

HWLL Playtest Notes

Introduction

Play-testing is the lifeblood of successful game design. Even if you've written dozens of scenarios, you must interact with players to determine where your design needs improvement. To paraphrase a famous saying, no scenario survives contact with the players.

For HWLL, I ran six playtests: three at Dundracon, one at Celesticon, one at Big Bad Con (all conventions in the San Francisco Bay Area), and one for my home group. These playtests were critical while I wrote the scenario, as I tweaked small ideas in response to the parties doing crazy things I had never considered. Sometimes I just added a sentence or two. Other times, as I mentioned in the scenario introduction, I rewrote large chunks.

To me, scenario writing is iterative, with play-testing serving as the review cycle. When I first ran HWLL at DDC in February 2012, I had written just scene sketches, outlines, and important lists of details to guide play. This helped me make drastic changes (like redoing the entire third act) without having to rewrite large chunks of text. By the time I ran it for Celesticon in September 2012, though, I had nearly the entire scenario written.

Just as important in this process is blind play-testing – sending the scenario out for people to run without any guidance or comments from the author. HWLL had four blind playtests, which provided clear feedback for a couple of issues but confirmed overall that the scenario was complete and could be run on its own.

My appreciation for play-testing extends to play-testing notes as well. I love to see the inside workings of a game, see how different groups react to specific threats and clues, and to just understand how other people approach the same game. My favorite playtest notes come from Pagan Publishing's *Realm of Shadows*, which has detailed examples of play dropped throughout the campaign that make it easy to correlate the notes to specific scenes.

My goal with this document is to provide context and insight as to how others have played the game. Between my six sessions, and another four from others, I've collected notes on ten sessions here. But another goal is really to point out how much scenario design is out of your hands once you finish writing it. It's up to the GM and party to take a story and run with it – the writer can only get them to the starting line. And that's the beauty of writing RPGs: you are just building a framework for a group to use, constructing a guide for others to have fun by.

I've organized this document in pretty much the same order as the scenario, so you can easily find notes related to specific parts of the scenario. I've interspersed both my ideas and others' notes, and pointed out which is which when relative.

I hope you find them useful.

Dave Sokolowski

Lessons, Experiences and Tips

These are organized generally along with the book's sections.

- **Cthulhu Dark** – One of the playtesting GMs didn't give a second roll for when players use their madness dice to reroll. If the madness die is the highest they would take a SAN hit, which he translated as a temporary insanity. He thought it hard to otherwise go insane in a one shot scenario. Harsh, but that's a fun ride for everyone!
- **The Industry** – A couple of the groups looked up various people on IMDB.COM and Facebook. This is a nice intersection of the modern age with the TV and movie industry. Both Janey and Susan would have listings there, as would Bryan for a standup special or two. It's just another place to leverage clues.
- **Sheriff NPC** – In an early draft of the story, both the sheriff and the coroner were colluding on hiding the mystery. Getting the right number and type of characters is critical for both scenario design and story writing in general, and it was clear pretty early that a sheriff served no purpose than to just further obfuscate the mystery. By pinning the entire conspiracy (at least the law enforcement angle) on David Lee, the PCs now have a much clearer path to find the clues necessary.
- **David Lee** – One of the things you can't really account for in horror scenario design is the level of player (and thus PC) suspicion and paranoia. To this point, one of the blind playtest groups did something that no other group did that highlights just how paranoid horror groups can get. When they first heard about Lee, they used social media to find pictures of him through the years. They then saw that he had not changed in 40 years, they instantly suspected him, then ran off and executed him! This only happened with one group, and no other group even came close to this level of paranoia, so I just wrote it off to crazy players (aren't they all?). But it's something that could happen in a game that will force a Keeper to improvise, certainly.
- **Missing Lee's Clues** – Speaking of Lee's clues, in play-testing a few parties never visited Lee or even investigated his involvement. This created the problem of getting the package of clues to the PCs, for giving the clues to the PCs without a connection is an obvious deus ex machine, which I generally try to avoid anywhere in a story after the first act is complete. The first time this happened I had Aunt Sissy, whom the PCs had befriended, come to the party with the clues, which was a bit of a stretch but worked nonetheless (now I know how Christopher Nolan feels when he needs to stretch a bit of his plot – just keep the pace up and no one will notice). The second time, the party ignored both Lee AND Sissy, which really put me in a bind. I struggled to figure out where to provide the clues over a break, and when we came back I had figured out that Becca's hard-drive could hold all the answers. All of this is to reinforce how important play-testing is – in my mind, visiting Lee would be the top priority for any investigation, but not every party is created equally. Make sure you provide multiple access points to your clues.
- **Selecting Rafe-PC** – This has been the most fun part of running the scenario, as picking the right player has a very specific effect on the story. The first time I tried this was a delightful surprise and I knew I had found something fun and interesting for the players to sink their teeth into. The mystery was building – the party had found most of the initial clues but had not yet looked into

Ares – and so a good rapport had developed between the PCs. At the exact moment where a couple of PCs looked up Ares Entertainment online, the player next to me was looking at his phone under the table and was not paying attention to the game. As I told the party about Ares, I lowered my voice to a whisper (everyone except the one player was looking right at me), pointed to the player with the phone, and said “and Ares looks exactly like him.” As everyone stared at the player with wide, suspicious eyes, he finally looked up from his phone and saw everyone staring at him. He sighed and said, “I’ve missed something important, haven’t I?” To which the rest of the party slowly nodded in agreement. That was when I knew I had something different at hand.

- **Rafe-PC Weirdness** – Many great stories came out of manipulating the group dynamic surrounding the Ralph-PC. All of the GMs for the blind playtest took advantage of this, but one was particularly focused in building a lot of suspicion around the Ralph-PC character. This GM used visions and dreams of Ralph-PC as Rafe driving through LA and heading to his office, floating amongst the stars, having dreams within dreams, disappearing before the rest of the group was trapped in the septic tank, and generally flashing in and out of a shared identity with Rafe. This identity swap ended with a confrontation between PCs as they demanded he hand over the amulet and threatened him with the glass dagger! So much paranoia and fun!
- **Home depot** – One of the key challenges in scenario design is knowing when to make the PCs work for a clue. In early drafts of the scenario, nothing could be found at Home Depot – I thought it would be impossible for the party to actually find clues there and didn’t want to waste time with that avenue of investigation. But once they got their hands on the pictures on Becca’s camera, every party worked really, really hard to figure out what had happened at Home Depot. Either I needed to get rid of the pictures (which I thought gave Becca some good backstory) or I needed to make Home Depot work as a location. A couple of times I forced the party to spend a lot of time at Home Depots – asking questions, looking at maps, and trying to put together a narrative around the blue truck. But this would drag the pacing down when the party should probably be talking to Janey or Susan, and so I had to be careful in using the scene. This is just an example of how to use pacing to entice or frustrate the party. Use with discretion.
- **Glass dagger** – Originally, when the Detective goes to find the glass dagger for the party, it’s been shattered into a million pieces, forcing the party to go find a new one of their own. In my own playtests, I would just hand-wave this scene, not forcing the players to role-play it but just say “Then you go find a new glass dagger.” But then feedback from a playtester pointed out something I knew but was unwilling to admit – this accomplished nothing. It neither brought a new element to the mystery nor gave an interesting opportunity for role-playing. Once I changed the text to just provide the glass dagger, one small gap in the scenario closed up.
- **The Big One** – I will finish these notes with a walkthrough of the climax written by one of the GMs (thanks Steve!). It shows a bunch of great ways to finish off the scenario in a satisfactory manner. Enjoy!

The big climax was actually the murder of Tobler and the Big One. The final hour of the game saw the group follow Tobler’s limo from Burbank to his Inland Empire home. They waited until

after dark, and broke in through the gate (that was chained up after they'd hacked the electronic lock during their last visit).

They found Tobler alone in his house, oblivious to the approaching chaos. One PC had rigged up some black powder explosives in a back pack, another had acquired some guns, and they had three glass daggers between them (they found one in China town and had a glass blower make two more). Also, enterprisingly, they'd equipped themselves with industrial strength in-ear noise reducing ear plugs - bought from Home Depot!

They set and hatched the plan: One PC shot Bryan in the leg through the window. At the sound of the gunshot the other PC detonated the explosives smashing in the front door and the foyer, and Ralph-PC, glass dagger in hand, jumped in through the broken window.

The other PCs rushed in, Tobler was shot, dragging himself across the floor, and chanting the Laughing Hyena - but no one could hear him. They knocked him unconscious in the hallway to his bedroom, and Ralph-PC stabbed him through the heart.

As his chest exploded, showering them in blood, the building began to shake. They all ran outside onto the lawn. They could feel the bass rumble through their feet, and when they took out the earplugs they could here - off in the distance - car alarms, explosions, dogs howling. They realized it was the Big One, and that LA was sliding into the sea.

The GM could tell at that point that the players thought that was the finalé. They were all making plans to flee the city. As the PCs stood in front of Tobler's home, LA collapsing around them, Ralph-PC's phone rang. It was Ares, thanking him for killing Tobler, and inviting him to come and see him. Ralph-PC sped off on his bike.

In the end Ralph-PC met Ares, who explained (roughly) what was going on, and invited Ralph-PC to join him in his clock. Ralph-PC's Insanity was 5/6 by this point. He looked out the window at the collapsing city and stepped inside the clock.

The final scene was weeks later, with the rest of the party returning to LA amongst the rubble, and a poster for Tobler's Homecoming gig blew past them in the dust. Great finish!