

Slogging Through the Sewers

By Steven Dawes

“Man, you must have ‘steelies’! I wouldn’t go down there for nuthin... there’s rats as big as dogs down there!” – Homeless man, Rise of the Dragon

I’m a big fan of using sewers in my BTS games (and to a lesser extent storm drains & steam and utility/maintenance tunnels). As far as I’m concerned, the sewers provide an expansive, treacherous labyrinth-like horror haven worthy of the dungeon crawling experience it conjures up. Coincidentally, Palladium has published some info on traversing the sewers, such as in the “Hitchhiker of Death” adventure from the ***Boxed Nightmares*** sourcebook for BTS, and quite a bit of info about them via the ***Dead Reign: Dark Places*** sourcebook. And while I should be a big fan of the sewers (I’m the GM after all), the players on the other hand should find the prospect exciting, but terrifying.

Any horror RPG player who doesn’t see the scariness of the sewers should be corrected quickly. Sewers are not happy places to visit in real life (most sewer workers don’t even like going in them), and in a horror setting like BTS, trekking through one can (and should) at times be a harrowing experience! PC’s should never ‘want’ to go into the sewers. They should decide to only go in when they have no other choice, such as tracking a supernatural creature, looking for something important or valuable that was hidden away deep within one, rescuing someone, running from the authorities or other pursuers or something similar. Whatever their reason is, they shouldn’t be happy about it.

Concerning Sewers

Just imagining the entrance into the sewers should be enough to cause players to think twice. Imagine that you’ve just opened a manhole cover (a chore in and of itself, especially without a crowbar or similar shaped tool to help) and you’re staring down into the brownish black abyss. Strange sounds (pipes making noises, thick sludge making sloppy sounds as it slowly oozes along, vermin moving about freely, etc.) and an indescribably fowl and steamy stench belches up from it. Besides the obvious hazards of a sewer, a variety of threats could be down there waiting for them (from crazy homeless people to mutant turtles to horrible supernatural monstrosities).

Just taking in the sights once you’re down the manhole is a sobering and claustrophobic experience. It just seems ‘dark’ down there, even with flashlights. The sewage is thick and brown and the sounds of its flow echoes across the tunnels, masking potential sounds of danger approaching. Even worse, they will have to slog through the ***main lines*** of the sewer. As I understand it, all the waste water from both homes and businesses (dishwashing, laundry, toilet, kitchen sink, etc) travels down a series of pipes called ***laterals*** (and can go into upper and lower lateral pipes, creating a flowing maze of pipes underground), and these pipes all flow into... you guessed it, the main line; the crap the pc’s will be trekking through. And in the largest cities, this sewage will only come up to their knees on a good day.

To illustrate what I mean by a good day, the realization that there’s a line of filth that marks the brown tile covered or cement walls, marks just how high the raw sewage can get (and is more than likely

80-90% of the height of the main line). Beyond that, ALL of the walls are covered in a thick layer of grime and slime. Also note if the sewage is low and moving slowly enough, they will have deal with vermin (bugs WILL crawl all over them and rats might as well). Wild animals can also present occasional problems during low levels.

If the water's too high for the vermin to travel (up to the player's waist or higher, and even then rats can still be found swimming through it), the players will still need to deal with the junk that flows in the sewage which constantly bumps up against their legs as it passes. The junk can include debris that was dumped in by people topside (and constant clogging problem that has to be dealt with in the real world as well), which can include drift wood bits, dead animal and pet carcasses, items that are light enough to float and even sacks of garbage that are air tight enough to float will pass by. Buildups and outright clogs of garbage can be found blocking the bar grills, especially after recent downpours.

Wild animals can also be an issue at times. Raccoons, foxes, and other animals build nests out of the debris down here and have been known to get protective of them, especially when their young is involved. Other animals, such as turtles, snakes, small alligators (or really big ones as is proper in a horror RPG) and even fish manage to survive down here there (various types of carp and goldfish are notoriously found in sewage and reports of tilapia living in raw sewage is rising). Homeless people are also found living in the sewers (Las Vegas for example has reported that more than 300 people on average live in the 200 miles of the city's sewers and storm drains), and can provide mini-adventures in and of themselves.

Getting back to the sewer itself, footing will ALWAYS be a problem even on the best days and the lowest water levels as the main line is a big pipe, meaning that the ground is concave(see below for penalties) and will still be slimy when the water is low. Height will also be problem when traveling in most modern sewers as main lines range between four to six feet in diameter. I know this goes against a lot of the stereo type of a sewer, which is usually portrayed as a big cavernous tunnel with walkways on each side of the raw sewage that flows down the center. This is an old and long outdated method of sewers (at least in America and Canada), any sewer system newer than 1950 can be expected to be the main line pipe setup. However, older cities (especially along the east coast) and a lot of foreign countries still have the old styled sewer system (see the 2nd level of the video game *F.E.A.R. 3* for a great example of one.)

Interestingly enough, the smell isn't so bad once you're actually in the sewer. While the obvious culprits of toilet water and rotting debris come to mind, in most sections the various other kinds of wastes helps dilute the more unpleasant aspects. I read somewhere once than laterals pipe that connects a laundry mat to the main line will actually create pleasant smelling pockets of air! I also suspect that people just learn to block out the bombardment of horrible smells (or the nose just short circuits after awhile). However, there are indeed places that just stinks to high heaven, smells just god awful, and cannot be masked, even with air filters (although a gas mask might help). Eyes watering and coughing will most likely affect the pc's. There are also pockets fumes and toxic gases to deal with at times down here well (see below for details).

Concerning Storm Drains and Steam/maintenance Tunnels

Storm drains are very different from sewers, and are much easier and safer to travel in. The underground portions of storm drains are large (in most cases are 12 feet wide and seven feet tall), rectangle in shape, and is usually more musty and dusty than slimy and wet. Another benefit of storm drains is that there are usually locations where they are open (outdoors) and in some cases are entirely open structures and resemble canals (like the one used in the chase scene in *Terminator 2*, where the T-1000 pursues John Conner via a semi-truck inside of one).

Storm drains were built to deal with the run off of rain water, and as a result, when it's not raining, most days only a trickle of water may run down the middle of the drain (during lawn watering season for example) or is completely dry. There can still be a lot of garbage found in them via dumping and wild animals and homeless people living in them, but other hazards (like diseases) aren't a problem. Of course during rain showers, slipping, being swept away downstream and even drowning can be just as real of a danger as they are in the sewers.

Maintenance tunnels are usually even dryer, better lit and safer to trek through, it's finding the entrance to them that's the trick. And once inside them, pc's will find them to be a cramped, labyrinth like maze or tunnels and pipes, and in area that manage steam pipes will make them very humid and warm. And as is the way of horror RPG, lots of strange sounds will mask other sounds, steam exhaust sprays will hiss out occasionally (needing horror factors saves), animals, homeless people, street gangs, and of course the supernatural can all be present. Of course, occasional exploding pipes, electrical hazards, collapsing pipes and other hazards can all be found down here. See chapter 4 of the video game ***Condemned: Criminal Origins*** for a great example of steam/maintenance tunnels and the horrors they can contain.

Concerning Dangers and Hazards

Obviously, between the sewers, storm drains and maintenance tunnels, the Supernatural will find them ideal for traveling around the city secretly, and many of them can (and do) live in them when needed or desired. This means the characters will have to deal with these situations from time to time, and as a result, the following hazards can apply during their adventures in the sewers (and at times the storm drains and utility tunnels).

Slipping: Footing will always be uncertain in the sewers (and at times in storm drains). In some cases there are small pipes fastened along the walls for telephone, electric and fiber optic cable wires, gas lines and steam pipes and so on which might help the players keep their footing while walking, but otherwise the slime coated walls provides them no support. As per pg. 71 of the ***Boxed Nightmares*** sourcebook, maximum speed is reduced by 25% and all dodges are at -1 (in smaller lines, -2 or more may apply). Any attempt to dodge, make any sudden moves, running, or any similar actions means that the pc's are likely to slip and fall; roll a 20-side die, a roll less than 12 (including dodge bonuses) means the pc falls in the sludge, takes 1D4 damage and loses 1 attack/action that melee round.

Being Swept Downstream: In most cases the raw sewage slowly slogs its way down sewer lines (usually about a mile an hour). But during downpours, water pipe explosions, and a variety of inexplicably reasons (which happens a lot in horror RPG's), the water rises and accelerates in speed. Sewage workers deal with this by wearing safety harnesses and cable systems, but even they can fall prey to the sewers in real life, so the pc's should never feel confident that they can always withstand strong currents. Pages 56-57 of *Dead Reign: Dark Places* covers dealing with this hazard.

Drowning: Pages 57-58 of *Dead Reign: Dark Places* covers dealing with drowning as well (that book's saving me pages worth of writing I tell ya!)

Disease: Page 58 of *Dead Reign: Dark Places* has a good illness table for handling diseases (actually, the entire book is a treasure trove of disease details in and of itself). But besides swallowing a gulp of sewage, being completely dunked in it could be enough to cause illness. I would say to make the *save vs. disease* roll for those who were swept away downstream, submerged somehow, was in danger of drowning or even got cut or stabbed somehow as soon as they exit the sewer. Cuts via rusty nails or shard of metal may warrant a trip to the doctor for a tetanus shot.

Perception Penalties: Between the unnatural like darkness, the debris, and even obstructions like tree root incursion (a common problem in sewers older built before 1950), all perception rolls should be at a challenging level at minimum (14 or better). Using some sort of heavy duty lighting or flares could raise the visual perception challenge to moderate, but hearing perception rolls will ALWAYS be an issue in the sewers.

Toxic/Poison Fumes and Gases: The *bad fumes* angle is covered on page 73 of the *Boxed Nightmares* book. As far as toxic gases go, besides the general crap that can be breathed in while in the sewers (see page 55 of *Dead Reign: Dark Places* as to the dangers and how to deal with it), it's my understanding that *Hydrogen Sulfide* can build up in pockets along the sewers, especially in spots where the sewage is backs up and effectively becomes *septic*. Exposure to this gas causes a feeling of numbness or feeling lightheaded, suffer dizziness, and even going unconscious.

In my game, dealing with this gas requires a *save vs. non-lethal poison*, those who save only deal with the numbness and lightheadedness. Those who fail suffer dizziness. Roll once per each round within the gas pocket, three failed rolls results in the character falling unconsciousness (and potentially drowning in the sewage without help). I use the table on Page 58 of *Dead Reign: Dark Places* when dealing with the penalties involved with poison gases, and the size of the pockets of air are randomly rolled as a 2D6x10 foot area.

Getting Lost: This is discussed on page 56 of *Dead Reign: Dark Places*.

The Authorities: The sewer is a hostile environment, and only sewer workers are allowed to enter them. The players will usually have to deal with finding and entering a manhole that's out of sight, but even then, onlookers and bystanders who spot them might call the police. Characters who get apprehended by the police can expect a free ride to the local police station, be questioned suspiciously as to why they were in the sewers to begin with (and further examination as to any special equipment or weaponry

found on them will be required), and gets a good finger wagging and a detailed discussion from either a police officer or public works specialist about the dangers of the sewers.

Fortunately illegally entering the sewers is not a harshly punished crime (even illegally connecting home or business to the sewers is more harshly punished). The first couple of offenses may result in fines (from \$100-\$600) and held in the station for a few hours. Having good contacts within the precinct or other political avenues can be a boon here and may get them out with only a warning.

Repeat offenders however can expect steeper fines (\$1000 to as high as \$2000), community service may be required, and those caught a 3rd or 4th time can start expecting jail time for “Repeated Trespassing” (something usually only homeless people tend to get jailed for).

Note: See page 72-73 of the *Boxed Nightmares* book for a good *Random Sewer Encounters* table (the “Rat Stampede” is a favorite of mine, and the deep water and fumes section has nearly killed a lot of characters at con games I’ve run while succeeding at killing a couple of them as well.

References: Besides the books and games mentioned above, I’ve had too many resources and references to even attempt to provide them all here. I will say that if you plan to take your players into the sewers, storm drains and maintenance tunnels, do at least 20 minutes of internet research to gather some details on what you can find in them, and then look for the potential horror and terrors they facts provide. Happy hunting!