



Using Alternate History in Any Campaign

by Kenneth Hite

"To me all the past is alive with alternatives, and nobody can show, nobody has really attempted to show, that they were not real alternatives." - - G.K. Chesterton, "On Fate And A Communist"

If I love any kind of pointless speculation best (and indeed I do), that kind is the alternate history. For an amateur historian and professional world-builder, there is no greater joy than finding yet another road not taken, another bump or side trail in the dry suburban route of Whig Progress, another weird happening that should, by rights, be as central to History as 1492 and 1941. I've collected a lot of them in my time, but there's always more to be found. And if you don't restrict your net to the real, but start considering unreal and downright surreal alternates (and allow a little judicious time travel), an alternate-history campaign can give you the perfect hook for all (and I do mean all) your [GURPS](#) books. Especially, of course, [GURPS Alternate Earths](#).

Let's start with a nice, easy alternate, and work our way up from there, okay? Alternate histories stemming from the victory of the Spanish Armada in 1588 aren't as common as they used to be (the best by far is Keith Roberts' *Pavane*, although John Brunner's *Times Without Number* is a nifty crosstime brouhaha stepping off there as well); but say that the Duke of Medina-Sidonia had somehow slipped past Drake (or met Parma on time, or just listened to Recalde, or any number of ifs and ors), with the result that Parma's *tercios* had landed and marched on London, plopped James VI of Scotland on the throne, and ended the Tudor experiment with national Protestantism before two generations had passed. The thing about decisive battles, unfortunately, is that not all of them are really decisive. Unless something happens to take France down a peg, Spain is only trading one annoyance for another much closer to hand. So, let's say that James VI pays back Spain and helps out the Guise party at the Battle of Ivry, smashing the Bourbons and leaving the Guise kings of France Spanish puppets. The Dutch rebellion fails, too, without British moral and covert support. Without England, France, or Holland to worry about, the Spanish Holy Roman Empire can ride out the troublesome 17th century in placid hegemony.

What kind of game is that? The best darn [GURPS Swashbucklers](#) game ever, that's what kind. With all the Main Spanish, the pirates will be forced to make common cause not just with each other, in the loose Tortuga Brotherhood, but with every opponent of Imperial Spain from the Natchez and Cherokee Indians ([GURPS Old West](#), sort of) to the Moorish emirs of Morocco (and lords of the Sallee Rover pirate republic, not to mention the Barbary Pirates, oh, and [GURPS Arabian Nights](#)), to the

escaped *cimarron* slaves in the wilds of Cuba, Hispaniola and Brazil ([GURPS Voodoo](#), and now you're catching on). Don't forget that the Spanish Inquisition (and the much-feared Jesuits) will have made a lot of enemies of their own, from witches ([GURPS Wizards](#)) to vampires ([GURPS Blood Types](#)) to the mysteriously Rosicrucian Alumbrados ([GURPS Illuminati](#)). Call it Alternate High Historical Fantasy, and get ready to rock and roll.

"In short, I believe that, again and again, man was at the cross-roads and might have taken another road. Nobody can prove or disprove it metaphysically, but I am the more content with a philosophy which permits of occasional miracles, because the alternative philosophy does not even permit of alternatives. It forbids a man even to dream of anything so natural as the lfs of History. - - G.K. Chesterton, "On Fate And A Communist"

You may have noticed that alternate histories can involve a lot of things you wouldn't normally have thought of as part of alternate history. That's because once you start changing things, it's like eating popcorn: there's no point in stopping until the movie gets really good, and even then it only makes it better. Adding magic to alternate histories is simple: Randall Garrett's brilliant *Lord Darcy* series wasn't the first to do it, although it certainly did it best. (But check out Poul Anderson's *Operation: Chaos* and Harry Turtledove's *The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump* for two more wonderful versions.) The "steampunk" wizards in [GURPS Wizards](#) stem from just this sort of foolishness; in our 1588 branch-point, there are plenty of possible inventors of practical magic puttering around. Agrippa and Paracelsus (the two best) both predate the Armada by about 40 years, but the GM who wants the battle against the Spanish Armada fought between aetherick galleons suspended high above the Channel by powerful levitation spells (or pieces of lunar matter . . .) might be well-advised to use their researches as the "scientific revolution" of magic.

For a secret-magic 1588 campaign, of course, the ideal centerpiece is Elizabeth's court wizard John Dee, reputed to be the model for Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the holder of the first code-number 007 in British Intelligence. Let Dee and his Rosicrucian cohorts Sir Francis Bacon and Sir Walter Raleigh spirit Elizabeth away to faerie ([GURPS Celtic Myth](#)) or to the Secret Refuge of Croatan (or somewhere else in the wilds of mysterious North America); they can either be the Unseen Allies of the pirate PCs, or the nucleus of a group of sorcerous PC [Special Ops](#). If, as we all suspected, the Spaniards are in league with Demonic Powers, Vampire Lords, or worse yet, Alien Masterminds, the truly ambitious GM could build an Alternate High Cinematic Swashbuckling [Black Ops](#) campaign. (All of this is terribly unfair to the Spanish, who have been the victim of perhaps history's best-ever propaganda campaign, the "Black Legend." Suffice it to say that, while they were no walk in the park, they weren't really that bad. It's just that everything is more fun when you've got a good villain.)

"The past isn't dead. It's not even past." - - Old time-traveler saying, coined roughly 300 years from now

You can, of course, use alternate history as a cool excuse for horror gaming. Kim Newman does something of the sort with *Anno Dracula*, a pulp-horror tour de force which diverges during Chapter 7 of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (no kidding). Thus, Dracula becomes Prince Consort of the British Empire, and vampires rule the roost. Brian Stableford's *Empire of Fear* has a similar schtick, although his vampires start earlier; Attila the Hun brings vampirism into Europe, and the Plantagenets, among others, rule the vampiric roost in the novel's 17th century. For our 1588 setting, we

can turn it around: Count Dracula *was* real, but in our alternate rather than ignominiously dying in 1476, Vlad Tepes rose in dark vampiric glory. By 1588, perhaps England and Spain must fight side by side, doctrinal differences forgotten, against Dracula and his horde of ghoulish janissaries. Perhaps the vampires from our first setting have opened a worldgate to this one, or perhaps the Vampire Lord from our [Black Ops/Swashbucklers](#) crossover has opened a worldgate to each: Crosstime High Alternate Swashbuckling Cinematic Fantasy - Horror.

What if the alternate history itself is your villain? Jorge Luis Borges' story "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" tells of a parallel world which is slowly *replacing* ours; what if worldgates are actually centers of a quantum cancer eating away at our reality and replacing it with another? (Grant Morrison ripped this notion off, repeatedly and beautifully, for his run on *Doom Patrol*: check this out, especially the story arc involving "Orkwith," to find out how to make it *really* scary.) Perhaps more than one alternate history competes for ecological/ciological niches on Homeline; if each is tied to a specific occult threat, your PCs could find themselves chasing the Chinese hopping vampires back to a reality where the Ming Chinese conquered England in the 17th century, and turning around to harry werewolves back into a High German empire descended from an unbroken Mathildine Dynasty. The whole soft-time spot notion can stay hidden and localized, or it can overwhelm the world as in Murray Leinster's *Sideways in Time* or, on another level, as in the old West End roleplaying game *TORG*.

Alternate history makes a less satisfying secret history: if the story depends on a secret explanation for history, it seems like cheating to change the effect and the cause. Of course, if you really want to have your cake and eat it too, the way to go is the way Melissa Scott and Lisa Barnett do in their novel *Armor of Light*. Here, Sir Philip Sidney and Christopher Marlowe (both of whom were dead in Our 1596), defeat the secret plans of the Earl of Bothwell to murder King James VI of Scotland by magic! Elizabethan England is rife with conspiracies and plots which are confusing enough in our history; changing the players, adding secret magic or secret mysticism, and throwing in a lot of Shakespeare and Marlowe will drive your players batty with delicious frustration. This, needless to say, would be an intrigue-heavy game; don't go into it without players who like that sort of thing, and take a lot of notes. Tie it into Neil Gaiman's secret-historical explanations for Shakespeare's career in *Sandman*, and let the PCs travel the faerie trods or the fields of dream to alternate Englands existing only in the minds of Elizabeth's courtiers. (Look into Michael Moorcock's *Gloriana* if you go this route.)

Finally, a word or two about conspiracy and alternate history. The absolutely very best story of such is John Crowley's "Great Work Of Time," which you simply have to find and read. This one deals with a secret society founded by Cecil Rhodes (his first will, in fact, left just such a provision) that uses time travel to build a series of interlocking alternate histories where Britain rules the world. Crowley is also quite fond of our boy John Dee; *Aegypt* will get you started or finish you off, one or the other. Consider, however, John Dee as the center of a vast conspiracy stretching from Arthurian Britain ([GURPS Camelot](#)) to Zone London ([GURPS Reign of Steel](#)). For this one, Dee uses aethyric magicks to hurl PCs back and forth through the multiverse, linking the great *feng shui* sites of the world ([GURPS Places of Mystery](#)) through Stonehenge and into a seamless perfection: a Camelot across time and space. Is this what Zone London ponders? Is this what Malory meant by the "once and future king"? Is this really a Good Thing For England? For the world? Does everything, finally, come down to a pitching deck in the English Channel in 1588? Only the GM knows for sure.

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