

The following is taken from an assignment completed in Susan O'Conner's GAME WRITING MASTERCLASS.

ASSIGNMENT: Conceive a valid game story given the following:

- *Suppose I am a writer working on a **horror game**.*
- *The designer has developed TWO gameplay mechanics: **run** or **fight**.*
- *One of the creative pillars, or guidelines, of the game, is to "**motivate the player to embrace the horror**."*

My horror game concept:

LAST HOUSE ON THE LAUGH

You have **coulrophobia**, a fear of clowns. You are trapped in a clown college that is really a front for a Satanic cult hell-bent on summoning their dark lord, **Beelzebozo**. You are the only one who can stop the summoning and prevent Beelzebozo from shoving a Satanic pie into the face of civilization, but the longer you are exposed to clowns, the higher your Fear Gauge rises and the more ineffectual your abilities become.

A WRINKLE IN THE ASSIGNMENT

Later in development, user testing reveals that players really want the ability to crouch.

So the designer comes to you and says, "OK, now the player can crouch. Let me know how that changes the story."

MY RESPONSE

The ability to crouch gives the player more opportunities to avoid Clowns. It will add a stealth component to gameplay which will support the RUN gameplay mechanic as well as the EMBRACE THE HORROR design pillar, since a lot of horror can be derived from fear of the unseen or unknown, not knowing what is around the next corner.

Playing into the survival horror fantasy, the crouch effect could make the experience feel **SCARIER**. By the same token, it could also make the experience feel **SLOWER**.

However, **the slower pace could be used to our advantage** to provide dynamics to the overall pacing. It could also be used in high stress scenarios -- a chase sequence through air ducts or another tight space, for example -- where the use of slower or intermittent pacing could still very much feel kinetic and high stakes.

At first glance, a crouching mechanic doesn't seem to affect our character, but it certainly could if we get creative.

For example, perhaps our character is geriatric and has a hard time crouching. This could limit the duration of the crouch ability and provide time-gated challenges for certain stealth missions or scenarios.

There could be any number of reasons that our character would have a hard time crouching. Maybe they're wheelchair-bound and can only move outside of the chair for a short duration. Perhaps they suffer movement penalties as they take damage, or as their Fear Gauge goes up as they are exposed to more and more clowns.

Perhaps our character is a large person such that crouching still puts them at a pretty tall height. Conversely, our character could be ultra short (or a gameplay item/mechanic could allow them to shrink), and crouching could allow them to fit into some really tight places.

Crouching during combat could give players new options for the FIGHT mechanic of gameplay: taking a chainsaw to a demonic clown's knees or ankles, for example.

THE FINAL STEP

Brainstorm modifications to your original story concept, incorporating the mechanic of crouching.

MY REVISED STORY

You are the aging, retired headmaster of the world's most renowned clown college. You began your career as a mime and transitioned into artful clowning. You played stages from the West End to Jakarta to Broadway and later founded the college to pass on what you have learned. However, **you and your husband/wife/spouse were assaulted in an alleyway one night by a person in a clown mask.** Your loved one was killed. **You survived, but now suffer from crippling coulrophobia,** which forced you to step down as headmaster. But when you discover your old college has been infiltrated by a satanic cult and no one believes you, **you must overcome your fear of clowns, return to the college, and stop the cult from summoning Beezlebozo into the world.**

Furthermore, as the story progresses, you will learn that **the cult is responsible for the assault that killed you and your beloved.** It was an attempt to take you out of the equation to usher in their evil plot uncontested. It could have been orchestrated by a disgruntled former apprentice, your beloved (who might have been in on it the entire time), or some other character yet to be invented.

As you progress through the game, you will use your elite skills as a mime to confound, circumvent, and combat the legions of evil Satanic clowns.

FLOWCHART

In order to turn our story into a playable experience, we were to pick a section of our game/story to focus on and map out in a flowchart.

FLOWCHART THOUGHTS

I've chosen to focus on a section of the game leading up to a boss battle with **Pagliacci**. Pagliacci (based off the clown from [the joke in WATCHMEN](#) (and older sources)), is a depressed clown and a major NPC in this game.

Pagliacci turns out to be the hero/protagonist of the story. His depression has led to nihilism, which explains why he is helping the Satanic clown cult, but there could be a pivot point in the story where he realizes life has meaning and decides to stop the cult. But this is all just food for thought --

For now, all that matters for this assignment is:

- Pagliacci is a boss.
- He has been a presence in the game before this point.
- The player is en route to the boss encounter and Pagliacci is trying to stop them.

The Player/Avatar is approaching Pagliacci's inner sanctum but first must pass through a fun house. Pagliacci will taunt the Player/Avatar from afar while presenting challenges and obstacles that exploit the Avatar's fear of clowns.

Given that choices have real impact on the Player when those choices affect characters (vs plot), I am adding an NPC into this sequence around which my Player choices will be centered.

POOFY DU VEY (major NPC): a bundle of nerves with big dreams and even bigger fears. Poofy's got a lot to say if she could only remember what that was.

Poofy really does want to be a clown and was horrified when she discovered the cult was behind her beloved clown college. Now she's trapped, travelling with the Player/Avatar. But our Player/Avatar is afraid of clowns, so being around Poofy makes our Fear Gauge fill up over time, making the Player/Avatar weaker.

GAMEPLAY/STORY MOMENTS

Player/Avatar and Poofy Du Vey enter Pagliacci's Fun House. They must decide: go left, into the HALL OF MIRRORS or to right into the BALL PIT?

1. HALL OF MIRRORS: Poofy's reflections result in crippling fear. Will the Player leave Poofy behind or suck it up and stay with her?
2. BALL PIT: It cuts the Avatar's speed in half -- and the walls are closing in!

In the Ball Pits, I imagine an Edgar Allan Poe, "The Pit and the Pendulum" kind of encounter, where the Player must solve puzzles while avoiding clowns to save Poofy.

- Once Poofy is safe, the Player may advance to a Pagliacci mini-boss encounter where having Poofy around and happy will prove to be more of an advantage than not (due to some hilarious TBD Poofy skill).

Alternatively, in the Hall of Mirrors, the Player must avoid clowns while solving puzzles and navigating a mirror maze. This will be compounded by Poofy and the Fear Gauge.

If the Player trusts Poofy to guide them, the Avatar will blindfold themselves and the Player will control Poofy to navigate the maze without having to worry about the Fear Gauge. This will lead to the same mini-boss encounter as if the Player went through the Ball Pits (Player advantage).

However, if the Player does NOT trust Poofy to guide them, navigating the Maze as the Avatar is much more difficult because of the Fear Gauge. This will also lead to a disadvantageous encounter with **the mini-boss, which will be further complicated by Poofy's hurt feelings and unwillingness to help.**

In all cases, once the Player has defeated the mini-boss, they will move on to the next section, the BARREL SHOOT.

Before moving to the Barrel Shoot, the Player will have the option to bring Poofy with them or leave her behind in a safe location. However, because of the Fear Gauge, bringing Poofy to the Barrel Shoot will cause a disadvantage in the next challenge.

I wanted Poofy's presence to usually be a hindrance because of the Avatar's fear of clowns, **but I also wanted to keep things interesting by making her presence occasionally helpful**, as in the case with the mini-boss in this section.

