

Three Buckets of Blood

A TTRPG campaign blending classic horror cinema with teen comedy.

It was run using GURPS Lite – a simplified version of Generic Universal RolePlaying System.

My role and goals

I was the sole designer and GM.

My goal was to create an experience similar to **being inside a teen horror film or series**, and use it to do a **retrospection of the genre**.

Design challenges

- Create a movie-like horror experience based on tropes and conventions of the genre → **setting**
- Emulate the dynamics of film ensemble casts in the playable character group → **character relation system**
- Structure the campaign around retrospective evolution of the horror genre → **act structure**

Setting

The setting was based on many tropes and references to classic horror movies.

The players take on roles of 16-year-old teenagers, new to town and its weirdness.

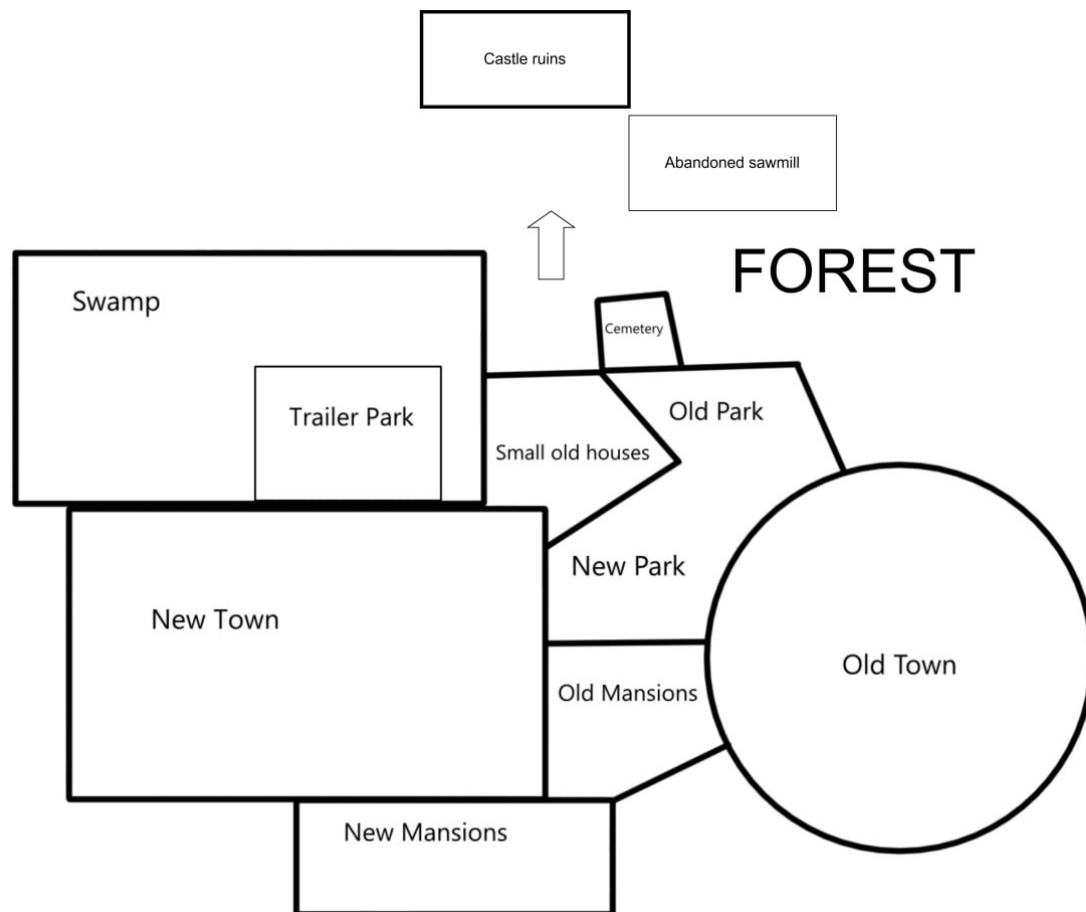
Important note: the setting was always supposed to be ‘cinematic’ and trope-heavy, not realistic and with no references to real-life people or events.

The story starts in the caricature 90s, in a [secluded US town](#) in an intentionally unspecified location closed to the outside world.

Most of the NPCs were made from tropes, for example, the main antagonist blends the [Evil Principal](#), the [Lost Lenore](#) and ‘[alchemy is magic](#)’ tropes. There’s also a mad scientist, a shy girl, a lovable jock, and other stock characters who matured during development and play.

I made the town’s structure modular. Each neighbourhood had its theme and main buildings, but was flexible enough for creating new locations on the fly. There was room in it for: societal horror, creepy forest, blob monsters, human experiments, bullying, undead hordes, abusive parents and grandparents, capitalism, creepy crypts, old money mansions, abandoned castles, generational trauma, artifacts of incredible power, mind-control, parasitism, etc.

There were several iterations of the town’s map, but this is the layout I decided to use:

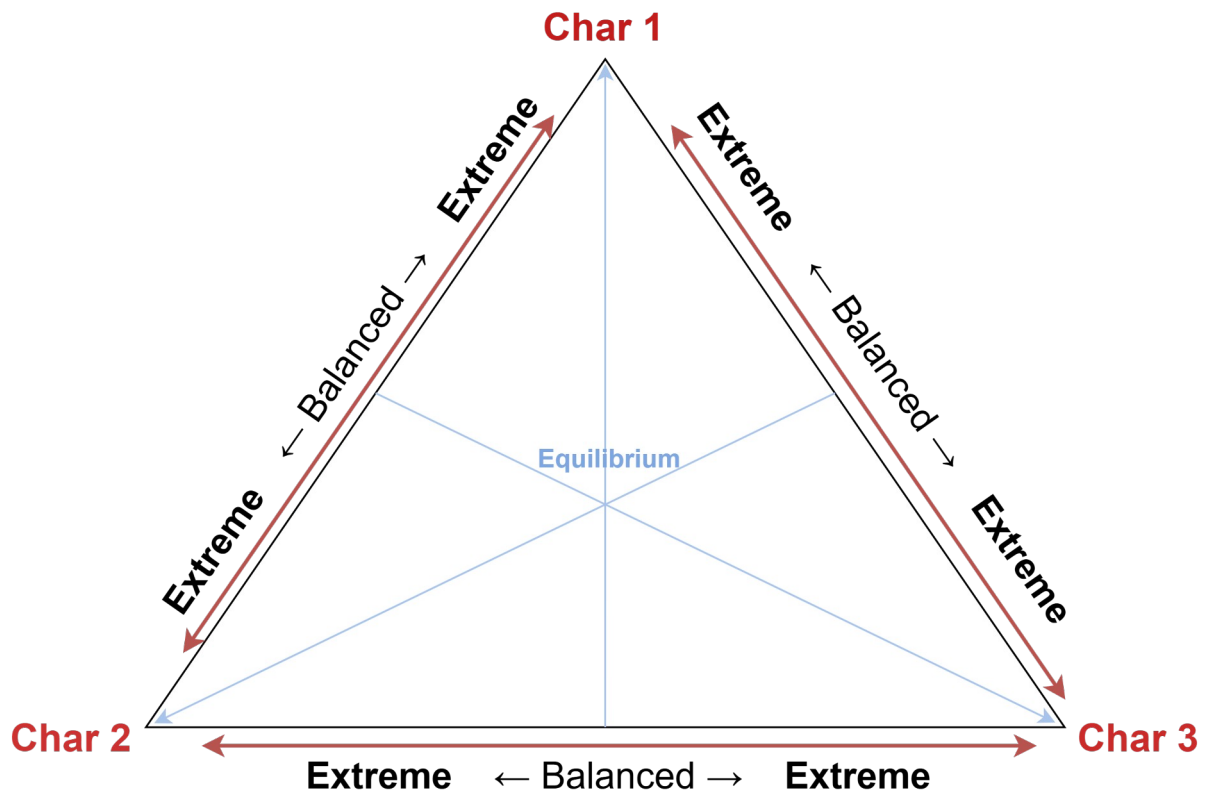


The town had a history to accommodate the time-travel plot and possible variations. It helped flesh out the town as a character in itself, and its map was indicative of its changes over time.

Character relation system

To try and emulate the dynamics of a film character ensemble, I created a system to **tie the characters together** even before the players finish making them. The goal was to prototype tension and juxtapose their dispositions, while leaving the choices to the players.

The idea was to place all three characters on a diagram to see how they can be connected. The emerging pattern then formed a schematic of their relations. Think of the [Freudian Trio](#), but as a schematic and with a role rotation.



The **extremes** show characters' predilections, strong opinions or learned behaviours.

The middle of the range is an important **equilibrium** trait – the golden mean, which allows the character to see between extremes and resolve disputes between the other two. It's a glue that was designed to help the cast work together.

To make a specific chart, I first needed to know what **type** of character the players wanted to play. I suggested a list of different tropes and types of characters **specific to the genre**. The broadest possible description for the character – where they stand and how others might see them.

Because the focus of the setting was very specific – teen comedy horror, most of the types came from teen movies.

For example: brainiac, jock, princess, delinquent, basket case, etc.

The players chose types and subtypes:

1. Character 1: **Straight A's + Neurotic**
2. Character 2: **Musician + Metalhead**
3. Character 3: **Stoner + Nerd**

It was enough for me to come up with scales of traits specific to those three characters:

1. **Conformity – Nonconformity**

(How important the rules are for the character, do they specifically try following them, or intentionally break them)

2. **Methodical – Impulsive**

(How quickly the character tends to act; if they need a detailed plan, or if they do the first thing that comes into their head without thinking)

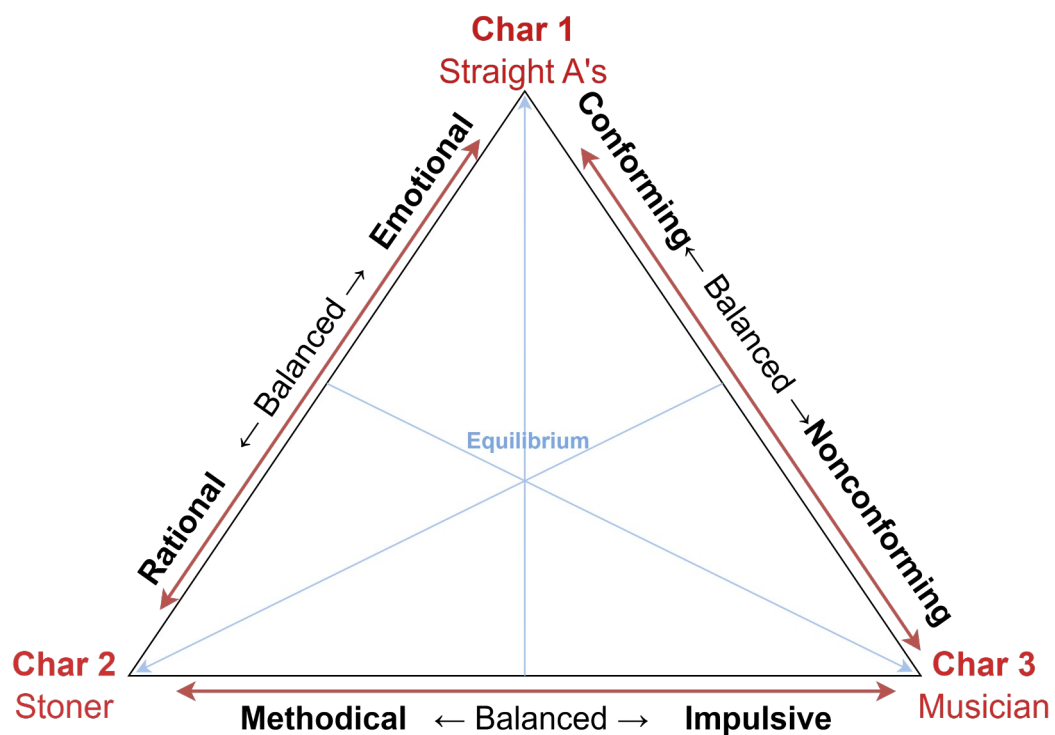
3. **Rational – Emotional**

(How important emotions are for the character, if they act according to their emotions or rationalise things)

Example

Stoner Nerd: Overly rational, overly methodical planner, equilibrium in conformity-nonconformity scale (can see the benefits of both).

And then I put them on a chart. Characters in a corner and their characteristics on the sides of the triangle, connecting them:



Example situations that arose during play

- The **metalhead** character was always pushing the group to break or at least bend the rules. The **straight A's**, being a neurotic, was hesitant to protest, but usually tried to minimise the damage – until the pressure built up and they finally snapped.
- And there were times when the situation demanded a certain behaviour and while those two insisted on doing things their way – their **Stoner** friend with the golden mean trait managed to interject and explain the situation and why it was important to, for example, sneak into the school at night.

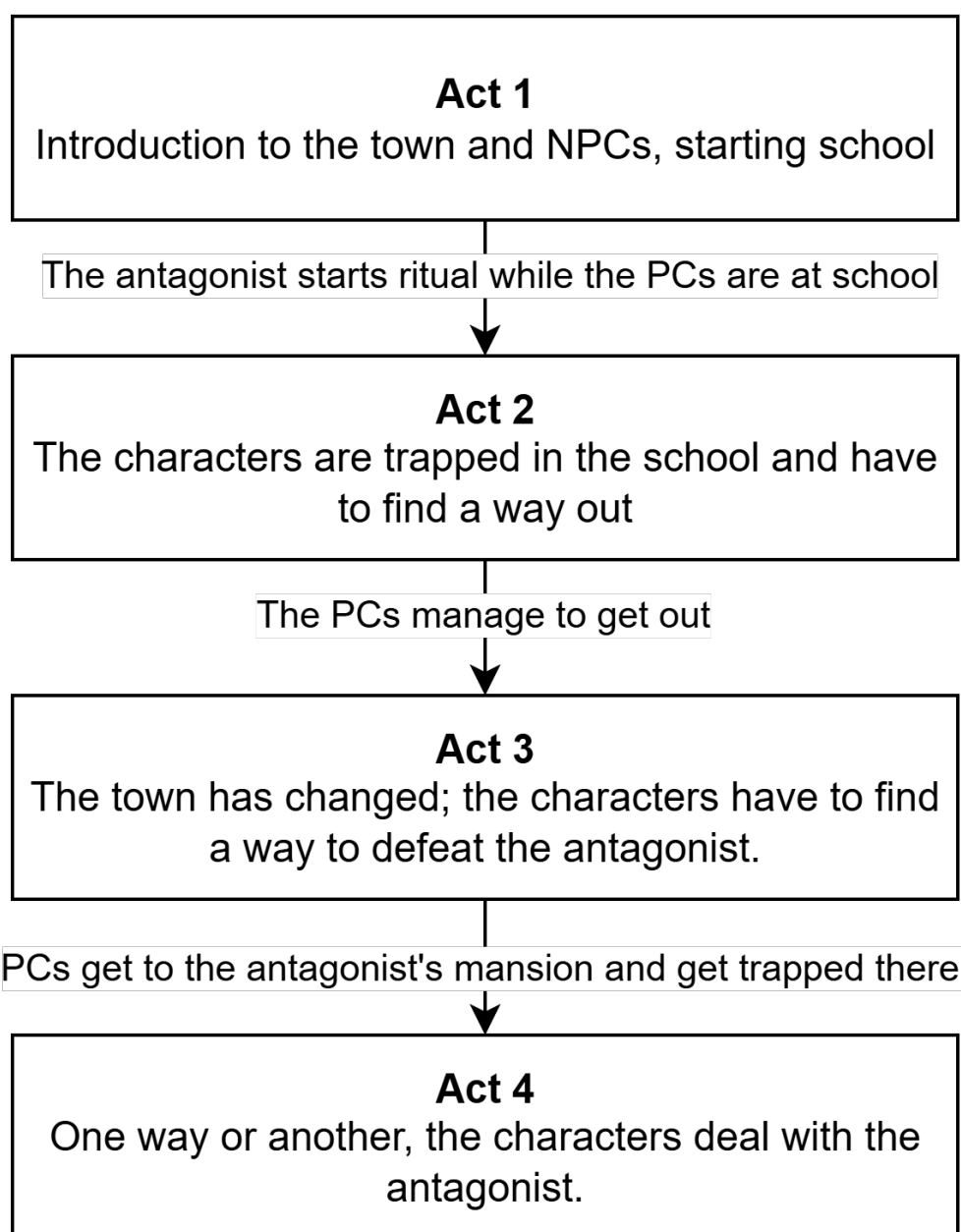
With this basis that they helped define, the players could go ahead with creating their characters and fleshing out their backstories.

Important note: this system had no direct effect on the mechanics, but offered guidelines for narrative and role-playing, as well as informed the players' choices of advantages, disadvantages, skills and quirks for GURPS Lite.

Act structure

To **create** the retrospective look at the genre, I structured the game into acts.

Each act corresponded to a specific era of the horror genre, travelling backwards through the history of cinema horror and in the world of the game. The plot was mapped with only key sequences to maintain the flexibility, and bottlenecks between acts to help players along.



Act I – the 80s-90s

Action, teen horror, teens as the main characters, ensemble cast

Inspired by films like The Faculty (1998), Scream (1996), The Blob (1988)

After completing their introductory sequences and meeting each other, the characters are free to roam and explore the world. The bottleneck comes after they familiarised themselves with the town and school, found important clues and witnessed at least one death.

Bottleneck: lured in by a promise of a party, children get trapped in the school

Act II – the 60-80's

Violent horror, paranoia horror, invasion horror, body horror

Inspired by films like The Thing (1982), The Fly (1986), The Night of the Living Dead (1968)

The whole act is situated within a locked school. The only way to leave school is to get into the headmaster's office to find keys.

Most of their classmates start rapidly changing into zombies (dependent on whether the character managed to connect the dots and save some of them from that fate). There are many obstacles besides zombies, some magical in nature. There's also a possibility of helping the other survivors.

Bottleneck: the kids leave the school grounds and enter the changed Homeville

Act III – the 50's

Science fiction horror, camp horror, theatrical horror

Inspired by films like The House of Wax (1953), The Blob (1958), The Thing from Another World (1951)

The town was sent back in time for twenty years. PCs have to find the cause of changes, the way to defeat the antagonist, and reach his mansion on the hill.

Bottleneck: to reach the mansion, characters have to go through the underground labs and tunnels, there is no way back.

Act IV – the 30's and earlier

Gothic horror, expressionism

Inspired by films like Mad Love (1935), The Invisible Man (1933), Frankenstein (1931), The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

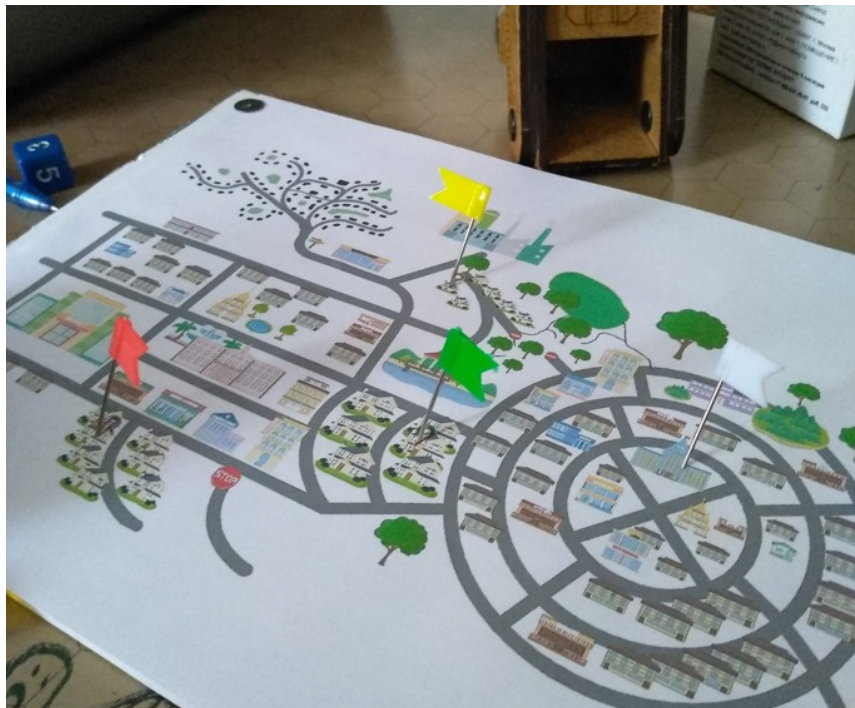
The closing act is in the mansion of the evil alchemist, who knows weird magic and wants to turn back time to the 1600s, to bring his wife and daughter back from the dead. But the grief and his actions over the centuries changed him so much he's hardly a human any more, and if he manages to bring back his family, he can't recognise them through the veil of memories he held onto.

Very dependent on the players' choices over the course of the game.

The Process

One GM, three players, 10+ live sessions once every two weeks.

I printed the map, and let the players draw and put pins on it to indicate things they discovered – this hands-on approach complemented the setting. The coloured flags were used to pinpoint their homes and the school.



In 2019, we went through **Act 1**, **Act 2** and most of **Act 3**.

Unfortunately, we didn't finish the game due to scheduling issues and, later, Covid restrictions.

So, the end of **Act 3** and **Act 4** are presented here as designed, not played.

The Result

Setting

The setting got very positive reviews: the players said it was exactly what they were expecting from cinematic teen horror.

The usage of tropes and familiar symbols helped set up the atmosphere and subverting them was fun both for me and for the players. I feared cramming in this many tropes would feel bloated, but fleshing the stock characters out during play turned them from references into people.

Here, I must give thanks to my players, who understood the genre and worked with me to elevate the experience.

Character relation system

The character relation system was a success in my opinion, and character interaction played out very close to what I was expecting.

- **It gave just enough constraints for the players to guide their character creation**
I got very positive feedback on this stage, because after the players told me what they wanted to play, I gave them the rules of how their characters can interact with the world, and it was enough to spark their creative process.
- **It grounded their characters without restricting them to a single role**
Again, with the idea of playable film, the characters had to have specific roles, and this helped structure the dynamic within the group.
- **Once created, the system had no need to be invoked again** – the players were free to act as they saw fit, – and yet the foundation it laid out influenced the whole thing.

It's important to **note**, however, that this system might not work for other groups of people. It's demanding of the players and needs open dialogue and willingness to work through it.

Nevertheless, I think it's a fun system and can be used in different ways for different projects.

Act structure

The introspective journey across horror genre worked well on paper, but with emergent narrative it felt constraining.

It was very hard to make the transitions between acts play out more smoothly: I dropped some foreshadowing in the clues they were getting, in the music and the types of characters they were meeting, but still, for some players the change felt very jarring.

I feel like a retrospection like this requires more restraint and much more control over the player's experience. In a live play, I'd prefer to lay out the rails to guide the players and to constrain them less.

In a video game though the transition could be made more precise, with the support of diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of the game, like visual clues and changes to the interface.