

General Review Values

(In no particular order):

1. Something new. UA is a pretty gonzo game that can cover a lot of conceptual ground. Unfortunately, I see a lot of the same territory getting dug up. Give me something novel that makes me think “I haven’t seen that before.”
2. Ease of deployability. You only got 1333 words including stat blocks, so you’re often going to be limited in what you can achieve here. Still, within the scope of what you’re trying to pull off, try to give me some straightforward hooks on how to drop this into my game. A lot of content for this game skews towards a monster or cabal playing with itself in the corner, begging the question of how the PC’s find out about them.
3. Includes stats. Unless the writeup is so packed to the gills with good content that mechanics straight wouldn’t fit, I’ll usually advocate to include them when missing. Cool ideas can be great inspiration, but you need to include the game stuff so people can actually use it without having to do the prep themselves.
4. Characters with character. An express ticket to my good graces is to include cool guys that would be fun for me, the GM, to roleplay. This means the character has an interesting personality, a solid motivation, and a decent sense of what identities they might have. A good writer can convey this in a sentence or two. I think this is a skill any RPG writer should cultivate.
5. Well written. I like purty words.

Reviews

Four of Chimneys

Good way to open the jam. This is an readily usable little location that can be added to the corkboard with ease or introduced to a local underground later in a campaign. The sample characters are solid and given personality in a succinct fashion, a boon in any RPG writing. I am left wishing for a “What You Hear” section with some ideas on how a player cabal could find out about this game and get involved with it, and you have the word count to include something like that. I also think an excellent inclusion would be guidance on how to handle resolving these in a less involved fashion than spending a session running an in-character poker game. The Gridiron could be useful here, though it could use some modification to determine the results for conflicts with more than two sides. Such an inclusion could even be useful outside of this particular set piece, since high stakes gambling is a common genre trope in the media Unknown Armies tends to draw from.

Jack of clubs/10

The Greggs and the Graveyard

My merits and issues with this entry are basically the opposite of the previous. The “Why are you here?” section is much appreciated. If you can’t come up with a really solid hook with specificity, give a smorgasbord for the GM to choose from as fits their particular campaign. The other side is the GMC’s frequently aren’t given enough information for me to get a decent idea

of how to run them. Sure, Hadrian McGee is too busy playing Underrail to notice the player characters, but if there's nothing that will get his attention to interact with the players, why include him in the first place? I get that it's basically non-viable to include in depth GMC personalities in a scenario with this tight of a word count. However, my preference in scenario writing tends to be towards having small casts with fleshed out personalities, and that applies doubly so for something this short. The scenario feels constrained by the word limit. This read to me like you had a lot more fun with the Travelodge and the Barrow Gang than the Greggs and the Shell. I recommend cutting one or both and using the remaining word count to expand on what's left.

Just focus on the parts you like/10

Darla Jean

I very much enjoyed this iteration of one of your favorite character types to write: large, aggressive, sexually open woman with a penchant for violence. The personality description of an unflappable and extremely physical woman who molds nervous camera-virgins into hardened porno professionals is excellent. The little details, like the role she plays in rituals, the kind of person she attracts, and the lack of Provides Firearm Attacks as a feature in any of her identities, are what really make this. The Box of Rubbers artifact, which I love, is just icing on the cake. Considering the industry she's involved with, I'm surprised that she's so scared of opiates (hence the narcan) rather than date rape drugs like ketamine and rohypnol. However, that is the absolute nittest of picks. Well done.

Excellently written, though you obviously did it one-handed/10

Alexander Head and the Undercroft

My first impression of this was that you wrote a big ol' wall of text, and this could really use some headers. Upon completion, my opinion is that this is a cool NPC with an excellent concept. I'm left with a lot of questions about Alexander, and I say that as both a compliment and a critique. What was Alex like before he was put in the Hyper-Olive Time Chamber? Since the whole experience with the Undercroft is implicitly memetic, what do other people who have spent time in the Undercroft get up to? Adding a couple paragraphs on the kind of kid Alex was before this he's a bit one note, since basically every detail on his character sheet is directly related to his time in the Undercroft. This also has the very common issue of RPG character write ups where the vast majority of the text is spent on the character's backstory, and very little detail is given on what they're up to in the present day. Adding three or four on Alexander's current activities would really fill this out because one short paragraph isn't really enough.

Needs a quiet place to think for a while/10

Styx Subway Train

This is another entry where I love the core concept, but I'm left wanting for more detail. Fundamentally, a ritual that lets you get into any Otherspace in existence has staggering implications, especially when said ritual is a few dollars and a few minor charges. I don't care much about the sanctity of the lore, but I could see this making a ton of work for a GM that included it in their game, and the writeup could really do more to support that. Some limitations could make this more viable, with one idea being that, with multiple uses, the charge cost goes up alongside the monetary cost. Perhaps this is a tall order, but a good table for randomly generating Otherspaces could make this absolutely sing. An inclusion like that would do wonders for making this more usable for a GM. I do love the little touches of this, like the other occultists you can meet on the train and the cenobite conductor. I'd love it if you expanded on him, giving him some stats, personality details, and a few hints on what his whole deal is.

These rails shine, but more track needs to be laid/10

Otherspace Sickness

I absolutely love your inclusion of alternate names. It's absolutely perfect for conveying how a scene dominated by rumor and hearsay like the Occult Underground talks about experiences like this. Since this keys into the Ongoing Madness system, I do think this could use some more definite mechanics, like making contacting the disease less vague and giving specific stats to "Untethered from Reality". I'm also left wondering if there is any way to delay the disease's progression without curing it, since that could be an interesting but costly tool for players looking to explore Otherspaces. The GM notes are an excellent inclusion, giving some example pairs of Otherspaces and their respective bleeds.

I am down with the sickness/10

The Secret Saints of the Cecilites

This is an excellent direction to take the Cecilites, a faction which can always use some more loving detail. It's also a logical expansion of the group, with Saint Cecil not being an officially recognized saint in Catholic doctrine. This has very interesting implications for the Order in general, in a way that makes them much more interesting to me. Each of the example saints given are fun, with Charles Carroll being my particular favorite. You bring up the notion of these saints having relics like any other, and I'd love to see some examples of those written up as proper artifacts. The campaign seeds are a welcome inclusion, though I'd like to see one or two more given, focused on more typical secular cabals that are neutral or even allied with the Cecilites.

Deus est bonus/10

Felix Kaufman, Not a Medium

This is my favorite GMC concept in the contest. A self-aware and honest faux-medium is a great spin on a therapist that fits the tone of this game perfectly. Unfortunately, he does feel a bit one note. The core concept of Felix is excellent, but I'd like to see him fleshed out a bit more. What's his personality like? Is the self referential medium work his only job? Does he do anything outside of work or is the pseudo-medium thing the only important thing in his life? Something that could help here would be a third identity that isn't directly related to his job, but that's admittedly a matter of personal taste. More pragmatically, I think Felix needs some ideas for how a GM could include him in their game. How does Felix get involved with people from the Occult Underground? If he isn't involved with the underground, how do the players hear about him? I could see Felix knowing a little something about demons, at least enough to advise the players that they shouldn't try to summon the closest thing this setting has to real ghosts.

If he could, your dead grandfather would tell me that you earned a good score/10

University Street

This is about the perfect amount of information for an Otherspace. You have a solid overview of its current state, reasons for player characters to get involved, well-drawn GMC's that can work with or against players depending on their choices, and, most importantly, an evocative entrance and exit. Any good Otherspace needs a cool way of getting there. I am left feeling that the details are a bit lopsided in places. I think you gave a bit too much detail on street layouts, but a Seattle local might find this more interesting than an outsider like myself. Some hyperlinks to information about the named locations could also be helpful here. If you want to develop this further, I'd love to be given some leads that players could use to find this place. What I want most of all though is some detail on this alternate Seattle's culture. I want to know more about how it differs from our own. Including some GMC's local to this Otherspace could do a lot to fill out that dimension.

1st Ave/10

The Cleaners

Of the scenarios written for this contest, this is absolutely my favorite. It does feel very much constrained by the word limit, which is the main thing I see holding it back from both a content and a usability standpoint. The issue that stands out most is that progression of the scenario hinges upon a puzzle, coloring in the eye on the daruman, that appears simple at first glance. However, I could easily see players getting stuck on it for a while. Much of the scenario's word count is dedicated to setup, which is necessary, but it does make the actually playable portions at the office and Rin's house feel underdeveloped. The imagery with the daruman and the dummies are excellent, the prose is often quite good, but 1,333 words is not enough to give this the room it needs to breathe. Luckily, I know the writers are working on fleshing this out right now, and I very much look forward to seeing the final product.

A daruman with an eye that hasn't been filled yet/10

Galatea

I'm a fan of anything that blends the weird and occult with Big Tech, so I'm inherently biased towards this entry. It does a lot of things right with regards to a faction writeup, like including advice for how to insert this into your campaign and listing the faction's resources that they can use to help/hinder the player cabal. This last is especially critical for a group write up, and even factions in the 3e books will fail to include this information. I do think that some of the characters could use some fleshing out, and you have the spare wordcount to do it. Despite nominally being the factions' leaders, I have less of an understanding of Ada and Hayley's personalities than Kenneth or Benny. Giving each leader a couple sentences of writeup on their character would help a lot. I'm also left confused about SIER's personality. Describing her persona as "Elvira-esque" is absolutely perfect, but I'd appreciate a bit more than that. I'm not entirely sure you're trying to make SIER an independently motivated character, a resource, or something in between, and that ambiguity doesn't feel intentional.

7.931 (with a +/- 2.056 margin of error)/10

Bartlett and Sprouse, College Thaumaturges

This is another entry that runs into the common issue of using too much of the initial writeup on their backstory and not enough on the pair of NPC's as they exist in the present. I'd recommend focusing more of the content on what sort of activities these guys would get up to if a GM wanted to include them in their game, rather than writing a narrative about their brief window of existence. I will say that I think a pair of college-aged Agrimancer slackers has a lot of potential in a "fucked up spin on college comedies" sort of way. I'd love to hear more about what kind of activities these guys got up to before they graduated, some anecdotes of occulted college hijinks. What they do while they're still active is significantly more useful to a GM than what makes them break up. Despite my criticisms of the core writeup, I absolutely love the rituals you included. Midnight Oil is probably my favorite, being a fun ritual description paired with a useful effect, and Freshman Fifteen has just the right amount of body horror. They even have appropriate charge costs, well done.

Two duct-taped 40's/10

Ultraflat

Spacial fuckery is one of my favorite horror tropes, and this is an excellent spin on that idea. A lot of the given examples of unnatural phenomena for this game are ultimately just flavorful traps for player characters. That tendency also describes this, but it's fleshed out in a way that feels a lot less like a "gotcha". What makes the difference is the writeup here includes immediate signposting, multiple ways to get rid of the phenomena, methods to heal the effects, and ideas for how players can turn this phenomena on their enemies. I am left wondering why there's so many posters if people trapped in the room only last for five days. That's a minor

nitpick though, and, overall, this is one of my favorite examples of unnatural phenomena that I've read. Additional kudos on including one of my favorite descriptions of a spell effect in any game ever: "victims feel like uncomfortably warm sliced lunchmeat".

16 oz of pork/10

Cábala del Rey del Invierno

This feels like a part of a Tim Powers story in the best way, though I'm sure Ozzie Fuentes' headquarters in LA are a strong contributor to that vibe. Revenants don't see much use, so I'm happy you've found an atypical way to include them in a game. "Snowfallen hunter" is just a really cool character concept. However, the way this piece has been developed strikes me as a bit lopsided. The backstory is good, but it could definitely use an editing pass, both to improve brevity and to address some typos. I'm also left wishing Mr. Fuentes had some GMC stats, and if you revise this piece, I would highly recommend adding those. I do really appreciate the inclusion of a fleshed out hook for how to include this in a game, to the point that I worry it's so specific that it becomes difficult to include in a game as written. If you want to merely revise, then shortening the hook given and adding a few more of similar length could improve usability. However, I do quite like the hook you've given here, and if you're of a similar mind, I could easily see it expanded into a whole damn scenario.

November 1st to 2nd/10

Gert

I love the voice of the writing for this entry. It feels like a very classic 1e/2e style dirtbag wizard, and that tone is the foundation of why I love this game. Gert is also very usable to a broad swath of player cabals, I could see this character dropped into pretty much any campaign. However, it's often difficult to parse this information because of the lack of headers or any other means of organization other than the old wall o' text. You have a lot of wordcount to spare, so I'd recommend adding a proper stat block for Gert and writing up a description for her ritual and maybe increase the charge cost a bit. If you want to make this even more easy to use, include suggestions for how to include her in a campaign and some circumstances that could get Gert to teach a player the ritual.

An improved layout would make this shine/10

Urizen Shaft

I love this guy's personality, and this is almost the perfect amount of information for an NPC. Therefore, this hits my two primary criteria for good RPG content: you make me want to include this content in my game and you make it easy to do so. Particular details I'm fond of are Urizen's relationship with the ritual Gnome Music (nice bonus by the way) and your description of how he intentionally plays up the Crypt Keeper look. I do have some extremely minor nitpicks,

the biggest of which is to please include whitespace between paragraphs, as it makes reading single column RPG content on a monitor so much easier. As always, I'd love a section with ideas on how to insert Mr. Shaft into a campaign, but you have included this information, it's just scattered around the writeup.

Bonus point for including 5 out of 6 prompts in one entry

You actually made me want to run a game in London(+1)/10

Avatar: The Mascot

This is an excellent idea for an archetype, and it's honestly a niche that really needed to be filled. However, I do have some definite issues with the implementation. The biggest is that it strikes me as very strange that an avatar of The Mascot can't actually be someone that wears a costume for a well known character. Mascots are almost always associated with some larger organization like a movie studio or a sports team. The guy who is gainfully employed to wear the Phillie Phanatic costume should absolutely be able to channel this archetype. However, I do appreciate you addressing the very important question of whether or not furry OC. A potential alternative to the taboo you wrote could be that the Avatar has to be the only person who wears the mascot suit in question.

I really like the first two channels, especially for the image of a guy in a Goofy outfit picking locks and full tilt sprinting. However, I'd recommend coming up with new third and forth channels, as neither feel especially relevant to the idea of a mascot, a friendly and anonymous entertainer that acts as a representative of some larger idea or organization. I don't really associate mascots with having the ability to strike fear into a man's heart with just a look. I could see you doing some interesting things with having the line between the wearer, the suit, and the character the suit represents becoming increasingly blurry as the Avatar gains more channels. Ultimately, I do really like his Avatar, but I think it could use some revision.

Hey Stwong Bad, I weally like yow scawy fuwsona avataw/10

Samuel Pin Bone

Absolutely killer opening sentence. The compliments that I gave to Darla Jean apply to here as well: I like this character, I think I'd enjoy playing him, and you give pretty much all the information I'd need to do so. That's just from the GM perspective, from a player's point of view, Sam has a well described, memorable appearance and a player facing purpose that's likely to come up in a campaign. Though UA3 doesn't really have mechanics to handle it, from a typical theme and plot-beat standpoint, a loan shark is a character players are likely to seek out, and it's nice to have an interesting one in my pocket. I do think the "What You Hear" section could use an entry or two specifically targeted towards the Occult Underground and Sam's reaction to such, but it isn't hard to make the call that the average Checker doesn't have the best credit rating.

432.81% APY/10

Uncut Gems

I appreciate that you worked to make this inclusive to multiple sets of genitals. This a memorably gross ritual, which is, historically, pretty much this game's claim to fame. Broadly, I like the concept of this ritual and the act it entails. I especially appreciate the tip to use the fibula as an excuse for making old wizards unusually spry. However, I am left asking a lot of questions about the mechanical implementation.. First of all, is there any reason why the Helplessness shocks for getting pent up can't be resolved with a prostate or clitoral orgasm? This oversight is especially strange since in the "What You Hear" section you specifically bring up Alexandria Clemmens, a character who does this exact thing., while dropping the wonderful phrase "Prostate milkmaid". I assume the reason there's no charge cost is that you're only supposed to be able to do this once. I'd specify this in the text because, as is, there's no reason someone can't just keep piercing their junk to stack bonuses, especially if they're already hardened in the right meters. If stacking is intended behavior, then I'd give this a (low) charge cost, as much as I love the "For you, no charge" bit.

Gross, well done/10

The Midnight Screening

Of the scenarios you wrote for this content, this is the most packed. Unfortunately, this is more to the scenario's detriment than its benefit. This scenario is overflowing with neat concepts and cool characters, but they're given such brief overviews that they're barely usable. I'm very interested in the concept of an anti-Naked Goddess tape and an adventure focused on a public showing of an illicit and magickal movie. However, as is, this feels more like GM notes than a tool to actually help someone run a game session. About a quarter of the scenario is dedicated to the set pieces and actually interactable bits. You have this massive list of characters, but I have basically no idea how to roleplay any of them. I know that a lot of these guys are from the Mellonbread Extended Universe, so you could at least include links to the content they show up in to help a GM get a handle on their personalities and motivation. Put less focus on listing extremely general summaries of dubiously relevant characters and their Halloween costumes, more on giving players things to actually do.

This reminds me of those Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay scenarios that spend several pages listing a dozen factions and NPC's with their agendas and schedules, presents a timetable for a night, and then gives no guidance on what happens when the players disrupt any of that. My issues here are the same for those: they don't actually make it any easier for a GM to run the game.

Getting out of a two and a half hour movie at 3 AM/10

Frahnk's 3 Favorites

(In no particular order):

- Galatea by Valiant
For making a faction that remembers to include information that many forget and because this is the entry I see myself most likely to actually use.
- Samuel Pin Bone by Mellonbread
For making an easy to use GMC filled with personality who is likable, memorable, and useful to a wide variety of player cabals and because you wrote my favorite opening sentence in the contest.
- Ultraflat by Cliomancer
For making an extremely memorable piece of unnatural phenomena that avoids almost every issue I have with how they tend to be written, and because the phrase "victims feel like uncomfortably warm sliced lunchmeat" trespasses into my thoughts while I'm trying to sleep.

Closing Remarks

Unknown Armies is considered something of a "cult hit" in RPG circles. In a hobby that is already as niche as this one, outside of D&D at least, that's a damn small fanbase. So it's incredibly gratifying to see 15 people all submitting content of such high quality to a jam that only lasted a week. I hope this Halloween Jam is the first of many annuals, and I hope this inspires further events from the community. If this is what being part of a cult is like, then I'm all for it.

I spent a lot of my feedback picking at nits, but I do want to say that every single entry I read for this sparked some sort of inspiration for me, some notion of "Oh, I could use this guy for..." or "Huh, that idea has some interesting implications." All other RPG jams or contests that I've had the pleasure of reading through had at least a couple submissions that I outright did not like. To me, that says something about that average quality of the ideas and writing coming out of this community.

Most of my criticisms of the submission to this were fundamentally about usability. Solid ideas are critical to a nice piece of roleplaying game material, as the fundamental purpose of RPG writing is to inspire creativity that happens at the table. Judging from the imagination I saw displayed in these submissions, you guys have that down pat. However, you also want to make bringing that writing to the table as painless as you can, and that entails including headers and formatting, game bits like stat blocks, and preemptively answering questions a GM and their players will have. My perspective is that writing for this medium that you release into the wild should be done with the intent of creating something that another GM can use without hassle. Otherwise you're basically just making your session notes publicly accessible.

Good RPG writing is material that you are excited to run that your players will love. Great RPG writing is material a complete stranger will be excited to run that their players will love.

I think part of the issues with this, the lack of stat blocks especially, come from the rules of this particular jam. I strongly recommend that any future contests and jams exclude stat blocks from any word limits. While I understand that this can increase the perceived threshold of submissions and lead to people skirting the word limit by expositing in stats, those are sacrifices I think are worth making to encourage more readily usable content. I also strongly impassion participants to throw away the fear of submitting entries that you feel are “unfinished”. Give me your incompletes and imperfects, I will happily feast on them regardless.

To everyone who submitted, I plead to not stop with this jam. Even if it doesn't have the layout polish expected of a Statosphere entry, please post more of your Google Docs and MS Word files to the Unknown Armies Discord, subreddit, wherever. I want more samples from each of your respective derangements.