

Channeling the World Beyond

By Jackson Tegu

The narrative power of spirits comes from their mystery. They are ineffable and alien – we get a glimpse and want to know more, but can never truly understand. They have their own world and existence, even those spirits who used to be human have moved on and are, generally speaking, more concerned with their own lives than with ours. When we glimpse them, we are the outsiders.

At least, those are some of the ways I like to look at the secret lives of spirits. Here are three tips to help you bring some of what I love about spirits into the game world you're making for and with your friends.

~ The feeling of specialness, of otherness, is key. Spirits are secret and mysterious. Don't explain any of it. Though you can of course hint at their lives and the rules governing their kind (which you'll have to invent if you crave such things), if the players learn enough to create a field guide for spirits, something ephemeral will have been lost. Similarly, spirit locations are places to carefully walk through, not to dwell in or apply science to.

~ Keep spirits out of the spotlight. They're minor characters. They're not a main ingredient, they're spice: a little goes a long way. If you use too much, the magical feeling will be lost. Miyazaki knew that we couldn't stay forever in the spirit realm, its ephemeral nature makes it special. Putting in just a touch of spirits helps keep that specialness intact. I feel like this is similar to the first tip, but different enough that it warrants its own mention.

~ Use poetic license and the strengths of the spoken medium. We aren't using our eyes to see these spirits, we're using our imaginations. So feel free to mix senses, to be poetic and strange in your descriptions, leaving much for the imagination to fill in. Instead of wearing a blue coat, perhaps a spirit wears a button-up storm cloud or a coat cut from the edge of a soft early frost.

Here are some strange spirits that you might wish to include, or might find inspiring. When I add characters like these, I describe how the players perceive them, I don't generally read these sections aloud.

~ Garjerm, also called Throat-Scratcher. A spirit who looks like a human baby, pudgy and soft. Garjerm hunts by drawing people close enough so that it can reach up and steal their voice. This tricky spirit can then speak with the stolen voice for a couple of days until the voice is completely digested.

~ Ghost Sprouts are, I suppose, a type of spirit. When the seed of a plant is eaten by particular insects, sometimes the seed doesn't understand what happened and tries to grow anyway. Since it's dead, it just pops up a cute little phantasmal sprout.

~ Gire, the rustling shadow. Hiding under every leaf, Gire calls to other spirits by shaking the leaves, occasionally attempting to warn people away from something or draw someone towards something. What does it mean when the leaves rustle on windless days? The rustling shadow is out to play.

~ Harmo. With his tiny ears and his large, wide nose, Harmo looks a little bit funny and a little bit scary. Though his gaze is intense, his intimidating looks are deceptive. He's a little full of himself. If he's nearby, Harmo can't help but accompany anyone who starts singing. He sometimes even sings notes that don't usually exist.

~ Kleeblii, the passion-eater. Kleeblii has huge hands and long muscular arms, which is how he propels himself about. He feeds off of passion and purpose, slowly sapping the energy from those he convinces to stay and lounge in his comfortable abode.

~ Korbesh. A small-statured cart driver who is very strong but whose cart is barely big enough to fit one person. So fast that he can get you where you're going on time, no matter the distance. The fare is one small kindness.

~ Mormnock the ponderer. A spirit who sits beside you as you watch the rain. It seeks to understand basic human impulses. For every question you answer satisfyingly it will also answer one for you. If you turn to look, Mormnock wisps away.

~ Suvrog, the honey shouter. Headless, its mouth takes up most of its body, Suvrog is searching for its invisible slippers which are extremely comfortable but which it is always misplacing. When Suvrog shouts, a bubble-wall of honey spreads out of its mouth and coats everything in front of it.

~ Velcava. A tall, genderless spirit who lives in the grain fields. They come out at night carrying their mahjong tiles, hoping to find someone who will play with them. They look fearsome but are very sweet. They try to stay in the shadows so as not to frighten people, but this often has the reverse effect.

~ A now-nameless spirit, the spirit of a particular festival day in a small abandoned village. This spirit can create memories of the modest festival for people to stroll through. The spirit is lonely and painfully nostalgic. With some help it could perhaps find new purpose.

And now here are some places that people might stumble across. Some of these places are visions of the spirit world (or worlds), others are locations inside this world where the spirit energy is particularly strong.

~ A gigantic bakery, so vast that you are no taller than the rolling pins. The baker is so large that their features are indiscernible. It smells warm and sweet and otherworldly.

~ An aviary for all of the poems that a particular great writer has recited aloud, poems so light and agile that they sprouted wings when they cleared their speaker's lips. There are various copies of some of the poems. All of the poems look like wind, but they chirp their stanzas merrily.

~ A room that sounds as if it's under a ballroom, with the creak of boards and the scuff of danced steps and the distant pull of bows on strings. But it's not.

~ A blossom temple, with giant stone petals that gradually, silently close up every night. Once they're closed they stay that way until morning. A quiet, out-of-the-way place where someone might accidentally give themselves a lot of time for introspection if they don't leave before nightfall.

- ~ A grove of fruit trees, each fruit a memory of you eating that fruit. Happy memories might make you wish to return to the past, memories of hardship might fill you with emotion at the rawness of those times.
- ~ A starlit swamp with really giant toads. The toads are mere animals and don't speak, but their croak sounds like "Who-ARE-you." The water may be crossed by jumping from head to half-submerged head, one placid toad to the next.
- ~ A post office where you can send scents or reactions or feelings by special delivery. The overworked clerks expect you to have all of your paperwork in place before approaching the counter, which seems to entail drawing a picture of the receiver and where to find them. One particular clerk may take pity on you, but for their own reasons.
- ~ House of Flickering Lanterns – the shadows from the lanterns in each room depict silhouettes of scenes that aren't taking place. Room to room, one of the shadows slowly grows up. The scenes appear to be various tragedies, though each reveals itself to be a joyous occasion if you watch it for long enough.
- ~ An old mill which rests on a long sweeping hill, where bad-hearted people are ground down into flies, and good-hearted people are ground down into pleasant dreams.
- ~ A restaurant inside of a turtle shell. The turtle is also still in residence, though some of the shell's sections have been replaced with stained glass. Undersea dining, or having one's restaurant pull itself across the sand of the beach.