



No. 1
2016

STORIES FROM THE GRAVE

NOT
10¢
REALLY

Example of Play

To keep things easy, the players' names have simply been replaced with their characters' names. Text in quotation marks indicate "in character" dialogue.

GRAVE KEEPER: [In the Grave Hag's voice] "What was the awful thing which screamed and howled in the black vistas of the deep bayous? Henry Baxter learned the horrible truth, but the discovery nearly cost him his life."

HENRY: Hey, at least I know my character isn't actually going to die!

GRAVE KEEPER: Don't be so sure. It's called post-production. It's so easy to alter that sentence if your character bites the dust. Anyway, there's a rambling old edifice in the remote swamps of southern Georgia that is the temporary laboratory of Professor Henry Baxter, a brilliant bio-chemist. Beside the crumbling old mansion was an abandoned graveyard, which many believed was visited by supernatural forces. In his spacious workshop on the ground floor, Professor Baxter and his assistant, Rex Barton, worked day and night in an effort to develop a longevity serum, to prolong human life. Okay, you're in the lab and you've not made any progress.

REX: "How is the culture reacting, Professor?"

HENRY: "No good, Rex." I was never very good with science, so I'm just adlibbing here. [chuckles]

GRAVE KEEPER: You could make a Brains-based Intention to see if Henry can get a grasp on what's going wrong. There are no Obstacles or Benefits here.

Henry has a Brains rating of 2, which allows him to roll 4 dice and keep the highest two. He rolls 2, 3, 5 and 6. He adds the 5 and 6 together for a total

of 11. According to the Intention Result Table, that's a Success.

GRAVE KEEPER: Henry knows the cause of the problem. Run with it. Just make up pseudo-scientific gibberish that sounds half-plausible and run with it.

HENRY: I'll give it my best shot. "It's beginning to separate. The entire mass has crystallized. If we could only get the molecular structure to solidify, I'm sure we would have it!"

GRAVE KEEPER: That works for me. You both notice the late hour. You've been at this all day.



REX: “Well, let’s knock off for now, Professor. We’ll try again tomorrow.”

HENRY: “Yes, perhaps tomorrow will reveal the elusive secret we’re seeking.”

GRAVE KEEPER: I need you both to make a Brains-based Intention to notice something. But there will be an Obstacle of 1.

Henry has a Brains rating of 2, which would normally allow him to roll 4 dice and keep the highest two. However, the Obstacle reduces his effective rating to 1, so he rolls 3 dice instead. He rolls 1, 2 and 3. He adds the 2 and 3 together for a total of 5. According to the Intention Result Table, that’s a Failure.

Rex has a Brains rating of 1, which would normally allow him to roll 3 dice and keep the highest two. But that Obstacle reduces it to 0, so he rolls 2 dice and takes whatever he gets. Talk about luck! He rolls a 5 and 5, which is a total result of 10. A Success!

HENRY: What was the Obstacle for?

GRAVE KEEPER: It’s because of the fact that it’s very dark outside. At any rate, Henry is too busy putting up his tools to spot it, but Rex notices a face peering in through the window. It looks like the face of a rotting cadaver, with tangled, messy hair.

REX: “Professor! Look! That face in the window!”

HENRY: “What? I don’t see anything. There’s nothing out there.”

REX: “But there was! I just caught a glimpse of it. It was ghastly!”

GRAVE KEEPER: Okay, that was the end of Act One. No one has collected any Grave Tokens yet, so we can move right along. Gretta, who is Rex’s girlfriend and the daughter of Henry, bounds into the room, having



heard the commotion. “What’s wrong, Rex? I heard you shouting all the way in the living room.”

REX: “Oh, Gretta, I thought I saw someone or something glancing in the window, but I may have just imagined it.”

HENRY: “Certainly you imagined it, Rex. This weird morass has probably worked on your nerves, as it has all of us.”

REX: “Perhaps so, Professor.” Henry isn’t really convinced that it’s just his nerves though. He’s going to go outside to have a quick look around without trying to alert the others that he still thinks he saw someone out there.



GRAVE KEEPER: Well, after each session, you usually dispose of the failed serums in the graveyard beside the house, so that would make a good excuse.

REX: Perfect! That’s what Rex does then. “There goes another day’s hard work.” He says that just in case Henry or Gretta can hear him. Does he see anyone out there?

GRAVE KEEPER: No, but he does see a peculiar crack in one of the headstones. It looks relatively fresh, like it had only begun to crack recently.

REX: “That’s strange. That grave has started to crack open. I wonder if it’s erosion or...” I think he’ll go back

inside and get some sleep. He’s now beginning to wonder if his mind is just playing tricks on him.

GRAVE KEEPER: I need Henry to make a Brains-based Intention to try to find a solution to the chemical failure over the coming days. He will receive a Benefit of 1 since Rex is assisting him.

Again, Henry has a Brains rating of 2, which would normally allow him to roll 4 dice and keep the highest two. However, the Benefit increases his effective rating to 3, so he rolls 5 dice instead. He rolls 1, 1, 2, 3 and 4. He adds the 3 and 4 together for a total of 7. According to the Intention Result Table, he can choose between Conditional Success or Controlled Failure.

HENRY: That’s a tough choice, but I’ll go with Conditional Success.

GRAVE KEEPER: In the days that followed, the two men continued their work with a renewed vigor. Finally, weeks later, Henry pronounces, “This is it, Rex! The molecular structure has locked into a solid mass!! We’ve found it! Our longevity serum is perfected!” But suddenly, the air was rent by a horrible moaning sound.

REX: I’m guessing the creature coming back was the complication stemming from the Conditional Success?

GRAVE KEEPER: You’re correct.

Possibilities

Let’s pull back the curtain and look at what might have been, had the situation (rolls, choices, etc.) been different with the Brains-based Intention. Had it been a Failure, perhaps the formula they were working on would have gone awry and caused an explosion. Had Henry chosen Controlled Failure, perhaps the serum simply wouldn’t have worked, making the stretch of time a total waste of effort. Success might have been similar to the way the events turned out, except that the creature may not have shown up so soon.

HENRY: “Good Lord! What was that?”

REX: “Where is the noise coming from?”

GRAVE KEEPER: The graveyard.

REX: “It came from outside, in the graveyard!”

GRAVE KEEPER: Suddenly, Gretta bursts into the laboratory. “Father, what was that horrible noise?”

HENRY: “Don’t be alarmed, dear. I’m sure there’s a logical reason for it.”

REX: Rex has the “Man of action” Descriptor, so he’s going to rush outside and confront whatever it is that’s making this noise.

GRAVE KEEPER: For that, I’ll add a Grave Token to the pool. I love it when players use things on their character sheets, especially if it furthers the story... and this certainly accomplishes that! Gretta urges Rex: “Come back, Rex! Don’t go out there!”

REX: He’s going to pay her no mind. “There’s something fiendish in that graveyard and I’m going to find out what it is!”

HENRY: Henry is going to try to talk some sense into him. Can I roll to convince him to stay inside?

GRAVE KEEPER: You’re going to have to make a PC-versus-PC Intention. It will use Henry’s Tongue rating and Rex’s Guts rating.

Henry has a Tongue rating of 0, which allows him to roll 2 dice and add the two rolls together. He rolls 5 and 6. He adds them together for a total of 11.

Rex has a Guts rating of 0 also, so he will only be rolling 2 dice as well. He rolls a 2 and 3, which is a total result of 5.

The Grave Keeper cross references the two results on the PC vs. PC Intention Result Table, with Henry acting as “Character A” and Rex acting as “Character B”. Looking at the result, the table says, “Character A succeeds”. Okay, Henry, you get to narrate the results.

HENRY: Henry implores him: “It would be foolhardy to go out there now, Rex. It’s as black as pitch! Wait until tomorrow and we’ll investigate together.” With a sigh, Rex says, “Well, perhaps it would be best to wait.”

GRAVE KEEPER: Rex, you can attempt another mini-conflict if you would like, Rex.

REX: No, I think Rex will head to bed. He won’t argue further and get everyone even more upset.

GRAVE KEEPER: The three retired for the evening, but during the small hours of the night, Gretta was suddenly awakened by the awful moans. She gets up from her bed, and says to herself, “It’s started again! Coming from the cemetery!” She sees it, a huge contorted creature. Freaking out, she yells out, “Father! Rex! Come quickly!”

REX: Rex beats feet to her room.

HENRY: Henry does too.

GRAVE KEEPER: Each of you need to make Flesh-based Intention. Since you were dead asleep when she yelled, you’re facing an Obstacle of 1.

REX: Rex really wants to lay eyes on this thing so he can find out what it actually is. I’m going to spend a Grave Token from the pool. Can I exploit my “Man of action” Descriptor to make my bonus a +3 instead of just a +1?

GRAVE KEEPER: Yes, you can do that. Henry are you spending any Grave Tokens on this Intention?

HENRY: No. I’ll be happy if at least one of us can see the creature or whatever it is. No need to waste more Grave Tokens than necessary.

GRAVE KEEPER: I’m going to place a new Grave Token into the pool in order to trigger Henry’s “Getting up there in age” Flaw. That will give him a -2 to his final result.

Henry has a Flesh rating of -1, so he rolls 3 dice and takes the two lowest results. He rolls 4, 4 and 6. Ordinarily, he would have a result of 8, but due to the Flaw that was triggered, he only has 6. That’s a Failure.

Rex has a Flesh rating of 1, so he rolls 3 dice and takes the two highest results. He rolls an abysmal 1, 1 and 2. His total result would have been 3, but he spent a Grave Token and exploited his “Man of action” Descriptor, so that brings it up to 6. So close, but still a Failure!

GRAVE KEEPER: In response to the girl’s screams, the two men ran into her room and when Rex glanced out the window, nothing was out there. They were too late.

REX: “It’s gone now, but I’m convinced whatever it was, it must be the same creature I spotted through the window several weeks ago.”

HENRY: “It’ll be dawn soon. Perhaps we’ll get to the bottom of this then.”

GRAVE KEEPER: Come the dawn, the two men step forth to investigate. The first thing they notice is that one of the tombstones has been busted open.

REX: Was it the same one Rex saw with cracks in it earlier?

GRAVE KEEPER: One and the same. Did Rex tell Henry about seeing it that night?

REX: No. He was trying to be inconspicuous at that point.

HENRY: “Say, what happened to that grave?”

REX: [laughing] Does anybody actually start sentences out with “say”?

HENRY: [laughing also] Henry does, apparently.

REX: “That’s what I’m wondering! A few weeks ago, I noticed that this grave was splitting. Now it’s completely cracked open!”

GRAVE KEEPER: The terrible implications of the discovery weighed upon their troubled minds, suggesting horrible consequences, which they tried to suppress.

Many thoughts swirled about in their minds: “Whoever was buried there is now liberated”, “It’s something from beyond the grave”, “Logic tells me such things are impossible but how can I doubt?” Okay, guys, these thoughts are the kind of things that can drive someone mad, so I’m going to have you both make a Grave Guts-based Intention. No Obstacles or Benefits.

Henry has a Guts rating of 1, so he rolls 3 dice and takes the two highest results. He rolls 4, 6 and 6. That’s a total result of 12... a Success!

Rex has a Guts rating of 0, so he rolls 2 dice and adds them together. He rolls 2 and 4... a total of 6. That’s a Failure!



GRAVE KEEPER: Since this was a Grave Intention, Rex might go completely insane and be out of the installment. Rex, roll two dice and add them together for the Grave Failure Table.

Rex rolls 4 and 5. This means that it is a Non-Game Ending result.

GRAVE KEEPER: Rex doesn't go insane, but he does panic and decides to act without thinking. And now, we begin Act Three.

REX: Uh-oh. That can't be good.

GRAVE KEEPER: Probably not. Rex, you collected a Grave Token earlier. You can now roll a die to try to purge it.

Rex rolls 4. He needed a 5 or 6 to purge it, so it stays with him.

GRAVE KEEPER: The terrible moaning phenomenon continues to torment them until finally, Rex could restrain himself no longer. He declares, "I'm going to settle this thing once and for all, right now!" They try to stop him, but this time, they can't. He barges out the door. He is attacked by an unseen creature. I don't normally like to have so many Intentions, but it's unavoidable here. Rex is looking at a Grave Flesh-based Intention. The creature's own Flesh rating is 2, so that is subtracted from Rex's Flesh rating.

Rex's Flesh rating is normally 1, but because of the monster's Flesh rating, it counts as a rating of -1. He rolls 3 dice and uses the two lowest results. He rolls 4, 5 and 5. That's a total result of 9. Rex can choose between Controlled Failure or Conditional Success.

REX: Well, the Conditional Success came back and bit us on the butt last time, so I'll choose Controlled Failure. At least I control the narrative that way. Inside the house, Henry and Gretta can hear a sound of a struggle and then Rex screams out, "NO! STAY AWAY! AAAGH!"

GRAVE KEEPER: Scared out of her wits, Gretta says, "Listen, Father! It's Got Rex!"

HENRY: Henry is going to listen really closely. Do I need to make an Intention?

GRAVE KEEPER: No roll necessary. As you listen, you can tell that Rex has survived and is returning.

HENRY: "No! He's on the porch! He's coming in!"

GRAVE KEEPER: Suddenly, the door bursts open and Rex collapses, inert, upon the floor, muttering incoherently.

REX: I've got an idea. We know the thing is probably undead in nature, right? I mean, Rex saw a zombie-looking critter at the window. Maybe we could use the serum we've been working on. All those chemicals might dissolve the monster. After clearing his head a few minutes, Rex says, "We've got to kill it! Get the longevity serum... it's the only thing that can destroy him!"

HENRY: [laughing] How do you know it's the only thing that can kill it?

REX: I don't know. It just sounded dramatic.

GRAVE KEEPER: All this was too much for Gretta. She says, "I can't stand it! I'm going out there before it comes in after us!" She removes her father's pistol from a drawer and runs from the house.

HENRY: "Gretta, come back!" I want to make an Intention to coax her into coming back before something bad happens to her.

GRAVE KEEPER: It will be Tongue-based and her SC rating is 0, so there won't be an Obstacle because of it.

Henry's Tongue rating is 0, so he rolls 2 dice and hopes for the best. He rolls 2 and 3, a total result of 5... a Failure.

GRAVE KEEPER: She yells, "No! I won't wait! I'll kill it! Kill it!"

REX: Yep, she's gone goofy.

GRAVE KEEPER: When she comes face to face with the horrible thing in the fens, her resolution is turned into stark terror. For the first time, Henry and Gretta lay eyes on the monster. It is a large mostly-skeletal humanoid with a little bit of skin remaining. Outstretching its boney arms, it clutches her... and it speaks in a creaky, terrifying voice: "So, you will be next to feel my wrath!"

HENRY: "Good Lord, no! Let her go, you fiend!"

GRAVE KEEPER: The creature continues, "You all must die! But you shall be first, professor! It was your accursed elixirs drenching my grave continually which resurrected this wretched body from the sod!" Gretta, now fully captured by the monster pleads for her father to help her.

HENRY: Did Gretta drop the pistol?

GRAVE KEEPER: No. She still has it in her hand, but she's too scared to use it. She's panicky.

HENRY: Could I spend a Grave Token to edit the scene so that she dropped the pistol?

GRAVE KEEPER: Sure!

HENRY: Okay, I'll spend it then. Henry Baxter retrieves the fallen pistol and fired as the horribly emaciated thing advances toward him.

GRAVE KEEPER: Since the creature is coming toward Henry and Henry is also shooting back, both are in peril. Make a Flesh-based Grave Intention. The creature has a Flesh rating of 2, so that will be -2 modifier to Henry's Flesh rating.

HENRY: Since Henry's Flesh is so low, I want to spend two Grave Tokens to boost the result. He doesn't have anything I can exploit though, so each one will only add 1 to the result.

Henry's Flesh rating is normally -1, but the beast's own Flesh is 2, so the modified rating is -3. He rolls 5 dice and takes the lowest two results. He rolls 2, 2, 3, 6, 6... a total of 4. But Henry spent 2 Grave Tokens to boost the result by 2... giving him a final result of 6. That's still a Failure, which means poor Henry has to roll on the Grave Failure Table.

There are penalties for the roll. Since the game is in Act Three, the roll is decreased by 3. Plus, for every two Grave Tokens collected by the character, the roll is decreased by 1; he currently has three Grave Tokens, so it gives a penalty of 1. Henry rolls 5 and 6. That's 11.

Subtracting the combined penalty of 4, the final roll is 7. That's a Non-Game Ending result! He was very lucky!

REX: Can Rex come out of the house and help out? He has been laying there on the floor recovering from the earlier attack.

GRAVE KEEPER: Yes, he can.

REX: While the scuffling has been going on, Rex runs to the laboratory to grab a glass vial of the serum. Then, he heads outside to confront the skeleton guy.

GRAVE KEEPER: As the terrifying creature grasps the old chemist, Rex arrives on the scene.



HENRY: Before Rex interrupts, I'd like Henry to hit a classic "old scientist" line that one might see in the old comics or shows. He says, "No! Don't! I gave you life! Don't do this to me!"

GRAVE KEEPER: The creature retorts, "LIFE? Do you call this life? Can a man live without a soul? My spirit departed when I died, but you have kept the rest of me in a state of LIVING DEATH!" The monster is so distracted by his own soliloquy that Rex can take him by surprise.

REX: Rex is going to lob the vial right in the thing's face!

GRAVE KEEPER: Okay, it's a Flesh-based Grave Intention. Only the monster's 'life' is in danger, though, since he is surprised and isn't in a position to attack. Remember, the critter's Flesh is 2. Also, I'm going to use the Grave Token you collected to give you a -1 to your final result.

Rex's Flesh rating is normally 1, but due to the creature's Flesh rating, it's reduced to -1. He has to roll 3 dice and take the two lowest results. He gets 5, 6 and 6! That would be 11 in most cases, but the Grave Token used by the Grave Keeper lowers it to 10, which is still (barely!) a Success!

REX: Without pausing, the young scientist flings the vial of longevity serum into the creature's face. "Take that, you thing of darkness!"

The Grave Keeper rolls on the Grave Failure Table.

There are penalties for the roll. Since the game is in Act Three, the roll is decreased by 3. The Grave Keeper rolls 3 and 4. With the -3 penalty, the final roll is 4... a Game Ending result!

GRAVE KEEPER: As the potent liquid sank into that decayed flesh, an incredible change took place; a metamorphosis the likes of which no mortal had ever seen! You see the creature de-age... from a dead cadaver, to a young man, to a youth, to a small child, to a baby, to an embryo and finally into nothingness.

REX: "Did you see that, professor? He turned into an embryo and then vanished!"

HENRY: The entire pattern of life, enacted before our very eyes, in reverse. This means we were on the wrong trail, Rex! The serum we developed, overactivated the glandular functions in the body and had digressive effects!"

REX: "Then all we have to do is reverse the formula and we'll have it!"

GRAVE KEEPER: Gretta adds, "It's ironic to think that a Harbinger of death was responsible for bringing prolonged life to the people of the world!" Aaaand that's a wrap!



Epilogue

For me, it all started with *Creepshow* when I was ten years old. Despite my tender age, I was already something of a horror aficionado, having cut my teeth on films such as *Halloween*, *My Bloody Valentine* and *Happy Birthday to Me*. But *Creepshow* was different; it was comprised of several different stories, each with a eyebrow-raising ending and linked together by animated segments that evoked (unbeknownst to me at the time) the EC Comics of old. I watched it that movie just about every time HBO played it. It was enthralled.

Right around that time, I found around a half-dozen issues of DC's *The Witching Hour* at a garage sale and snatched them up. My first impression that each issue was its own *Creepshow* and that appealed to me. Unfortunately, the small town I lived in didn't have any stores that carried *The Witching Hour* or any other horror comics, for that matter.

After that, I searched for anything that resembled anthology-style horror, which led me to EC Comics back issues, *Tales from the Darkside* and two series from HBO: *The Hitchhiker* and, of course, *Tales from the Crypt*. I've been a fan of this flavor of horror ever since.

Strangely, it never even occurred to me to design a roleplaying game that emulated anthology-style horror. Perhaps it never dawned on me that it would be possible until one day, I stumbled across a website that discussed the death of EC Comics artist Jack Davis. One thing led to another and I found myself bouncing from link to link, reading old snippets from *The Vault of Horror*, *The Vault of Fear* and *Tales from the Crypt*. All the while, I was making a mental list of design challenges for emulating anthology-style horror; stuff that would seemingly make it impossible or at least not very much fun. How could I overcome them? Would it be possible to run more than one story per session and, if so, what could I do to facilitate that playstyle? How could I encourage groups to play to the genre? What reward system could I put in place while making it true to the source material? How could I replicate the ultra-tight pacing of these comics, shows and films?

These design challenges were just too much for me to ignore. I *had* to design this game... and in time for *Halloween*, no less! The more I thought about it, the more I began to gravitate toward Barak Blackburn's In-

tention System, which is the rule-set that powers our RPG, *Retrostar*. It's a near perfect fit, due partly to its narrative approach and also because it is based on the three-act structure that these stories used. It just needed some yanking, adjusting and snipping to make it the perfect system for the genre.

When I mentioned designing *Stories from the Grave*, people were very enthused and I was able to assemble a team of crack artists who love the source material and were excited to make this product visually exciting! I owe C. Michael Hall, Bradley K. McDevitt and Nolan Segrest a massive "thanks" for all they've done! I can't leave out Norbert Franz and Barak Blackburn for jumping right into the fray and helping me get this game ready to roll. And lastly, I have to thank all the playtesters. Without their short-notice work, who knows how well this thing would play?

So, here we are, exiting the grave... but not for the last time. There will be more to come.

--Cynthia Celeste Miller

