important to a PC is involved, they'll care, and get involved. And a story will develop organically with any kind of sensible selection of aspects to probe.

Ideally, of course, the aspects will dovetail with the grammar so that at each juncture in the story there is also a relevant aspect to involve. The rulebook goes to great lengths to try and explain to prospective players how to select aspects such that they will dovetail in this way.

And obviously, if more than one set of PC aspects can be tugged, or nearly tugged, at the same time it involves more people and hence greater fun. It's probably for this reason that the designers chose to have people retroactively guest-star in novels, rather than necessarily collaborate on future stories. It results, potentially, in three characters drawing on the same basic story for 2 aspects each. So if someone's first novel is about slashing through the Andes, both guest-stars will also likely pick up aspects related to the Andes: to that character's defining novel. When the GM tugs on an aspect "Amazon river", he's going to catch three PCs in the crossfire through similar, but different, aspects.

As I've already related, this was not absolutely successful for my group. Given my basic premiss of "1920s occult pulp" only the Green Gargoyle really dovetailed nicely. Other characters had no real bias towards either occult adventures, or adventures in NYC. Indeed, I don't think that any trio of characters really suggested converging stories. And their aspects, even having featured in the relevant novels from GG, didn't reflect those novels' thematic elements very well, instead rationalizing into those novels pre-conceived Aspects.

Faced with the situation of divergent PCs, I opted to use the basic story grammar provided by the game authors. Endanger the characters, reveal the true danger, insert a complication, reveal a certain doom, wrap it up. For each of their basic story turning points I made a one-line notation about where I saw the story, and for each character I noted down one or two aspects that looked like they could be relevant, and then I waited for the group to turn up for Session 1: my bases were covered.

This is just about the least amount of preparation I've ever done for a game. But, I had no fear in my heart for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the group I'd arranged for the game are all experienced and competent. Secondly, the basic story grammar they suggests seemed fine to me. Thirdly, with the backup of the limited shared-narrative power of Aspects, the group had a powerful tool for influencing the game beyond merely trying to play the characters truly.

I opened the game with the characters imperilled: holed up in an antique book store with an angry cult outside. And almost just as immediately, things started to go wrong. The players seemed, if not confused, then definitely not enthused, by the opening scene. Half the group tried to dash around frantically being involved with everything, half sat back and did nothing at all.

I was very soon asked for a range of details, and three PCs found themselves embroiled in battling a mob of cultists. In fact, upon describing a horde of 60+ cultists, one character actually simply leapt out of the book store with a view to killing the whole lot in hand to hand fighting. The immediate danger to the story was that this would cripple group unity: with a whole party subdued you cut to a death-trap scene, with only half...

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you're left with half the group uninvolved.

We muddled through the nominal adventure plan, and I think it was a disappointing experience for everyone involved.

While it's difficult to rank the relative importance of the things that went wrong, I have a few ideas about what those errors might have been.

My own mind betrayed me: I simply couldn't invent plausibly consistent detail as fast as the PCs tried to uncover it. What do the cultists want? Well, it wasn't on my plan: but a Dread Book. Okay, now why? Oh, so they didn't get it... what now? Yeah, so they are going to do bad stuff anyway (or there's no adventure)... what? And so on. I was very quickly off my pithy little story track. Perhaps this is a failure to implement the abundance of excellent GMing tips in the book, or a more general slow-witted nature: who could say? What I can say is that the story grammar alone wasn't enough, much more detailed preparation was required.

As with most previous pulp virgins, I found there wasn't a lot of intuition for the narrow line that pulps walk between rationality and cool, and between mortals and supers. There was an unhealthy amount of player time spent trying to figure out how all the bits worked as if it were a mystery. And there were a few occasions where the players simply acted as though they were invincible. And possibly more deadly than both of these, where NPCs seemed like they could be useful for actually executing parts of the plot, the players were all for roping them in.

Now, I had gone through the characters and picked a few that looked interesting. But I really struggled with speedy and improvised implementations of these seeds. I was a bit surprised about that, because I've had a moderate amount of success with this tool in my SotC hack for *Planescape*. When I really looked carefully at the Aspects afterwards, I thought that I'd picked the wrong ones for my story grammar, and couldn't remember the ones I hadn't highlighted well enough for speedy substitutions. So the tool I had hoped to use actually impeded me slightly by wasting processing-thinking time in the midst of the game.

More generally, the Aspects were used almost solely by the players as a way of getting a re-roll. The wider implications of tagging and compelling aspects for particular kinds of stories were never explored at all. No aspects were used to help insert detail or flavour, and so their whole point was no greater than a supply of Drama points in Buffy.

For all of these failings, I must take my share of the blame. But also, more generally, I think that these are not as easy to use and implement as they seem like they should be. The conventions of traditional game are not easy to overcome, and it takes more than just a working knowledge of the concepts to quickly and painlessly express them to the players, in such a way as they seem natural. A large part of my thinking before every pulp game has been about how to convey the free-wheeling adventure without pushing the silliness to hard, and I saw quickly that a pithy explanation of aspects would necessarily be an additional bit of exposition at the game's opening.

The basic conclusion I drew was that my original optimistic ideal of a group of PCs written by others and a free-wheeling an loosely structured game driven by the players of those characters from which I could plunder was a total fantasy.

As a result I sat down to do the hard work of a convention GM: writing characters and plot lines as needed

TEARING UP NEW YORK CITY

Pulp was not the first genre to play hard to get. Westerns have proved, if possible, even more difficult to run than Pulps. Both rely on a few key, but ultimately counter-intuitive, genre conventions. For Westerns, the challenge is to have successive confrontations which build up to the climactic battle. These scenes are very difficult, because any sensible character who meets the big bad for the first time will do their best to kill them in that first encounter. But if they don't meet the villain of the adventure before the end, then the big fight will

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often feel underdone.

Solving the problem of running Westerns was tricky, and I did it by writing a gaming system that modelled closely the narrative shape of the kind of Western story that I find most interesting. Thinking through those issues has really helped when running other games, like *Deadlands*. With KapCon looming, I had no luxurious time in which to write a game system to teach myself how to make the pulp game work, but I did have the chance to reinvent any part of the game, introduce any simplifications or rule alterations that might give me a better game.

My first thoughts turned to the characters: the promise of a group devised by others than myself had been a significant factor in green-lighting this experiment. As I said in my previous post, I was generally happy with the characters as individual characters, but felt like they weren't, as a collective, really well targeted at the genre I intended to run. I thought that by aggressively re-writing one character, I could perhaps shift it enough to bring it onto the right path.

My second thought was that in structuring an adventure for Westerns, you have to make each step of the story seem rational. I guess this is a basic truth about GMing: each thing that's essential to your plot must make sense, and if for some reason it doesn't make sense within the causality of the ordinary world, you must provide some other framework to your players and this provision must be invisible. For Westerns, this is difficult. Why shouldn't they pull the trigger the first time they meet the corrupt sheriff? You make it a game, not of getting to the sheriff, but of evening the odds.

For pulps the difficulty is in making the necessary events heroic... but not super-heroic. Of making them improbable... but not impossible. And of managing coincidences that are convenient... but not silly. It's an odd balance, as I have alluded to previously. One thing that at all costs, you must not do for any genre game, is build it such that there is any reliance on the players understanding that genre. Maybe they will, but more likely they will need to learn the genre conventions over the course of the game.

The result was, that I wrote a very very short and simple story, of a group of cultists who wanted to get hold of a magical book to summon a giant otherworldly monster. The catch? They'd already summoned one to act as bait. Like using a worm to catch a fish, where the earth itself is scum floating on a pond filled with Deep Ones. The tale did not access any aspects, although there was in my mind that some aspects might be useful for the player characters to access: but by divorcing the story from the characters specifically, I built a layer of redundancy which would hopefully ensure that my game would, if not be great, then at least not suck.

Perhaps because it was such a basic story, yet provided a framework, I think that both the groups who went through the adventure found it moved along at a reasonably good pace with quite a few places for character touches. The second group, who had the benefit of a better briefing from me on pulps and the game system, added quite a few little details which gave the game flavour, and made more of the aspects appear as narrative tools rather than simple dice rolls. The second group also had a slightly more complicated story, based on recommendations from the play-testers.

Does *Spirit of the Century* save Pulps?

The basic answer is: yes. I've read and run *Adventure!*, *Pulp Zombies*, *Two Fisted Tales* and *D6*, which are all basically pulp systems. It is much better than any of those, and the reasons are: the basic ease of Fudge combined with a reasonably high level of abstraction; and aspects. *Adventure!* had a very solid character generation system, also using an incremental system BTW, but was a dog to run. A simple fight could take an hour, even for my group that played it for almost a year. *Pulp Zombies* provided awesome setting material and flavour text which it utterly failed to support with any kind of useful rules. TFT is just boring (sorry guys, I know you probably worked hard on it.) *D6* is fast, fun, provides a great range of support for games. But aspects really push *SoC* comfortably in front.

It's not as revolutionary an approach to the genre problem as *With Great Power* was for Super Heroes, nor quite as painless to use as *Truth and Justice*. I think both of those could be scaled down to do pulps if required. It

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wouldn't be the same though. *With Great Power* deals with a range of issues that aren't important to Pulps. And *T&J* is pretty much off the traditional beaten path.

The last thing that *Spirit of the Century* provides that's streets ahead, is the detailed GMing advice. I took the hype for that advice a bit far: but all the core material they present is good. Their discussions of plot construction, and the down-to-earth and honest discussion of what actually happens in a game should be models for any other game writer. It doesn't just deal with the kinds of niceties that most games deal with: it actually offers pretty specific advice about dealing with specific issues.

I will be using *Spirit of the Century* again for my pulpy needs, but I won't be trying to so heavily utilize their preparation short cut advice. I think that this is still in its heart, a traditional game, and as such, requires a lot of traditional GMing approaches, including comprehensive preparation.

EPILOGUE

This experiment was an important moment for me. I have usually found that I need to make a concerted and sustained effort to manage high-intensity fun and action. A very insightful friend of mine, who played in the play tests, asked me why I wanted to run a game so much at odds with my GMing strengths.

I gave him two reasons. Firstly: I love pulps, and they're not represented well in the convention circuit. Neither, as it happens, is my other favourite genre of Westerns. And secondly: I aspire to being better than that. I hate the thought of being limited in the kinds of games I can run and play. It is important to me that I'm not a one-trick GM.

By running a successful pulp game at KapCon, I was both bringing an awareness of the game to the wider world, and prove a point to myself.

In the end, I think the game was successful. It was the only scored round I ran, and apparently I did well. The player feedback that I got was generally that the game was good. Obviously in the future the lessons learned will be helpful in assuring future success.

But what were those lessons? That's the disappointing thing about the experience for me. I learned that I can do Action, but it's tough. My very fun *Parallax* game based on Sliders kinda showed me that. I learned that *Spirit of the Century* is by a long way the best pulp game on the market. It wasn't a surprising lesson.

Ultimately, I was hoping for some kind of epiphany; and if part 4 seemed a bit limp-wristed to you, I think that's the reason. There was no epiphany, just a bit of fun, and reinforcing some lessons about how to have it.

CHARACTER NOVELS

THE IDEAS MAN IN THE SECRETS OF THE DARK PLACES

FEATURING THE 3 FISTED MIDGET & SILENT DRAGON

When science reaches its uttermost limit, when danger beyond mortal comprehension rears its fateful head, when the world has gone mad and defies all logic... the Ideas Man must probe the Secrets of the Dark Places.

Travelling down to Haiti, at the request of the Silent Dragon, the intrepid WIZARD OF SCIENCE finds himself matched against forces beyond man's comprehension: a cult of fear and magic intent on destroying an INNOCENT YOUNG WOMAN. Defiant, the Ideas Man uses all his wit and cunning to stave off the fell magics of the tropics.

He is aided in this endeavour by that MIGHTIEST OF MIDGETS, the 3 Fisted Midget, masked wrestling hero of Mexico and the Silent Dragon, hero of the East. But can even two such powerful fighters overcome the dread, the misery, the sheer evil of the WALKING DEAD? Masks are no protection against the MIND READING POWERS, of Voodoo. Read as the 3 Fisted Midget is ensnared by a Voodoo Curse, tremble as the Silent Dragon's worst fears are brought ever closer by WITCH DOCTORS and their ZOMBIE servants.

Will the light of science OBLITERATE THE DARKNESS? Can the Ideas Man invent and devise while his friends are in MORTAL DANGER? Will the damsel be saved? Will the SECRETS OF THE DARK PLACES be revealed?

THE 3 FISTED MIDGET POUNDS THE HORDES OF HELL

FEATURING THE BRITISH BULLDOG & SILENT DRAGON

Marvel as the three greatest fighting heroes of the age are brought together in one ACTION PACKED SPECTACULAR. Never before has such might of arms been deployed against a foe, never have such deeds of martial prowess been performed, never, indeed has the need been so great, as three stand against all the HORDES OF HELL.

In the back alleys and docks of Mexico city, a Cult of DEATH PRIESTS seeks to open the GATES OF HELL. Masked Wrestling Hero, the 3 Fisted Midget, refuses to be cowed by such cowards. He traverses the night, looking for the chanting, looking for the source of the IMPENDING DOOM.

He discovers TOO LATE, that the mighty British Bulldog is already a captive and will be SACRIFICED to the DARK GODS to open a gate to another reality. Realizing the knife-edged peril, he calls upon his old friend the Silent Dragon, to rescue the Bulldog while the 3 Fisted Midget tackles the Cultists.

Is the Bulldog really captured, or is it another of his FAMOUS RUSES? Can the 3 Fisted Midget and Silent Dragon free the Bulldog before the CEREMONY IS COMPLETE? Can the three stand fast against all the HORDES OF HELL?

CHARACTER NOVELS

THE GREEN GARGOYLE STROLLS THE BOULEVARD OF DARK DREAMS

FEATURING THE 3 FISTED MIDGET & TEMPERED STEEL

Seeking to put the horrors of 'Beneath These Mean Streets' behind him, the Green Gargoyle settles in the big apple as a PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR. But all too soon, he learns that this city holds secrets even darker than those of New England when the champion of the right and just, TEMPERED STEEL, is struck down by WAKING NIGHTMARES.

And she is not alone, as the city falls under the black spell of night, it seems that only the Green Gargoyle, and that Mexican force of nature, the 3 Fisted Midget, are immune! One protected by his dark secrets, and the other by his blessed wrestling mask.

Trapped in a nightmarish world, will they wake Tempered Steel only to find her mad? To save New York, this unlikely duo must both face their GREATEST FEARS. Can a descendant of Dagon stand against his ancient line? Can a midget stand against the weight of the world? Only they stand between mankind and a nightmare that is ALL TOO REAL.

TEMPERED STEEL IN THE WOUNDS OF WAR

FEATURING THE IDEAS MAN & BRITISH BULLDOG

The Mistress of Misinformation, the Sexiest of Spies, Tempered Steel, travels to War-torn Europe in search of her father: the Greatest Thief of the Victorian Age. Can she redeem the sins of her Father, the MAN WITH NO NAME? Will she learn the truth of her Father's identity? Can she unmask THE INVEIGLER?

When news reaches Tempered Steel of her father's journey to England, she follows him into the Great War, hoping to finally prove his identity, and see that he is brought to the JUSTICE he deserves.

To her horror she discovers that worse than theft seems to be on the agenda, as the British Bulldog, so-called Stalwart of the British Isles, is embroiled in a plot to kill the King. Cracking the circle of conspirators, she finds an ally in Algernon Pendlebury-Davenport, who seeks to clear the Bulldog's Name.

Together, they discover that Doctor Electron is behind the Bulldog's actions: he has been replaced by a MECHANICAL MAN. Only the IDEAS MAN can devise a way of telling the living from the merely moving.

Thrill as Tempered Steel matches wits with her father. Be amazed as Doctor Electron is put to the test by the Ideas Man. Hold your breath, as that finest of Englishmen must do battle with his own mechanical double to staunch the WOUNDS OF WAR.

CHARACTER NOVELS

THE BRITISH BULLDOG IN THE MYSTERY OF THE MASKED STRANGER

FEATURING THE IDEAS MAN & GREEN GARGOYLE

Picking up the trail of his parents' killer, Algernon Pendlebury-Davenport travels to South America and the SACRED BROTHERHOOD OF THE SUN. Men, Women Children are disappearing from the streets, and nobody seems safe.

Only the Ideas Man, the MATHEMATICAL PRODIGY of New York, can unlock the brotherhood's Mayan calendar to give the British Bulldog the location of the Brotherhood's Secret Base, but when he gets no response he suspects the worst. Once informed by the Green Gargoyle of the brotherhood's fell purpose, and knowing the location of the cult, they travel to South America to rescue their comrade in justice.

But the tables are turned, as the British Bulldog, whose savvy is legendary, has allowed himself to be captured to find the heart of the evil cult. Now he must break free and play the part of rescuer. This is no mean feat even for the GREATEST ENGLISHMAN ALIVE. It will require not only the greatest wits and cunning, but EVERY OUNCE of the Bulldog's legendary fighting prowess.

Can the Bulldog rescue his friends from CERTAIN DEATH? While maintaining the fiction of his ALTER EGO, the whimsical Algernon Pendlebury-Davenport? Can he stop the Sacred Brotherhood?

THE SILENT DRAGON STORMS THE CITADEL OF SIN

FEATURING THE GREEN GARGOYLE & TEMPERED STEEL

Harbinger of the Earth's Doom, first defender against the darkness, mysterious white man embraced by the mysterious cults of the East... even he feels love. Returning from his studies in the MYSTERIOUS ORIENT, the Silent Dragon falls in love with the Princess Jasmine. And though their love is doomed by his sworn service to humanity, when she is kidnapped, he must act!

Enlisting the help of the GREATEST DETECTIVE ALIVE, the Green Gargoyle, he searches for his love. Alas, it is no ransom scheme or petty crook that has stolen the flower of Arabia, but the DARK SORCERER Akbar Abd Kharji, who intends to wed her in his mountain fortress.

Entering the keep is no easy task, even for the MASTERS OF STEALTH. The fortress is protected both by the mundane, and by DARK PACTS with the OLD ONES. Fortunately, Tempered Steel is on hand to infiltrate the fortress as a concubine... a disguise that nobody would wish to penetrate.

Can Tempered Steel escape being ravished? Can the Green Gargoyle hold the fell magics in abeyance? Can the Silent Dragon triumph over all the guards in the place to rescue his love?