How to Hack a Store Bought Prop: Zombie to Chupacabra

And Moth Man, Too!
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Maker Faire

Why Hack a Store Bought Prop?

- Sometimes, building a prop completely from scratch is not the best way to go, as it could take too much time or be too difficult.

- There are lots of inexpensive Halloween props out there, even at your local drug store, that can serve as the basis for a great prop.

- You can physically alter these props to improve them and fit better with your desired theme.

- You can even take animated props that make noise and hack into them to give your prop better sound, and to control it more easily for your haunted house.

- Using the "Chupacabra" & "Marvelous Moth Man" prop, we'll explain how to approach this.

First – Change How It Looks!

Chupacabra & Marvelous Moth Man

1. Thematic Ideas & the Starting Prop for "The Chupacabra/ Werewolf-Alien Hybrid"

- The first thing to do is to select your theme & what prop you need to support it.

- My favorite theme is "mad scientist lab" since I am a scientist in real life. Other themes might be a haunted cemetery, pirates, or our theme this year – the twisted carnival.

- For this year's haunted carnival freak show, I decided to combine my mad scientist human-animal hybrids with the carnival to create a Horrible Human Hybrid Freak Show.

- I wanted to make an odd werewolf hybrid that could also be the cryptid "Chupacabra".

- I started with a Spirit Halloween prop, the Grave Grabber Corpse Skull Animatronic, which animates both arms and the head:

  https://www.spirithalloween.com/product/2-ft-grave-grabber-corpse-skull-animatronics-decorations/39026.uts

Initial Prop

2. Decide how you want to "Redress" the Prop

- Many inexpensive props are not well painted or are very standard – typical spiders, ghosts, etc., and may not directly fit your theme.

- You can improve them by painting them, adding fur, feathers, or cloth, or adding other decorative parts.   Corpsing (see other poster) can also be done to an animated skeleton to make it a zombie creature.

- I wanted a weird werewolf/Chupacabra, so I started with a cheap werewolf mask and used image search on Google.

- Using acrylic paint, mask latex, a translucent green Easter egg, thermoplastic, witch fake fingers, fake fur, lollipop sticks, and hot glue, I changed the zombie head and arms into a Chupacabra.
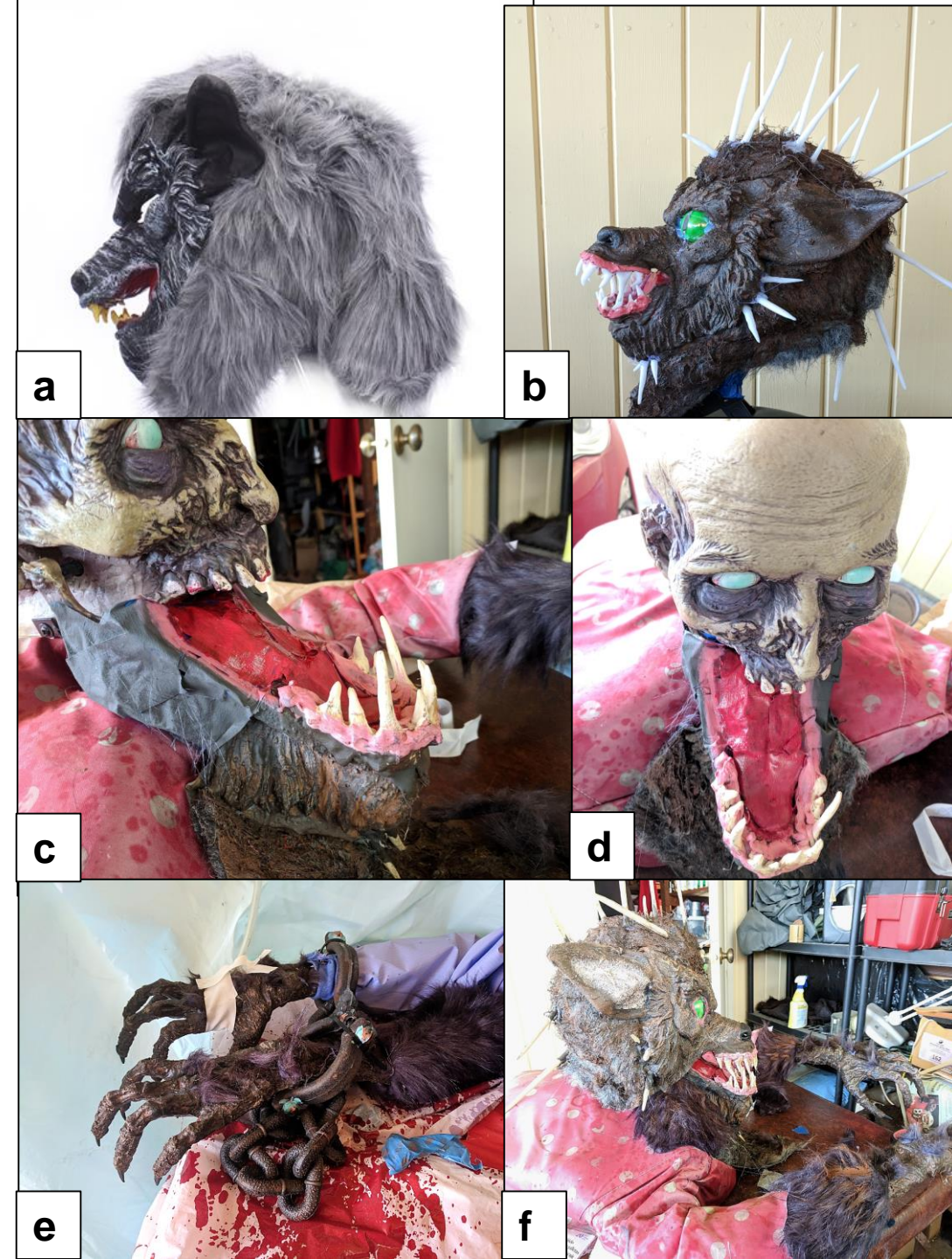
Original Mask & Materials

Image Inspirations, canine & alien

3. Hack the Prop - Zombie to Chupacabra!

- The mask (a) was painted with dark brown paint & latex to give the fur a mangy look & to match the legs. Green, glowy bug eyes were made from an Easter egg. Teeth and spikes were made from thermoplastic attached to the mask jaw & head. (b)

- The lower jaw was cut from the mask, & using lollipop sticks, tape, latex & paint, & fur, was fitted to extend the lower jaw so it could move with the prop (c & d)

- The zombie arms had cheap plastic finger/claws slipped over their fingers to lengthen them. They were painted dark brown, dry-brushed, and mangy tufts of fur added randomly. Cuffs of fur hid the top of the arms (e)

- For the final step, the top of the mask was slipped back over the zombie head. Ears were pinned back & the mask was fitted to the zombie head underneath with safety pins (f). The animatronic was then tested & adjustments made for free movement.

4. Set the Scene- Chupacabra Comes to Life!

- You should also put your prop in an appropriate setting. This was an exhibit for a scientific freak show – I put the Chupacabra on an operating table with an IV, dressed him in a patient gown, and built a lower body from scrub pants, corpsed werewolf legs, & bubble wrap (a).

- I then chained him down with a baby goat in front of him for "feeding", and an evil clown surgeon giving him an injection (b).

- Final testing was done of the animatronic to make sure the chains weren't too heavy or the costume didn't impede the movement.

a

b

5. Final Prop Appearance – Before & After Hacking

Initial Prop

Final Prop Close Up

Final Prop In Scene

Second Example – Marvelous Moth Man

- The "Moth Man" in the horrible human hybrids freak show room was based on the Spirit Cocooned Corpse animatronic, sold in 2018. This prop squirms and makes a moaning sound to simulate a spider victim that isn't dead yet. It is found on: https://www.spirithalloween.com/product/5-5-ft-cocooned-corpse-animatronics-decorations/160937.uts

- I was creating props for a "twisted carnival" for the California Academy of Sciences, and the "Moth Man" cryptid seemed a great exhibit that worked for the "Insectorium" room.

- It took very little work to change this to a "Moth Man" emerging from his cocoon.

Initial Prop

Marvelous Moth Man - Quick Hack

Initial Prop

Fake Tree

Close up head

Back with wings

Starting Cocoon Prop plus insect head from beat up giant fly, giant brown pipe cleaners for legs, moth wing costume, feathers for antenna, & fake/real leaves for a "cocoon".

Fake "tree" to hang cocoon from – made from my umbrella stand, a dead Toyon branch, and some fake plant material.

The Marvelous Moth Man!

Second Part – Hack the Sound & Animation!

This can be applied to any animated prop

1. Controlling Your Prop & Fitting it to Your Haunted House

- Some store bought props have sound and animation – but usually, these have issues.

- The sound track may be inappropriate or have poor speakers & the controller for the animation may not work well. I still remember a haunted house at home where I had to keep clapping at a Spirit prop to get it to actually move.

- While you could simply build your own or buy a high end animated prop, this is very expensive and/or may take a long time.

- By hacking the sound and electronics of a store bought prop, you can improve the quality of it and can make it more appropriate for your specific haunted house theme.

2. Decide Whether You Need a New Sound Track. If so, the Internet is Your Friend

- Frequently, the associated sound track isn't very good – either it has a lot of inappropriate "scary sounds" or the speakers are not good.

- It is easy to just get rid of that by snipping a speaker wire or turning down the sound, but then you have to fill in the void.

- While you could tape your own sound effects, this can get complicated. The internet has many free snippets of sound that can be stitched using free, open-source Audacity sound editing software.

- We used a combination of werewolf attack sounds/howls & human screams for the Chupacabra, as his original sound track was for a zombie.

- Also, even if your prop has a good sound track (such as for a barking dog skeleton), attaching it to a better speaker can make a huge difference. Moth man had good sound, so we just hooked him up to a speaker.

3. Sound & Software

- To find sounds for your home haunt, Google is very useful. Just search for the type of sound effect you have in mind, such as:
    - "graveyard sound effects"
    - "Halloween sounds"
    - "werewolf sounds"
- Then download or record them on your computer, and turn them into an MP3. You can use an iPod or laptop to give your home haunt a background soundtrack.
- Get Audacity – This is open-source sound editing software. It can capture audio that your computer is playing and save it. You can then edit the sound track to keep just what you want.

4. Hacking the controller & prop sound - the electronics of the hack.

- Many inexpensive animated props don't have a good way to control when the prop activates – either it goes off all the time, or it never seems to do it when you want it to.

- The demo pterodactyl on the table shows the basics, using an Arduino and a relay. The Arduino is running a simple timer program, based on the "Blink" sketch, found in the Arduino software.

- This can be applied to many props, as long as there is a way to connect to it – in our room, it controls the Chupacabra & Mothman movements & sound.

- You can snip the speaker wire and use the Arduino to play back your own MP3 from a sound board. Check Adafruit or Sparkfun for these modules.

Wrap Up

- As you can see, "hacking" a store bought prop by changing its physical look and by improving the sound and control can give you a unique prop to fit your theme.

- It also can save you time and money, compared to either buying a more expensive custom prop or making it from scratch – this is particularly important if you aren't highly experienced in prop making.

- Sometimes, it is also the only way to come up with a specific prop to meet your need, as many times Halloween vendors stick with limited types of props & this tends to follow limited trends each year.

- Finally, it will give you bragging rights to the most unique prop in your neighborhood!