

GUMSHOE 102 for GMs: How to Design Adventures in GUMSHOE

Let me walk you through my own process. I seldom have more than a one-page outline when I run GUMSHOE, but it benefits from some pre-thought. Warning: there are spoilers here for a Night's Black Agents adventure I might eventually publish. All this applies only to my personal prep, and may not work for others.

Step 1: have the core of a cool idea. My archeologist friend works in Peru, and she mentioned a kind of regional vampire legend called pishtacos (worth looking up on wikipedia.) They are vampires in the Peruvian Andes that drain body fat, not blood. I think this is incredibly cool, as they're a real legend that no one has ever heard of.

Step 2: Develop the idea. Okay, the main bad guy is a pishtaco. But so what? It means that people around him die of wasting sickness, that his Renfields are probably cadaverously skinny, that he hangs out with Peruvians... I remember Famine from the book Good Omens. He was a diet guru making people starve themselves to death willingly. Gotta steal that.

So my bad guy is a South American pishtaco who is also a diet guru. I cast him as "Dr. Gabe," a charming and handsome TV personality that is one of Oprah's favorites. He is opening a new line of diet restaurants with delicious and calorie-free food, and he has a brand new diet book about to debut. It'll be a best-seller.

So what is he doing? Well, I have (from a previous adventure) an evangelical church that's secretly run by charismatic vampires. Let's say that Dr. Gabe is a member and he's convinced himself that he really is the embodiment of Famine. Although he feeds on body fat, he considers himself a divine tool, and the world is a fat fat place. He will change this. There was a Leverage episode about bio-engineered wheat blight -- a fungus that will wipe out all the world's wheat fields except for the crops designed to be resistant. I'll totally steal that plot, only the strain of fungus he wants to steal doesn't have a cure yet.

How to distribute that fungus worldwide? Why, clearly in the pallets of books he's about to ship out from his warehouse. His agents internationally will secure fungus samples from those pallets and do the rest. Soon, the world will starve.

Bingo. I have my charismatic super-villain and my overly complicated spy plot. Give the villain a henchman: a former Peruvian fashion model trained in Paris, then recruited as a French spy, now Dr Gabe's personal assistant. She's gorgeous, incredibly capable, and cadaverously skinny as a bit of foreshadowing. Let's call her Elena.

Step 3: involve the PCs and consider clues. I want to start Narrow and with action, so half the PCs are trying to prevent a (supposedly) defunct Russian warhead from being launched by terrorists. To do so, they need a launch code from the phone of the Russian arms dealer who arranged this. He was on a plane, and before the PCs could grab him he got killed by the mysterious Elena and had his phone stolen.

At game start, there's 30 seconds before warhead launch. The PCs in the missile base are fighting multiple thugs trying to kill them, and the other half are skydiving with no parachute, trying to catch up with Elena, her Peruvian bodyguards, and that phone she just stole.

[See this brief play-by-post for how this actually plays out:]

<http://www.enworld.org/forum/showthread.php?336526-Night-s-Black-Agents-Countdown-%28demo-encounter%29>

I figure they'll get the phone, and if Elena "dies" I won't sweat it; she's a Renfield and can return through blatant GM fiat (proving she's not human). More likely she'll clone the phone and escape. Either way, that beginning set piece stops with the warhead disabled with mere seconds to spare, and the PCs (having stolen parachutes from dead skydiving bodyguards) landing safely. As noted earlier, at this point all the PCs refresh all General ability pools, since that was the intro scene that introduces the rules system.

Step 4: Follow the logic through. Then the investigation. Who was that woman, and why did she want a copy of the phone info? The PCs will ID her through facial recognition, which leads them to Dr. Gabe. They find a code on the phone which matches the sequence used by Glenn-Reader security systems. A Glenn-Reader security system was robbed the day after the phone was stolen, the system guarding a high-tech agro-business.

The investigation is Wide here. They have clues to Elena and Dr Gabe, but don't know why he's involved. They have clues to the agro-business lab. Investigation (in person or through contacts) reveals that dozens of vials of a grain blight were stolen, and the company is covering it up because their whole company is at stake. Now the PCs know that Dr Gabe has grain blight. But why?

Step 5: Let them be clever. They'll probably have to infiltrate his offices to find out, and he is one charming SOB. He's arrogant enough that he'll probably even reveal his plan, secure that no one knows how to destroy him (actual method, according to legend? Mummy dust. Wacky) and excited about his new restaurant and books. It's up to the PCs how they proceed. They may figure out the vials are in his book warehouse, and go burn the whole thing down, or they may confront him at his restaurant opening. Lots of fun possibilities here.

Due to his personality, threatening to ruin his carefully built reputation might actually get him to back down. He's a sucker for the limelight, it turns out. PCs can claim victory if they stop the blight, whether or not Dr Gabe is still around.

Step 6: Aim for a big finale, preferable with explosions. So you'll notice that this end is crappily not narrow. It's a scenario flaw. Ideally, I'd lead up to a specific set piece and confrontation, and I can do that (a fight at the warehouse, a big reveal at the restaurant opening), but here I tend to leave it a little loose. In this adventure, the climax tends to happen on the red carpet outside of Dr. Gabe's star-studded restaurant opening, but I let the players choose how they want to settle the problem; then I think to myself, what's the most exciting thing that could possibly happen here?

The takeaway?

Step 1: make a cool bad guy.

Step 2: give him a cool plot and cool henchmen.

Step 3: Set the players on the right trail. Anything they do to follow that trail, if reasonable, will get them more info.

Step 4: Don't dribble out clues too slowly. Give them good info, then glory in the chaos as they act on it.