GURPS: JAZZ AGE MYTHOS

JAZZ AGE MYTHOS CAMPAIGN GUIDE

CONTENTS

GURPS: JAZZ AGE MYTHOS

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

This is primarily an investigative horror game, with an expectation that players will also engage with the social aspects of the setting. The game is strongly based on the genre known as the *Cthulhu Mythos*, created and made famous by the works of H. P. Lovecraft and authors copying or following his style. The GURPS ruleset will be used, with a few very minor changes to what appears in the rulebook, mainly with regards to the wealth and income levels for the setting.

The game's tone will lay towards the Realism end of the spectrum than towards the Pulp end. Expect life-threatening injuries in fights and legal consequences for illegal actions. Money is important but this is not a game of accountancy. Minor purchases and everyday expenses will not be tracked to the dollar, but the Cost of Living, as suggested by a character's Social Status, will determine where a character lives and what they might reasonably be expected to afford each month. The genre is not one of resource management.

The game emphasises mental breakdown at least as much as it does physical injury. The main danger involved when confronting nightmare extra-terrestrial horrors is insanity, although the physical danger is also considerable.

As with the original stories, the base setting is primarily the North-Eastern USA (specifically New England and New York) in the period 1919-1939, mainly encompassing the time known as the 'Roaring Twenties' or the 'Jazz Age'. This is a period of contrasts; it begins and ends with economic depression but is interspersed with a rampant consumer boom; fabulously wealthy industrialists live only a few streets from the most wretched poverty; and the US President calls for national self-determination for oppressed countries whilst his own country sees startling racial violence and racist and sexist legislations.

The campaign will include some reference to racism, sexism and homophobia as appropriate to the setting and time period. Players are encouraged to speak up if they are uncomfortable in situations where these occur (see *Player Input*, below).

Technology is, in GURPS terms, Tech Level (TL) 6, with some rare elements of TL7. The USA operates at a legal Control Rating (CR) of 3, *Moderate*.

EXPECTATIONS

It is expected that players will at least familiarise themselves with the flavour of the setting, reading the *GURPS: Jazz Age Mythos: 1920s Setting* section would be a good start.

The game mainly revolves around investigation, with occasional short periods of danger and action adventure thrown in. Investigation may involve speaking to people, digging through archives or libraries, staking out or shadowing people, or other methods as appropriate. Academic skills are as important as

physical ones, if not more so. At least one or two characters with 'proper' investigation skills such as *Research* and *Observation* will be useful. Characters do not have to be professional investigators, however, and the game genre actually works better if most are not. Characters have jobs and not character classes!

The 'gritty' nature of both the genre and the GURPS rules will very likely see some characters put out of action for some time, or even killed. As noted below, it is recommended that players create two or three characters so that they have a 'stand in' to play when required.

Characters are assumed to have no knowledge of the Mythos at the start of the campaign. A character with the right background and occupation may conceivably have heard rumours of the *existence* of the Mythos, but this will be extremely rare and players should not assume such knowledge without checking with the GM first. This does not affect any knowledge of the non-Mythos occult such as ghosts and vampires.

Firearms and other weapons are going to be part of the campaign but not a central part; one or two characters with decent firearms skills should be sufficient. Not all characters have to have military level small arms skills, but a few with skills such as *Brawling* will be useful.

H. P. LOVECRAFT VERSUS CAMPAIGN REALITY

H. P. Lovecraft's investigators are often independently wealthy white middle-class men who stumble into a Mythos situation and rarely manage to stumble out of it entirely unscathed. *GURPS: Jazz Age Mythos* assumes that most characters have a reasonable chance of continuing in the campaign unless they do something very stupid (or are incredibly unlucky). All social classes, ethnic backgrounds and both sexes are suited to becoming investigators in this campaign, but those struggling for money may have a more interesting time trying to fit investigating in around a paying job.

Lovecraft's stories were isolated tales. The campaign is a longer time period and players should be aware that their actions may affect the way society reacts to their characters in the future. Blowing up public buildings because you believe an extra-terrestrial god is loose in the cellar will not be good for your social standing.

GURPS VERSUS CHAOSIUM

GURPS is a slightly more gritty and realistic system than that of Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*. In particular, the combat in GURPS is more likely to cause lasting injury.

Obviously, the two systems use different rules for skills. An article converting Chaosium's system to that of GURPS is available (*GURPS: Jazz Age Mythos: Conversion*) if this becomes necessary. Most conversion of one system to another is likely to be the problem of the GM running printed Chaosium source material, rather than that of the players.

Spells and magic are a fairly minor but nonetheless significant part of the *Cthulhu Mythos* genre and are not easily translated across the two systems. Whilst a list of spells and rough mechanical rules have been

created (*GURPS: Jazz Age Mythos: Grimoire*), magic in this campaign is going to involve a lot more description and 'hand-wavium' than game mechanics, with situational modifiers and narrative necessity weighing heavily on the results. This is not a fantasy game where magic-users cast fireballs, it is a horror game where cultist sorcerers summon tentacled monsters and infiltrate your dreams.

CHARACTERS

Characters will be based on the GURPS character level of *Competent*, with an allocation of 60 points plus up to 30 points in Disadvantages (hence up to a 90 point total). At least 5 Disadvantage points must be spent on a Disadvantage relating to a friend or family member included in the character's backstory (see below). All character should have a reasonable chance of being involved in investigations in the New York and Boston areas of the USA. The (fictional) Massachusetts university town of Arkham and its surrounding area is a classic starting place for investigators of the *Cthulhu Mythos*.

Player should strongly consider creating two or three characters because investigators are fragile and may need to spend time in hospital or asylums. Having more characters in a 'pool' also allows the most suitable investigator to be taken along. A polar explorer is less useful than a black labourer when investigating the Jazz clubs and back streets of Harlem. All the characters run by a player should know each other and be at least on speaking terms. Having complementary or related characters is not a problem, and it will be very useful if they all have a reason to regularly stay in touch with each other so that 'dropping in' to an ongoing investigation will not be such a suspension of belief. Characters should generally see through the adventure they are engaged in, however; it is not good form to play 'tag-teams' partway through an investigation.

Players are urged to play the character they find interesting rather than trying to create the perfect Mythos investigator. All (well, most) skills will find a use but it is the player's narrative input that will be most important. Do not forget social skills and Advantages such as Contacts. Most Jazz Age characters live in bustling cities and will have built up several social connections that might be useful. Not all characters need be experts and heroes and the game's underlying theme works best if the investigators are actually ordinary people drawn into extraordinary events. Don't be put off playing a bibliophile housewife or an office clerk with a high school-level interest in history. The campaign can cope with people from most backgrounds.

All characters should have at least 5 Disadvantage points which relate to people in their backstory. This may be *Dependents*, people to whom they have a *Sense of Duty*, or some other social link. These people may not be other player characters. The people in question should still be alive at the start of the campaign. Suggestions are old friends, former teachers or mentors, former or existing lovers, family members, or someone else who has had a significant effect on the character's life. Usually, such people will be built on *Average* points (25) and may be left to the GM to write up if preferred. Needless to say, the primary reason for this is to give the GM a plot hook to involve that character In a given scenario. Such NPCS are unlikely to be of regular use in an investigation party, but may provide useful skills or contacts in 'downtime' or in the background. Having a friend who happens to be a scientist or pilot and using their skills when required is perfectly fine.

GURPS: JAZZ AGE MYTHOS

If you can build in a solid mechanical reason for your character to want to investigate the paranormal then feel free, but this is not necessary. Most characters are drawn in almost against their will and through social or other pressures, there do not have to be mechanical reasons to investigate built into the character.

Try to avoid one-trick pony, quirky, comical, or other one-dimensional characters. They may look fun to begin with, but you, the GM and/or the other players will very likely tire of them quickly. Don't copy real, film or TV characters too closely. There are only so many Phillip Marlowes that a campaign can take. Go for characters you care about and can play believably. The most mundane character may quickly become interesting.

PLAYER INPUT

The game is run for everyone, players as well as GM, and all have a right to provide input and suggestions as to how scenes play and to the campaign gaming style. The GM, however, has created and is running the game so has the final say, and particular scenarios often require a particular style in order to work.

It is recognised that the USA in the 1920s suffered from racism, sexism and homophobia. To completely ignore these historical elements of the period would run counter to the historical verisimilitude that the campaign is aiming for. That said, the players should certainly make it known if they are uncomfortable with particular scenes or situations. Deliberately offending players to maintain the game's historical accuracy is not the intention.

Players should invest in their character backgrounds. The more input and colour that is given to a character, the more this will be used by the GM. The GM will usually be happy to *slightly* bend the campaign setting around character backgrounds where possible and appropriate. Please don't use this as a 'power play' excuse, however. I'm afraid that your character is unlikely to be the New York Chief of Police or the local Mafia Godfather, no matter how much depth you have created for them.

MESHING; THE FIRST SESSION

The first session, and possibly the first couple of sessions, will introduce the characters to the other players and allow the players to get a grasp of the game mechanics and campaign flavour. The assumption is that each character has a connection to at least two other characters. This may be a close connection or a distant one, but should be strong enough for the characters to think of contacting each other if in need of help. Two characters will obviously have a mutual connection, but they may not share the same connection with a third character; no little closed social triangles are allowed.

The web of connections will be explained in more detail and established during the meshing session; at this stage you just need to know that each character will know at least two of the other characters in the party from the outset. Characters may undergo minor rewrites immediately following the meshing session, so long as the connections and basic character premise (e.g. 'nerdy librarian' or 'tough brawler') are unchanged.