The Creative Process

by Stu McIntire

There are no hard and fast rules for the creative process when designing and executing a haunted attraction. Every haunt is unique, even when employing concepts and designs that others have used time and again. What usually sets one haunt away from another is the story that is created to scare and thrill the audience.

The Plot
The story (referred to hereafter as the plot) may or may not be told in detail to your customers. The plot is different from the script in that it does not include lines written for your actors to speak.

One year, my crew and I decided that our haunt would be a collection of dark oddities - a traveling museum if you will, of items mysterious, grotesque, and frightening. These "objets d'arc" were said to be collected over a lifetime by a world renowned adventurer/thrillseeker by the name of Dr. Tiberius Ignatius Daark. It was further stated that Dr. Daark was not satisfied with mere trophies as would be most big game safari hunters. No, Dr. Daark was a collector of not just the macabre, but the *living* macabre. After considering and reconsidering several story ideas, and fine tuning the one we ultimately selected, we had our plot.

If I may digress, let me step back for a few moments. I have successfully used a technique that may be helpful to you in the early creative stages. I have worked for the past five years with a core group of folks who have made my life infinitely easier. I used to try to micromanage every aspect of the haunt from beginning to end. Not a good idea. I began to realize that I was only ensuring extra work, unnecessary frustration, and an early burnout for myself, while possibly alienating the very people I relied on to execute my concepts.

I always held planning meetings well ahead of the scheduled event. Thing was, I was doing most of the talking. I began to wonder if I was inhibiting the thoughts and ideas of my peers. So a few years back when everyone took their seats at the table, I announced that we were having a brainstorming session. I said (truthfully) that I hadn't a clue what this year's haunt would be about. I further said that they were there to help provide them. Initially, the words came with

hesitation. As the evening progressed, I'd throw in a *"Great idea! What if we tried that with_____,"* and I heard in reply "*Not bad. What we should* **really** *try is_____."* Shortly, my notepad was filled. We made important strides that night. I made a personal achievement or two myself. First, I was able to hand over a certain amount of control while at the same time preserving my sanity. Secondly, I got more excitement, extra effort, and more loyalty out of an already excellent crew.

I strongly encourage this approach (or one like it). Even if you're the "lone wolf" out there who must maintain that control, at least try bouncing your ideas off a friend or loved one. End of digression.

The Script
I don't have a lot to say about a formal script for your actors. I don't use scripts mostly because they tend to create a logjam in the haunt. I always tell my actors to ad lib to the extent that they stay consistent with the plot. I've heard some pretty interesting lines spoken, I have to tell you. Again, this motivates the actors. It's much easier to take it over the top when ad libbing. People exaggerate body language and their lines; exaggeration can be a useful method in a haunt.

Storyboards
Another tried and true device that you can use is storyboarding. Storyboards are used in every visual storytelling medium, so why not when creating your haunt? They are a way to arrange the various plot components into a cohesive whole, with a logical progression from beginning to middle to end.

Storyboards can consist of anything from hastily scribbled stick figures to more elaborate pieces drawn by a professional artist. Certainly, if you operate a haunt that charges $15 a head and you draw tens of thousands of customers every year, hire a professional artist. It's not necessary though. Storyboarding is a simple concept that anyone can execute. Do it by yourself or do it with a group. It's easy and it's a useful tool. Here's how it works:

Buy yourself a pack of blank 3X5" unlined cards. Now that you've figured out what your plot will be and what scenes, effects, and/or illusions you plan to employ, begin to sketch out the highlights of the haunt as you wish to present them. Don't worry about artistic skills. You can draw a stick figure, right? It's not important. This exercise is designed to get your thoughts organized and to gel your concepts into a framework to build on.

Do not spend a lot of time on insignificant details. You're not drawing the floor plan here. If you don't already have a layout designed, that can come later. Storyboards are just to capture the main points of action and put them in the order your audience will see them. Say for example I was to ask you to storyboard the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. If you sit down to sketch out the story, you'll find yourself recalling the sequence of events. Goldilocks walks into the bear's house; Goldilocks samples the porridge and eats all of Baby Bear's portion; Goldilocks sits in the Bear family's chairs, breaking Baby Bear's to bits; Goldilocks lays down in each of the bear's beds, falling asleep in the one that belongs to Baby Bear; bears come home, see the mess Goldilocks has made and catch Goldilocks asleep in Baby Bear's bed; Goldilocks runs from the cottage.

The entire story can be drawn in storyboards on a total of six index cards. Pretty easy as I'm sure you'll agree. Now take your cards and post them on a bulletin board. Move the cards around. Change the sequence. Will the story progress naturally if you switch the first and fifth cards? Third and sixth? The answer is likely to be no. You may be able to change the minor details or even toy with the sequence of minor events, but you see the need to move the plot towards a natural conclusion. That's what you want to do with your haunt.

You may or may not decide that a plot is necessary and that's your call. Having a plot (even if my audience is completely unaware that I am, after all, trying to tell them a story) makes it more interesting for me and allows me to stick to a plan of action. Kind of like with a budget. It gives me a sort of a guideline - even if I decide to deviate from it, it's not the end of the world. Think of it as spending $1.73 more than you planned for skull props. The storyboard session is the time to determine in what sequence things will occur. The larger your haunt, the more likely storyboards will serve their intended purpose.

Sound
For many, sound is a secondary consideration to the visual elements of a haunted attraction. And why not? "Seeing is believing," as the hoary cliché states. It is what your customers see that is what they will likely remember. Of the five senses, the sense of sight is the one that leaves the most indelible impressions on one's mind. Sound is the "red-headed stepchild" of many a haunt. It needn't be that way, though.

In the world of animation, few talents have gone as unrecognized and underappreciated as those of the Music Director. One of the greatest (in my opinion, the *best* of the music men) was Carl Stalling. Stalling's career began as a theater organist (what do you want to bet that he played accompanying music to Chaney's Phantom?) in Kansas City during the 1920s. There, he met and went to work for Walt Disney, and later, Ub Iwerks before eventually migrating to the Warner Bros. animation studio. It was with Warner that Stalling made his most enduring contributions to the art of animation. If you check any well-stocked music store, you can find collections of Stalling's work that graced the cartoons of old. In the meantime, spend an hour or two examining some of the Warner output that includes Stalling's music. Using both eyes and ears, you will develop an understanding of the importance of sound (music as well as sound effects) to the visual medium.

When developing your haunt, keep in mind how you can best use sound to your advantage. As with theatrical lighting, sound is used best when noticed least. You do not need to overwhelm your customers with loud, jarring sounds or music - as tempting as that may be. In his book **How to Build A Portable Modular Dark Attraction**, JB Corn points out the various ways to use sound and music in your haunt. My ideal haunt would include many of the ideas and concepts that JB raises.

I am constantly searching for the ultimate haunted house music and sound effects. On a semi-regular basis, I will visit different music stores to seek out something the others may not carry. You never know when or where you'll find a little gem. One unique CD I've found is titled Mr. Bones. Mr. Bones is an original soundtrack from a Sega video game. Who'da thunk it? One of

the best sources I've located for film scores and soundtracks is Borders Books & Music. Unfortunately, they are also one of the more expensive in my area.

Film scores make for a haunt dripping with mood and atmosphere. Sound effects enhance the scare, or startle. Well-placed vocalizations from your actors can push the customer over the edge.

Consider how you will employ your sound system to augment the attack on the visual sense. It is a good idea to plan this out either during or immediately after the storyboarding stage. It helps to know where you will place certain speakers; how or when to use remote mikes; and more. In short, sound becomes one more device via which you can entertain your audience. Use it wisely. Use it to your advantage.

One last note about sound. Sometimes, an unnerving experience on the part of your customer is the total *absence* of sound. The use of contrast in entertainment has long made unique impressions on the mind. Good vs. Evil, Dark vs. Light, Nature vs. Science...I could go on. David Skal, writing about the 1919 film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* in his book **The Monster Show**, makes much of the artistic deviations of this film from the norm. Skal writes (in part):

"...The shock and surprise of Caligari *was its break with the established conventions of cinematography... the settings were angular and distorted, their shadows created with paint instead of light...there was no pretense of 'realism.' It is difficult to overstate the kind of revelation* Caligari *represented to much of its audience, which felt it was witnessing an evolutionary leap in the cinema..."*

C*aligari* was nothing short of an epiphany of sorts for American filmmakers. Its influence extended for decades afterward. The use of contrasting images was art itself.

As a strobe light in stark fashion accentuates the dark/light motif, so can the calculated use of silence in your haunt. Imagine your customer leaving one area that has just bombarded him or her with a feast of color, images, music, and sound effects and entering into another that is an homage to artistic expressionism. Suddenly, your "victim" is surrounded by twisted shadows, weird angles, and distorted perspective - all bathed in an unnatural gray monotone wash. Gone is all sound. Your customer is left to his devices to maneuver his way through this unnatural landscape. Perhaps enhanced with a strobe or strobes, this room or scene has the potential to *really* disorient your customers - in ways latex props, fake blood, and animatronics never could. It is the contrast you use that throws your audience off. If I expect the unsettling sounds of tortured victims, revving chainsaws, and unearthly moans...well, am I not just as affected by the unexpected eerie silence?

Lighting
It is common for the operator of a haunted attraction to attempt to think of the lighting design in ways not unlike that of the theater. This way of thought is at once both limiting in scope and offers new ways of thinking too. My last statement is not necessarily contradictory.

Lighting design is an integral part of the haunt. Proper lighting can cue actors, give the audience a focal point, set a desired mood, and so forth. To think solely in terms of theatrical stage lighting is limiting because certain rules followed in the theater may not be necessary or desired in a haunted attraction. One example is the use of green light. Green light used without care and consideration on the stage can give the human form an unnatural, almost "deadened" image. In a haunt, this may be exactly the effect you desire! Consider too, the (often liberal) use of UV blacklights in a haunt. UV blacklights are generally not used in stage productions - at least not to any appreciable degree. Almost any lighting effect used in a haunt that renders the scene/effect/actors in an otherworldly way can be considered to be desirable, unlike in professional stage productions.

On the other hand, much can be learned from a good theatrical lighting designer. The use of high quality equipment designed for a specific purpose; concepts of reflection, additive and subtractive color; special effects; electrical requirements; all of this and more (enough to fill many volumes of books) is knowledge for the taking. Anyone who runs a haunt should keep a library of reference materials and/or textbooks on hand. Few items are of equal value.

Try to incorporate the basic elements of your lighting design in the early planning stages. Again, the storyboarding process is a way to collect your thoughts and present them in an ordered, logical manner.

Finding Your Identity
As you build your first haunt - or redesign your existing one - do you ask yourself how you will make your haunt readily identifiable to the as yet non-existent customer base? If not, you should. You should always endeavor to make your haunted house the one everyone remembers and talks about.

Naturally, the effects you employ to scare people will be well thought out in advance. That's why we're all doing this, after all. If you plan to be around for any length of time, you'll want to come up with a way for your customers to recognize you.

At the risk of stating the painfully obvious, I will point out some of the types of things you've probably already considered.

Do you have a name for your haunt that is easily remembered, yet still unique? While I would not personally choose something as trite as Horror Haven, Spooky Woods, or Mystery Manor (apologies if I'm unintentionally slighting the name of any actual haunts), I would not choose Count Gregore's Traveling Thriller Chiller Sideshow and Amusements either. While it's always good to be creative, you don't want to blend in with all the rest. Nor do you want to get to cloying or cute. KISS is a good rule of thumb. Keep It Simple, Stupid.

You may choose to base the name and look of your haunt on a theme. Such themes may include a medieval castle, a Victorian mansion, a cave, a ghost ship...the list is nearly endless. But a theme may very well suggest it's own name in your mind.

You should consider the size of your haunt. For the sake of argument, I define these as mini-, midi-, or maxi-haunts. Mini-haunts would be something put together on a small scale by Scouts or PTAs to name two examples. Midi-haunts might be those constructed by Jaycees chapters and which attract somewhat larger audiences. Maxis would be the "Big Daddys" of the industry such as the amusement parks (e.g., Disney or Spookyworld), or the newer sizable attractions like the Silo Xs that can cover more than a few football fields in size. The size of your haunt may also suggest your target audience.

Knowing your target market is another critical factor. Most haunts profess to cater to families, but how many seem to have an unnatural affinity with bucket upon bucket of fake blood? Will your attraction draw young families? Post adolescents? College students? The Goth crowd? Tailor the look of your haunt to the intended audience and unify everything in such a manner that you can not be mistaken for the haunted house across town.

You'll want a striking logo that is recognizable on a matchbook cover or billboard. I won't go into the intricacies of solid logo design, but I will say this: do everything you can to keep it uncluttered and free of potentially confusing type faces. I've always believed that if there are just some things you can't do (or at least do *well*), hire a professional. A professional artist will, with your consultations, likely come up with an exciting design that you could never produce in a hundred years.

You'll want the look of your attraction to remain consistent with your theme, target market, logo, and so forth. Movie studios hire production designers. The very talented (late) Anton Furst designed the production of the 1989 *Batman*. While not always to my liking, the City of Gotham became a jagged, almost surreal urban landscape that tends to blend in wonderfully with the kind of film that director Tim Burton envisioned. Regardless of my personal opinion as to the artistic and commercial success of *Batman*, Furst indeed did exactly what he was hired to do - and with gritty style.

Of course, I cite the above example to illustrate a point. I hardly expect anyone of modest means to hire scene or production artists for a haunted attraction. But try to keep the concept in mind, especially if your plans include building a year-round permanent haunt, or if you work on temporary annual haunts where the same customers return time and again for the thrills and chills that you are surely giving them.

Giving your attraction a visual continuity, even if not immediately apparent to the bystander, is a great way to build and keep the customer base you seek. Sending confusing visual signals (bloodbaths in a supposedly 'G' rated house) can not only subconsciously drive some folks away, but in some cases create the kind of negative publicity that you simply can do without.

In Closing
I can not hope by any stretch of the imagination give full due to the concepts I've raised in this article in six or seven pages. If I do nothing else, I hope to get the gears turning in your heads to think in broader terms; to stimulate your thought, interest, and feedback; to apply proven concepts in a fresh new way; to encourage you to read and learn more about the various topics I've discussed in frustrating brevity.

Every time I think I've thought my ideas through to the minute detail, someone comes along and shatters that illusion. I'll never forget that some of my first communications with halloween-l members Denny Dahm and Bill Lewis centered on an illusion I borrowed from Morris's **How To Build A (Financially) Successful Haunted House**; namely, the "Vampire Mirror." Though I did not construct the set, I lent ideas to those that did. What was accomplished was amazing given the tight budget (but *what a motivated team I had!* :-). We had people standing and gaping at the effect in awe that night.

The bottom line is that it is difficult for any one person to give full consideration to the hundreds of details that need to be addressed when producing a haunted attraction. Creative thinking is not the domain of the artist. Anyone with prodding and encouragement can be a creative thinker. It is much more difficult to execute. I (for all the art training I ever had) can not illustrate my way out of a paper bag. I have a fair sense of design, or so I've been told. These days, my artistic diversion consists of dreaming up the next haunt I produce.

When all is said and done, whatever I accomplish is in no small part due to the input of friends and family - and the haunting community that has come before me as well as those who are my contemporaries.

Always keep your eyes, ears, and mind open to new possibilities. Keep plugging away. Don't be afraid to start from scratch if that's what it takes.

And always - keep up the good work.

Recommended Reading:

- *Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas:The Film, The Art, The Vision*
  by FrankThompson Hyperion
- The World of Animation **Kodak Publication No. S-35**
  Kodak Motion Picture and Audiovisual Markets Div.
- *Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an*
  Animated Cartoonist **by Chuck Jones Avon Books**
- Of Mice and Magic: A History of American
  Animated Cartoons **by Leonard Maltin Plume Books**
- *How To Build A Portable Modular Dark Attraction(A Haunted House)*
  by J. B. Corn JBC Productions
- The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror
  by David J. Skal W.W. Norton & Company
- *Scene Design and Stage Lighting (3rd Ed.)* *by*
  W. Oren Parker and Harvey K. Smith Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc.