



The Esoterrorists Scenario Design Notes

[Ed. This was originally an internal document not intended for publication, but I thought it might be of interest to any GM designing Esoterrorist adventures]

Here are some thoughts and guidelines to help you in creating *Esoterrorist* scenarios for publication. Our understanding of these issues continues to evolve over time, so there may be material in early scenarios that contradicts advice given here. Some of these approaches became consciously apparent to me only after seeing Adrian Bott's excellent work adapting his scenario from the original *Unremitting Horror* book to its GUMSHOE incarnation [Ed. To be released in March]

Creating Investigation Triggers

Use the Ordo Veritatis as a narrative device allowing you to insert the characters immediately into the story without the need for elaborate motivation. The PCs' unknown bosses place them in a situation, giving them the information they need to get started, and off they go. If you're having trouble getting the characters into the story, you're probably over-thinking.

The OV investigates a large number of weird-seeming incidents, including ones with no overt supernatural connection. Anything that induces wide scale cognitive dissonance may be an Esoterrorist plot. (Their success in placing disorienting text crawls under all news broadcasts after 9/11, which had no supernatural component, is a prime example.)

So it is perfectly permissible to have the OV briefer say: "According to our computer modeling, this Britney Spears serial flashing incident has increased background unease in the population by sixteen basis points. There may be nothing to it, but we want you to check it out and file a background report just in case." (Presumably the characters get sent on wild goose chases on a regular basis, but since this isn't particularly interesting, it happens in the background, between real adventures, just like their trips to the mall to buy socks and visits to the dentist.)

The OV also doubtless maintain various data mining techniques, searching communications for keywords, and may trigger an investigation based on this alone. "This company matches the profile for an Esoterrorist front, and we've red flagged seventeen different cognitive dissonance techniques in their advertising. Then, last week, their marketing manager disappeared under mysterious circumstances."

Or they may have uncovered intelligence, the sources of which they can't reveal to the team for fear of blowing other agents' identities. "We have good reason to believe this guy/place/company is hinky, so we're sending you in to check it out. For operational reasons we have to leave you in the dark, but if our confidential source is correct, you'll soon confirm his or her intelligence on your own."

So you don't need a monster sighting or dismembered corpse to start an adventure, although those things are cool, too.

Remember also that it's okay to portray the Esoterrorists as bold or careless, especially when an operation is already beginning to unravel for them:

- they're carefully organized in a cell structure, so that the damage from possible exposure only hits expendable operatives.
- they enjoy ordering murders, and look for rationalizations justifying them

THE ESOTERRORISTS



- they're self-centered sociopathic scumbags, who are happily prepared to throw their rivals and lackeys under the bus
- in many past cases, they've often gotten as much zeitgeist-damaging bang out of the clean up of an abortive operation as from the operations themselves

It's all part of the unusual dynamic where the good guys are more anxious to cover up the crimes than the people committing them. This is a distinctive element, so don't be shy about playing it up.

The organizational structure of the Esoterrorists should remain somewhat shadowy and undefined, because it's more menacing that way. The players should believe them capable of anything, even if they're not.

The conspiracy adapts and changes in response to OV countermeasures. They can be compared to post-Afghanistan Al Qaeda, in that they have a fugitive, hard-pressed command center using quasi-covert means to communicate with small, highly autonomous operational cells who are unaware of one another. However unlike Al Qaeda, no one knows who their ultimate leaders are.

Local cell leaders act with considerable autonomy. There may be someone up the chain to see to their murders if they screw up, but if they're caught, they have little to reveal about the higher-ups. Many cells may be connected to the main leadership by ideology alone. Despite ongoing OV efforts to block communications, any lunatic with a web connection can find Esoterrorist propaganda and the inspiration to self-start his own operation. The rich, twisted and alienated are disproportionately represented in their ranks, so they can have whatever real-world resources you need to make your stories work. On the other hand, if you want to do a scenario where isolated backwoods rubes who barely have running water are conducting an Esoterror operation, that works, too.

Making Plots Specifically Esoterroristic

The Esoterrorists is an unusual setting for an RPG, in that it's intentionally narrow in focus. Most settings instead offer complicated, wide-ranging settings supporting a huge number of potential campaign premises (even if most groups actually play the default premise.) In this way, *The Esoterrorists* is more like a tightly focused mainstream media property than an RPG setting.

It is also meant to be highly accessible, so that if a GM prefers a pre-existing contemporary horror investigation setting, she can adapt *Esoterrorists* material and techniques to it with a minimum of tweaking.

That said, there are a few distinctive elements in the *Esoterrorists* formula, and these are worth playing up, because they may result in fresher content.

Always find a way to introduce the idea of manipulation of the zeitgeist to the Esoterrorist plot. A great Esoterrorist scenario is a novel mix of elements from real world news and headlines with standard horror tropes. When introducing weird or supernatural elements, ask yourself, "How can I make this shockingly real and current?"

Another important distinction from *Delta Green*, *Chill*, and other similar settings is that the bad guys are very sharply limited in what they can pull off, supernaturally. They can summon horrible creatures, and that's about it. Perhaps they can use the changing zeitgeist to change physical reality in a way that does not overtly appear to be supernatural in any way. For example, they might be able to ritually channel peoples' growing fear of global climate change to accelerate global climate change.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

However, they are not sorcerers and can't throw lightning bolts, kill at a distance, read minds, or whatever. This is to preserve the investigative aspect of the game, so that the reality of physical evidence isn't thrown out the window by the presence in the setting of efficacious magical effects. When players encounter a locked room mystery, they can be confident that the bad guy hasn't just teleported out or flown off the balcony.

Future iterations of GUMSHOE may include forensic magic, along the lines of Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy stories, but this is not a feature of *The Esoterrorists*.

Clues

The whole point of the system is to make clues easy to acquire, so that players can get on with the fun of figuring out how they fit together. Facilitate this by making choices that get information into the hands of players. Habits die hard, so make sure you're not slipping back into the old paradigm and making the clues hard to get.

Some things should go without saying, but don't. Suggest alternate abilities which can be used to gain clues. Encourage creative ability use. Remind GMs that they can use abilities in unconventional ways. Any credible attempt to get information that would yield a given clue yields that clue, whether or not this is the ability you've specified in the scenario.

Remember that clues needn't all lead directly to the solution of the mystery. They can provide information that makes an encounter more interesting, or gives the character a small victory unrelated to the main plot line. They can confer advantages on later general ability use. A spend in Cop Talk, for example, might allow you a combat advantage against a rogue police officer, because you took the same martial arts courses he did and can anticipate his moves. Avoid spends which stack on other investigative abilities, because these make it harder to gather needed clues.

Alternate Structures

One gamer bugaboo we keep running into is the fear of being placed in a linear structure. This is often more a matter of perception than reality – witness our playtest experience where the groups whose GMs did the most improvising were the most likely to think they were being chained to the scenario as written. Nonetheless, it is useful to do what you can to show that your scenario can successfully unfold in a number of different ways.

Whenever possible, illustrate this by mapping out various orders in which the clue-gathering scenes can occur. Show that general action scenes can occur at different times, depending on the GMs need to inject excitement or keep the story moving. Add optional sequences to help GMs improvise. Suggest possible tangents interested groups might have fun pursuing. Provide alternate endings.

The downside of all of this is that it takes space, expending precious word count on scenes that only some groups will use. But, as it is something we keep hearing, and so should continue to address.

Player-Facing Rolls

Unlike other systems, GUMSHOE is not a simulation in which PCs and GMCs are mechanically equal. Because protagonists and supporting characters have different structural roles in the creation of an investigative story they have different mechanics to support them.

THE ESOTERRORISTS

GMCs should never roll independently of the PCs to determine whether or not something happens. For example, there is no need for them to make Stability rolls, or to have other decisions or behaviors determined by die rolls during play. If you think it's interesting or necessary for a character to go nuts if condition Y is met, just say that it happens. Where possible, see to it that player decisions determine whether condition Y occurs. If it's not interesting or necessary, there shouldn't be a chance of it happening.

Where the responses of supporting characters ought to be variable, find a way to trigger them by rolls or spends made by the players. Make them player-facing, in other words.

Let's say the arms dealer the players are interrogating has a chance of panicking midway through the exchange and attempting to swallow a cyanide pill. A traditional way to do this would be to have him make a confidence roll or something like that.

The GUMSHOE way to do it is to make his decision incumbent on what the players do. You could:

- Call for a **Shrink** roll to keep him calm.
- Allow for both **Intimidation** or **Reassurance** as ways of getting him to talk, but (after giving the players an indication that one choice is better than the other) having him freak out if it's **Intimidation** they used.
- Have him remain calm on a **Reassurance** spend.
- Have him remain calm if they remind him of his mother, who (if they were smart) they befriended during the previous scene.

Statting GMCs

Because GMCs are not congruent with PCs, you don't have to provide more than a handful of stats for them. They are generally not investigative characters, so you although in a very few cases (cops and so on) you might want to include academic or technical investigative stats as a point of comparison. A PC might want to know whether to be intimidated by the credentials of the FBI profiler he's consulting, or to regard him as a well-meaning novice.

Interpersonal stats are never required. When GMCs are likely to be lied to by the PCs, provide textual guidelines on how gullible they are and what deceptions they might be either impervious or susceptible to. (PCs might be able to figure this out in advance of their deceptions with Interpersonal spends.)

Stability can always be omitted. As mentioned above, incidents involving GMC stability should instead be converted to situational events or player-facing spends and/or rolls.

Supply other general abilities. Provide other tags or identifiers (like the Worst Thing I Ever Did or character stereotype from GUMSHOE Horror) if you think they're helpful to GMs in playing the characters. Avoid information overload by only providing data points that might actually come into play in the scenes in which the GMC appears.