



HORROR GAMES

HELLO DARKNESS

HORROR IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Lead writer Chris Perkins reveals how the vampiric villains and delightful dread of Ravenloft and *Curse of Strahd* helped the RPG's adventures discover a dark side

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Wizards of the Coast

You stumble through the mists, lost inside a valley of eternal rain. In the distance, the vast crooked spectre of Ravenloft castle glowers. A mad, irredeemably murderous vampire prowls its corridors – and you can't shake the feeling he's watching you. Waiting.

Welcome to Barovia, the location of fifth-edition *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign *Curse of Strahd*, released in 2016. Unlike classic insta-death bonanza module *Tomb of Horrors* from 1978, *Curse of Strahd* invokes a different sort of horror entirely. Influenced by all things Gothic, Barovia is packed full of dread and yearning.

"It's a beautiful gloom," says *Curse of Strahd* designer and lead writer Chris Perkins. "Barovia strikes a balance between beauty and ghastriness. It's a study of contrasts. It's also very isolated; characters learn quickly that no-one can save them – they're on their own."

A far cry from other places in the *Dungeons & Dragons* world, Barovia has no tangible economy, and no welcoming party for the heroes. As you'd expect in a land where witches, wizards, flesh golems and psychotic angels run amok, the people have seen it all before.

The landscape features an eerie spectrum of horror locations: the swampy recesses of derelict town Berezh, the malevolent trees and singing runes of Yester Hill, and the ruined splendour and crazed cultists of mini-dungeon murder factory the Death House.

"For me personally, I find Old Bonegrinder, the dilapidated windmill, terrifying – both the location and its sinister goings-on," highlights Perkins. "It invokes certain fairytales that disturbed me as a child and stuck with me into adulthood."

At Barovia's centre is its villain: Count Strahd von Zarovich, the ultimate big bad. Fuelled by powerful magic and fiendishly calculating, "that Devil" Strahd could murder the player characters at anytime. However, possessing a fatal hubris, he chooses to toy with them instead. Similar to the titular extra terrestrial of *Alien*, he can turn up at anytime, lashings of bloodshed in his wake. But like Gothic antihero Dracula, Strahd is not a happy boy.

"A good horror villain is fabulously evil and tormented," comments Perkins. "In Gothic horror fiction, the villain's torment is often self-inflicted; the villain becomes, ironically, a victim of their own monstrous nature and horrible acts."

Strahd's appeal lies in his arrogance: "He can't see who he truly is; as is the case with vampires, he looks in the mirror and sees nothing," continues Perkins. "He is a malignant narcissist trapped by his malignant narcissism – forever alone, forever feared and unable to change. He must be destroyed because salvation is beyond him."

Barovia is the mirror that reflects the true horror of its dark lord, according to Perkins, and everything in it



is touched and corrupted by Strahd in some way. The world itself continuously reveals new horrors relating to the vampire, like a grim canvas of Strahd's past.

Most characters in *Curse of Strahd*, NPCs and monsters alike, are grappling with something terrible. They've developed painful, and often dangerous, ways of surviving. Those that have not been driven mad are melancholy – resigned to their fate.

"In horror fiction, the villain is framed as inhumanity personified, often serving as a cautionary tale: once you lose your humanity, you can never get it back," Perkins says. "Other fantasy villains aren't usually burdened with that kind of terrifying reality."

And what better trope for humanity stripped to nothing than vampires, creatures consumed by parasitic hunger?

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

The origins of *Curse of Strahd* lie in '70s Provo, Utah. Couple Tracy Hickman and Laura Curtis – tired of mundane vampire tropes in *Dungeons & Dragons* – decided to create a genuinely frightening vampire-based adventure module. Back then, vampires sprung up somewhat unceremoniously as random encounters in dungeons, barring the starring role of the vampiric lizard ruler in *Tomb of the Lizard King* (1982).

Hickman and Curtis' *Ravenloft* was published by TSR in 1983 as a 32-page first edition adventure module. Eschewing the sword-and-sorcery traditions of the time, it was instead driven by the machinations of its dastardly villain, who would go on to become *Dungeons & Dragons*' most prominent vampire – and the source of the scourge in its world.

It went on to gain a sequel, and inspired a campaign setting of the same name in 1990. Part of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* collection,

the *Ravenloft* series expanded the world of Barovia – which is but one of many 'Domains of Dread' scattered about the Forgotten Realms universe. The second-edition series included a number of its own bestiaries (like *Van Richten's Monster Hunter's Compendium*) and a trove of modules; one adventure even has lycanthropic sea wolves.

Additionally, *Ravenloft* instalments featured 'Terror Tips' for the DM. These ranged from withholding secrets to taping plastic spiders to the underside of players' chairs and shaking aforementioned chairs in simulation of an earthquake.

The original designers of *Ravenloft* helped create *Curse of Strahd*, providing "30 years' worth of ideas" during creation, says Perkins. For example, the Amber Temple in *Curse of Strahd* was inspired by a Russian palace mentioned by Hickman. Classic horror stories like *The Island of Doctor Moreau* also proved influential.

Needless to say, the tips in *Curse of Strahd* are more subtle. Like *Ravenloft*, they advise maintaining a horror atmosphere that is occasionally broken with light humour.

BACK INTO THE DARK

Curse of Strahd is a unique *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure, a dark, unsettling unicorn of a campaign. It's also the only abashedly horror-themed long campaign. That said, there are horrifying elements at play in other adventure modules. Picture the seedy streets and undercover machinations of *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*, *Apocalypse Now*-style Underdark trip *Out of the Abyss* or adventuring through the Nine Hells in *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*. Horror in essence, is a key component of much adult fantasy.

However, *Dungeons & Dragons*, as a game inherently about player empowerment, is not a natural fit for horror. As a genre, horror relies on disempowerment and vulnerability. Feelings of fear are invoked through a crushing of agency: things unseen and inescapable. It's a mechanic that horror-focused titles like *Call of Cthulhu* and the diceless *Dread* structure themselves around. These are games where permadeath lurks around every corner.

It's hard to do this in the *Dungeons & Dragons* world, at least in its latest incarnation. Culturally, we've shifted from 'total party knockout' machines like *Tomb of Horrors*. Nowadays, player characters operate as godlike figures of super strength and magic. They shape the world around them.

Yet, *Curse of Strahd* proves that a mix of strong writing and ingenious DMing can create an effective horror tale. Suitable dread is built through an evocative world, and canny manipulation of the environment and players. Players learn quickly that rushing in swords a blazing leads to death – or something far worse.

Horror is about emotion, and Barovia itself is pure dread. A place where the sun no longer shines, and hollow-eyed villagers gather in protective circles, waiting for the wolves. A place perhaps, where we are forced to confront our own darkness. 🐺

FIVE FRIGHTS

Lead writer Chris Perkins reveals his top tips for running a horror campaign in *Dungeons & Dragons*

1. DON'T REVEAL TOO MUCH

"Horror comes from the unknown. Once you've seen the horrible thing, it becomes less horrible. As a DM running a horror-themed game, I cling to the unknown and keep players in the dark as long and as often as possible. As one monster reveals itself, it's good to have another unknown waiting in the wings."

2. SET THE MOOD

"How one sets the scene and describes things to the players is important for laying the groundwork and invoking the appropriate mood. The voice of the DM, the crispness of the details, the deliberate obscuring of details – all of these can help create tension and suspense."

3. VARY THE DEGREES OF TENSION

"The DM also needs to dial down the horror at times, putting the players at ease just long enough for the tension to start ramping up again. Peaks and valleys – all stories have them. You can't keep players on their edges of their seats perpetually in a horror-themed game. They need to let down their guard, so that the horror can creep up on them again."

4. EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT HORROR STYLES

"I think it's okay to challenge the players' expectations of what horror is. Surprising them with new flavors of primal horror is something *Curse of Strahd* strives to accomplish, insofar as the locations featured in the adventure each handle horror differently."

5. ENSURE YOUR PLAYERS ARE INVESTED

"What makes an amazing horror campaign is more than words on a page: it requires investment and commitment on the part of the game's participants. Eerie background music and a few candles might help, but nothing spoils a perfectly good horror moment like players being silly."