ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: MAKING MYSTERIES

We've all been there.

The PCs are investigating the scene of a murder. But they don't search outside the house, so they never find the wolf tracks that transform into human footprints. They fail the Search check to find the hidden love letters, so they never realize both women were being courted by the same man. They find the broken crate reading DANNER'S MEATS, but rather than going back to check on the local butcher they spoke to earlier, they stake out the nearest meat processing plant instead.

Mysteries in RPGs? They're impossible. The players aren't Sherlock Holmes after all.

… or are they?

<p align="center">[TITLE SEQUENCE]</p>

Let's consider one scene from *A Study in Scarlet,* the first Sherlock Holmes story: Sherlock is investigating the scene of a murder. He discovers a small pile of ashes in the corner of the room. He studies them carefully and is able to conclude that they come from a Trichinopoly cigar.

How would this minor deduction play out in a roleplaying game?

- The players would need to declare that they're searching the room.
- They would need to succeed on the skill check to find the ashes.
- They would need to care enough about the ashes to examine them.
- They would need to succeed at a skill check to identify them.
- They would need to use that knowledge to reach the correct conclusion.

One clue. Five points of failure.

If they need this clue for the adventure to proceed – if they need to go to the nearest specialty cigar shop and start asking questions – then the clue serves as a **chokepoint**: Either the PCs understand the clue or they slam into the wall and the adventure comes screeching to a halt.

But it's actually much worse than that. Each clue is not just ONE chokepoint. As we've seen here it can be MULTIPLE chokepoints.

- The players can fail to look.
- The players can fail the check.
- The players can fail to deduce.

And of course there's not just one clue! To solve a mystery, the players must follow a **bread crumb trail** of clues – each clue with multiple points of failure pointing to another clue with multiple points of failure which points to another clue with multiple points of failure… And if the players fail to understand ANY of these clues, it will break the trail and wreck the adventure.

A popular piece of GM advice is that the players should never have to make a check to find an essential clue. The entire GUMSHOE system, designed by Robin D. Laws, for example, is built around this concept, and you can easily graft it onto almost any system. The idea is that you can solve the problem of missed clues by eliminating the mechanical check required to find them.

But remember that failing the check to find a clue is only ONE of the chokepoints: They need to **look** for the clue, they need to **find** the clue, and they need to **interpret** the clue.

You've eliminated one of these, but there are still two chokepoints left. You've improved the situation, but you haven't solved the problem.

Here's the good news: That's not how mysteries work. This type of simplistic "A leads to B leads to C leads to D" plotting isn't typical of the mystery genre.

For a very simple example of this, let's return to *A Study in Scarlet*:

[PICK UP BOOK]

>   WATSON: "That seems simple enough," said I; but how about the other man's height?"

>   HOLMES: "Why, the height of a man, in nine cases out of ten, can be told from the length of his stride. It is a simple calculation enough, though there is no use my boring you with figures. I had this fellow's stride both on the clay outside and on the dust within. Then I had a way of checking my calculation. When a man writes on a wall, his instinct leads him to write above the level of his own eyes. Now that writing was just over six feet from the ground. It was child's play."

This is just one small deduction in a much larger mystery, but Holmes has gathered several clues, studied them, and then distilled a conclusion out of them.

One conclusion: The man's height.

Three clues: Tracks outside. Tracks inside. Writing on the wall.

This is how mysteries actually work!

The detective slowly gathers a body of evidence until, finally, a conclusion emerges. In the famous words of Holmes himself, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

And what's left for us is the Three Clue Rule:

>   *For any conclusion you want the PCs to make, include at least three clues.*

Why three clues?

If you think of each clue as a plan, then with three clues you have both a plan and two backup plans. And since your plans as a GM *never* survive contact with the players, it's obvious why you want those backups.

In the best case scenario, the players will find all three clues! There's nothing wrong with that. They can use these clues to confirm their suspicions and reinforce their conclusions. Additional clues can also push them off incorrect conclusions: Remember the group that staked out the meat processing plant? If they find additional clues implicating the local butcher, that will help them realize their mistake and point them back in the right direction.

In a worst case scenario, they should be able to use at least one of the clues to reach the right conclusion and keep the adventure moving forward.

If three clues are good, why not more? Why not five clues? Or eight? Or twenty?

There's nothing wrong with more clues, but in my experience, three clues is the sweet spot. With three clues you have enough redundancy that the PCs almost NEVER completely miss all of the clues they

need. Three clues also offer enough complexity that the players will be able to combine information, confirm their hypotheses, and enjoy a positive reinforcement that makes the whole mystery feel tight and satisfying.

Speaking of combining information, though, one mistake that a lot of GMs make when using the Three Clue Rule for the first time is to mistake the Three Clue Rule for a kind of logic puzzle:

- This clue indicates that the killer was wearing a green sweater.
- This clue indicates that the killer was taller than 6 feet.
- This clue indicates that the killer had gray hair.

If you combine those together, you know that the only person with gray hair who was taller than 6 feet who was also wearing a green sweater was Peter!

This CAN work if each of those uniquely points to Peter: He was the only one with a green sweater. He was the only one taller than 6 feet. He was the only one with gray hair.

But if you NEED all three pieces of information (to eliminate the other people with green sweaters or gray hair or whatever), then those are three different CONCLUSIONS and each one needs three different clues pointing to it.

Here's the other tip: THERE ARE NO EXCEPTIONS TO THE THREE CLUE RULE.

"But Justin!" I hear you say. "This clue is *really* obvious. There is NO WAY that the players won't figure it out!"

In my experience, you're probably wrong.

A key thing to keep in mind is that you're the one designing the scenario: Any puzzle looks obvious when you already know the solution. So your judgment of what is and is not obvious is irreparably biased.

And even if you're right, so what? Having extra clues isn't going to cause any problems. Why not be safe rather than sorry?

And that's it.

That's the big secret to designing mystery scenarios: The Three Clue Rule. For any conclusion you want the PCs to reach, include at least three clues.

COROLLARIES

There are a few corollaries to the Three Clue Rule.

First, **BE PERMISSIVE WITH CLUE-FINDING**.

We think of mysteries as being defined by a lack of information: The detective DOESN'T know who the murderer is.

As Game Masters, this can give us a subconscious bias towards trying to hide information from the players: If it wasn't a clue we specifically planned to give them, then NO! They can't have it!

But mysteries are actually defined by the ACQUISITON of knowledge, so we need to do the exact opposite. We need to consciously choose to be permissive in clue-finding.

In other words, DEFAULT TO YES: If the players go looking for information, default to the idea that they find something useful, unless their method of investigation is completely misguided… like, say, staking out an unrelated meat processing plant.

To do this, you'll need to understand the underlying situation – Who is the werewolf? How did he kill the victim? Why did he kill them? When did he kill them? – and then figure out how the unexpected ideas of the players could point them towards these revelations.

The second corollary is **HAVE PROACTIVE CLUES.**

A.K.A. bash them on the head with it.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the players will work themselves into a dead-end. They don't have the right clues and they don't know where to look for more clues.

That's when it's useful to have a backup plan.

Raymond Chandler's advice for mystery authors in this situation was simple: "Have a guy with a gun walk through the door."

Or, more generally: The bad guy find out they're being investigated and they take some sort of action against the PCs.

Or, alternatively: The next part of the bad guy's plan happens. For example, they rob another bank. Or kill another victim.

The goal here is not just to have something happen. What you're really doing is giving the PCs a new avenue for obtaining a clue that they need: That's either a new crime scene for them to investigate. Or it's a matchbook in the thug's pocket that will point them at the bar they need to investigate.

Having a couple of these proactive interactions prepped as part of your mystery will make it super easy to get things back on track. Or just inject some excitement when it's most needed.

The third corollary is, **RED HERRINGS ARE OVERRATED**.

Red herrings are a classic element of mystery stories: The detective is convinced that Julia MUST be the murderer… but then it turns out that she can't be!

When it comes to designing an RPG scenario, however, red herrings are overrated. I'm not going to go so far as to say you should never use them, but I will go so far as to say that you should only use them with EXTREME caution.

There are two reasons for this.

First, getting the players to make the deductions they're supposed to make is hard enough. Throwing in a red herring (i.e., clues pointing to a false deduction) just makes it all the harder. This is particularly true because players, once they've reached a conclusion, will cling to it like a drowning man clutching a life preserver.

One of the ways to make a red herring work is to make sure that there's incontrovertible evidence refuting it. Here's the problem: Your concept of "incontrovertible evidence" may hold just as much water as your concept of "really obvious clue that cannot be missed"… and we've all seen where that ends up!

Second, there's really no need to include red herrings in your scenario design. The players are almost certainly going to take care of it for you: If you fill your adventure with nothing but clues pointing conclusively and decisively at the real killer, I can virtually guarantee you that the players will become suspicious of at least three other people before they figure out who's really behind it.

In other words, the big trick in designing a mystery is avoiding a car wreck. Throwing red herrings into the mix is like boozing the players before putting them behind the wheel.

CONCLUSION

The last thing I'll say about designing a mystery scenario is this: There are **TWO TYPES OF CLUES**.

There are clues that help you understand what's happening (like who the murderer is).

And there are clues that tell you where to find more clues. We can call these **leads**.

Both clues and leads should follow the Three Clue Rule, but they can do so in slightly different ways.

In order to get out of one scene and into the next, the players need to have enough **leads** pointing them to another scene where they can look for more clues and leads.

The clues that point to the solution of the mystery, on the other hand, can be spread out across multiple scenes. There might even be entire scenes (particularly early in the adventure) which include no such clues! The players need to follow several leads in order to get deep enough into the mystery to start uncovering the truth!

To design your mystery, start by making a **REVELATION LIST**. In this list you'll want to write down:

- All of the conclusions the PCs need to make to understand what's going on.
- All of the places the PCs can go to continue their investigation (and find more clues).

Under each of these revelations, list the three clues pointing at them.

At that point, somewhere between 80% and 100% of your prep work will be done.

Basically what this boils down to is simple: Plan multiple paths to success. Encourage player ingenuity. Give yourself a failsafe.

And remember the Three Clue Rule:

> *For any conclusion you want the PCs to reach, include at least three clues.*

If you liked this video, you can watch more of these videos… Nowhere. Because this is the first one. If you want to see more of these in the future, though, hit the Like and Subscribe buttons. You can also support the channel at my Patreon, which I'll link to in the Font of All-Knowledge below. If you just can't wait, you can find more of my GMing advice at the Alexandrian, which you'll also find in the Font.

Please leave a comment, too! I'd love to hear what topics you'd like to see videos on in the future.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see *you* at the table!

SCRIPT:
THE GOBLIN AMPERSAND

Imagine you're creating a dungeon.

Exactly what the dungeon is doesn't really matter. It could be

- A ruined castle
- A crystal cavern
- An ancient mine
- A floating fortress abandoned by storm giants

The important bit is that this dungeon is filled with goblins.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

So that's the scenario here: A dungeon filled with goblins. And the goblins have been causing problems (killing farmers' cows, raiding the local merchant caravans, or whatever) and the PCs need to track 'em back to their lair and make them stop causing problems.

In the fifty years since Dave Arneson created Castle Blackmoor and the modern roleplaying game, variations of this basic scenario have been created tens of thousands (or, more likely, millions) of times. Its pre-RPG antecedents can be traced back to stories like Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*.

And, as scenarios go, it's just fine. I am not here to cast any shade on this venerable classic.

But here's what I *do* recommend: Don't just fill that dungeon with goblins. Instead, pair the goblins with some other type of monster. Heck, you can literally just flip through the *Monster Manual* and grab one at random:

- Goblins and ogres
- Goblins and displacer beasts
- Goblins and half-dragons
- Goblins and owlbears

Just listening to me read through that list, I'm betting a bunch of ideas immediately started skittering across your imagination: You *knew* what a clan of goblins whose lives are intertwined with a pack of displacer beasts looked like, and it was completely different from the goblin tribe you imagined whose bloodlines descend from Arak, the Great Wyrm, for example.

The juxtaposition forced an act of creative closure: Your brain basically *had* to explain why these two monsters have been placed next to each other. In the process, it creates something unique and exciting. It's instinctual.

And, of course, there's no right answer: Are the goblins subservient to the ogres? Is there just one ogre who dominates the goblins through fear? Have goblin psychics enslaved the ogres? Are they at war, each trying to claim the dungeon from the other? Are the "ogres" actually goblins who have been alchemically altered to become more powerful warriors?

The spark of a single juxtaposition can ignite a limitless variety of ideas, and in that creative frisson you'll also likely find a wellspring of fresh and unique details that will make stocking your dungeon super easy.

I call this technique the **goblin ampersand** because it can trivially spice up even the most well-worn of fantasy tropes (e.g., goblins in a dungeon). But it's universally applicable. Any time you have a simple, straightforward adventure concept of X – goblin dungeon, wizard's tower, serial killer, vampire clan – see what happens if you arbitrarily pair it with a second element and force yourself to creatively close the gap.

(I say "force," but it wasn't exactly a hardship, was it?)

In addition to supercharging your own creativity during prep, the goblin ampersand is also great in actual play because the unique situations it creates will surprise the players and push them out of their comfort zone. It lends itself particularly well to the use of surprising scenario hooks (the PCs head to the lair expecting goblins, but they *aren't* expecting the displacer beasts or owlbears or whatever else you put on the other side of the ampersand), but regardless of when the PCs become aware of the full scope of the scenario, the ampersand keeps paying dividends. For example, the tactics required to fight goblins & displacer beasts are different than those required for fighting goblins & ogres or goblins & half-dragons, resulting in refreshing and interesting combat encounters.

So think about using the goblin ampersand in your next adventure.

And while you're thinking about that, grab your claymore and cleave that subscribe button! While you're down there, hit the like button and leave a comment, too. I know it's a cliché, but we're a brand new channel here at the Alexandrian and it makes a difference. More importantly, if you have a question about being a game master or running a roleplaying game, I want to know! This video came from one of your questions and I'd love to do more.

Don't forget to drop by the Font of All-Knowledge, too. I'll be leaving some useful links down there about surprising scenario hooks. There'll also be a link to my Patreon, where you can support new videos directly!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!

SCRIPT:
RUNNING THE SANDBOX

You want to run a sandbox campaign. You're excited about running a game where the players are empowered to choose or define what their next scenario is going to be. You prep your world, the players roll up their characters, and the first session begins: "You're in the village of Caer Monoc in the Realm of the Seventh Nexus. What do you want to do?"

And the entire table gives you a blank stare.

The players have no idea what to do.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

I've talked to a number of GMs who have experienced this. Sadly some of them have concluded that their players don't want or can't handle choosing their own goals. "My players," they say, "WANT to be led around by the nose."

I've also talked to players who have been on the opposite side of this experience. Some of them have reached the same conclusion: They didn't like the complete lack of direction in the sandbox and they'd much rather have a GM provide them with a plot than to sit in a featureless void trying to entertain themselves.

The problem, of course, is that there was nothing to DO in the village of Caer Monoc. And there wouldn't be, right? That's the players' job! It's a sandbox. The whole point of the sandbox is that the players are supposed to be deciding what to do! A scenario hook is the GM telling the players what they're going to do. Therefore, there are no scenario hooks in a sandbox!

What if I told you that this was COMPLETELY WRONG?

A good sandbox actually has scenario hooks hanging all over the place. The successful sandbox will not only be festooned with scenario hooks, it will also feature some form of default action that can be used to deliver more scenario hooks if the players find themselves bereft of interesting options.

For example, a classic wilderness exploration sandbox using a hexcrawl will usually feature a rumor table – which serves up some arbitrary number of scenario hooks to the PCs – and a default action if none of those rumors sound appealing: The PCs can pick a direction and start walking until they spot something interesting.

Remember that a sandbox campaign is one in which the players are empowered to define or CHOOSE what the next scenario will be. Yes, this can include them creating goals out of wholecloth – perhaps they decide to become Lord Mayor of Caer Monoc, defining that scenario for themselves. But it can also be choosing to explore Undermountain, which they can only do if they know Undermountain exists – if you give them a scenario hook for Undermountain.

Prepping this plethora of scenario hooks can be daunting for a GM who believes that every scenario hook needs to be linked to a distinct, unique plot. The trick of a sandbox, though, is that you don't prep plots: You prep situations.

And in a sandbox you'll be able to hang countless hooks off of every situation. You'll also discover how sandbox situations "stay alive" even after the PCs have interacted with them, rather than being completely chewed up and discarded like a plot.

For example, let's say you've got a dungeon a fair distance outside of Caer Monoc that's the remains of a Neo-Norskan temple complex. It's currently being occupied by a Bandit King who has forged together a loose alliance of humans, goblins, and ogres. He's also renting skeletons off a nearby necromancer.

In terms of scenario hooks, there's all kinds of stuff you can hang on this situation: Bandit raids are terrorizing local villages. A powerful magical artifact was stolen from a local caravan. There are old legends about the Neo-Norskan temple and what it contains. Because of the skeletons, there are false rumors that the necromancer lives there. Or that the necromancer has allied with the Bandit King.

And you can salt these scenario hooks into the campaign in any number of ways: Rumor tables. Lore recovered from other locations. Allies of the PCs who are now in need. A local merchant hiring guards to protect his caravans. Et cetera.

So one day the PCs grab one of these hooks and they go off and they kill the Bandit King and they take the magical artifact he was carrying.

Over and done with, right?

Only not really, because the guy who originally owned the magical artifact still wants it, and now the PCs are being attacked by bounty hunters attempting to recover the artifact. Meanwhile, they didn't wipe out all the bandits and the remaining goblins are renewing their raids under the leadership of the One-Eyed Ogre.

So the PCs go back to the Neo-Norskan temple and this time they wipe out all the bandits, permanently ending their threat to the region.

Except now the Necromancer sees a big, open dungeon complex filled with the discarded corpses the PCs have left in their wake, and so he moves in and animates the corpses as a skeletal army.

All this might sound like a lot of work, but because you prepped the whole thing as a situation to begin with you haven't needed to spend more than about 5 minutes "refreshing" this content between sessions: You're reusing the same maps and stat blocks over and over again. You spent a little time putting together new stat blocks for the bounty hunters when they showed up. And there was probably some light re-keying necessary for the changes the Necromancer made when he took over the temple.

But you didn't have to buy a whole new set of tools every single time. You just occasionally added a new tool. And sometimes removed a tool that the PCs had broken – like the Bandit King they killed.

This can be easier to visualize with a location like the Neo-Norskan temple. (Which is why I used it as an example.) But the same basic process holds true for, say, factions in an urban campaign.

For example, create a gang that's manufacturing and marketing a drug derived from blood that's been harvested from vampires and you should be able to use that toolkit to generate dozens of sessions of play – from the gang, the vampires, the drug, et cetera.

The other thing that happens in a sandbox campaign is synergy between the different elements of the sandbox: By holding onto the artifact that was stolen from them, the PCs make enemies of House Nobuzo. This unexpectedly earns them a patron in the form of House Erskine, unleashing a flurry of scenario hooks from the Feuding Noble Houses toolkit you designed. As the PCs get drawn into the world of the noble houses, they're approached by a minor house named Tannar.

Tannar is currently allied with House Nobuzo, but their daughter has been murdered by the Necromancer who has now stolen her body in order to transform her into his Corpse Bride. If the PCs can rescue their daughter from a fate literally worse than death, Tannar will break their alliance with House Nobuzo and pledge for House Erskine.

After that scenario has resolved itself, you might find that the players are now actively looking for minor houses that they can endear to their political causes by doing favors for them.

Not only is this an example of the players defining a scenario for themselves, they've organically created an entirely new default action for delivering scenario hooks in the form of those favors.

Once your sandbox toolkits start interacting with each other like this, you'll quickly discover that your sandbox is basically running itself.

Which should leave you with plenty of time to draw your dirk and backstab that subscribe button! Take a second to leave a comment, too, and let me know what other aspects of running a sandbox campaign you'd be interested in hearing about.

Don't forget to drop by the Font of All-Knowledge, too. I'll be leaving some links about prepping situations down there, along with a link to my Patreon, where you can support new videos and other GM advice!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!

SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: SPEAK WITH DEAD MYSTERIES

by Justin Alexander – March 10th, 2021

The PCs are members of Dweredell's Guard. They've been called in to investigate the scene of a bloody murder: A maester of the Guild has been killed in his counting house and a large sum of gold and dwarf-etched rubies have gone missing.

You've concocted a truly devilish mystery which will slowly draw the party into the darkest depths of the corruption which clutches at the heart of the city. But just a couple of minutes after the PCs show up, they cast a *speak with dead* spell and the victim quickly explains the whole scheme to them.

A murder mystery in D&D? It's impossible. The PCs will just cast a divination spell!

… but don't crumple up your campaign notes just yet.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

So you want to run a murder mystery in D&D, but you're frustrated because the *speak with dead* spell makes the whole thing pointless.

I've seen this sentiment a lot, but it's never really made any sense to me: The act of investigating a mystery is one by which you reveal that which is unknown. When we talk about a PC casting a *speak with dead* spell, we're describing a situation in which the players reveal that which is unknown – i.e., they investigate the mystery.

But then, oddly, we're supposed to conclude that they can't investigate the mystery because they've investigated the mystery.

Part of the problem here is something I talked about in my video on Mysteries in RPGs: There is a natural impulse when designing a mystery to hold back information. This makes sense because a mystery seems to be defined by a lack of information – the detective *doesn't* know who the murderer is. But in reality, a mystery is not about the PCs missing information; it's about the PCs *acquiring* information.

Let me put this another way.

Strip the magic out of this scenario. Imagine that you've designed a mystery scenario in which there's a witness to the crime. The PCs turn to this witness and say, "Who killed him?" and the witness says, "It was Bob."

And it turns out Bob is standing right there, so the PCs arrest him. End of mystery.

You wouldn't conclude from this that you can't do mystery scenarios just because people can talk to each other, right?

Is it just the fantastical nature of the *speak with dead* spell that causes the problem?

Well, imagine yourself as a Game Master in 1858 running a science fiction game with security cameras. You might say to yourself, "How am I supposed to a design a mystery scenario when there are cameras everywhere?! They can just see who did the crime!"

But modern criminals, of course, simply design their crimes to bypass or deceive the security cameras.

To this end, you may see people suggesting that you nerf the spell to one degree or another. (Corpses that arbitrarily refuse to answer questions, for example.) But nothing is more frustrating to a player than to have their abilities and their smart choices blocked because the GM has some preconceived notion of how they're *supposed* to be investigating the crime.

So your first and best answer is to simply reward the use of the spell: Casting *speak with dead* on the corpse should give the PCs a meaningful clue. The clue, of course, does not have to be – and almost certainly shouldn't be – the whole solution to the mystery.

It's likely to be a lead: The victim didn't know the killer, but he recognized the badge they were wearing or the weapon they used. Or they didn't see the killer at all, but they do have a list of people they're pretty sure wanted to kill them and they'd love to share that with the investigators from beyond the grave.

People in the game world know that *speak with dead* spells exist, so it makes sense that they'll plan their murders to take those spells into account: They'll find ways to conceal their identity. They'll strike from a distance. Or use poison. They may even find ways to *use* the spell to frame other people. For example, imagine a murder scenario where the victim thinks one of the PCs actually IS the murderer because the perpetrator used a *polymorph* spell!

But the precautions the bad guys take to thwart the spell can become clues in and of themselves. For example, who has access to a *polymorph* spell? What poison was used and where could it have been acquired? And those clues are the reward that the PCs receive for using their ability.

If you do decide to nerf the spell, though, try to do so in a way that makes the scenario more interesting: For example, the spell doesn't work on corpses that have been made undead, so the killer turned the victim into a wight. The PCs will have to kill the wight before they can investigate the crime scene. Or the killers have hidden the corpse's head and part of the investigation becomes finding it so that they can cast the spell.

These approaches often turn the use of the spell itself into the reward: You killed the wight, and that gives you the opportunity to cast your spell and have a moment of awesome. Rather than being told that they can't use their cool ability, the player is instead having a spotlight shone on how important it is.

This same basic advice can generally be applied to other divination spells, too.

You can cast a divination spell yourself by hitting the Subscribe button: It will magically alert you every time a new video is posted. Your sixth sense is probably also telling you that I'm about to say you should like the video and leave a comment, too.

If you haven't seen it already, check out my video about running mystery scenarios in RPGs for more information about designing clues, building revelation lists, and the secrets of the Three Clue Rule. You can also check out the Font of All-Knowledge down below, where you'll find some links to other tips for designing mystery scenarios. There'll also be a link to my Patreon, where you can help support new videos in the future!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!

SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: SURPRISING SCENARIO HOOKS

by Justin Alexander – March 17th, 2021

Let's talk about scenario hooks.

These can also be known as plot hooks, but the term "plot" can have a lot of baggage when it comes to roleplaying games. The analogy to the various plot hooks or narrative hooks found in other mediums like film, novels, and poetry are also probably more confusing than they are illuminating.

So, over the years, I've come to prefer the term scenario hook when talking about RPG adventure design.

Now, this is Advanced Gamemastery, so you probably already know what a scenario hook is. But let's take a moment to really nail it down, because I've seen a number of lists of RPG scenario hooks recently that don't actually have any scenario hooks in them.

For example, let's say you have a scenario featuring a pack of werewolves that have taken up residence in a ruined castle a few miles away from a small village.

That is a not a scenario hook.

It is your scenario concept.

The scenario hook is how the player characters get involved with your scenario. It's the thing that hooks them and pulls them in.

And scenario hooks can be a lot more surprising than you think.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

Okay, we have a pack of werewolves in a ruined castle near a small village.

What scenario hook can we use to get the PCs involved in this scenario?

Perhaps the villagers could ask them for help, or a local burgher could offer to pay them to get rid of the werewolves. This is an example of **patronage**; an NPC is requesting that something specific be done.

Or maybe the PCs could hear rumors in the local tavern about the spate of recent werewolf attacks, or they see bounty notices posted by the local sheriff. This is an example of an **offer**; the GM is simply offering information and it's up to the PCs to determine what they want to do with that information, if anything.

Alternatively, as the PCs ride past the ruined castle, the werewolves could come racing out to attack them. Or, similarly, the PCs could hear screams of terror emanating from a farmhouse. This is a **confrontation**; the scenario is directly encountered by the PCs.

In each case, the PCs generally come away with a basic understanding of the situation and an understanding of what action they're expected to take: There are werewolves in the ruined castle and they need to get rid of them.

Now, to be clear, with some hooks they might only know that there are werewolves in the area and need to do some investigation to identify the ruined castle as their den, but that still counts as a general understanding of the situation.

Similarly, it's possible, of course, for the PCs to choose a course of action that doesn't involve getting rid of the werewolves. But when you design a scenario with slavering werewolves who are killing innocent people, it's fairly clear what the *expected* decision will be.

However, these are not a necessary characteristics of a scenario hook. You can twist the scenario hook by misleading the PCs about either the situation or the expected course of action or both.

For example, you might mislead them about the **nature of the threat**.

The villagers, discovering dismembered limbs and unfamiliar with lycanthropic activity, think that the attacks signal a return of the tribe of cannibalistic ogres who plagued the region a generation ago. That's what they tell the PCs, who will be unpleasantly surprised – and perhaps wish they had stocked up on silvered weapons! – when they head out to the ruined castle and discover the truth.

You might also mislead the PCs about the **motives** of the various NPCs involved. For example, it turns out that the werewolves in the ruined castle have actually come to the area to END the werewolf attacks by hunting down their former packmate who's suffering from silvered rabies.

Or when the werewolves come rushing out of the castle towards the PCs, it's because they've just escaped from the hidden torture dungeons of the local baron, who is transforming innocent villagers into werewolves to build a powerful, supernatural army. **Reversing good guys and bad guys** like this is an extreme example of the principle here.

When NPCs are involved in delivering the misleading scenario hooks, it can be useful to distinguish between **NPCs who are deceiving the PCs** and **NPCs who are being deceived** (or are mistaken) about the situation: If the villagers know that the werewolves are just peaceful nature-lovers and they're lying to the PCs so that the PCs will eliminate the werewolves and the villagers can claim the werewolf clan's ancestral property in the valley, that's a very different story from the villagers honestly believing that the werewolves are guilty of horrible crimes.

Once you start twisting your scenario hooks like this, the possibilities are basically endless. And can obviously vary a lot depending on the specific details of the scenario in question.

The reason to use a misleading scenario hook is that it creates a **reversal**: The players enter the scenario thinking that it's one thing, and when they discover the truth the entire scenario changes into something new.

Delivering a strong reversal like this can turn even an otherwise pedestrian scenario into a truly memorable one.

Of course, if every single scenario hook is misleading the PCs, they'll stop being surprised when things go awry. So you'll still want to use some scenario hooks that are relatively straightforward. But, honestly, you can get away with a lot more surprising scenario hooks than you might think, as long as you vary the types of twists that are being used.

As the PCs learn that the scenario hooks they're getting may not be giving them a complete understanding of the situation, they may start investigating things to figure out what's really going on.

This is great!

Thoughtful interaction and critical engagement with the scenario? That's pure gold! There are GMs who go their entire lives wishing their players would do that!

These follow-up inquiries also provide a natural opportunity for you to give the PCs additional scenario hooks tied to the scenario.

This actually touches on another common misunderstanding about scenario hooks: The idea that each scenario only has one scenario hook pointing at it. This is THE hook for this adventure.

In reality, you can have LOTS of scenario hooks pointing at the same scenario. In other words, there can be lots of different reasons that PCs might be interested in a situation.

And there arguably SHOULD be, for the same reason that the Three Clue Rule is a good idea when designing mystery scenarios. Ideally, you want each of these scenario hooks to be distinct: Coming from different sources. Including different (although probably overlapping) information about what's going on. Being driven by different motives.

It's less interesting for three different villagers to all follow the same basic script in asking the PCs to help them fight the werewolves. It's more interesting if the PCs see werewolf tracks in the forest and then a villager asks them for help and then they spot a poster offering to pay a bounty for werewolf pelts.

Or the same things in any other order.

A quick shortcut here is to look at the three types of scenario hooks we discussed earlier – patronage, offers, and confrontations – and include one scenario hook of each type for the scenario.

Having multiple scenario hooks like this adds depth to the world. It also empowers the players, inherently creating a situation in which they get to make a meaningful choice about how and why they're engaging a given scenario.

When some or all of these scenario hooks are misleading – particularly if they are misleading in interesting and different ways – it not only becomes easier to vary the hooks, it immediately creates a sense of mystery that will tantalize the players and encourage them to engage with the scenario in order to figure out what the heck is going on.

The other form of misleading scenario hook is one that is only "misleading" from a metagame perspective: This "bait hook" can be completely legitimate from the perspective of the game world, but the reason the GM includes it is to put the PCs in a position where they can be confronted by the TRUE scenario.

For example, they might be hired to guard a package of diamonds that's being delivered to a bank vault. But the only reason that job exists (and it might even go off without a hitch) is to put the PCs in the bank when the bank robbers show up.

On rare occasions, bait hooks like this can also be diegetic when an NPC gives the PCs a false job offer in order to maneuver them into a location or situation for an ulterior purpose. This plot conceit is quite common in pulp fiction, for example, when detectives are hired to keep a person or location under observation so that they can be framed for a crime.

Speaking of scenario hooks, I've hidden several of them down in the Font of All-Knowledge: A collection of links that will lead you to more information about using and designing cool hooks for your own adventures.

While you're down there, make sure to hit the Like and Subscribe buttons. And leave a comment about the best scenario hook you ever saw in a game!

All of that is just the bait book, though: The REAL adventure is the link to my Patreon, where you can join the team that makes everything at the Alexandrian possible!

Good gaming, this is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table.

SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: RUNNING THE SANDBOX – ICEWIND DALE

by Justin Alexander – March 24th, 2021

Auril the Frostmaiden has claimed Icewind Dale, laying her enchantment upon it: a terrible curse of perpetual winter. The denizens of Ten-Towns – ten settlements clustered around the lakes at the center of the Dale, nestled between the Spine of the World and the Great Glacier – grow increasingly desperate for a spring which never comes. When the PCs arrive in this gloom-riven land, they will discover that the cold of the wintry north has leeched into the hearts of men. Surrounded by darkness, can they be the flame that rekindles the light of hope?

The opening chapters of *Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden* are designed as a sandbox. And I mean a true sandbox. The term is often abused to just mean any non-linear scenario, but *Icewind Dale* is the real deal: A campaign in which the players are empowered to either choose or define what their next scenario is going to be.

Now, there are a couple of caveats to this.

First, the explanation of how the campaign is supposed to be run is a little inadequate and the book's advice on best practices can be inconsistent. As a result, I've seen a lot of Dungeon Masters who are confused about how the *Rime* is supposed to work.

Second, although the opening of the campaign flirts with being a sandbox, around sixth or seventh level, *Rime of the Frostmaiden* abruptly collapses back into a linear plot.

Which is unfortunate because a bonafide sandbox is unusual (if not unique) among D&D campaigns, and the town-based structure used by *Icewind Dale* is intriguing and ripe with possibility.

Let's take a closer look.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

There are going to be some significant spoilers for *Rime of Frostmaiden* in this video. So if you don't want to be spoiled, you should turn back now! If you do have a copy of the book, you may want to grab it so that you can follow along, but it's not necessary.

Icewind Dale is a fantastic opportunity to see what a sandbox campaign looks like in actual play. Here's how it works:

There are ten towns in Ten-Towns. Each one has a quest associated with it, and these are almost universally triggered proactively – if the PCs go to the town, they're supposed to get the quest associated with that town.

There is a Stage 1 rumor table on page 18 of the book. Each rumor on this table points at one of the town-associated quests.

There is also a Stage 2 rumor table, referred to as "tall tales" on page 102, which is unlocked at either third or fourth level. These rumors point to higher level quests located in the wilderness around Ten-Towns.

Finally, there are two Starting Quests. These are to be given to the PCs at the beginning of the campaign, and each is designed to motivate the PCs to travel to other towns.

For example, the Cold-Hearted Killer starting quest instructs the Dungeon Master to:

First, randomly choose one of the towns to be the starting town for the campaign and also where the PCs get the Cold-Hearted Killer scenario hook to track down a serial killer targeting victims throughout Ten-Towns.

Second, randomly choose a different town, which will be where the serial killer can be found.

Although not explicitly stated in the book (which seems to have caused some confusion), the intention here is fairly clear: In following the starting quest, the PCs will go to another town and investigate to see if, for example, the serial killer is there. In that town they'll scoop up the quest associated with that town and, in many cases, additional rumors pointing to quests in other towns.

This is essentially the default action of the campaign: If in doubt, the PCs should go to a town and look for their starting quest objective.

The final element here is how the campaign handles milestone advancement: The characters will advance to second level after completing their first quest, then third level after three quests, then fourth level after five quests.

Now, let's talk about my quibbles with this structure.

First, the book tells the DM to only use one of the starting quests. I disagree. You should use both starting quests.

Partly this is logistically superior, because each starting quest will end in a random town. Having both quests in play makes it less likely for the PCs to prematurely exhaust their starting quests after just one town.

But it's also just a superior experience: Having both quests in hand will deepen the default interactions with each community. It will also break the players of the expectation that they'll be doing a linear set of assigned tasks.

So my recommendation is to give one starting quest in the first town visited and the other starting quest in the second town visited. This will create a motivation for the PCs to potentially backtrack to the first town — either immediately or at some later time — to investigate the second starting quest there.

My second quibble is how the book handles rumor tables. Its advice is inconsistent, but there are several places where you're told to dole them out one at a time.

The problem is that the point of a rumor table in a sandbox is generally to give the group LOTS of rumors – i.e., scenario hooks – that they can then choose between and prioritize. There's a much longer discussion to be had here, but what I would briefly recommend is:

Delivering one or two rumors whenever the PCs investigate a town for their starting quests. In other words, tie the rumors into the default action of the campaign.

Second, deliver one or two rumors any time they're hanging out in a tavern.

Finally, opportunistically drop rumors as part of miscellaneous conversations with NPCs in Ten-Towns. People gossip about current events, so rumor tables almost always make for good topics of casual chat.

You also want to generally make sure that the rumors come from an action that the PCs are taking, like chatting in a tavern or canvassing a town for information. You don't want to just arbitrarily say, "Lo! I have come from on high to deliver unto you a rumor!"

I'd probably also discard the distinction between Stage 1 and Stage 2 rumors. It's not strictly necessary, particularly for players who have experience with sandbox play. If your players are heavily conditioned to linear play, however – and might heedlessly plunge into danger they're not ready to handle – you might want to start by dropping non-actionable versions of the Stage 2 rumors.

For example, one of the Stage 2 rumors points the PCs to the Jarlmoot – a hill where the frost giant leaders once met to settle disputes.

What you could do at lower levels is just have an NPC mention the old jarlmoots of the frost giants without telling the PCs where they can find the hill.

Maybe the PCs will go hunting specifically for that information, or maybe the foreshadowing just pays off later when they learn the location through another rumor drop. Either way, the depth of the experience makes the game world feel more real and meaningful to the players.

All right, so what does this all look like in actual play?

Let's simulate a campaign (with some actual dice rolls for stuff like the campaign's starting town) and take a look.

For the purposes of this simulated campaign, we're going to mostly ignore the players being able to define their own scenarios. In actual play, this will almost certainly happen: Ten-Towns is enough of a living environment that the players can, for example, decide to become caravan guards from Kelvin's Cairn. Or re-open an abandoned inn. Or buy mead in one town to sell at a high price in another town where the taverns are running dry.

But what we're going to primarily focus on here is just the baseline play that arises directly out of the sandbox structures in the campaign.

[ROLL DICE]

I've randomly determined that our initial starting quest will be the Cold-Hearted Killer.

A dwarf named Hlin Trollbane believes she's identified the serial killer who's been plaguing Ten-Towns – it's a man named Sephek who's travelling with Torg's merchant caravan.

She approaches the PCs in a tavern and asks them to track the killer down.

[ROLL DICE]

Our starting town is Caer-Konig.

The quest in Caer-Konig sees the PCs stumble across Speaker Torvus, the dragonborn leader of the town who is drunkenly patrolling the streets in a vain attempt to capture dwarven thieves who have been sneaking into town. This will eventually lead them to a nearby Duergar Outpost, which can be found on page 47 of the book.

Right off the bat here, my instinct is to have the PCs enter Caer-Konig, encounter the drunken Speaker, and get the Duergar Outpost quest. When they get back to town (having leveled up to second level), Hlin says, "I'm impressed. I think you might be able to help me bring a little more justice to this cold-blighted Dale."

In other words, the success of the first quest can diegetically justify Hlin approaching them for the bigger job.

I now roll to see which town Sephek will be found in.

[ROLL DICE]

Easthaven.

Alternatively, if you wanted to more strictly adhere to the published structure and have the PCs receive the starting quest first, then our campaign would start in the Hook, Line, and Sinker tavern, described on page 46, where Hlin hires them to kill the serial killer. They leave the tavern and immediately stumble over Speaker Torvus, who leads them to the Northern Light tavern on the other side of town and starts the Duergar Outpost quest.

Either way, they head down the road and pass through Caer-Dineval.

Caer-Dineval is one of the towns without a proactive quest, so the PCs could just pass right through without getting one. But they're looking for the serial killer, right? So they're going to head to the local tavern, which is the Uphill Climb on page 38, and start asking questions.

The adventure tells us that Roark, the proprietor of the Uphill Climb, won't explicitly tell the PCs what's going on in town (most likely out of fear), but he WILL try to point them at the caer – or castle – in the hope that they'll get involved.

So when they start asking questions, he'll say something like, "If any caravan was looking for permission to set up here, they'd inquire with the Speaker up at the caer."

So the PCs head up there and knock on the door.

The keep has been secretly invaded by a cult called the Knights of the Black Swords that, among other things, wants to stop the duergar invasion of Ten-Towns. They've killed the guards, taken the Speaker hostage, and are ruling the town in his name. The way this quest works is that the PCs can bust up the cult and rescue the Speaker, OR they can end up allying with the cult.

The cult has some divine guidance which, if the PCs have taken any anti-duergar actions, will have informed the cult that the PCs can be useful allies and that they should go out of their way to accommodate them.

So if the PCs did the Duergar Outpost quest, then the likely outcome here is that the Black Swords form an alliance with them. "Your coming has been foretold!"

That's a second quest complete.

Alternatively, if the PCs heard about the duergar thieves and said, "Doesn't seem like our problem," or if they tried to follow the duergar tracks, got lost, and never found the outpost, then when they go up to the caer to ask questions about Torg's caravan, they're simply told, "Nope, no Sephek here," and turned away.

As the PCs head back down the hill from the caer, they meet Dannika Graysteel, who's heading back from another disappointing attempt to find a type of fairy called a chwinga. This kicks off Nature Spirits, the Second Starting Quest, when Dannika asks them to look for chwingas in the other towns of Ten-Towns.

Now the PCs head down the road to where it intersects the Eastway.

The choice of which way to go is now basically random. So, for the sake of argument, let's roll a die.

[ROLL DICE]

Looks like our hypothetical group is heading to Good Mead.

As they approach Good Mead, they encounter a trapper. They ask him about chwingas…

[ROLL DICE]

…but he shakes his head. He hasn't seen any chwingas around here. There's a 25% chance each town has chwingas and I've rolled a 47 for Good Mead, so no chwingas here.

But the trapper does tell them he just discovered five dead bodies out on the tundra. This is the quest hook for the Verbeeg Lair, which is on page 71.

These players, however, decide NOT to follow the trail from the dead bodies back to the verbeeg's lair. Tackling a giant all by themselves just sounds too tough. But they want to do the right thing, so they gather up the bodies and take them into Good Mead for a proper burial.

In Good Mead they hear that the verbeeg has stolen the town's mead supply and killed the Speaker, threatening to ruin the town's economy. This mostly just confirms that the giant is going to be too tough for them to handle, so most of the PCs think it would be best to push on.

One of the PCs, however, decides to rally the townspeople: Alone they can't stop the verbeeg menace, but together they can triumph!

The stat block for Good Mead on page 72 conveniently lists what the local militia can muster: Up to twenty soldiers and two veterans.

[ROLL DICE]

So the PCs make some solid Charisma checks and they rally the two veterans and ten of the soldiers to go giant-hunting. If they'd rolled better, they could have perhaps gotten ALL the soldiers to go with them.

On the way to the verbeeg lair, I frame a couple of scenes where the PCs are chatting with other members of the expedition. I use the opportunity to introduce Shandar Froth and Olivessa Untapoor, two wealthy merchants from Good Mead who are described on page 78. I also improvise a couple of new NPCs representing the common folk of Good Mead.

During this small talk, the PCs also pick up two more rumors.

[ROLL DICE TWICE]

Dwarves are having trouble bringing their goods to Bryn Shander due to yeti attacks. And Dougan's Hole, down the road, is being plagued by a couple of dire wolves or awakened wolves or polar wolves or werewolves…

Well, it really depends on who you ask and how tall the tale has gotten.

Note that I'm deliberately inserting uncertainty and/or broader context into these rumors compared to the default text provided in the adventure. We talked about this technique in our video on Surprising Scenario Hooks.

The giant-hunting expedition is a huge success. Maybe one of the group's new NPC friends gets killed (a little pathos never hurt anybody), but that's another quest complete, so the PCs are now 3rd level.

They return to Good Mead. While everyone is celebrating (and mourning), Olivessa Untapoor approaches them: Good Mead needs a new speaker. A strong speaker. Shandar Froth thinks he should do it, but he's a jackass. People are asking Olivessa to run against him, but she really doesn't want the position. She thinks that one of the PCs should stand for the election.

Now, if the PCs want this, it could totally happen!

They're the heroes of the hour. They've got the support of a major civic leader. On page 78 there's a whole thing where Shandar, no matter who he's running against, pulls some shenanigans during the elections, but the PC candidate can probably end up on top.

This would, of course, change the entire course of the campaign! Which is great! As the DM you'd need to come up with some civic challenges for the new Speaker (and the other PCs as their closest advisors), but you don't need to completely abandon the existing toybox while you're doing this.

For example, you can look at the existing rumor tables and think about how to re-contextualize them to the PCs' current circumstance.

Here's one: "In Lonelywood, beware the dreaded white moose! It attacks loggers and trappers on sight, and the town's best hunters can't seem to catch or kill the beast. They could probably use some help."

We could easily imagine Speaker Huddle of Lonelywood sending a diplomatic mission to the newly ensconced Speaker of Good Mead: Having heard the success they've had with the verbeeg raider, she's hoping they can send help to Lonelywood. In exchange, she promises to give Good Mead a discounted rate on Lonelywood's lumber.

Or maybe it's not Speaker Huddle. Maybe local loggers in Lonelywood have lost confidence in her and have sent their people to extend a similar offer to the PCs. Maybe the PCs will end up conspiring with the loggers to oust Speaker Huddle and another PC ends up taking HER place! Desperate times call for strong men, right?

So maybe this whole things ends with one of the PCs rising up to become the new King of Ten-Towns… but at what cost to their soul? And maybe this is what the devil supporting the Knights of the Black Sword wanted to have happen all along!

However this might turn out, we've clearly drifted away from the baseline structure of *Rime of the Frostmaiden*. So, for the sake of argument, let's say this doesn't happen: Maybe the PCs aren't interested. Or maybe one of the PCs gets elected Speaker, but the others decide to continue adventuring without them. The player of the PC who became the Speaker, of course, would create a new character. Or maybe pick up one of the NPCs who fought by their side against the verbeeg.

In any case, they continue down the road to Dougan's Hole. Here we have a scenario hook in which the white wolves plaguing the town meet the PCs on the road and try to lure them back to their lair on page 54. But the PCs, having heard about them in Good Mead, know not to trust them. They kill one of the wolves and, as described in the book, the other one runs away.

Reaching Dougan's Hole they're told people have been kidnapped by the wolves, so they track the wolf that escaped, rescue the prisoners, and complete another quest. They also hear that there are adventurers in Targos planning an expedition to Kelvin's Cairn.

But still no Sephek. And

[ROLL DICE]

no chwingas, either. So they head back up towards the Eastway. They come back to the intersection and need to choose between Bryn Shander (where they've got a quest rumor) and Easthaven (where the killer has been known to operate).

It's still a toss-up in my opinion. Players could rationalize either choice pretty easily. They could even decide to head all the way back to Caer-Konig to see if there's any chwingas there, but that seems like a marginal possibility to me. Let's roll randomly.

[ROLL DICE]

It looks like this hypothetical group is heading to Bryn Shander.

As they enter town, they're approached by three dwarves who would like their help recovering a sled shipment of iron that they had to abandon during a yeti attack. (This is described on page 34.)

The PCs do that, completing their fifth quest and leveling up to fourth level. They also pick up two more rumors at the Northlook Inn on page 33: Kobolds have invaded the gem mines of Termalaine. And people are also talking about how no one has seen the town speaker of Caer-Dineval for weeks now…

Huh. That's weird, actually. The people in the castle were very nice, but now that you mention it, we never actually SAW the Speaker, did we?

At this point, I'm not sure what our hypothetical group will do next. Lots of options, though.

Maybe they're running low on coin and decide rescuing a gem mine from kobolds in Termalaine sounds profitable.

Or they might double back to Caer-Dineval to check out what's really going on with their "allies."

Or try to backtrack the goblins who stole the dwarves' iron.

Before leaving Bryn Shander, they might stop by the local shrine to Amaunator and speak to a gnome tinkerer on page 33 who asks them to check in on his friend who lives in an abandoned cabin north of Lonelywood.

Or they could just continue down the road to Targos, searching for fairies and serial killers as they go.

There are a couple key things to note here.

First, looking over these events, you can see how easy it would be to end up with a completely different campaign. A different starting town; a different decision by the PCs; a different random die roll; a different moment of creative inspiration and everything is transformed.

This is not just interesting and exciting, it's also EMPOWERING. The players can feel the difference, and it will be intoxicating.

Second, the level of emergent complexity that we see here – the event horizon beyond which you can have no clear vision of what the campaign will become – is inherent to true sandbox play. Do the PCs become political leaders? Run a tavern? Become security guards for a logging consortium? Start a trading company? Mount archaeological expeditions to explore giant ruins?

There's no way to know and only one way to find out!

This is why *Rime of the Frostmaiden* collapsing the sandbox of the early levels into a more-or-less linear plot at the middle levels is rather disappointing. At the very point where the limitless potential of the sandbox begins to truly explode, the book instead says, "Okay. That was nice. But let's lock it down."

If nothing else, I hope you've seen here that there's nothing magical or even particularly difficult about running a sandbox campaign: After the sandbox has been filled with a selection of simple toys (some NPCs, some dungeons, some bad guys), all you have to do is observe a fairly simple procedure and follow the players' lead, responding to their actions by picking up the appropriate (or most convenient) toys and actively playing with them.

What you discover together will be a campaign that you will never forget.

If you'd like to go with me on my next expedition, make sure to track down the Subscribe button in the Font of All-Knowledge.

If you forage around a little bit down there, you'll also find some links to more tips and tools for running *Rime of the Frostmaiden*. If you haven't seen them already, you should also check out my videos on Running the Sandbox and Surprising Scenario Hooks.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!

SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: SPECTACULAR SIDEKICKS

by Justin Alexander – April 2nd, 2021

In the *Infinity* roleplaying game I designed for Modiphius Entertainment, which takes place in a space opera future, geists are pseudo-AIs who act as companions and assistants. They're also referred to as domotic partners, domotica, hantu, QPAs, virtual personal guides, and a wide variety of cute nicknames.

Basically everyone in the Human Sphere has one. In fact, most people have had the same geist since they were very young children. Over time, a geist learns your habits and preferences, becoming so familiar with you that they can seamlessly predict what you want (sometimes before you even realize it yourself). They become invisible extensions of their partner's will. Their persistent presence and collaboration in every facet of a person's life is a transformative experience. Life without your geist – without your oldest and most constant friend – would be difficult for most people to imagine.

Now you're the Game Master. You have five players at the table. And every single one of them has a companion character who is with them in every single scene. These characters should be constantly interacting with, at the very least, their companion, and more likely everyone in the group.

How do you juggle that many balls? How do you keep them in the air? How do you make all of those companions memorable characters who are actively participating in every moment of the game without losing your mind or upstaging your players?

The answer?

You don't.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

This is a technique that works equally well for familiars, hirelings, AI assistants, golems, and even the demon who possessed you and now lurks as a whisper trapped in your hippocampus.

When thinking about how to handle companion characters, we tend to think of our options as a binary choice: Either the PC's player can control their companion. Or the Game Master can control them.

The disadvantage of having the GM do it is the cognitive load. They're already juggling a lot of other stuff, and it's easy for the companion character to slip through the cracks. It can also be tough for the GM to roleplay the companion without the other players assuming that they're speaking with the Voice of the GM.

For example, if the companion suggests in character that they'd like to check out the Old Mine, the other players may assume that this is actually the Game Master telling them out of character that this is what they NEED to do.

The result is that the companion characters can become bland non-entities: Incapable of truly participating in scenes like fully realized individuals, and yet technically omnipresent in the campaign. Always there, but never participating.

On the other hand, the disadvantage of having the player play their own companion is that the PC the companion is most likely to interact with is, in fact, the player's character. And this means that the player will need to frequently talk to themselves, and this is NOT an easy thing to do!

Because it's not easy, it generally won't happen. And because it's not happening, the result, once again, is that the companion becomes a flat non-entity. A character more in theory than in practice.

And this is too bad!

Because when these companion characters are truly brought to life – when they're genuinely part of the world with fully developed personalities capable of forging meaningful relationships – a lot of really amazing stuff can happen in play: Moments of sweetness and sorrow; laughter and tragedy; love and despair; sacrifice and friendship.

These companions are not the protagonists of your game – those are the PCs, of course. And this is great. In their role as secondary characters, companions have a unique utility and offer a distinct window into the game world and also an insight into the relationship of the protagonists to the game world.

So how can we make this happen in actual play?

Well, the somewhat useless answer is to, you know, just… get better. Its not impossible as a GM to develop the skills necessary to run multiple NPCs in every scene while simultaneously building trust with your players so that they implicitly understand those NPCs are not speaking with the voice of your authority.

The hard truth, though, is that there's no simple trick or shortcut to achieving that level of skill. It just takes lots and lots and lots of practice. And, in my experience, even once you have these skills, implementing them in this way is nevertheless a trade-off: The limited mental resources you are devoting to running those companions are not available to juggle other aspects of the campaign that are also important and add value.

So what's the other solution?

The key is to realize that what we perceived as a binary choice is, in fact, a false dilemma.

If we don't want the Game Master running the companion and we don't want the player playing their own companion and needing to talk to themselves, who is available to play the companion?

The answer, of course, is one of the other players at the table.

In the case of *Infinity*, where every single PC has their own geist, I simply established that your character's geist is always being played by the player to your left. Which, of course, means that you're playing the geist of the player to your right.

This does mean that every player is responsible for two characters – a protagonist and a companion – and that is trickier than playing just one character. But it's generally okay if these characters rarely talk directly to each other, and, in my experience, that makes it fairly easy to swap between characters.

In many groups, there also won't be a one-to-one correspondence between PCs and companions – for example, you might have a group where the only companion is the wizard's familiar. So only players who are comfortable taking on the challenge of a second character will need to do so.

You'll also discover that there are a lot of surprising advantages to this approach beyond the wizard simply getting to have a more meaningful relationship with their familiar.

For example, it becomes easier to split the party. Even when you're not deliberately attempting to do so, you'll often find that a player's primary character and secondary character will end up in different groups, which means that the player is able to participate in both sets of scenes.

These fully developed secondary characters can also be super useful if a PC ends up needing to leave the campaign: If they die or retire or are elected the Speaker of Good Mead, for example. The player can

simply adopt one of the secondary characters – quite possibly the one they were already playing – and promote them to being their new PC.

This kind of internal promotion makes it a lot easier to maintain continuity in the campaign and also means that the player doesn't have to sit out until their new character can be introduced to the group.

In the end, that's it: Hirelings, familiars, geists, baby brothers, Jimmy Olsen. Whatever companion you might have, just ask the player to your left if they'd be willing to tackle the role. And if you're a GM with a player whose character has a companion, help them to cast the role with one of their fellow players.

While you're helping people out, it would also be a big help to me if you would like, comment, subscribe, and do all that other stuff that earns me XP to level up with the Youtube Algorithm. Tell me about your favorite familiar, or let me know what topics you'd like to see me tackle in the future for Advanced Gamemastery.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!

SCRIPT – MASTERING A PUBLISHED SETTING

Over the years, I've run into a number of Game Masters who are nervous about running a game set in an established setting. Sometimes that's an established media property (like Tolkien's Middle Earth or Lucas' Star Wars), in other cases it's a published RPG setting.

This becomes even more true, of course, when the lore of the setting is particularly dense or particularly expansive. Common examples include Empire of the Petal Throne, Transhuman Space, or even the Forgotten Realms. The perception is that, in order to run such settings, the GM must be possessed of an encyclopedic mastery of their minutia. A similar problem seems to often afflict historical settings.

"I've gotta get this right!" is a mental trap that I can understand, but as a GM you need to be comfortable letting it go because it will consistently limit your gaming.

Want to run a game set in contemporary Toronto? Well, even if you've lived there your entire life, you're probably going to end up contradicting reality at some point while running it. Ditto if you're running a World War II scenario or a Victorian London scenario or a Samurai Japan scenario. Running only settings which you've created for yourself completely out of whole cloth is a really strict straitjacket that's going to rob you of a lot of great gaming experiences.

On the flip-side, that doesn't mean you should get flippant with continuity either. Nobody playing a Star Wars game wants to see the Death Star show up as a giant cube.

What you're looking for is the "grok threshold": The point where you fundamentally understand how the setting ticks so that you can make up new details about the setting in a way that's consistent with the setting as a whole.

Once you've hit the grok threshold, though, you should feel free to OWN the setting (which can also mean making significant changes to the established canon).

Often the quickest way to reach the grok threshold is to actually start *using the setting*. A few tips that I've found useful:

(1) If you want to look up a detail during the game, give yourself 30 seconds to find it. If you haven't found it after 30 seconds, make it up. If it turns out that you've contradicted something, sort it out after the session (by either revising the setting or explaining the necessary retcon to your players).

(2) If you've got a player at the table with expertise, don't be afraid to leverage that expertise. ("Hey, Bob, what's the name of the Archduke of the Red Isles?")

On the other hand, if you're feeling pressured by the expert to "always get it right", it can be useful to establish upfront that you've customized the setting and that people can expect changes. Don't be afraid of accepting corrections if it's not a big deal; but if it would mean that you have to scrap all of the prep for your current session just retcon the setting to match your prep and move forward from there.

(3) You can dip your toes into the setting by starting in areas which aren't heavily described. *Eclipse Phase*, for example, is an incredibly dense and complicated setting, but there are thousands of habitats and settlements which have no description whatsoever. Even official locations within the setting will often have only minimal descriptions. For example, this is the description of the Carpo habitat:

Carpo is one of the few moons of Jupiter that is in its own group. This irregular moonlet is only about 3 kilometers in diameter, yet hosts a population of around 17,000 transhumans; over 98% of that number are infomorphs and the remainder synthmorphs. The Carpo infomorphs reside in a simulspace designed

and managed by an infomorph calling himself Da5id. The simulspace itself is an alternate historical America, in which transhuman ethics and morality are being applied to 1800s sensibilities. Admission is very strict and seemingly completely arbitrary.

It's easy to completely master those details and then build on top of them.

(4) With particularly expansive settings, it can also be effective to limit the "official canon" for your games. For example, when I run *Star Wars* campaigns I have virtually always limited my canon to the six movies created by George Lucas (unless I'm specifically running a game to explore some other chunk of official lore). I'll freely reach out and grab other interesting bits of lore (planets, characters, etc.) from novels, comics, and animated series (or even the *Holiday Special* if I'm feeling perverse) — they become resources I can tap without being restrictions which I feel bound by.

That may all seem like a lot of hassle. So… why bother?

Well, the primary reasons for using a pre-made campaign setting are the extant expectations and knowledge of the players; the sense of shared community; the reduction in prep time; and the injection of someone else's creative vision into your own.

Using a setting that your players are already familiar with is a great way of simplifying how much they need to learn before you can start playing. It can also be really exciting for a player to leap into a universe that they know and love! Everybody wants to be a Jedi and when you mention "Alderaan" you don't have to explain that it was the site of a horrible genocide by the Dark Lord – everyone immediately understands!

And you, as the Game Master, get to create and share experiences from your favorite fictional worlds!

The resources available for these fictional worlds can also drastically reduce your prep time: If you want to run a campaign in a fantasy metropolis in your homebrewed setting, for example, you'll have to start by creating the metropolis. If you're running a campaign in the Forgotten Realms, on the other hand, there are like a half dozen fully developed metropolises and you can just pick one!

Finally, there's this idea of injecting someone else's creative vision into your own. Or vice versa.

I actually think this can be the most valuable aspect of using a published setting.

Just as actors perform the role of Hamlet because they want to take Shakespeare's creative vision and expand it with their own, so your goal in using a pre-made campaign setting should be to take the creative vision of that setting and expand it with your own. The actor playing Hamlet will learn things and create things they would never have created if they had simply improvised their own dialogue; similarly you will learn things and create things you would never have created if you had simply created the setting yourself.

(Which is not to disparage the art of creating your own campaign setting or improv acting, obviously.)

My point here is that the degree to which you accept the creative vision and the degree to which you *transform* the creative vision will vary in both part and scale. You want to take the setting of *Eclipse Phase*, for example, and consciously make some huge changes to the setting like moving the Jovian Republic to Mercury or having the Factors waging a guerilla war against humanity on Mars? Go for it. After you ran the last session you discovered that you were referring to Carpo's AI as Mel1ssa instead of Da5id? It's similarly fine for you to just embrace that change and then move forward to see what happens next.

What you should do next is drop down into the comments and let me know what topics Advanced Gamemastery should cover in the future.

While you're down there, check out the Font of All-Knowledge. I'll be dropping some links in there to the games and settings we've talked about today. And if you haven't subscribed already, you should do that, too!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table.

SCRIPT – PRINCIPLES OF RPG VILLAINY

by Justin Alexander – April 21st, 2021

I talk a lot about why Game Masters should never railroad their players.

And a lot of Game Masters will respond by saying, "Oh, yeah. I don't want to railroad my players, but…"

But.

There are a lot of justifications or rationalizations that follow the "but."

Most of us know that roleplaying games aren't really designed for linear, predetermined plots, but since the vast majority of the media we consume is purely linear (even most of the quote-unquote "interactive" stuff) these linear creative instincts get buried pretty deep in us.

One of the most common versions of the "but" I hear is, "But I don't want them to kill my bad guy!" The justifications for this vary from a predetermined finale that's being ruined, to the more seductive version of convincing yourself that your players just won't be "satisfied" if the bad guy is "prematurely" knocked off.

These instincts aren't necessarily wrong: Pulp fiction is filled with scenes where the heroes impotently watch the bad guys escape, building the sense of rivalry between them, and baiting our appetite for the inevitable showdown at the end of the story. It's an effective trope.

But I don't think railroading is the only way to achieve that trope at the gaming table. Nor do I think it's the most effective: When you push your thumb onto the scales of fate in order to predetermine the outcome of your game, you deflate the value of that outcome. Worse yet, if you do it poorly – or simply do it often enough! – the anger and frustration of your players will stop being focused on the NPC villain and it will start focusing on you!

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

So if railroading isn't the answer, how do we create memorable villains in our roleplaying games?

What I recommend is a three-pronged approach:

First, build tension between the PCs and the villain without using direct confrontations between them. Give the bad guy minions. Have the bad guy do horrible things off-screen to people, places, and organizations that the PCs care about. Social interactions in situations where the PCs won't be able to simply shoot them in the head without serious consequences can also work well to build a personal relationship. (As do taunting communiques and phone calls.)

Second, when you're prepping your scenarios include *lots of bad guys*. You're probably doing this any way, so the real key here is to simply refrain from pre-investing one of these guys as the "big villain". Basically, don't get attached to any of your antagonists: Assume that the first time they're in a position where the PCs *might* kill them that the PCs will *definitely* kill them. (This attitude will help to break any railroading habits you may still be secretly harboring.)

Third, remember that people in the real world usually don't fight to the death. Have your bad guys run away. And not just your "big villain" (since you won't have one of those any way, right?)

Unless their back is truly to the wall, *most* of the people your PCs fight should try to escape once a fight turns against them. Most of them will probably still end up with a bullet in the back of their heads, but some of them will manage to escape.

The ones that escape?

Those are your memorable villains. Those are your major antagonists.

This is the crucial inversion: Instead of figuring out who your major bad guy is and then predetermining that they will escape to wreak their vengeance, what's happening here is that the guy who escapes to wreak their vengeance *becomes the major bad guy*.

Consider *Die Hard* for a moment. As written, this film is a great example of our first principle: The antagonism between John McClane and Hans Gruber is established almost entirely without any direct interaction between the two of them:

Gruber takes McClane's wife hostage.

They talk to each other through telecommunication devices.

Gruber sends his thugs to fight McClane elsewhere in the building.

The exception to this is the scene where Gruber pretends to be one of the hostages. This is actually a really clever device that heightens the conflict between McClane and Gruber by allowing them to directly interact with each other. But if this was a game table, what would happen if the PCs saw through Gruber's bluff and put a bullet through his forehead right then and there?

It doesn't matter.

Remember our second principle? Lots of bad guys. So now *Die Hard* becomes the story of the hot-headed Karl Vreski taking control of Gruber's delicate operation and blowing it up in a mad pursuit for vengeance. Maybe he starts killing hostages and becomes the most memorable villain of the campaign when he throws McClane's wife off the top of Nakatomi Plaza.

Okay, so cycling through the org-chart of Villains, Inc. works when you're facing a team of bad guys. But what if the PCs really are just facing off against a single nemesis?

First off, remember that not every challenge needs to be of epic proportions: Sometimes you run into some goblins in the woods and you kill them and you move on. You don't need every goblin to murder the priestess' cousin or become the sworn blood-enemy of the paladin.

Second, even the most memorable villains from fiction are often part of Villains, Inc. even when that isn't immediately obvious. For example, consider *Dracula*: Wouldn't it be really unsatisfying if Jonathan Harker sneaked into Dracula's tomb at the beginning of the book and staked him through the heart before he ever went to England? I mean… this is *the* Dracula, right?

Remember, though, that Dracula is only *the* Dracula because that didn't happen at the hypothetical gaming table. If we were running this as an actual scenario, then we wouldn't know that he's supposed to become obsessed with Harker's wife and kill Mina's best friend in pursuit of her. We would discover that during play. So let's pretend that play had gone a different way: Harker stakes Dracula and heads back to England, satisfied that he's destroyed an ancient evil. It's a beautiful, happy ending…

… until the Brides of Dracula pursue him to England seeking bloody vengeance.

Dracula? Schmacula.

He was just the appetizer.

Fake examples like this from other forms of media can be useful due to the common understanding we have of the source material, but can also be misleading because the official version of events from the original media lends a patina of canonicity that shouldn't be true of actual tabletop scenarios. So let me

offer a handful of examples from In the Shadow of the Spire – my 3rd Edition D&D campaign set in Monte Cook's Ptolus.

Silion was a cult leader. Using our first principle, I built her up in a variety of ways: Her name was referenced in early foreshadowing. The PCs tangled with her thugs and were targeted for retaliation by her organization. She was also incorporated into the background of a new PC joining the campaign, becoming responsible for murdering the PCs' family and destroying their village.

Eventually, the PCs managed to track down her lair. They snuck in, found her digging through a box of archaeological artifacts, rolled a critical hit, and put an arrow through the back of her skull. She literally never even got a chance to look them in the face.

My players gleefully tell this story at almost every opportunity. They love it. It's one of their favorite moments from the entire campaign.

Why did it work?

Because when you heavily invest a villain through foreshadowing, the payoff of defeating them is massively satisfying. It can be argued that this sort of thing might not work as well in other media (although consider that Luke's physical confrontation with the Emperor in *Return of the Jedi*, after building up to it over the course of three films, lasts almost no time at all), but in a roleplaying game the audience is synonymous with the protagonist. Your players don't want to be handed their quarry on a plate, but a quick kill shot isn't a gimme: It's a reward for all the work that got them to the point where they could take the shot.

Here's another example from the opposite end of the spectrum.

Arveth was a mook. She was captured by the PCs, questioned by Tithenmamiwen, and then cut loose. When Elestra, another PC, tried to sneak back and slit Arveth's throat to stop her from warning the other cultists, Tithenmamiwen stopped her.

But then the cultists caught up with Arveth: Believing that she had betrayed them to the PCs, they tortured her and even cut out her eye. Eventually concluding that Arveth was still loyal to their cause, however, the cult gave her a team of assassins and sent her to kill Tithenmamiwen.

This was our second principle: Use lots of bad guys and develop the ones who survive. In some other campaign, Arveth could have easily been cut down randomly during combat and completely forgotten by the next session.

Targeting Tithenmamiwen when she was alone, Arveth nearly succeeded in her assassination attempt before the rest of the party showed up. While the rest of her team held the party at bay, Arveth managed to escape (barely evading Tithenmamiwen's angry pursuit). This was our third principle: When they're losing a fight, have your bad guys run away.

At this point, things transitioned to the first principle: Arveth used a magical artifact to send horrible nightmares to Tithenmamiwen, often featuring Arveth cutting out Tithenmamiwen's eye. She issued threats to Tithenmamiwen's friends. She placed a bounty on Tithenmamiwen's head.

Tithenmamiwen responded, hiring spies to hunt down Arveth and leaving Arveth messages on the bodies of cultists she killed along the way.

The PCs would eventually fight Arveth again. This time Arveth was teamed up with a medusa who turned two of the party members to stone. Arveth carved an eye out of each of the statues before making her escape once again.

By this point, of course, the PCs were absolutely furious. Tithenmamiwen, in particular, had a rage which burned so white hot that her alignment actually shifted: She had shown this bitch *mercy* and she was

repaid with endless torment. I don't think I've ever seen such intense hatred focused towards an NPC before. It reshaped the entire course of the campaign.

Arveth was a mook no more.

When she finally died, the cheers of the players rocked the house. They literally took her miniature as a trophy so that it could never be used in a game again.

These are the villains that will be remembered forever by your players.

And by you.

Good gaming. This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table.

SCRIPT – THE CAMPAIGN STITCH

by Justin Alexander – June 27th, 2021

As Game Masters, we're living in a golden age. We have an incredible wealth of resources at our fingertips, available for building, improving, and enhancing our campaigns in countless ways.

Among these are published scenarios. Never before have GMs had such easy access to so many adventures!

This is particularly true if we're running D&D. Wizards of the Coast alone produces enough adventures every year to fuel at least three full campaigns, and that's not even counting all the third-party publishers, Patreon-funded adventure initiatives, DMs Guild creators, adventures converted from previous editions, and just fans posting cool stuff on their websites!

Broadly speaking, these adventures take two forms. There are an increasing number of full campaigns – ready-to-run, straight out of the box – published each year.

But most of this adventure content is still episodic – short scenarios designed to be played in one, two, or maybe a few sessions.

These scenarios can be played as one-shots, but most of us are interested in more than that. And to run a full campaign of episodic adventures, obviously, you'll need to pick a bunch of them and run them one after another.

Of course, these adventures weren't written to be played together. Each adventure will be a single episode – a complete, fun experience in itself, but you won't see the events of one adventure spill over into another and things won't build over the course of the campaign to a dramatic, unified conclusion.

And that can be great! Life itself is often just a series of things that happen. A collection of short stories can be just as much fun as a novel, and there are things a collection of short stories can do that a novel can't.

But if you want your short scenarios to capture the imagination – like the tales of Conan or Elric or Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser – then you'll want to do a little bit more. You'll want to stitch those adventures together.

[INTRO]

Let's say that you have two adventures that you want to run for your group. How can you stitch those together into a unified experience?

Start by recasting the characters in one adventure with characters from the other adventure.

You can do this with any character, but it's often particularly easy to focus on patrons and villains.

For example, if the PCs are asked by a friendly druid to journey into the nearby swamps and find the mystic heart that's corrupting the wildlife in one adventure, and then hired in the other adventure by a baron to hunt a legendary white stag, then it can be quite easy to swap out the baron and instead have the druid send them after the stag. Or vice versa.

It can be easier to recast characters like this if they are quite similar to each other, but they don't have to be.

For example, if the villain of Adventure X is the dread lich Vaatharik and the villain of Adventure Y is the ancient lich Tam Shoon… well, it probably doesn't take much effort to make those both the same lich, so that the PCs can build a relationship with the antagonist over multiple confrontations.

But you can do the same thing even with very different characters. For example, a red dragon named Bassaridiss who seeks vengeance against the baron – druid? – who stole his treasure can just as easily be the lich Vaatharik, who seeks the phylactery that was stolen from her.

When you recast a character like this, you don't need to completely overwrite one character with the other. In fact, you probably shouldn't. Instead, you can take elements from BOTH characters and use them together. The result will be a richer and more interesting character.

For example, the baron who was supposed to send the PCs to hunt the white stag was written to have a magical, talking sword which contains the soul of his dead son. When you recast the baron, you can give the druid that same sword (and the same dead son). What does that do to the druid's character?

Obviously, this technique doesn't have to be limited to characters, either. You can do the same thing with other elements of an adventure, too.

Take locations, for example. At a broad level, Adventure 1 might take place in the village of Olmstead and Adventure 2 might take place in the village of Torkney. You don't actually need to move the PCs from one village to another in order to run both those adventures: You can just change the name of "Torkney" to "Olmstead" and away you go!

In the process, of course, you can also scoop up all the NPCs who live in Torkney and add them to Olmstead. Are there interesting businesses or cool landmarks in Torkney? I guess those are all in Olmstead now, too!

Do this with a bunch of adventures and suddenly, instead of having a half dozen generic fantasy villages, you have one village that's teeming with cool details and a huge cast of interesting characters.

Along the way, you're likely to run into duplication. For example, maybe Olmstead and Torkney both have blacksmiths. When that happens, you might choose to recast – taking the best bits of both to create a gestalt blacksmith that uses the smithy blueprints from Olmstead and the husband and daughter of the blacksmith in Torkney.

But you might also use both elements separately, so that your village of Olmstead now has rival blacksmiths. What form does that rivalry take? Are there any cool situations or even entire adventures that might be spun out of the rivalry?

Of course, you aren't limited to just merging whole communities like this. You can also recast specific locations. For example, Vaatharik murders everyone in a church in Adventure X. Could that instead be worshippers in the druid's grove from the swamp adventure? Of course it could! And now the players have a personal relationship with the site and the lich's victims!

This technique isn't just about repeating elements over and over again for the sake of repetition. It's about reincorporating these elements in new and different ways. As you fold these elements into your campaign again and again and again, the players will develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with them as the elements themselves gain depth and meaning.

The other thing to note here is that you don't need to plan ahead in order to perform a campaign stitch like this. You can run your first adventure, for example, with no idea what's coming next. When you pick a second adventure, you can just think about recasting stuff in the second adventure with elements taken from the first adventure.

But if you do plan ahead – if you know some of the adventures you're planning to run later in the campaign – then obviously the stitch can work in both directions.

Another technique you can use if you're planning ahead is linking adventures with clues. Using the Three Clue Rule, for example, you can plant clues in the corrupted swamp and white stag adventures hinting at the existence of a villain named Vaatharik. When she shows up later, the players will have a great A-ha! moment.

We've also been talking in terms of sequential adventures: You run Adventure A and then you run Adventure B. But that's not strictly necessary. A great technique for stitching multiple adventures together is to just run them at the same time: The actions of the players will often stitch them together for you! They'll take an ally from Adventure A and ask them to help with Adventure B and then – presto! – the bad guy from Adventure B is targeting characters from Adventure A for payback and it's all one big happy campaign.

In my experience, this works best with medium-sized adventures that play out over several parts. You can run the first part of Adventure A, then the first part of Adventure B, then the second part of Adventure A, and so forth.

So far we've been talking about stitching elements from one adventure into another, but a campaign is made up of more than just adventures, and you can stitch those components together, too. For example, look at the backgrounds your players have created for their characters. Can those elements be recast into the adventures you've chosen to run? Probably!

For example, one of your players may have created a character who's driven to solve the mysterious murder of their sister. You can easily make Vaatharik the murderer. Or the druid, if you want to get twisty with it.

You can use a similar technique to stitch PCs to each other during character creation. If two of your players have created characters with wise mentor figures in their background, you might suggest that they could both have the SAME wise mentor figure. And maybe that's the druid who's secretly responsible for killing the third PC's sister!

There's also the campaign setting itself. With a kitchen sink setting you can just take stuff from the adventures you choose to run and keep dumping it into the setting. But it can also be effective to reincorporate the established lore of your setting by recasting adventure elements.

For example, your campaign may already have several orders of knighthood. When an adventure calls for a knight, which of these existing orders do they belong to? When a different adventure is set in the ruins of a chancery, could it have one belonged to the same order?

Each time you do this, you're choosing to add depth to your campaign world instead of shallow breadth. And each element feeds back into the other elements, adding exponential complexity over time. For example, discovering the ruined chancery can reveal a tragic truth about the NPC knight's back story, enhancing their character – and potentially the PCs' relationship with that character – in ways that wouldn't be possible if the chancery was just another bit of lore tossed into the sink.

Finally, what if you are, in fact, running a full campaign? Whether it's something you've designed yourself or a published campaign like *Dragon Heist* or *Descent Into Avernus* or *The Masks of Nyarlathotep*, you can still use these same techniques to add new adventures to the campaign. To integrate the player characters' into the lore of the campaign. Or to adapt the campaign to your own campaign setting.

Along the way you'll discover it takes surprisingly little effort to stitch a campaign together. In large part this is because the players will help you without ever realizing that they're doing it. They *want* the campaign to make sense; they want it to be a coherent experience, and for their actions this week to have

an impact on what happens to them next week. They'll also see connections you never imagined, and take actions to create those connections even where they didn't exist.

Like any good seamstress, your stitches will be invisible. And it will seem to your players as if the whole campaign was one glorious creation.

Now, if you wouldn't mind, take a moment to stitch yourself to the Alexandrian by liking, commenting, and subscribing down below!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT – PLAYERS WHO DON'T BITE

by Justin Alexander – July 6th, 2021

What do you do if you have players who refuse to engage the game?

You've prepped a bunch of interesting content, but they just aren't biting at any of your scenario hooks.

Well, the first question you have to answer is: Why are they doing this?

[INTRO]

Fortunately, I think it's relatively rare to run into a whole group who's having this problem. But you're slightly more likely to run into individual players who do this.

Often they're doing it for legitimate reasons. The most common variant is, "I'm gonna set up a safe house and hole up." Given the types of dangers the typical PC encounters in a typical RPG campaign, that's not an unreasonable response!

Sauron has sent Ringwraiths to hunt us down? Let's go hide in Rivendell!

But another common variant is, "I want to be a special snowflake and go off by myself."

Let's start with the snowflake.

These don't tend to be a problem for me any more. First, because I actually enjoy running split parties, which is probably a topic for another time.

Second, I make sure to balance the spotlight time between PLAYERS, not groups. So if there's a group of five players and a group of one player, I will try to make sure the group with five players gets five times as much attention.

Finally, I don't run linear "this is the one and only path" adventures, so it's perfectly fine to have a PC – or several PCs – head off to pursue their own agendas.

As a result, the behavior isn't disruptive. And if the loner's goal is to pull attention, they'll quickly discover that they're actually getting LESS attention because they're not getting penumbra spotlight from the other players.

So it either works out fine or the special snowflake adjusts their behavior.

Now, what about the PCs who are turtling up in good faith?

Resolving that situation usually just means practicing good pacing habits. That's also a longer topic for another time, but the short version is that you need to skip past empty time – when nothing interesting is happening – and cut to the next interesting action.

Broadly speaking, this boils down to one of two things.

First, you can ask: What do you want to do?

Second, you can say: Something interesting happens to you.

And maybe that interesting thing is an hour later or ten days later. It doesn't matter because, regardless of how much time it takes in the game world, the amount of time it takes at the table is twenty seconds.

The key problem here is that the players are making a choice that isn't fun.

Usually this isn't the case: If the players choose to do something, it will generally be because it's something they WOULD find fun. That's why they're doing it. But here circumstances have arisen in which they feel that they have to choose the smart thing – the thing that's least likely to get them killed – instead of the fun thing.

And that's okay!

But it's your job to get your players – not their characters, the players! – to the next point where they can have fun. Where interesting stuff is going to happen. And that's when you either:

Ask, "What's the next interesting thing that you do?"

Or look ahead yourself and see what the next interesting thing will be that happens TO them and describe it.

The more intractable version of this problem is if the players keep choosing to do things that are fun for them, but which you find boring. Where this problem can be particularly frustrating is if they're taking actions which they think should result in fun stuff, but because of how you're interpreting those actions as the GM the results are boring for everybody.

Either way, you need to have a frank meta-game discussion about what kind of game you can run that EVERYONE would enjoy.

Taking a further step back, you can also address this issue by encouraging the creation of characters who are (a) highly motivated to go out and do interesting things and (b) who have strong connections to the world around them, which can be used to motivate them.

That's all for today! If you enjoyed this video, please take a moment to give it a thumbs up and subscribe if you haven't already! Thank you to all my patrons on Patreon, without whom these videos would not be possible!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT - CALLING IN THE BIG GUNS

by Justin Alexander – March 30th, 2022

[SPOILER WARNING ON SCREEN: This video contains SPOILERS for Waterdeep: Dragon Heist.]

The heroes have just identified the location where the cultists are going to summon a cryo-demon in the sewers beneath Dweredell. The stage is set for them to descend into darkness, confront the great evil, save the day, and bring the campaign to a rousing conclusion.

And that's when the players take everything they know to the archmage Arundel, whose immense powers allow him to thank the PCs politely and then deal with the cryo-demon entirely by himself.

Womp-womp.

[INTRODUCTION]

A unique challenge to running urban campaigns is figuring out what happens if the PCs, confronted with some horrible crime or circumstance, do the logical thing and seek help from powerful allies. And this problem grows as technology (or its magical equivalent) improves communication, travel speeds, or both. (Low level D&D characters in the middle of the woods tend not to have any recourse; modern teenagers with cellphones are a completely different story.)

The problem can also get worse in what I'll call mythological settings, where single individuals (powerful wizards, Sith lords, starship captains) can have immense power. This is because it can be both easier for the PCs to get access to these characters *and* often harder to explain why they don't want to get involved.

Let's take a step back for a moment: Why is this a problem?

First, it really mucks up the challenge level of the scenario when Batman calls in Superman to deal with the Joker. Second, it's dramatically unsatisfying to go through all the preamble of a conflict only to be sidelined while Elminster heads off to experience the end of the story.

Now, let's address the elephant in the room: There's often an unspoken genre convention and/or table agreement that calling in the Big Guns is poor form and shouldn't be done because it's disruptive to the desired experience; to the players being the heroes. If you want to make that a spoken agreement more power to you, but there are a couple things to be aware of:

First, this can actually create a different sort of problem for some players because it creates a tension between what their characters *should* be doing (based on their understanding of who that character is) and what that character is *allowed* to do. For some players, making this an explicit, spoken agreement can resolve the problem (because with the option definitively off the table the tension disappears). But for other players, it will actually make the problem *worse* because either acknowledging the tension or explicitly prohibiting the choice is even more disruptive to their roleplaying.

Second, calling in the Big Guns is not exclusively a problem. It's also an opportunity. And there's a lot of really cool experiences that you're taking off the table if you just flat out ban these interactions. Superman shouldn't just swoop into every Batman story, but World's Finest crossovers can be really awesome.

On the flip side, this also means that sometimes players call in the Big Guns because it's what makes sense for their characters to do… but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's what *want* as players! They don't want to be sidelined while the Big Guns take care of everything, and they're actually hoping that you'll reject the offer so that they can have the satisfaction of roleplaying their character truthfully AND get what they want by continuing to be in the starring roles for the rest of the adventure.

All of which means that, at some point, you're going to run into a situation where the PCs decide that it's time to call in the Big Guns.
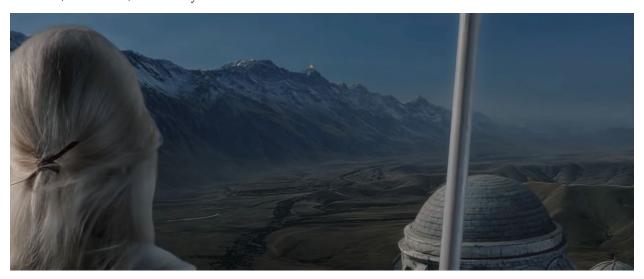
What happens next?

OPTION 1: IT WORKS.

They call in the Big Guns, the Big Guns have a good reason to be involved, and they come in and deal with the situation. Problem solved!

The trick here is to frame getting the help of the Big Guns as being the major accomplishment and then just letting loose and really *enjoying* the curb-stomping done by the Big Guns as the reward for a job well done.

If you want an example of this from another medium, look at *The Lord of the Rings*. Most of *The Two Towers* consists of the heroes trying to convince one major ally or another to put some skin in the game: Theoden, Treebeard, Denethory. Or take this scene from the movies:

Pippin literally summons an entire army to help solve his problems.

This approach works if the players see the Big Guns as a manifestation of their will; no different than a *fireball* or a powerful magical artifact. THEY were the ones who called on the Big Guns. Getting the Big Guns involved was what saved the day and THEY were the ones who did it. This can be a tricky balancing act to pull off, but it can be *immensely* satisfying when you do.

OPTION 2: THEY'RE BUSY.

The Big Guns are busy doing something else and therefore cannot help.

This can be used preemptively if there's a time crunch ("Sorry, Harry, Dumbledore isn't in his office right now"), but it can be equally effective if the conflict comes up at the last possible second:

"Great," says Arundel. "I'm glad we're all gathered here to go down into the Vault together. Now that we're fully committed to this course of action, let's— Wait! There's a tarrasaque attacking the harbor! I've got to go!"

This works better, of course, when it emerges naturally out of the narrative. For example, in my *Dragon Heist* campaign the group had recruited Renaer and the Black Tears to assist in raiding the Cassalanters. That gig resulted in them "arresting" (i.e., kidnapping) Lord Cassalanter and taking him to the Blackstaff. At this point, I could clearly see the risk of the PCs' contributions for the rest of the campaign getting

washed out by a confluence of powerful NPCs: The stakes had gotten high enough that it would be hard to justify the Blackstaff and the Open Lord of Waterdeep not getting directly involved. So I framed the Blackstaff's response accordingly: She called up Renaer and the Black Tears to help her perform a rapid-fire investigation of the Cassalanters to accumulate the evidence necessary to "make the arrest legal after the fact."

The Blackstaff and Renaer were still helping the PCs, but only off-screen and tangentially.

You can also bake larger priorities into the setting. For example, in my campaign set in Monte Cook's Ptolus there's an invading army that's marching towards the city. No matter how dire the stakes are in whatever scenario the PCs have gotten themselves involved in, it's not hard to argue that preparations for a literal war are more important, giving me an easy trump card that I can play any time I need it.

On the other hand, you don't actually *need* to go into a lot of detail as long as you've firmly established that the NPC in question is tied up in more important affairs; that they're operating at a higher tier than the PCs. For example, when the *Dragon Heist* PCs later sent word to the Blackstaff that they'd located the Vault, the Blackstaff simply replied, "Good luck! Let me know how it goes!" The implication was that she was busy doing something else and trusted the PCs to take care of it.

On that note: You usually want the NPC, even though they don't have the time or resources to deal with the problem, to acknowledge how clearly important the information the PCs are bringing them is, rather than belittling it. (Unless, of course, the PCs really are just wasting their time with trivialities.) This validates the players' actions AND ratchets up the stakes.

The quickest way to achieve this effect is for the NPC to say, "This is clearly very important… which is why I'm deputizing you to deal with it." In my Ptolus campaign, for example, I had the Commissar specifically deputize the PCs to deal with the local activities of the chaos cults. Ergo, any time they discovered some new, horrible thing that the chaos cults were involved with, the official response could neatly default to, "Keep up the good work!"

Another effective way of handling this brush off is for the Big Gun to give the PCs' *some* form of assistance, even if they can't get directly involved: A suitcase full of cash. A platoon of elven archers. The phone number of an old friend in Cairo they should talk to. And so forth.

This idea of rewarding the PCs for going to the Big Guns is a common theme here: Even if the Big Guns turn the PCs down flat and refuse to help, if there's still some sort of reward for having gone to them in the first place, then the players will feel validated in their choice. It also tends to just make sense, unless the PCs were completely off-base in their belief that the NPC would care about what's happening.

OPTION 3: THERE'S A REASON THEY CAN'T HELP.

Later in my *Dragon Heist* campaign, when Lady Cassalanter kidnapped one of the PCs' adopted kids, the PCs sent a message to the Blackstaff.

Since we'd already established that the Blackstaff was investigating the Cassalanters, there was no good reason for her not to drop everything and come to help. But I knew that a fight with Lady Cassalanter would become trivial if the Blackstaff was involved, so Lady Cassalanter erected some wards around her location that would have specifically detected the Blackstaff's approach (since she knew that the Blackstaff was now involved and had been investigating her family). The Blackstaff detected the wards, warned the PCs, and veered off. She'd be nearby, but with Lady Cassalanter holding a hostage it was just too risky for her to come barreling in with the PCs.

(This was also a hybrid because the Blackstaff actually gave them valuable intel on where Lady Cassalanter might be holding their son, so she'd already helped them to a certain extent and the PCs had been rewarded for calling her in. You can read about what happened next in the campaign journal linked to in the Font of All-Knowledge.)

In my Ptolus campaign, another major element of Act II is the exploration of the [Banewarrens](). These, once again, pose a potentially existential threat in the middle of the city, and there once again needs to be some explanation for why the city authorities and other major players don't come barging in to resolve the crisis. In this case, I simply turned the Banewarrens into a point of religious dispute. The two halves of the schismed Church effectively checkmated each other, and the civil authorities in the form of the Commissar refused to get involved because of the tangle of Church politics.

[INSERT CLIP FROM THE MATRIX RELOADED]

OPTION 4: SPLIT THEM UP.

Now that the Big Guns have been called in for the actual op, split the group up: While the Big Guns do one thing, the PCs need to do another.

For example, we could imagine a *Dragon Heist* campaign where the PCs have successfully recruited the Blackstaff or Manshoon or Laeral Silverhand to come into the Vault with them and retrieve Neverember's stolen hoard. But as the Vault cracks open, the bad guys suddenly arrive with something incredibly dangerous: the Cassalanters summon a pit fiend, or Xanathar himself shows up with a bevy of gazers and mind flayers, or Jarlaxle teleports in with a platoon of elite drow mercenaries.

The Big Gun has to deal with the big threat. They turn to the PCs and shout, "This could all be a distraction! Get into the Vault! Make sure the gold is secure!"

This is also a good example of how, as the GM, you want to pay attention to *why* the players want to call in the Big Guns. For example, they may have concocted some incredibly convoluted scheme that requires them to be in nine places at the same time and they have no idea how they can pull it off by themselves. That's a *perfect* opportunity to just lean back, let them bring in the Big Guns without fuss, and then peel them off into separate action groups.

OPTION 5: FLIP IT AROUND.

Now that the Big Guns are involved and putting themselves in charge, they send the PCs to do something crucial for their success.

Returning to our example of the *Dragon Heist* Vault, when Jarlaxle shows up with his force of drow mercenaries, the Blackstaff turns to the PCs and says, "Hold them off here! I'm heading into the Vault!" Once the drow goons are defeated, the PCs follow and discover the Blackstaff standing over the dragon she's just slain. A dragon?! Phew! Good thing they called her in!

If you're more dramatically inclined, you can also frame this so that the PCs show up just in time to take the shot that finishes off the dragon. "Thank you!" says the Blackstaff. "It was a more difficult foe than I had expected!" Or whatever.

You can also reverse expectations here by making it LOOK like the crucial part of the mission (i.e., the thing that the Big Guns are going to go do) is one thing and the ancillary goal is some other thing, while in reality it's actually the exact OPPOSITE. So the PCs get sent to pursue the ancillary goal in a supporting capacity, but then it turns out they're actually doing the absolutely vital thing that's going to save the day! ("I thought Griznak was going to be at the fort?!" "Yeah, well, he's here, and we're out of time. Let's go!")

OPTION 6: THEY ARE THE BIG GUNS!

The zero-to-hero dynamic of D&D tends to get ingrained to the point where we sometimes forget that it's fully possible to have a campaign dynamic where there AREN'T any Big Guns to appeal to because the PCs are the biggest guns around.

This can be particularly true within a specific set of parameters.

Even in D&D, it's quite possible to run a campaign where, once the PCs hit mid-level play, they're the most powerful people in town (and possibly for hundreds or thousands of miles around).

On that note, even if the PCs aren't the *biggest* guns in town, this is nevertheless a great time to have low-level adventuring parties come knocking on their door with problems that they need a Big Gun to solve for them.

Remind them that they are Big Damn Heroes.

And if you want to be a Big Damn Hero, you can hit the Subscribe button below. You can also support these videos on Patreon. There's a link for that in the Font of All-Knowledge.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT – CALLING THE COPS

by Justin Alexander – April 6th, 2022

The heroes have just figured out that Old Tom the lighthouse keeper is the mysterious serial killer. Everything is ready for the final confrontation. For the big showdown between the PCs and the demon-ghost which has been plaguing Moorville.

And that's when the player call the cops.

Because of course they do. What would you do if you had evidence identifying a murderer? You'd call the cops.

[INTRO]

In our last video talked about what happens when the players call an uber-powerful NPC like Elminster or Odin or the President of the Galactic Federation to solve all their problems for them. NPCs that logically SHOULD want to help them with their current situation, but whose involvement would sideline the PCs and maybe even remove them from the scenario entirely.

Today we're going to talk about a very similar problem: What happens when the PCs, confronted with some horrible crime or circumstance, do the logical thing and report it to the proper authorities? For example, the police. Or the CIA. Or the army. The big, organized forces of Little Guys who enforce civilization.

Many of the techniques from the previous video will also work for this situation (and vice vera), but in practice they're different enough to pose unique challenges. For example, while it's relatively easy to explain why Elminster is busy and can't help right now, it's more difficult to explain why the entire police department would be so preoccupied that none of them can respond to a crisis.

In my experience, calling in the Little Guys also tends to be more disruptive than calling in a Big Gun. I think this is because most RPGs are structured around small bands of extraordinary heroes. Whereas Big Guns tend to work in the same paradigm, the inclusion of Big Brother seems to simply drown the PCs out. To mix my metaphors, the PCs end up being a fish out of water.

This assumes that it's the players who are deciding to reach out to the NPCs. Oddly, if the situation is reversed and it's the GM who's pushing the NPCs into the scenario I find that the exact opposite is true: Big Guns become far more disruptive and the Little Guys are manageable. I suspect this is for the exact same reason. The Big Gun operates in the same paradigm as the PCs, so when the GM tries to shove them down the players' throats it feels as if the PCs are just being replaced by a newer, shinier model that they don't get to play. Whereas when the Little Guys show up uninvited, they tend to be interpreted as simply another obstacle that our strong, independent heroes need to figure out a way to overcome.

But I digress.

The PCs have picked up the phone and called the cops.

What happens next?

OPTION 1: THEY DON'T BELIEVE THEM.

This solution can be basically a genre convention for any modern campaign featuring the paranormal. Think of shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Supernatural*: If you go to the cops babbling about werewolves, they aren't going to believe you. They'll probably just end up making the problem worse.

You can even use this paradigm in campaigns where the PCs *are* the authority. In fact, if you frame it correctly, it can let the PCs both simultaneously belong to a government agency AND be a small band of extraordinary heroes. Think of the *The X-Files*, for example.

But this conceit doesn't require the supernatural, either. Think about the beginning of *[Die Hard](#)*, where John McClane is continually trying to convince the LAPD that the terrorist threat is real, but they keep dismissing him as a kook or prank caller. And even when they DO show up, they just make things worse. On that note…

OPTION 2: LOST IN BUREAUCRACY.

The PCs detect an oncoming crisis, warn the appropriate authorities, and… nothing. The authorities don't do anything. Or they do something, but it's misguided and doesn't actually solve the problem. Or there's a committee that's going to figure out what the proper course of action is, but it's clear by the time they're done deliberating the asteroid will have already obliterated Venice (or whatever).

Look no further than restraining orders that take three weeks to process when the guy bought a gun yesterday, the government response to the climate crisis, or the clusterfuck pandemic response we've seen literally everywhere except Taiwan and New Zealand for the past two years.

You can send a strong signal early in a campaign that the Little Guys aren't going to help the PCs by sending the bureaucracy looking for them first. Think about Walter Peck, the abusive EPA rep in the original *[Ghostbusters](#)*, for example.

OPTION 3: THE BAD GUYS ARE CONNECTED.

Coming back to *Die Hard*, do you remember that scene where McClane is celebrating because he can see the cop cars coming down the boulevard… but then the bad guys call it in as a false alarm and the cops flip off their sirens, turn around, and leave?

This technique covers any number of possibilities for how the bad guys can counter the PCs notifying the authorities, like the horror and suspense movies where the heroes see something suspicious and call the cops, but by the time the cops show up, the bad guys have had a chance to make everything look normal.

It may be even more insidious than that, with the bad guys having already infiltrated the Little Guys: That might just be a few crooked cops so you don't know who to trust, or it could be a conspiracy that secretly controls the entire local government. (Or an invasion of body-snatchers to the same effect.)

OPTION 4: THEY DEFER TO THE PCs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, let the Little Guys recognize that the PCs are the most qualified, the most skilled, and/or have the most insight into what's happening. They'll either partner up with the PCs or simply put resources (and manpower) at their disposal.

One variant of this that can work particularly well is for each PC to be put in command of a squad of NPCs. You can let the players run the whole squad or, if the squads split up to pursue multiple objectives simultaneously, you can use troupe-style play (in which all the other players take on the role of an NPC in the current PC's squad).

But what really makes this technique work is to *actually* put the players in charge: Give them access to the resources, but let them figure out how they want to utilize them.

This can be a fine line to walk if you want to make sure that it doesn't permanently transform the campaign, but it's usually not too difficult to justify why this is a temporary circumstance that only applies to the immediate situation.

Although maybe permanently shifting the campaign is exactly the right way to go!

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Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT – THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE

by Justin Alexander – July 4th, 2021

"She took a step further in – then two or three steps – always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. But she could not feel it.

"'This must be a simply enormous wardrobe!' though Lucy, going still further in and pushing the soft folds of the coats aside to make room for her…

"Next moment she found that what was rubbing against her face and hands was no longer soft fur but something hard and rough and even prickly. 'Why, it's just like the branches of trees!' exclaimed Lucy."

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the four Pevensey children are sent away from London during the Blitz to shelter at a remarkably large house owned by the Professor. In one of the many, many rooms within this mansion there is a magical wardrobe: If you walk into this wardrobe it will act as a magical portal, transporting you to the land of Narnia.

This is Lewis' scenario hook: In order for the adventures of Narnia to begin, one of the kids needs to walk into the wardrobe.

Lewis gets away with this, of course, because he's writing a book. He controls the characters and so it is quite easy for him to, first, make the kids decide to explore the house and then, second, make Lucy climb into the wardrobe and go looking for the back of it.

To be clear: This is not bad writing. Everything the kids do is a perfectly reasonable thing for them to do and completely justified.

But if we imagine C.S. Lewis as a Game Master running this as a scenario for four PCs, there are several possible ways it could play out:

The PCs could all find the wardrobe portal together.

Some of the PCs could find the portal, return, and lead the others back into Narnia.

One of the PCs could find the portal without the others, come back, and then find that the portal has "vanished" due to its strange metaphysics. (But investigation will reveal that it returns.)

The PCs could all enter the portal separately (or in different groups) and end up making independent alliances with different hostile factions within Narnia.

But, of course, the overwhelmingly likely outcome is that the PCs never find the wardrobe and never go to Narnia, right? Even if they were LARPing this scenario in real-time, they might never go into that room. And, if they did, they could easily never think, "I'm going to try climbing into this wardrobe and see if I can touch the back of it."

My point is that premises which work just fine in linear narratives from other mediums don't necessarily work *at all* when used in an RPG. So if you use those linear narratives as your model for how to prep an RPG scenario, you'll fail more often than you succeed.

[INTRO]

Let's take a step back.

We need to get the PCs to Narnia.

One way to handle this would be aggressive scene-framing:

[GM] Okay, so you wake up the next morning and its raining out. You all decide to play hide-and-seek. Lucy, you go into a room that's quite empty except for one big wardrobe; the sort that has a looking-glass door. There's nothing else in there at all except a dead bluebottle on the window-sill. That's when the door handle starts to turn! You've got nowhere else to go, so you pop into the wardrobe! It's filled with fur coats and there's a thick smell of mothballs. You head towards the back where it'll be harder to spot you… only you can't find the back! This wardrobe is huge!

This works, and it's based on accurately identifying where the **active premise** of the scenario is — the point where the players know what they're supposed to do (or, in a sandbox campaign, where they are made aware that a particular course of action or type of action is available to them). In this case, the active premise is NOT "the Pevenseys have arrived at the Professor's mansion" (because it's not clear what action they're supposed to be taking there), but rather "Lucy has discovered a magic portal" (because it is immediately apparent that "go through the portal" is a clear action that they can take).

Of course, there are drawbacks to such aggressive scene-framing.

Players will generally feel less immersed in the moment and feel less ownership of the hook: Lucy's player wasn't the one who chose to go into the wardrobe, so they won't feel responsible for what happens as a result. And they might even become upset that they're being forced to do things they don't want to do.

There are some mechanical structures – like compels in Fate – that can address this, but they generally can't solve all of the potential problems.

So if we're currently standing at "the Pevenseys have arrived at the Professor's mansion," what other options do we have for getting the PCs an active premise that will take them to Narnia (i.e., hook them into the scenario)?

Well, **proactive hooks** – hooks that come looking for the PCs – are a lot easier to use than a **reactive hook** that requires the players to do something to discover it. Waiting for the PCs to find the wardrobe is reactive. But what if we had stuff coming OUT of Narnia through the wardrobe?

For example:

A strange creature that goes rampaging around the house. It keeps damaging stuff and Mrs. Macready blames the kids for it.

Or refugees from the tyranny of the White Witch.

Or wolves of the secret police pursuing aforesaid refugees.

Or agents of the White Witch who try to kidnap one of the kids and take them back through the wardrobe.

When the PCs question these NPCs or backtrack them, they'll be led to the wardrobe.

Another option is to **reframe the active premise**. There's no clean way to say "you need to search the house in order to find a magic wardrobe" if the players don't know the magic wardrobe exists (and discovering that is the whole point to begin with).

But what you CAN do is give the PCs a DIFFERENT reason for searching the house.

For example:

The Professor has died and they need to find his will.

Or a stray dog gets into the house and Mrs. Macready tells the kids they need to track it down before the next tour group arrives.

Or you provide a game structure in which the kids earn XP by playing childhood games, with hide 'n seek appearing on the list.

We discussed similar techniques in the video on *Surprising Scenario Hooks*: The players are given the hook for what they THINK the scenario is, but it leads them to a completely different scenario.

Another option, or perhaps a supplemental one, is to use **multiple hooks**. This is really just the Three Clue Rule in a different form: You include multiple hooks so that, even if the PCs miss some of the hooks, they're still likely to find at least ONE of them.

One of the corollaries of the Three Clue Rule is permissive clue-finding, and you can often achieve a similar effect through **organic scenario hooks** – hooks that emerge spontaneously from the actions of the PCs rather than being planned ahead of time.

For example, rather than it being specifically the wardrobe that's magical, we could say that the entire estate is magical and/or that there's some powerful fey magic trying to draw the children into Narnia. No matter what they do, we can improvise a hook that offers them a path to Narnia:

They go to play Poohsticks in the stream? They find their sticks disappearing through a magical shimmer under the bridge.

They help the cook make dinner? They discover a secret passage behind the wine rack in the cellar when they're sent down for supplies.

They read books in the library? They open a magical book!

They play hide 'n seek? Wardrobe!

Okay, but what if it's important that the portal specifically be located in the wardrobe AND you want them to simply stumble across it accidentally?

In that case, you need to fill the mansion with **other active premises** that the players can engage with until the reactive premise is discovered. In other words, you have OTHER adventures – or, at least, interesting things the PCs are aware that they can interact with – happening in the mansion. And then, at some point during these adventures, the wardrobe can appear.

Or maybe it appears several times as part of the background scenery until the revelation finally happens — until someone opens the doors.

You can also take a laid back approach to this by asking each player to describe what a typical day at the house looks like for their character. This frames the action declaration at a sufficiently abstract level that the players aren't trying to fill the minute-to-minute activities of their lives. Essentially, the **active premise becomes defining routine**. Specifically, in this case, what the new "normal" looks like for the kids.

You can ask questions like:

After you've said good night to the Professor and gone upstairs to your rooms on the first night, what plans do you make for the next day?

What if it's a rainy day and you can't go outside? What do you?

It's been a week and you're getting bored. What do you do to mix things up?

What you're looking for, of course, is the opportunity to say, "While you're doing that, you happen to see this wardrobe and that's when the adventures begin…"

In a storytelling game you can use a variant of this technique by giving the players narrative control. You could turn to Peter's player, for example, and say, "Somewhere in this house there is a portal to the magical land of Narnia. What is it?" And after Peter's player has said that it's a wardrobe, you could turn to Lucy's player and say, "And how do you find this portal?" Similar approaches using the specific mechanics of a particular storytelling game are also quite common.

As a campaign evolves over time, the group will also often develop a collective sense of what a "normal day" looks like in any case. This knowledge makes it easier to aggressively frame scenario hooks without the players feeling as if their toes are getting stepped on… which brings us full circle.

Before I send you off to like, comment, and subscribe, let's take a second to talk about proactive players.

Proactive players are the ones who will pursue courses of action even when they haven't been presented with an active premise for that action.

For example, in my original 1974 D&D open table, one of the PCs spontaneously decided to buy up all the garlic in the local community and then use their monopoly to jack up prices. They knew that the local adventurers had just discovered vampires and concluded that demand was about to spike.

The result was the creation of the Halfling Mafia, who grew to become a pervasive presence in the campaign.

That's an example of proactive play: There was no "buy up all the garlic and form a mafia" scenario hook that I had put into play.

By contrast, in my current Castle Blackmoor open table, I'm using a set of Special Interest XP rules that specifically encourages the PCs to, for example, set up philanthropic societies. So when one of the PCs decided to set up the Vampire Awareness and Relief Foundation, that was really awesome, but it wasn't proactive play. The mechanical structure had offered the active premise of setting up philanthropic societies.

Some players are naturally proactive. Others will never be. (And that's okay!) But often proactive players are created in the sandbox: When they are inundated with scenario hooks, as we discussed in *Running the Sandbox*, and it becomes clear that THEY are empowered to choose what they will do next, often the leap will be made that they do not need to choose, but can instead CREATE.

When you say, "You've arrived at the Professor's house. What do you want to do?" a reactive group, in the absence of an active premise, will stare at you blankly.

But if you have proactive players, don't feel like you need to immediately start hurling scenario hooks at them. Let the Pevenseys tell YOU what they're going to do and follow their lead, giving them the incredible reward of knowing that the action THEY created is the one which set everything in motion.

It is the proactive player who will say, without prompting, "I'm going to explore the house!"

"Everyone agreed to this and that was how the adventures began. It was the sort of house that you never seem to come to the end of, and it was full of unexpected places. The first few doors they tried led only into spare bedrooms, as everyone had expected they would; but soon they came to a very long room full of pictures and there they found a suit of armor; and after that was a room all hung with green, with a harp in one corner; and then came three steps down and five steps up, and then a kind of little upstairs hall and a door that led out onto a balcony, and then a whole series of rooms that led into each other and were lined with books — most of them very old books and some bigger than a Bible in a church. And shortly after that they looked into a room that was quite empty except for one big wardrobe…"

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

Script – Matryoshka Clues

by Justin Alexander – April 20th, 2022

The investigators have found the bloodstains in the living room, but now they've stepped into the bedroom of a serial killer. There's a hidden trap door in the floor leading down into the killer's mystic butchering chamber.

The players want to search the room.

What do you do?

[INTRO]

The basic structure of a room like this — whether it's a serial killer's bedroom or an area in a dungeon — can be conceptually broken down into several parts:

First: What the PCs immediately see — for example, the window, the bed, the bookcase, the Justin Bieber posters on the wall.

Second: What they *might* see, like the faint bloodstains spotted with a Perception check or the heraldry recognized with a successful History check.

And, finally, what they can investigate and, furthermore, what they discover when they investigate it.

In some cases this will mean interacting with some specific feature of the room; an item of interest designed to attract their attention. For example, you might check out the bookcase to discover what books are on it.

In other cases, like this one, it can just mean searching the entire room.

> **Player**: There's gotta be more here. I search the room.
> **GM**: Give me a Search check.
> **Player**: (*rolls dice*) 25
> **GM**: You find a secret trap door in the floor.

And that works just fine! It gets the job done and you'll often not need to do anything more than that.

But there's an advanced technique you can use that looks like this:

> **Player**: There's gotta be more here. I search the room.
> **GM**: Give me a Search check.
> **Player**: (*rolls dice*) 25
> **GM**: There are scuff marks on the floor around the legs of the bed.
> **Player**: As if the bed had been moved back and forth a lot?
> **GM**: Yeah.
> **Player**: I shove the bed to one side and take a look.
> **GM**: You find a secret trap door in the floor.

Instead of immediately discovering the item of interest, the character instead discovers an *indicator* pointing in the direction of the item of interest. The advantage is that it allows (and even requires) the player to receive information and then *draw a conclusion*. It's a subtle distinction, but instead of the GM telling them about the trap door, it was the PLAYER who found it. They own that accomplishment.

The result increases the player's engagement and reduces the feeling that the GM is just handing them whatever information he feels like.

I call this the Matryoshka search technique because it turns the interaction into a nested doll: One investigation "opens" new information, which can then be opened by another investigation in turn. It works even when the indicator really only points at one possible conclusion, as we've seen here, but it can be even MORE effective if there are multiple explanations possible for the indicator.

As a very simple example, the GM might say something like, "Taking a closer look at the floor, you can see through the dust and grime clear indications of a square-shaped seam."

Is it a pit trap? A pedestal that rises up? Do the seams release poison gas or a *force cage* projected from below?

The player is going to have to figure that out. And when they do, it will be THEIR victory. Not the dice roll.

Now, a word of caution here. One drawback of a Matryoshka clue is that it makes the clue more fragile. It's possible, for example, for a PC to spot the scuff marks on the floor and for the player to think, "Huh. Scuff marks." And then never look for the trap door.

If you're using the redundancy of the Three Clue Rule, as we discussed in our video on RPG Mysteries, then there's no problem with this. The slightly higher probability of missing the Matryoshka clue is just one of the many ways in which a clue can be missed or misinterpreted or ignored that the Three Clue Rule is specifically designed to account for.

But if your whole scenario unwisely depends on finding one specific trap door in one specific bedroom using one specific skill check… using a Matryoshka technique may create a problem.

But since you shouldn't be designing your scenarios like that any way, Matryoshka clues are a great way to add depth and interaction and investment to your games.

If you'd like to add depth to your investment in this channel, interact now by hitting that Subscribe button down below. And add a comment to tell us about the most memorable clue you've seen in an RPG session. While you're down there, check out the Font of All-Knowledge for additional tips and tricks on designing and running mystery scenarios.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT: STEALING THE SHIP

by Justin Alexander – June 2022

[MANDALORIAN MONTAGE: Ship landing. Mandalorian going cross-country. Mandalorian seeing his ship being dismantled. Chase. Baby Yoda uses Force powers.]

So the PCs are bounty hunters. They park their ship on an alien planet and head off on an adventure. Lots of exciting stuff happens. There are gunfights that they win and unexpected treasure that they claim. But when they return to their ship, they find it being stripped for parts by opportunistic jawas.

Cue an exciting chase scene, followed by an adventure hooks that leads to some startling revelations.

[END MONTAGE]

While keeping in mind that RPGs aren't movies, how could we include awesome stuff like this in our games?

One option, obviously, is that our Game Master, Jon Favreau, just had a really cool idea and made it happen. Nothing wrong with that, of course.

But what if we wanted to take it one step further than that? The cool thing here is the discovery that he game world exists beyond line of sight. So how can we keep the world in motion even when the players aren't looking at it?

One technique is non-focal random encounters.

Random encounters can be used to achieve a lot of different effects. But one of the ways they can be used is as a procedural content generator, providing a creative prompt to the GM for an event.

Because the "camera" of our game session is almost always focused on the PCs, we tend to think of the event generated by the random encounter tables as intersecting the path of the party. It's something that happens randomly in the place where the PCs happen to be.

But it doesn't have to be!

You can just as easily use procedural content generators to model events happening off-screen.

For example, if the PCs leave mounts or henchmen at the entrance of the dungeon while they go delving within, you can just make random encounter checks for the group left behind.

When I ran "The Sunless Citadel," an adventure by Bruce Cordell, as part of my first D&D 3rd Edition campaign, the PCs left their mounts on the surface while they went down into the citadel. I rolled regular random encounter checks, and when the PCs returned they found the horses still there calmly munching grass… surrounded by a dozen goblin corpses that had been burnt to a crisp.

What the hell happened?!

We can imagine alternate universe GM Jon Favreau doing the same thing: The Mandalorian leaves his ship, so Favreau makes a random encounter check for it and gets "Jawa sandcrawler." What would Jawas do upon finding an unattended ship? Strip it for parts.

Ultimately, what I'm suggesting is pretty simple:

Roll random encounters for locations and people that aren't the PCs.

That's it. That's the tip.

You can generalize this by identifying what the PCs care about and then rolling encounters for those things. This might include people, places, organizations, or, as we've seen, ships. The rate and nature of these encounters will depend on what and where these things are. The henchmen at the dungeon entrance are easy because you can just roll on the dungeon's random encounter table. Same thing with the Mandalorian's ship, because Favreau can roll on the Desert Planet Encounter tables.

But what about the PCs' favorite tavern? Or their emotionally troubled ward? Or their political patron?

The effects of this technique can be dramatic, incidental, or strategic. It might just be a PC's mother calling to complain about a myconid infestation in the garden. But it can also prompt the players to preemptively react. For example, if we're going to leave your mounts somewhere, maybe we should try to make it somewhere with a lower rate of random encounters. Or figure out a way to camouflage the camp in order to reduce the rate of random encounter checks.

In the most generic version of this technique, you can just create a list of important Things in the Campaign and then roll encounter checks for everything on the list as part of your session prep. Maybe each thing has a 1 in 6 or 1 in 10 chance of an encounter. Whatever feels right.

If an encounter is indicated, it just means that this element of the campaign world has seen some sort of interesting development: What is it? And, more importantly, how will the PCs learn of it?

This can be a really easy way to keep a big, complicated campaign world in motion without needing to constantly grapple with the almost impossible enormity of managing an entire universe. It can also just be a good way of reminding the players that the campaign world does, in fact, continue to exist even when they're not looking at it.

You know what else continues to exist even when you're not looking at it? The subscribe button! Pop down to the Font of All-Knowledge and catch it in the act. You might also want to check out the links I have down there to other random encounter advice.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table.

SCRIPT: ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DO THAT?

by Justin Alexander – June 2022

> **Player**: I jump to the ground.
>
> **GM**: Are you SURE you want to do that?

No! Bad Game Master! Don't do that!

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

Okay, yes, it's become a cliché. The players say they're doing something that's going to get them killed. The GM arches their brow. "Are you sure you want to do that?" And the players all panic! Abort! Abort! Silly players.

Here's the thing, though: If the players are suggesting something which is self-evidently suicidal to the GM, then there's probably been some sort of miscommunication.

> **Player**: I jump to the ground.
>
> **GM**: Okay. You fall 200 feet, take 20d6 points of damage, and die.
>
> **Player**: What?! I thought the building was only 20 feet high!

Obviously we don't want that.

But I'm just not a big fan of the coy, "Are you SURE you want to do that?"

It may warn the player away from whatever course of action the GM is concerned about, but it probably won't clear up whatever the underlying confusion is.

What you SHOULD do is actually explain your understanding of the stakes to the player to make sure everyone is on the same page.

> **Player**: I jump to the ground.
>
> **GM**: The building is 200 feet tall. You'll take 20d6 points of damage if you do that.
>
> **Player**: Ah. Right. Well, let's try something else, then.

Of course, the misunderstanding can just as easily be on the GM's side!

> **Player**: I jump to the ground.
>
> **GM**: Are you SURE you want to do that?
>
> **Player**: What? Is it covered in lava or something?
>
> **GM**: No, but the building is 200 feet tall. You'll take 20d6 points of damage if you do that.
>
> **Player**: I'm planning to cast *feather fall*. I just want the princess to THINK I've committed suicide.
>
> **GM**: Carry on.

This carries beyond deadly situations. For example, if you're running a mystery scenario and one of the players says, "I inspect the carpet." And you don't know WHY they want to inspect the carpet… just ask them.

> **Player**: I inspect the carpet.

> **GM**: What are you looking for?

> **Player**: You said it rained last night at 2 AM. If the killer entered through the window after 2 AM, there would be mud on the carpet.

Now the GM knows that the murder took place at 4 AM, so now he can say:

> **GM**: Yup. It looks like somebody tried to clean it up, but you find some mud scraped onto the molding near the window.

If you don't ask the question and you don't understand what they're looking for, you might end up feeding them false – or, at least, misleading – information.

This suggests a general principle:

If you don't understand what your players are trying to achieve with a given action, find out before adjudicating the action.

Thanks to Roy G. for suggesting this topic in the comments for my Running the Sandbox video. If there's a video you'd like to see, I'd love to know about it. Drop it in the comments down below.

If you'd like to support the creation of these videos in the future, you should become a patron! You'll find a link to my Patreon in the Font of All Knowledge down below.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table.

SCRIPT: THE DEAD END

by Justin Alexander – June 2022

You're running a scenario. The PCs have a fistful of leads telling them where they're supposed to go next. They might have so many clues that there are *multiple* places they could go next. But instead of doing that, they head off in a completely different direction.

And there's nothing there.

Maybe they've made a mistake. Maybe they've made a brilliant leap of deduction which turns out not to be so brilliant after all. Maybe they have good reason to look for more information in the local library or the newspaper morgue or the records of the local school district, but there's nothing to be found there.

It's a dead end.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

Dead ends like this can be quite problematic because, once they have the bit in their teeth, players can be relentless: Convinced that there *must* be something there, they will try every angle they can think of to find the thing that doesn't exist. I've actually seen any number of groups convince themselves that the fact they can't find anything is *proof* that they must be on the right track!

The best evidence of a conspiracy, after all, is that the conspiracy isn't letting you find any evidence!

Not only can this self-inflicted quagmire chew up huge quantities of time at the table to little effect, but once the players have invested all of this mental effort into unraveling an illusory puzzle, their ultimate "failure" can be a demoralizing blow to the entire session. The effort can also blot out the group's collective memory of all the other leads they had before the wild goose chase began, completely derailing the scenario.

Fortunately, there are some simple techniques for quickly working past this challenge.

First things first: Is it really a dead end?

[ROLL WITH IT]

Just because they're doing something you didn't explicitly prep, that doesn't mean there's nothing there. In fact, the principle of [permissive clue-finding](#) that we talked about in our video on RPG Mysteries and the Three Clue Rule means that you should actually assume that there IS something to be found there.

So, start by checking yourself. Is it really a dead end, or is it just a path you didn't know was there?

Maybe the players thought of some aspect of the scenario that you didn't while you were prepping it. (That can be very exciting!) And even if something is a wild goose chase, there can be interesting things to be found there even if they don't immediately tie into the scenario the PCs are currently engaged with.

This is why I'll tend to give my players more rope in exploring these "dead ends" during campaigns than I will during one-shots: The consequences of doing something completely unexpected can develop in really interesting ways in the long-term play of the campaign, but don't really have time to go anywhere in a one-shot, and are therefore usually better pruned. Also, if the scenario runs long because you had a really cool roleplaying interaction with Old Ma Ferguson that everyone enjoyed — even though she has nothing to do with the current scenario — it's fine to hang out the To Be Continued shingle in a campaign and wrap things up in the next session, which is, once again, not an option in a one-shot.

In any case, if it's not really a dead end, then you should obviously roll with it and see where it takes you. If you don't feel confident in your ability to improvise the unexpected curveball, that's okay: Call for a ten minute break and spend the time throwing together some quick prep notes.

Although you don't need to announce the reason for the break, it's generally okay for the players to know that they've gone diving off the edge of your prep. Most players, in fact, love it. The fact you're rolling with it shows that you creatively trust them, and they will return that trust. It also deepens the sense of the game world as a "real" place that the players are free to explore however they choose to, and that's *exciting*.

[DRIVE PAST IT]

But what if it really is a dead end? There's nothing interesting where the PCs are heading and, therefore, nothing to be gained by playing through those events.

Well, if there's nothing there, there's nothing there.

At its root, this is a problem of pacing. In an RPG pacing is almost entirely about identifying empty time — the place where there's nothing — and jumping past it to focus on the next meaningful choice.

So when you see a dead end ahead, just drive past it: Frame hard into abstract time, quickly sum up the nothing that they find, and then move on.

For example:

- "You spend the afternoon asking around the Docks for anyone who's seen Jessica, but you can't find anyone who saw her down here."
- "You roll up on Jefferson Sienna, haul him down to the precinct, and grill him for four hours. But you come up dry: He doesn't know anything."
- "You drive over to Mayfair to see if the library has the book you're looking for, but their selection of occult books is pretty sparse."

The most straightforward, all-purpose version of this is to simply tell the players, "You're barking up the wrong tree. This isn't the solution, there's nothing to be found here, and the scenario is in a different direction." But this direct approach is usually a bad idea: You know all that stuff I said about how much the players love knowing the game world exists beyond the boundaries of your prep and that they're truly free to do anything and go anywhere? Well, this is basically the opposite of that. Even if you don't strictly mean it that way, the players are going to interpret this as, "You can only go where you're allowed to go."

The distinction between "this isn't the right way, try something else" and "you did it and didn't find anything, now what?" might seem rather small. But in my experience the difference in actual play is very large.

One is a statement about the game world, the other is a directive from the GM to the players. But I think it's also because the formulation of "you did it" still inherently values the players' contribution: I didn't tell you that you couldn't do the thing you wanted to do; I was open to trying it, you did it, and it just didn't pan out. It's a fine line to walk, but an important one.

The key here, once again, is to quickly sum up the totality of their intended course of action, rapidly resolve it, and then prompt them for the next action: "What do you do next?"

A good way start this can be, **"What are you trying to do here?"**

This pops the players out of action-by-action declarations and prompts them to sum up the totality of their intention. You then take their statement, **rephrase it as a description of them doing exactly that**, and then move on.

Player: Okay, I'm going to drive over to Mayfair.

GM: What are you planning to do?

Player: I want to check out the library there, see if they have a copy of *My Name is Dirk A* that hasn't been stolen yet.

GM: Okay, you drive over to the Mayfair library to see if they have a copy of the book. But their selection of occult books is pretty sparse. It doesn't look like they ever had a copy for circulation. It's about 6 p.m. by the time you pull out. The sun's getting low. Now what?

It's a little like judo: You just take what they give you and you redirect it straight back at them.

[USE A SKILL CHECK]

Where appropriate, you can empower the players' intention by **calling for an appropriate skill check**: Streetwise to ask questions around the Docks. Detective to interrogate Jefferson Sienna. Library Use to scour the stacks at Mayfair Library.

The check can't succeed, obviously, since you already know that there's nothing to find here: Jessica wasn't at the Docks. Jefferson Sienna isn't involved in this. Mayfair Library doesn't own the book.

Calling for the check, however, is part and parcel of allowing the player to truly pursue the action they want to pursue and resolving it truthfully within the context of the game world, while also letting the *player* know that this is what you're doing.

If the group is currently split up, you can also "disguise" the simple judo of this interaction by **cutting away once they've declared their intention** and then cutting back for the resolution.

GM: Bruce, you find Jefferson Sienna smoking outside of his club. What are you planning to do here, exactly?

Player: I want to haul him down to the precinct and grill him about the missing diamonds.

GM: Great. Give me a Detective check. Tammy, what are you doing?

Then, after the GM has run stuff with Tammy for a bit, they bring it back to Bruce:

GM: Okay, Bruce, you spent the afternoon grilling Jefferson Sienna in Interrogation Room #1. What did you get on your Detective check?

Player: 18.

GM: Hmm. Okay. Unfortunately, you come up dry: He really doesn't know anything. What are you doing after you cut him loose?

Notice that there's a difference between "Jefferson Sienna didn't tell you anything" and "you are absolutely certain that Jefferson Sienna doesn't know anything."

Even if the skill check can't give Bruce what he's looking for — because Jefferson Sienna doesn't know it — that doesn't mean the skill check needs to be meaningless. There can still be a meaningful difference between success and failure.

[ESCAPING A DEAD END]

Sometimes, though, it's not a whole scene that will be a dead end.

For example, maybe Jefferson Sienna wasn't involved in the heist, but he's heard word on the street that Joe O'Connell was the one fencing the diamonds. Whether that's a clue you planned or an example of you rolling with the PCs' lead and practicing a little permissive clue-finding, the scene has paid off! The PCs have gotten an important clue!

… but then the PCs just keep asking questions. They're convinced Sienna must know more than that, or they're just paranoid that they'll miss some essential clue if they don't squeeze blood from this stone. The scene has turned into a dead end.

Now what?

First, you can give yourself permission to **just do a sharp cut**: If the scene is over, the scene is over. Frame up the next scene and move on.

However, if the PCs are actively engaged with the scene and trying to accomplish something (even if it's impossible because, for example, Sienna doesn't actually know anything else), this can end up being very disruptive and feel very frustrating for the players.

You can soften the blow using some of the techniques we've already discussed. For example, you might cut to a different PC during a lull in the interrogation and then cut back to the PCs who were doing the interrogation while framing them into a new scene. You can also just ask, "What's your goal here?" And when they say something like, "I want to make sure we know everything Sienna has to tell us," you can judo straight off of that to wrap up the scene.

But we could also borrow a technique that Kenneth Hite uses for investigative games:

When the characters have gained all the information they're going to get from a scene, **hold up a sign** that says "SCENE OVER" or "DONE" or something like that. The statement cues the players to let them know that there's no reward to be gained by continuing to question the prisoner or ransack the apartment or whatever it is they're doing.

You could, obviously, just say that to them. But the sign is less intrusive to the natural flow of the scene. So if there's something they still want to accomplish of a non-investigative nature, the scene can continue without the GM unduly harshing the vibe.

You can adapt this pretty easily to other types of scenes, too. You're basically signaling that the essential question the scene was framed around has, in fact, been answered, and you're inviting the players to collaborate with you to quickly bring the scene to a satisfactory conclusion and wrap things up.

Then you can all drive out of the dead end together.

If you wouldn't mind joining me in the car for a moment, I'd like to take you for a quick drive. My analytics of recent videos tell me that 80% of you watching this are either already subscribed or will subscribe by the time you finishing watching this video. That's fantastic! Thank you so much for your support.

But it also means that for the channel to grow we need to reach out to more new viewers. Do the like, comment, and subscribe thing if you haven't already, but if you want to support the channel today, take a moment to find your favorite Alexandrian video — maybe it's this one! — and share it around. Post it on social media. Send it to your friends. It'll make a big difference.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander and I hope to see you at the table!

SCRIPT: CLIFFHANGERS & CONCLUSIONS

I know we're at the beginning, but let's talk about endings.

You know what makes a good ending? A cliffhanger.

Cliffhangers are great. There are all kinds of cliffhangers, but two significant ones for roleplaying games are the **unresolved peril** and the **escalating bang**.

Unresolved peril is pretty self-explanatory: The PCs — or people or things they care about — are in a state of jeopardy and we "leave them hanging." Uncertain of the outcome. The anticipation of the cliffhanger is based on desperately wanting to know the fate of the things we care about.

An escalating bang, on the other hand, is the point in the scene where the stakes are either precipitously raised to a whole new level OR when the stakes you *thought* the scene were about abruptly change into something completely different. If you cut more or less on the exact moment that the escalating bang is revealed, the anticipation of the cliffhanger is based on being uncertain about where the scene is going and also the eagerness to take action in the new reality presented by the bang.

Sometimes you can combine these.

For example, if the PCs are exploring an old house and a ghost suddenly appears, it not only changes the nature of the scene — the supernatural is now involved — it also puts the PCs in jeopardy.

"Anticipation" is a key word here. What makes a cliffhanger desirable as a dramatic technique is [that the players]—

[TITLE SEQUENCE; cut the bit in brackets up above]

Where were we?

Right. "Anticipation" is the key. What makes the cliffhanger desirable as a dramatic technique is that the players immediately want to keep playing. They want to take action. They want to see what happens next. But you're denying that to them. They're going to have to wait. It's a great way of ending a session because it makes the players eager for the next session

Your use of a good cliffhanger also doesn't have to be limited to the end of a session. Just like a television show cutting to a commercial break — if you're old enough to remember what a commercial break was — you can frame a cliffhanger before taking a 5 or 10 minute break in the middle of a session.

If the PCs have split up, you can create numerous cliffhangers by cutting from one group to the other in the middle of the action. You'll keep everyone at the table on the edge of their seats, anxious to see what happens next.

Cliffhangers, of course, are not the only way to end a session.

Another option is to **Ask a Question**. This can be quite literal, with either you as the Game Master asking a question of the players or an NPC asking it in-character of one or more of the PCs.

Will you pay the kiddnappers? Will you marry me? Will you free Robert the Outlaw King so that he can go to rescue his family?

The key thing is that the players don't get to answer the question until the next session.

If you get really lucky, the players will spend all their free time between now and the next session thinking about the question and debating with each other about what the answer should be.

A less literal way of doing this is to **create a mystery**. The PCs walk into a room and discover a corpse. Or discover documents that may reveal the location of the Lost City of Shandrala. Or activate a magical portal leading to places unknown. Who killed Othnag? How can they translate the documents and what do they say? What will they find on the other side of the portal?

As with the dilemma, the mystery invites the players to think about the answer and anticipate being able to solve the mystery when they play again.

Along similar lines, you can **describe a vista**. Wax a little poetic with a grandiose description: The strange azure planes of the Nephilim Realms. The great halls of Moria. A wretched hive of scum and villainy clinging to the horizon.

This description is an invitation to the players to explore this wondrous or enticing or terrifying place. And, of course, once again, you end the session so that they can only anticipate what they will find and await the opportunity to do so.

At the other end of the spectrum, rather than ending a session with an opportunity, it's perhaps unsurprising to discover that a good ending can also be a big conclusion.

An easy example is simply the **conclusion of a scenario**. Taking a break at the point where a scenario has reached a big, definitive conclusion can help to solidify the sense of accomplishment — that a new milestone in the campaign has been reached.

When you look back at a campaign, these milestones will chart out the journey you've all taken together. Placing these milestones definitively at the end of sessions will help them stand out in your group's memory.

And, from a practical standpoint, this can also be a good place to wrap up for the night so that everyone — including you! — can have some time to think about what they want to do next.

When you end a session at a scenario's conclusion, though, make sure to give space for the epilogue or falling action — the stuff that takes place AFTER the big climax. That's an important part of the scenario, and until it happens the scenario isn't actually done. It can be really easy to fall into the trap of thinking, "Big climax, so we're all done!" But for a sense of true finality, you want the denouement. You want the players to begin getting a feel for what the new equilibrium will be.

There can be exceptions to this, but they tend to skew back towards being a cliffhanger: You shoot the dragon! It falls from the air! You've won! The cliffhanger is the anticipation of the denouement: What will be your reward? What will be the consequences? You'll have to come back to find out!

You may be able to find similar moments in the middle of scenarios. Keep a particular eye out for the **resolution of stakes** that are of particularly significant importance to one or more of my characters. For example, when a cleric in my campaign realized that the church had betrayed him, I recognized that this was where we needed to end the session. By breaking on these significant character beats — particularly if the characters themselves are thinking deeply about how things turned out — you're giving the players the opportunity to also live long in those moments.

Another effective place to break a session is just after a **huge revelation**. We've already talked about escalating bangs that lead to cliffhangers – you open the door to find your ex-wife who you thought was dead standing there — but what I'm talking about here are big, significant infodumps.

For example, in my campaign set in Monte Cook's Ptolus the PCs had spent a dozen or so sessions finding enigmatic clues about a place called the "Banewarrens" and had been trying to figure out what

that was and why it was significant. Then there came a session where an NPC sat down and told the PCs *exactly* what the Banewarrens were, where they had come from, and why they were significant. It was a major payoff. And a lot of new information.

I ended the session there not only because this information changed the equilibrium of the campaign, but because I knew the players needed time to process everything they had just learned. I knew they would spend the time between this session and the next session thinking about this infodump. The campaign would live in their imagination even though we weren't actively playing, and when we came back to the table they would be raring to go with all the things they had thought about while we were gone.

Something to note here is that, when I sit down to start a session, I'm generally not aiming for a specific ending.

In fact, the real trick with an RPG is finding the ending. Unlike a scriptwriter, you only have a limited amount of control over where the game session will take you and how fast it will take you there. That's actually why I use the word "finding": The scriptwriter can sculpt any ending you want. As a GM, you need to be aware of when the ending happens and then *actually end the session*.

This can be tricky because, as we've seen, a lot of effective endings are about cutting at the moment when people are most eager and excited to keep playing. When everyone REALLY wants to know what will happen next. And that will include you. You will be eager. You will be excited. You will want to keep playing.

But if you miss a potential ending, there probably won't be another one coming along for awhile. That's when you'll end up just kind of awkwardly cutting at some arbitrary point because you've run out of time.

That's why it's your responsibility to find that moment of excitement and then resist the urge to keep playing.

Now, to find the moment for that effective ending, you'll first need to be aware when you're in what I call the **ending window**. That's the window of time at the end of the session where it's acceptable to say, "That's all folks!"

It doesn't matter how perfect an ending a particular moment might be if it comes two hours into a four hour session. Although that might be a good place to take a 5 or 10 minute break.

For me, in a four hour session, the ending window is generally from about 15 minutes before our scheduled end time to about 10 minutes after. If I'm running for a group where the end time is hard-and-fast, then the window starts more like 30 minutes before our end time.

If I'm in the ending window, I know that I'm looking for an ending and can start framing and pacing the action accordingly.

I have a simple trick for staying aware of where I am in the session: A kitchen timer.

Before the session starts, I simply set the timer to go off at our scheduled end time and put it discretely behind my screen. (It's usually surrounded by a pool of dice.) I can then tell at a glance where we're at: Three hours left. Two hours left. One hour left. Half an a hour left. Start looking for an ending.

Why not just use the timer on your phone? Well, the timer on my phone generally needs to be checked. I need to turn on the screen. It also opens up the possibility for other distractions in the form of notifications and the like. The kitchen timer, by contrast, just sits there in my peripheral vision. Not only can I check it with a flick of my eye, but I'll periodically notice it throughout the session without having to actively think about checking the time.

It keeps me tuned in.

Over time, you'll find your knowledge of where you are in a session will bring other benefits besides pacing for effective endings. Some of this is practical, like knowing when you should take a break. Others can be a little more ephemeral — you'll start developing a gut instinct for pacing; when you have time to let things play out and when you need to get the players moving with harder framing and higher stakes.

To bring this back around, here's the key thing to remember:

A good ending is an invitation to the next session.

Don't overthink it, though! The most important thing that will make your players anticipate the next session is having a good time in this one. So it can be just fine to end at the moment just after the moment where everyone is laughing and having a good time.

Now, if you've been having a good time here, and want to find a good way to end this session…You can hit the subscribe button. And the bell. And any other buttons you find down there. Leave a comment, too!

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table.

SCRIPT: VILLAIN MONOLOGUES

Bison: I'm sorry. I don't remember any of it.

Ming-Na Wen: You don't remember?

Bison: For you, the day Bison graced your village was the most important day of your life. But for me—

PLAYER: I kick him in the nuts!

[Justin sighs.]

INTRO: ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY

It's a common lament. After many trials and tribulations, the PCs finally stand before their nemesis. The final confrontation – the ultimate moment that you've all been building towards for weeks – has arrived!

You rub your hands with glee as you step into the role of your villain.

Roy Batty from *Blade Runner*. Hannibal Lecter. Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*. Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*. You can't handle the truth! I'm having an old friend for dinner! Greed is good! Nobody panics when things go according to plan!

This is it! The villain's denoument!

But the players don't want to hear it. They just want to shoot the bad guy in the head.

What we have here, obviously, is a mismatch in expectations. You want the big, dramatic moment, and you're not wrong. A good villain monologue – or, even better, a dialogue between the heroes and the villain – can be an incredibly powerful and memorable moment.

But for the simulationist, you obviously don't stop and chat in the middle of a SWAT raid. And the gamist wants to seize the tactical advantage of getting the first shot. Even other dramatists at the table may think that subverting the trope is a cool moment. (And they may be right!)

[SHOW FOOTAGE FROM RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK]

But you want the monologue.

Fortunately, it's super easy to pull this off.

One: The PCs burst into the room. The villain is there!

Two: Call for an initiative check.

Three: Begin monologuing.

Four: Finish monologuing.

Five: Start resolving initiative actions.

And that's it.

You can actually use this technique for all kinds of stuff, not just monologues. Any time you need to seize control of the flow of table declarations, just call for initiative. Initiative structurally tells the players that they need to wait for their turn in a way that the whole table just reflexively accepts.

This works because you're also making a promise. Calling for initiative says, "I understand that you want to take an action here, and I promise you that you will be able to do so."

It's important to keep this promise: Talking is a free action, so the villain can monologue. But they shouldn't be allowed to do a whole bunch of stuff like summoning minions, activating their machine gun turrets, casting a spell, or walking out of the room – let alone all of those things at once! – while the PCs are impotently frozen in place by narrative fiat.

Screwing the players like this will deeply frustrate them and – importantly! – make it even more likely they'll want to shoot the next villain in the head before you screw them over again.

Play fair, on the other hand, and the players can actually enjoy the moment, and even work with you to make it happen.

There are other methods you can use, too.

Method #2: Put the bad guy in a position they can logically monologue without interruption.

For example, she can talk to them over a walkie-talkie as they fight their way up through a megacorp arcology. Or the PCs can be assaulted by creepy telepathic messages as they crawl through the dungeon. Or they can confront each other from opposite sides of a *wall of force*.

Basically, if the villain monologues from a position where the PCs can't shoot them in the head, then the PCs can't shoot them in the head. QED.

Method #3: Monologue during the fight.

This doesn't work if the PCs actually do one-shot the bad guy, but rather than giving a big speech before the fight starts, you can weave the villain's dialogue throughout the fight.

If you want to prep this, just break the "monologue" into bite-sized chunks. You can deliver the chunks on each of the villain's turns, or you can trigger each bit on every character's turn.

You'll probably want to take a looser approach, though. Breaking the monologue up like this makes it more dynamic, and also invites the PCs to engage in a dialogue with the bad guy instead of just listening to them ramble on. Lean into that by having the bad guy push their point of view and actually try to challenge the PCs' beliefs and convince them that they're right.

[DARTH VADER: Join me…]

Method #4: Just let the PCs shoot them in the head.

In my video on the principles of RPG villainy, I told the tale of Silion, a cult leader who had been a thorn in the side of the PCs for many sessions. While infiltrating her lair, the PCs snuck up on her while she was digging through a box of archaeological artifacts, rolled a critical hit, and put an arrow through the back of her skull.

Was that moment anticlimactic?

Not at all! My players loved this moment. They remember it vividly years later, telling the story every chance they get.

Monologues are awesome, but the truth is that you'll rarely go wrong following your players' lead.

You also won't go far wrong by dropping down to the Font of All-Knowledge and hitting the Subscribe button. I've also left a link down there to the Principles of RPG Villainy video I mentioned earlier. It's filled with a bunch of tips for not just having your villains talk, but for making the players care about what they say.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT: PORTALS

by Justin Alexander – March 2023

Mystic portals are awesome. Beautiful, enigmatic, and alluring, as you can see in this phased battlemap from dScryb, the sponsor for today's video, but also filled with mysteries and terrifying temptation.

They're a classic trope for a reason, and I've run some variation of this gag countless times. They're also a great example of how a little bit of finesse in your game mastering techniques can take good material and advance it into something amazing.

[ROLL CREDITS]

If you can see through a portal, then it works just like any other door or archway. No problem. Things can get a little more interesting, though, if the portal really IS indistinguishable from a normal archway or empty hallway. The PCs are just walking along and don't even realize that they've been portaled to another location until their maps stop making sense.

If you're running in the theater of the mind or you're drawing a battlemap at the table, this is easy enough, but it gets a little harder if you're using pre-rendered maps on a virtual tabletop. The trick is that you just need to clone and rotate your map, attaching both ends of the portal together so that — on the screen as in the game world — the PCs can simply continue exploring as if nothing unusual had happened.

If the design of the dungeon allows for it, I recommend going two or three layers deep, since it's likely the players will try to double back and otherwise challenge the geography in an effort to figure out what's going on.

You can run into some physical impossibilities with this that will force alternative transitions, but disguising the actual moment of transition in the game world from the players can still pay big dividends in actual play.

And the payoff is that you can create all kinds of crazy, Escher-esque dungeons using these portals.

Where the raw paranoia will really kick in at the table, though, is when the PCs CAN'T see through the portal. In the classic *Tomb of Horrors* adventure, for example, there are misty archways and green devil faces with gaping maws of black energy you can crawl through. What lies on the far side of such portals? Is it safe to go through them, or is it all some kind of elaborate trap or ambush?

Another classic gimmick is the one-way portal. As soon as the PCs go through it, they turn around and find they've been trapped on the other side.

Often, of course, the PCs will also encounter a portal that isn't a one-way affair, but have no way of being certain of that. So, either way, the day will come when you hear some variation of, "Okay, let's send Kittisoth through first to check things out." or "I stick my ten-foot pole into the portal and pull it back out!"

So the first thing you'll want to do when running a magic portal is **know your metaphysic**.

What DOES happen when you stick something halfway into the portal and then pull it back out?

There are four major variations here.

First: No problem. It's just like a doorway in space, even if the field of energy blocks your line of sight. You might even be able to HEAR what's on the other side!

Second: You can't pull it out. Once an object has gone partially through the portal, the only movement allowed is forward through the portal. If you pull back, it will feel as if the object is "stuck."

Third: It's incredibly dangerous to do that! You can pull back, but you'll only pull back the portion that's still on THIS side of the portal. (When the time comes, make sure you walk through these portals with confidence.)

Fourth: That's not possible, because as soon as any object or creature touches the surface of the portal, it instantly vanishes and reappears on the other side. It's more of a "touch here to activate" effect than it is a literal gateway.

This last one can get a little tricky, though: If I touch it with a pole, is it only the pole that disappears or do I go with it? Can I tie a rope to an object hundreds of feet away, toss the other end of the rope through the portal, and have the object vanish? What if the object is bolted to the floor? Or it's a huge tree and the room on the other side is only 10 feet by 10 feet?

But, conversely, if I touch it with my hand, do I disappear but leave my clothes behind?

One way to simplify this metaphysic is to create a threshold in front of the portal — a misty arch, a field of energy, a penumbral aura, the entire room the portal is in, or any other such border — and only have objects vanish if they're completely within that threshold when the portal is touched.

In any case, the reason you want to have a clear understanding of the portal's metaphysic is because the players will want to experiment with the portal and figure out how it works. Or, more importantly, whether it's safe or not. They're going to come up with all kinds of crazy tests, so you really want to have a clear conceptual framework for consistently ruling what the outcomes of those tests will be.

Personally, I think it's important that the metaphysic you come up with feels consistent with the portal's behavior on the other side. If it's a one-way portal, for example, then you shouldn't be able to stick things through the portal — a ten-foot pole or a rock tied to a string —and then pull them back.

You should play fair and reward players who take the effort to explore and engage deeply with the scenario.

Now, what happens when the PCs actually take the plunge and go through the portal?

Well, if they all go together at the same time, then… they all go together. Describe the moment of transition — the flash of light or the momentary feeling of non-existence or the oily grease slick of the arcane sluicing across their skin — and then describe what they see on the other side.

That's super easy.

Where it gets more interesting, though, is when the PCs decide to send a scout through the portal.

When they do that —if it's a one-way portal — I recommend using a **portal countdown**.

Don't immediately describe what the scout sees. Instead, stay with the PCs that remained behind. Describe the scout going through the portal, disappearing, and then… what do you do?

You don't need to roll for initiative, but you're basically sliding into combat time. Keep track of the number of rounds it takes for each of the other characters to go through. Then, once they've all done so, you can flip to the other side of the portal and accurately play out events on the other side.

So, for example, Kittisoth walks into the portal. The other PCs wait a couple of rounds and then Edana sticks her ten-foot pole through. Unable to pull it out, she sighs and steps through on the next round. Everyone else then nervously follows on the fifth round.

Now cut to the other side of the portal: Kittisoth emerges into a goblin ambush! Roll initiative!

On the third round of combat, Edana's pole sticks out of the portal. On the fourth round, Edana walks out. On the fifth round, the other PCs finally join the fray!

Even if there's nothing immediately "interesting" happening on the other side of the portal countdown — for example, Kittisoth emerges into an empty room and just waits patiently for everyone else to join her — the experience is still immersive and tantalizing in its paranoia: *What is happening on the other side of the portal?!*

When there IS something happening on the other side of the portal, the dramatic tension of seeing the other side of the timeline playing out is a ton of fun.

Okay, now let's do a little troubleshooting for how you can handle some common scenarios here.

First, what if all the PCs don't come through? That's fine, actually. Run a couple rounds of the portal countdown, but when it becomes clear that some or all of the other PCs aren't going to follow Kittisoth blindly through the portal, just ask them how long they'd wait, write that down on your countdown, and then cut to the other side of the portal.

Second, should you have the players leave the room? You certainly can, but I haven't found that to be strictly necessary. Getting to see both sides of the portal interaction can be a lovely source of dramatic irony. On the other hand, the experience of being sent into another room and waiting while your fellow players join you one by one can also be mysterious and fun.

Play it by ear and get a feel for what works.

Third, what if it's not a one-way portal? Well, as long as the players think it might be, I recommend using the portal countdown. If for no other reason than that you don't want to tip your hand when it IS a one-way portal.

But this is trickier. The technique works almost flawlessly with a one-way portal because the two sides of the portal are firewalled from each other. Kittisoth, for example, can't just walk back through the portal.

This might be a good time to take the initial scout to another room, describe what they see on the other side of the portal, and get a sense of what their intention is. Are they going straight back? Are they going to explore for a bit? Do they get cut off from the portal by the goblin ambush?

Once you know what's happening, you can go back to the rest of the group and resolve things there.

It's also not the end of the world if Kittisoth comes back "early" and interrupts the portal countdown. You can just retcon the rest of that countdown. Those actions, although declared, never actually happened. Or maybe they belong to an alternative version of reality.

Premature returns aren't the only continuity glitches you might need to work around. For example, Kittisoth might try to initiate telepathic contact with her comrades after getting stuck on the other side of the portal. Or she might grab the end of Edana's pole and yank her through a round early.

Again, this is the type of thing we wring our hands over in theory, but in actual practice it's usually not a big deal. You just adjust and roll with it.

Meanwhile, what exactly is Kittisoth yanking Edana into on the other side of that portal?

It might be a Faerie Realm. Perhaps the portal emerges into an abandoned elven village which lies upon the borders of that place:

This village, once home to the people of leaf and song, lies silent now. No sounds of children playing, no bustle of commerce, no music from flutes or lyrical elven voices. Plants and trees, once tenderly cared for, now grow wild among the abandoned buildings of this empty place.

dScryb, the sponsor of today's video, offers interactive maps, an incredible sonic library, and lush descriptions created by an incredible team of professional RPG designers, like the one you just heard. Using their tools, you can weave these components into comprehensive compositions — scenes and immersive environments ready to be unleashed at your tabletop. dScryb also has prebuilt scenes and environments, like the Plane of Faerie where our dear friend Kittisoth has found herself stranded.

You can find a magical portal to the dScryb website down in the Font of All-Knowledge if you'd like to check out their free resources. Make an attack of opportunity on the Subcribe button while you're down there.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT – BETTER SCENARIO HOOKS

Published scenarios often teach us that scenario hooks are a bang-bang interaction: The mysterious stranger in the corner of the tavern tells us about a mysterious artifact, hires us to go look for it, and we immediately head to the dungeon to retrieve it.

Or we're traveling along an idyllic country road when we come across the smoking remnants of a merchant's wagon that was attacked by goblins. The ranger finds their tracks and leads us back to their warren.

There's nothing wrong with these bang-bang hooks. But they're disproportionately represented in published adventures because the writers have no way of knowing what's been happening in your campaign: Everything you need to run and play the adventure obviously has to be self-contained in the adventure.

But as the Game Master, you *do* know what's been going on in your campaign. In fact, you can control it. That gives you the power to easily do so much better than the author of that published scenario.

[ADVANCED GAMEMASTER INTRO]

Let's take a second look at those scenario hooks.

What if, instead of a "mysterious stranger," it's a long-time ally or patron of the PCs? Someone they've built a relationship with.

What if instead of fetching an artifact that an NPC wants, the McGuffin is something that the PCs *need* to accomplish their goals? Maybe the stranger isn't buying their services, but selling them information.

Instead of a random merchant, what if the goblins attacked someone the PCs know and care about?

What if the goblins don't just materialize out of thin air, but are a threat people in the local village have been talking about for weeks? Or are part of a goblin clan that the PCs have fought before?

These kinds of long-term threads will weave the adventure into your campaign. The stakes will be higher, and more meaningful to the players, because they aren't just transitory concerns.

Long-term scenario hooks can be implemented in a variety of ways (and have a variety of effects) depending on the [campaign structure](#) you're using, but for the sake of simplicity let's focus on episodic campaigns for the moment — the players are presented with a single scenario; they complete the scenario; and then they get presented with the next scenario.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to implement long-term scenario hooks. First, you can **retrofit the hook**. When you pick or design your next adventure, you simply look back at the campaign to date and figure out how to use the existing continuity to hook the new adventure. What are the PCs trying to accomplish? What do they want? Who do they care about? Who do they hate? What are your players talking about between sessions? Just dangle it on the hook.

The other option is to **plan for the hook**. Which is basically what it says on the tin: If you know what adventures you're planning to run later in the campaign — whether they're published adventures or something you're planning to make yourself — take a peek at them and think about how you can incorporate and foreshadow those elements into the earlier adventures of the campaign.

As an example of what this prep might look like, let's take a peek at *[Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel](#)*. This adventure anthology, shepherded into existence by project leads Ajit A. George and F. Wesley

Schneider, is a collection of thirteen D&D 5th Edition adventures designed for PCs from 1st level through 14th level.

And I should warn you now: There's going to be SPOILERS.

Although loosely bound by the conceit that the adventures are set in a location which can be reached via the transplanar nexus of the Radiant Citadel, each adventure is a completely standalone experience.

Nevertheless, it seems quite likely that many Dungeon Masters will run *Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel* as an episodic campaign, running each adventure in sequence, one after the other.

So how could we prep long-term scenario hooks for these adventures?

To start with, the tiers of play in D&D 5th Edition make for a handy rule of thumb here: To set yourself up for success, you should be dropping the groundwork for your Tier 2 and Tier 3 adventures in the Tier 1 adventures of your campaign.

So let's start by looking at the Tier 1 adventures in *Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel*.

First we've got SALTED LEGACY, in which the PCs get caught up in family drama and business rivalry in the Dyn Singh Night Market.

Second, WRITTEN IN BLOOD, in which the PCs journey to a farming commune to uncover the source of an undead curse.

Finally, THE FIEND OF HOLLOW MINE, in which the PCs must hunt down a demon-spawn which has unleashed a plague in San Citlán.

Using these scenarios as the foundation for our campaign, let's take a look a the scenario hooks for the next several adventures in the anthology. One of the great things about *Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel* is that the designers have included multiple scenario hooks for each scenario, so we'll have some nice options that we can work with.

The first Tier 2 scenario is WAGES OF VICE.

> *Zinda's March of Vice is famous throughout the region. An influential ally of the characters requests that they attend and, while they're there, purchase a bottle of jeli wine to be used as a gift in a diplomatic negotiation.*

Let's go back to "Salted Legacy," the first of the Tier 1 adventures. If we were looking to retrofit the hook, then the ally requesting the jeli wine in "Wages of Vice" could actually be Lamai Tyenmo, the owner of Tyenmo Noodles who hired the PCs in "Salted Legacy".

But since we already know that we'll be eventually running "Wages of Vice" when we start the campaign, let's also plan for the hook. At the end of "Salted Legacy," perhaps Tyenmo could ask the PCs to keep their eyes open for interesting ingredients and drinks that she might use to create new noodle dishes and enhance her menu.

That's a nice, open-ended link! If the players bite (pun intended), it's quite likely they'll keep finding new ways to engage with the hook in every adventure.

"Hmm… I wonder what aurumvorax steak noodles would taste like."

This isn't the only connection we could forge In Wages of Vice, the PCs also get involved with Madame Samira Arah, a King of Coin and one of the rulers of Zinda). She's investigating a series of attempted political assassinations. As we continue to plan for the hook, it might be nice to establish her earlier in the campaign. Let's reach back to the WRITTEN IN BLOOD adventure, for example, and take a peek at its scenario hook.

> *A trader the characters have had past dealings with — perhaps from the Radiant Citadel or the Dyn Singh Market — invites the characters to Promise to participate in a business deal with Aunt Dellie.*

We'll have this merchant be Samira Arah, the King of Coin from "Wages of Vice." She's been doing some economic outreach and the guards she had with her took ill after their visit to San Citlán. One of the merchants from "Salted Legacy" recommended the PCs to her, and she contacts them in the Radiant Citadel.

You can already see how we're weaving multiple elements from multiple adventures together.

Sins of Our Elders takes place in Yeonido during the week-long Dan-Nal Festival. One of the hooks involves the PCs being invited to attend the festival by a family member or friend. You can look to the PCs' backgrounds for the family member or friend (who might be native to Yeonido or you might just want to visit), but we can add a little foreshadowing by having Samira Arah mention in "Written in Blood" that her next festival envoy will be to Yeonido.

Gold for Fools and Princes takes place in the Sensa Empire, where the empire's rich gold mines are disrupted by an infestation of gold-eating aurumvoraxii. In addition to being a tasty treat for Tyenmo Noodles, the big thing we'd really like to pre-establish for this adventure is the Empire's reputation for goldsmithing and the powerful Aurum Guild. This should be fairly easy: Lady Drew, the trader from "Written in Blood," can try to sell the PCs Sensan gold jewelry. In "The Fiend of Hollow Mine," some of the miners who worked in the now-abandoned mine in that adventure can talk about wanting to travel to Sensa to see if they can find work with the Aurum Guild. They could even show up as recurring characters in this adventure!

And that's more or less all there is to it. Obviously, you could also continue weaving these threads through the later adventures in the book as well. For example, if the PCs are getting on well with Samira Arah, she might send them to the Goldwarrens on some errand as the primary scenario hook for "Gold for Fools and Princes."

Although I opened this discussion by saying that published adventures were predisposed to bang-bang hooks and that it's impossible for adventure writers to know the continuity of the campaigns of the GMs who choose to run the adventure, it's NOT true that designers can't design long-term scenario hooks like this for published adventures.

The trick is to simply prep tools and content that GMs can use *before your adventure begins*.

A tool I've developed in my own work as a designer are **groundwork sidebars**, which give the Game Master examples of how material in the scenarios can be incorporated into earlier adventures; it's literally laying the groundwork for the adventure.

There's a link describing these and other scenario tools you can use in published adventures in the Font of All-Knowledge below. If you'd like to see what these look like in practice, check out the *Welcome to the Island* adventure anthology I developed for Jonathan Tweet's *Over the Edge* roleplaying game. I'll leave a link for that down there, too.

And while you're down there, make sure you plan your own hook for watching the next video by hitting the Subscribe button.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table.

SCRIPT: THE BEST ADVENTURING GROUP

by Justin Alexander – June 2023

GM: Okay, so you all meet in a tavern—

Princess Bride Woman: Boo! Boo! Boo! Boo!

[Buttercup wakes up]

Narrator: It was ten days until the campaign. The players were still creating their characters, but the GM's nightmares were growing steadily worse.

Kid: See! Didn't I tell you there was a better way to create characters for a roleplaying game?

Narrator: Yes, you're very smart. Shut up.

[PLAY INTRO.]

The very best roleplaying campaigns aren't about plot. They're about characters.

These are the tables where the characters live vividly in your imagination and the chemistry between the PCs is so thick it could be cut with a knife.

We know this to be true, but nevertheless often leave it up to pure chance. We throw together a bunch of random characters, have them meet in a tavern, and hope that maybe lightning will strike.

The truth, of course, is that this type of chemistry is more art than science. There's no way to GUARANTEE that a particular group of characters will gel. But there's definitely stuff we can do to prime the pump.

Let's start with a **relationship circle**. You can probably pull this off in less than ten minutes during character creation.

Simply go around the table and ask each player to create a preexisting relationship between their character and one of the other PCs.

When you define your relationship with another PC, you're establishing a critical fact about both characters. You can make it any kind of relationship, but it should be an important one. Family relationships — mothers, sons, uncles, wives, heirs, and the like — can be the easiest to think of and may prove the most dramatic in play. Close friendships, coworkers, and the like can also be strong choices.

Choosing to be enemies can be a VERY strong choice, but should be approached with caution. At the very least, you'll need to come up with an even stronger reason why the two of you are forced to work together, and you may still have to accept that one or both of those characters will end up exiting the campaign at some point.

On that note, because the player creating the relationship is asserting a fact onto another player's character, you'll often want to give that player the right to veto the relationship. It may be more useful, though, to think about how the relationship can be modified rather than rejected.

Although simple, these relationships create emotional and practical bonds between the characters, binding them together before play begins.

For a slightly more elaborate technique, let's take a page from the *Dresden Files* roleplaying game and create an **adventure legacy**.

First, go around the table and have each player create the **story skeleton** for their adventure. *Dresden Files* suggests a simple formula:

When [something happens], [your protagonist] [pursues a goal]. But will [your protagonist] succeed when [antagonist provides opposition]?

For example:

When Caemar's crops begin glowing with a sickly green light, Ulfar must find the source of the supernatural curse before his people starve. But will Ulfar succeed before the village is overwhelmed by the radioactive zombies emerging from the Vault of the Elder Things?

Or:

When Princess Buttercup is kidnapped, Wesley must return as the Man in Black to rescue the love of his life. But can he outfox the legendary strategist Vezzini without revealing the true identity of the Dread Pirate Roberts?

Once everyone has established their story skeleton, go around the table again. This time, however, each player will cast their own character as a **guest star** in one of the other PCs' adventure. These supporting roles usually take one of three forms: they complicate a situation, solve a situation, or both.

For example:

Leronica's efforts to alchemically nullify the poisonous fruit failed, but when she ate of the white apple she was possessed of strange visions. She was able to provide Elfar with a map of the Vault of the Elder Things.

Inigo Montoya was working for the criminal mastermind Vezzini. Although impressed by the Man in Black's skill, he was bound by duty to stop his rescue attempt. They fought a mighty duel atop the Cliffs of Insanity.

The players don't need to do this in isolation. In fact, they should be encouraged to bounce ideas around and talk about how the adventure should be developed and what contribution could be made.

> **Wesley**: You're a master swordsman, right? You know what would be cool? If you wanted a challenge, so you decided to fight with your left hand instead of your right!
>
> **Inigo**: Yeah! And then I switch back, but it turns out—
>
> **Wesley**: That I was doing the same thing!

Each player should select a different adventure to guest star in. So once you've gone around the table twice, everyone should have an adventure, be guest starring in an adventure, and have someone guest starring in their adventure.

If you'd like, you can now go around the table a third time and have everyone guest star in an additional adventure. If you do, characters shouldn't revisit stories they've already guest starred in. They should visit a new adventure, which will mean that each adventure will have a starring character and two different guest stars.

This will knit the group together even tighter, and these connections will often provide a natural explanation for why they're all teaming up for the first adventure of the campaign with a shared backstory that can continue being developed during play.

To create a group with even greater dramatic potential, deeper relationships, and a ton of tension ripe for actual play, you can take things a step further by creating a **drama map**.

This technique is inspired by the DramaSystem, a generic storytelling game engine designed by Robin D. Laws. You've probably never heard of it because it's been cleverly hidden away inside a rulebook called *Hillfolk*.

Hillfolk is an odd duck of a book. There's about fifty pages of generic rules describing the DramaSystem, then about fifteen or twenty pages dedicated to *Hillfolk: A Game of Iron Age Drama*, and then another one hundred and fifty pages providing everything you need to use the DramaSystem to play in another 30 or so settings.

In other words, there's about two hundred pages of DramaSystem in there and less than a couple dozen pages of *Hillfolk*.

But I digress. My point is that the DramaSystem, hidden though it may be, is really cool. You should check it out even if you're not interested in the iron age setting of *Hillfolk*.

For today, though, we're just going to focus on harvesting its character creation system and turning it into a cap system.

If you're not familiar with them, a cap system can be used in conjunction with other RPGs. You can think of it as a system that goes over the top of another RPG. Or as a funny little hat your favorite RPG is wearing. Whatever works for you.

[STEP 1: ROLE IN THE GROUP]

In creating our drama map, we'll start by going around the table and having each player **define a role for their PC in the group**. Write the character's names and roles on a large sheet of paper.

If you're playing D&D, the game will provide you with some easy defaults: The warrior, the wizard, the rogue, and the healer. But you might want to challenge yourself to choose roles that are more specific to your unique group.

For example, if you're playing in the 5th Edition stone age fantasy setting of Planegea, the PCs might have different roles in their tribe: Leader, Elder, Oracle, Hunter, and so forth.

In a *Star Trek* campaign, on the other hand, you'd have the captain, science officer, engineer, chief security officer, and so forth.

On that note, don't necessarily shy away from a clearly defined chain of command. Roleplaying games often do that, but the tensions within a well-defined chain of command can be a rich source for dramatic play.

You can also bear in mind that chains of command aren't necessarily linear. Different characters can have ultimate power over different spheres of influence. Check out the history of the USSR Politburo if you want to see the excitement that can generate.

As the players choose their roles, you may notice that they leave behind some jagged holes. For example, maybe none of the PCs on a pirate ship take on the role of the Captain. Or one of them IS the Captain, but none of them is the Navigator.

Those holes are a prompt to the GM, who should fill them with compelling NPCs. While the PCs should, of course, remain the main characters of the campaign, these NPCs are likely to become some of the most important members of your supporting cast, so create them with care.

[STEP 2: THE RELATIONSHIP MAP]

Once all of the players have chosen their roles, each player in reverse order will define the relationship between their PC and another PC.

This is similar to the relationship circle we talked about earlier, but we're going to repeat the process until each character has a relationship with every other character.

As you're doing this, take the sheet of paper with the characters' names on it and create a **relationship map** by drawing lines between each of the characters and labeling those lines with the nature of their relationship.

[STEP 3: STATE DESIRES]

Once the relationship map is complete, each player will declare what their character's **Desire** is.

To quote Laws, "A desire is the broadly stated, strong motivation driving a character's actions during dramatic scenes. A character's desire moves them to pursue an inner, emotional goal, which can only be achieved by engaging with other members of the main cast and, to a lesser degree, with the recurring characters run by the GM."

The character's Desire might be seen as their weakness: It makes them vulnerable to others, placing their happiness in other peoples' hands. This creates dramatic action because conflict between the characters will prevent them from easily or permanently satisfying their Desires.

Another way to think about Desire is as a reward that they seek from others.

The most powerful choices for your Desire are generally the simplest: approval, acceptance, forgiveness, respect, love, subservience, reassurance, power, to punish, or to be punished.

Note that these are EMOTIONAL, not practical goals. If you find yourself drawn to a practical goal, delve past it to find the emotional need behind it. Veruca Salt, for example, craves material things in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, but it's because she's desperately trying to elicit true affection from her father and others.

Finding the emotional core of your need is both a more powerful choice and a more flexible one in actual play. How could Veruca Salt demand affection when she's NOT in a chocolate factory, for example?

[STEP 4: DEFINE DRAMATIC POLES]

Next we'll finish fleshing out the inner life of the characters by defining their **dramatic poles**.

Each pole, broadly speaking, defines the character's identity, and each player is going choose two poles for their character which are in CONFLICT with each other.

For example, George Bailey's poles in *It's a Wonderful Life* are ambition vs. responsibility.

Mark Thackeray's from *To Sir With Love* are anger vs. civilization.

Hamlet's are justice or revenge?

Joseph Cooper's, from *Interstellar*, is torn between adventure or family?

Brian O'Connor, in the first *Fast and the Furious* movie, is law or friendship?

~~You can see other options suggested by the DramaSystem over here. [pg. 15]~~

The important thing, again, is that these two identities are in conflict. This conflict of identity is what drives dramatic storytelling: Who is the character going to be? Who will they CHOOSE to be? What will they be FORCED to become?

You'll want to make both the poles and the conflict between them as clear as possible. In most dramatic scenes featuring your character, you, the GM, and the other players will want to play into this conflict, thus creating dramatic stakes and interest.

As you're playing out these scenes, note that this conflict doesn't mean your character is wishy-washy. For example, at the end of *The Fast & the Furious*, Brian rejects the law and chooses family. But then changing circumstances force him into fresh struggles between his two desires.

George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* chooses responsibility over ambition every time, but his story is nonetheless compelling. It is the *struggle* that creates dramatic interest.

At some point, of course, your character might find a way to end this conflict within them. Perhaps they'll do so by definitively choosing one identity and forever rejecting the temptation of the other. Or perhaps, like George Bailey, they'll realize that the rewards from a life of responsibility and care ARE his true ambition, and you'll find a way to reconcile them.

Either way, this would be the conclusion of your character arc. You would either need to find what new poles are creating conflict for the character. Or, perhaps, their story is triumphantly concluded and it will be time for you to create a new character.

[STEP 5: WHAT YOU WANT FROM OTHERS]

Finally, we will bring our dramatic poles into focus by declaring what they lead our characters to seek from the other PCs.

In an order determined by the GM, each player declares what they want from another specific PC. Examples could include: love from the object of your affection; approval from a mentor; or to punish your mother.

The player of that character then defines why they can't get it: "I could never love one of a lower caste." "If I give you approval, you would stop trying." "I will not be punished when I am blameless."

If necessary, both players should adjust the statement to reflect the first character's understanding of the situation. Then draw an arrow between the characters on your drama map and label it with the want.

Note that it is crucial that the PC CANNOT get what they want at the beginning of play. If the other player feels that their character would readily grant what the first PC is asking, then the stakes must be raised or changed.

Once again, this is an EMOTIONAL need. Wesley's practical goal is to rescue Princess Buttercup. But his emotional need is to find out if she still loves him… or if she ever loved him. She can't immediately give him that because she thinks he's dead and he's disguising his identity.

Repeat this process until all the characters are named as the objects of at least two other characters' wants. Other relationships may, of course, be defined and developed through play.

[CONCLUSION]

Through this process we have created the roles and relationships that define how and why the characters interact with each other. We've given each character a desire, complicated that desire through strong dramatic poles, and then created specific, actionable emotional goals.

Collectively, this gives you and the players a huge toolkit to use for guiding roleplaying, framing scenes that focus inter-character drama, or for complicating and developing interactions in any scene. We'll be taking a closer look at scene-framing in a future video, so make sure to hit the Subscribe button so you don't miss that.

If you'd like a little inspiration for creating a new character right now, check out the BOOK OF CONFLICT from RPCraft, the sponsor for today's video. Currently on Kickstarter, the BOOK OF CONFLICT focuses on orcs, goblinoids, and other forgotten folk. It includes a ton of new mechanical content, including classes, subclasses, new gameplay mechanics, feats, spells, magical items, and monsters, but what has me most intrigued about the BOOK OF CONFLICT is the lore: Goblin castes, orc upbringings, hobgoblin settlements, and bugbear tribes all promise to bring a breadth of cool cultural options to these heritages.

I'm going to drop a link to the BOOK OF CONFLICT Kickstarter into the Font of All-Knowledge below. When you head over there, don't forget to check out the cool custom DM screen that's included for backers.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT: THE REACTION POINT

by Justin Alexander – June 2023

You've just finished describing in your *Technoir* game how the evil cyborg clone of Jet Li has leapt through the warehouse window, sending a cascade of glittering glass across the oil-soaked floor. He lands in a perfect, three-point stance. You pause…

… but the players don't immediately respond.

Okay. Let's keep talking: Cyborg Jet Li somersaults forward and raises his arm. The flesh peels back, revealing a machine gun…

… Oh, god. Still nothing?

Uh, okay. So the machine gun fires, spraying the room with bullets. Then the cyborg dashes behind a forklift for cover! Then he shouts out, "Your deaths are all part of the program!" Then he summons a couple of attack drones, which come flying in through the window.

And then… and then… and then…

This is something I call **fearing the silence**. The GM finishes describing something and pauses… but there's not an IMMEDIATE response from the players. The silence, however fleeting, is like a vacuum, and the GM feels compelled to fill it.

So they start talking again. And what can they possibly talk about? Well, whatever would happen next, right?

I've just gotta keep talking!

[PLAY INTRO]

From the GM's perspective — either consciously or subconsciously — the players aren't engaged with the game. If they were engaged, then they'd be declaring an action. But they aren't. Which means the GM has done something wrong. So the GM has to do SOMETHING. The have to SAY something. They have to get the players engaged again!

Oh god. It's all going horribly wrong. What can I do? Gotta do something. Do something. Do something. JUST KEEP DOING THINGS!

But what's actually happening is that the players are being boxed out. They can't make declarations about what they're doing, so it stops feeling like they're interacting with the world and starts feeling like they're just watching it.

This can then become a cascading problem: As the players are forced into becoming a passive audience, they lose "momentum" in interacting with the world. Once that happens, it can take a moment for them to figuratively get up out of their chairs and back on stage again; for them to start taking action. But that moment they need to sort of reconnect to the game and get rolling again is a moment of silence, and the GM is still nervously filling it before the players can get going, pushing them even farther into passivity.

You can create a similar problem through **freeze-frame boxed text**, where the GM starts reading and then the PCs are frozen in place while a bunch of stuff happens. These can get really elaborate, with entire scenes being played through while the players sit impotently, boxed out — pun intended — from actually playing the game.

Here's a simpler example from *Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel*:

> **GM**: Grasping weeds and vines erupt from the cobblestone street beneath the carriage at the head of the parade. The ox pulling the cart panics, causing the vehicle to career into a post covered in decorations. The vegetation then wraps around the cart's wheels and the closest bystanders. A pair of revelers produce weapons, revealing themselves to be guards protecting the Prince of Vice.

As soon as the players hear, "Grasping weeds and vines erupt from the cobblestone street!" they'll want to respond to that. Instead, everyone else in the scene — including the ox! — gets to react before they do.

The problem here isn't that the GM is using boxed text. When used properly to clearly indicate the information players should have about a scene or location, boxed text and similar techniques can be a very efficient and effective form of prep.

For example, consider this example from dScryb, the sponsors of today's video:

> **GM**: A lattice of silvery-white metal, artfully crafted into the shape of a spiderweb, arcs low over a sarcophagus of black marble polished to a high sheen. The lattice is moored to marble posts, and atop it, stands a spider as big as a cat. From its mandibles dangles a thin gold chain, at the end of which hangs a red gem as thick as your thumb.

This is great boxed text.

To understand the difference — to understand why the first example was bad and the one by Matt Sernett for dScryb was good — it can be useful to realize that you can get an almost identical problem without any boxed text at all. In fact, **bottomless improv** can happen specifically because you don't have anything prepared.

Maybe the players have gone to a location I didn't anticipate, so I'm creating it on the spot. As I describe the location, I keep getting cool new ideas.

So I Just. Keep. Talking.

There's this… and this… and you see somebody doing this… and somebody else doing this… and there's also this other thing… and also… and then the first guy does this other thing… and then…

The game world is infinitely detailed! It exists far beyond the capacity for the single audio channel of the GM's voice to convey or describe in its entirety. So if you get into a creative groove, you will never run out of new things to describe. You're once again stuck in a loop and the players are, once again, boxed out.

Whether you're improvising NPC actions, writing boxed text, or improvising the description of a scene, what you want to do is identify the **reaction point** — the point at which something happens that the PCs will want to react to — and then you need to STOP TALKING.

Imagine that you're playing your favorite character and listen to this GM describe a scene.

> **GM**: With a sharp crack of splintering wood, the door smashes open, revealing five goblins who whip their heads in your direction. The room is about forty feet across. The high, curved walls are lined with built-in shelves of cherry wood filled with books and warmly lit by a crystal chandelier that hangs from the middle of the domed ceiling. The goblins have been ripping books off the shelves.

At what point in that description did you have an impulse to take action?

Your mileage may vary, but I'll bet it was as soon as the GM mentioned the goblins.

So let's take a different look at that same scene.

> **GM**: With the sharp crack of splintering wood, the door smashes open, revealing a room about forty feet across. The high, curved walls are lined with built-in shelves of cherry wood filled with books and warmly lit by a crystal chandelier that hangs from the middle of the domed ceiling. Five goblins are ripping books off the shelves, but their heads whip in your direction.

What do you do?

Did you feel the difference? Did your impulse for action come at the very moment that the GM stopped talking so that you could take that action?

Now, your descriptions at the game table are an artistic expression and the given circumstances of any particular moment at the game table are limitless. So there will be a bajillion-and-one hypothetical exceptions to any general principles we might discuss. But at least nine times out of ten, it boils down to recognizing the reaction point and then immediately letting the players react to it.

This can create results that seem counterintuitive to human perception or even contrary to what you might see in a novel or short story.

If you opened a door and saw a slavering beast, all of your attention would be immediately focused on the monster! You wouldn't take time to notice the bookshelves first!

In a novel, on the other hand, an author could easily introduce the threat of the monster and then keep the reader in suspense by describing the scene.

But we're not reading a novel. We're playing a roleplaying game. It's a unique medium, and the techniques that will make you most effective as a game master will often be unique, too.

In this case, the ACTUAL experience of the character is to see the slavering beast and immediately react to it! That's the adrenaline-pumping, fight-or-flight crisis response you need to capture if you're going to immerse the players into the scene. You don't want to blunt that reaction by forcing them to wait until you've finished describing the rest of the room.

Okay, but can't we resolve this dilemma by just NOT describing the room? The character's focus would be on the slavering monster!

> **GM**: With the sharp crack of splintering wood, the door smashes open, revealing five goblins! Their heads whip in your direction!

Unfortunately, this ignores the limited bandwidth of information the players have about the game world.

Although the character may be immediately fixated on the goblins, their peripheral vision is immediately processing the environment: Where are the exits? Where can they hide? How far away are the goblins? How can they attack?

Not only can they take in the totality of their sensorium, they can also take action while simultaneously continuing to observe their environment.

The players can't do that. As they communicate their intended actions to you, they're monopolizing the same channel of information that you'd use to give them more details about the environment.

So one of two things will then happen.

First, the players will recognize the problem and start asking questions. Are there any obstacles that would stop me from charging them? Do I see anything I can dive behind?

Second, without understanding the environment, they'll take nonsensical actions. For example, you didn't mention the giant chasm that runs across the room between them and the rabid mammoth, so now they're charging straight into it even though that would obviously be a ridiculous thing for their characters to do.

This will, of course, force you to stop and correct them.

In either case, you've still blunted the reaction point with additional environmental description. But you've also made it really awkward.

So the players need a coherent understanding of the environment in which they are taking action and you need to position the reaction point in the most effective way possible.

To do this effectively, another useful tip is to set yourself a **description limit**. What's the maximum number of things you can describe before you need to stop talking?

This isn't a hard or fast rule, but I recommend three to five, and almost never more than seven. Of course, you don't NEED to describe that many things. If you describe three things and that's everything you need to set the scene… great! You're done.

This limit can feel constraining, but there are a few things to keep in mind that will help.

First, at the beginning of a scene, whether that's a new location or a new situation, **start broad, then specific**. You've given yourself a budget, and you'll want to make sure the players know they're in a forest before you start describing individual trees.

Second, **identify the reaction point** before you start the description. Then aim your description at the reaction point. At a bare minimum, when you've spent your entire budget except for the reaction point, arbitrarily stop describing things and cut to the reaction point.

For example, once you've said four things describing the hotel room, it's time to mention the ogre with the gun and see what happens.

If you identify **multiple reaction points** in the scene, what you'll usually want to do is prioritize them. Present the first, let the PCs react to it, and then present the second. I also think of these as **actionable chunks**: Grasping weeds and vines erupting from the cobblestones is one actionable chunk. The ox pulling the cart panicking, causing it to careen into a post covered in decorations is another actionable chunk. The vegetation wrapping around the cart wheels and the nearest bystanders is another chunk. And so forth.

I use the word "actionable" here because you're specifically looking for **actions** you can take as a GM, allowing the PCs to have **reactions** to each of those actions.

Sometimes there might be two reaction points that are truly happening simultaneously. For example, the ogre pulls a gun at the very moment that kobold ninjas leap in through the window!

That's fine. It'll just chew up more of your budget, since you'll need to describe both reaction points.

This creates a natural corollary in which, generally speaking, the more complicated the stuff HAPPENING in the scene is, the simpler the SETTING of the scene should be.

Finally, remember that **description can persist** through the entire scene. You don't need to describe every single detail of the hotel room before the PCs react to the ogre pulling her gun. You may not have had

time to describe the lamp, but as Antoine rushes forward to knock the gun out of the ogre's hand, you can describe how the sickly light flickering out through the cigarette-stained lampshade throws his shadow garishly across the far wall. Maybe you haven't described what can be seen outside the window, but as more kobold ninjas swing through it you'll have the chance to mention the billboard declaring Mayor Thomas' re-election campaign behind them.

This is particularly useful if you find yourself bubbling over with bottomless improv. You don't need to discard all those cool ideas that are sparking in your imagination. You just need to hit the pause button on them, drop the reaction point, and then look for the opportunity to weave them into the carnage.

This is, of course, something that you can practice. You can make it a **practice point** by writing it on a Post-It note and attaching it to you GM screen. Something like:

1. Identify the reaction point.
2. 5 details!
3. Start broad, then specific.
4. Keep describing!

Or even just REACTION POINT in big, bold text.

Having that Post-It note on your screen will put it in your peripheral vision throughout the session, creating a persistent reminder of what you want to focus on.

This is also a skill you can practice away from the table with a simple exercise.

dScryb, the sponsor of today's video, offers interactive maps, an incredible sonic library, and lush descriptions created by an incredible team of professional RPG designers. This includes a large selection of prewritten boxed text, a lot of which you can access for free.

As an exercise, follow the sponsored link to dScryb in the Font of All-Knowledge below and look through their boxed text. Think about where the reaction point is. Does the description get it right? If not, how would you rearrange the text to get the maximum effect from the reaction point? Is there something you could add to make it better? Or take away?

This is also a great time to check out So You Want To Be a Game Master, my new book on GMing coming from Macmillan and Page Street Publishing this fall. You'll find a link with more information on that in the Font of All-Knowledge, too!

In the broader scope, the big solution to all of these problems that we're talking about is to simply **care about what your players are doing**.

Minimize the mindset of the Story you're trying to tell or even the World you're trying to immerse them in. Your NPCs should be awesome, but they are not ultimately the stars of your campaign.

The mindset you want to emphasize, in my opinion, is: I want to see what the PCs do.

I'm having an ogre draw her gun because I want to see how the players react to that. And I want to see how I react to what they do!

I can have a lot of fun playing around with all the cool lair actions the Lich-King can take, but ultimately the point of the Lich-King encounter is for the PCs to confront him.

It can be a subtle shift in thought. But when your primary focus becomes, "Oooo… I wonder what THIS will make them do?!" you'll never forget to give them the opportunity to do it.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT: DILEMMA HOOKS

by Justin Alexander – June 2023

I spend a lot of time talking about scenario hooks. It's because they're really important, and they're a lot more powerful than you think.

One of the reasons people don't get as much mileage from scenario hooks as they could is because they're prepping linear plots. When you force the players down a linear path without choice, the function of a scenario hook is to force them onto the path.

The thing about railroading is that it's boring. It's also difficult. You have to keep forcing the players or tricking the players into doing the very specific things you predetermined would move the plot forwards. That's why the scenario hooks for these adventures have to be so simple and boring.

When you abandon all that — when you start prepping situations instead of plots — you can have a lot more fun with your hooks.

For one thing, you can start having multiple hooks for the same scenario. When the PCs don't have to follow a specific, predetermined path, you can suddenly start pointing them at many different parts of the scenario: Maybe they get involved because they've been investigating the drug trade. Or maybe they get involved because their cousin is kidnapped. Or maybe they got involved because the tunnels from the cemetery lead to the basement of Sir Isaac's mansion.

This obviously makes it a lot easier to deliver scenario hooks for the scenario and also to design your campaign with the Three Clue Rule in mind. And when the PCs get multiple scenario hooks, they have a really interesting choice about how and why they're going to approach the scenario.

Let me give you a really simple example of this.

A common type of scenario hook is patronage: An NPC approaches the PCs and asks them to do something. Kill his sister, retrieve the Ruby of Obar Khadam, raise the Titanic using temporal voodoo, whatever the case may be.

The next time you want to use a patron as a scenario hook, though, don't just use one patron. Use two. And have them hire the PCs to do different things.

This setup creates the context for framing tough dilemmas.

> **PLAYER**: Do we chase after the assassin to claim the bounty or do we save the Jewel of Erthasard from the river of lava?

In fact, you can do this from the very beginning of the scenario by using what I call a **dilemma hook**: The first patron asks them to do X, and the second patron asks them to do the exact opposite.

If Patron A asks them to murder the CEO of Abletek and Patron B asks them to work as part of the CEO's security detail during an upcoming business conference, you're immediately forcing the players to really THINK about the scenario they're being hooked into: What do THEY want to have happen to the CEO?

They can't just sit back and passively do whatever they're told to do. They're going to have to make a decision.

The really cool thing is that once this empowers the players — once they know that they're in control — their choice will often be neither X nor Opposite-X. They will set their own agenda and take the game to places that none of you could have imagined.

If you'd like to learn more about making awesome scenario hooks, I have an entire chapter dedicated to them in my upcoming book *So You Want To Be a Game Master*, which I'll link to in the Font of All-Knowledge down below. I'll also leave some links down there to the other videos we've done on scenario hooks. Don't forget to like, comment and subscribe!

Good gaming! I'm Just—

What?

We forgot to play the intro?

Play the intro.

[PLAY INTRO]

I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT: HOW TO BE A BETTER GAME MASTER

by Justin Alexander – June 2023

I offer a lot of advice to game masters through my videos here on Youtube, on my website, in my book *So You Want To Be a Game Master*, through my Random GM Tip Twitch streams, and in the RPGs that I've designed and published.

And, of course, I'm not the only one. There are dozens of other people on Youtube and Twitch and designing their own roleplaying games.

It can honestly be a little overwhelming.

So something I get asked a lot is, "How do you keep track of all this stuff at the table?" "Do you have any tips for using your tips?"

Yes.

[PLAY INTRO]

So how do you become a better Game Master?

Well, it's a little like dancing. You do it one step at a time.

Of course, there are some pretty complicated dances out there. And I've never seen a ballet dancer keep track of half a dozen NPCs in combat while also describing the scene while also making sure they don't forget the vital clue the PCs are supposed to find…

A game master has a lot of things to juggle is my point.

So let's break this down into three simple techniques.

First, in order to become a better game master, you have to **run roleplaying games**.

There's just no substitute for it. That's why it's the approach I take for new GMs in my book *So You Want To Be a Game Master*. Right at the beginning of the book I very quickly lay out the basic skills a new game master needs in order to run their first session. This is after just twenty or maybe thirty pages. And then I say, "Go and do that." And then come back here and learn more.

You really can't become a better game master until you're at the table doing it.

Okay, so now you're at the table. How do you keep track of all this stuff?

Well, the answer is you don't. Instead, you need to focus and master, and to do that you'll set **practice points** for each session.

As you learn about new techniques you want to master — whether from my videos, *So You Want To Be a Game Master*, or some other source of GMing lore — list one to three of these techniques on a Post-It note and attach it to your GM screen.

For example, one tip that I find useful when roleplaying scenes with multiple NPCs is to give those NPCs competing goals or opinions. This conflict helps to keep the NPCs distinct in both YOUR mind and the players' minds, while also making it easy to roleplay the scene because you've given them something to

argue about. It also forces the players to make up their own minds about which NPC's goals and opinions they, personally, agree with, drawing them into the scene and the world.

If you wanted to make this a practice point for your own game, you might write NPCs ARGUE or NPCS HAVE DIFFERENT OPINIONS on your Post-It note.

Having that practice point on the Post-It note will keep it in your peripheral vision throughout the session — a constant reminder of the technique that you want to focus on.

Once the technique has become habitual, of course, you can take it off the list and replace it with the next technique you want to add to your skill set.

You can get extra mileage from this technique by choosing practice points that are complemented by the scenario you're running. And vice versa. Does the scenario feature a bunch of NPC social interactions? Grab two or three techniques designed to enhance your roleplaying and focus on those for the session.

Finally, although there's no substitute for actually running a game, you can practice some of these skills away from the table with **exercises**. You'll find a few of these in *So You Want To Be a Game Master*, but they're surprisingly rare in GM advice.

For example, when I wanted to work on improving my descriptions of combat, I would take a really great fight film like *The Matrix* or *John Wick* or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and narrate the action as it happened on screen. It may sound a little corny, but it will build your repertoire of action choreography and help loosen up your descriptive instincts.

When you discover a new technique, ask yourself how you might be able to practice it BEFORE your next session. That won't always be possible, of course, but it'll make a big difference when you can.

On a similar note, if you're watching videos like this one, it's likely you're going to build up a backlog of techniques. That's good! Keep a master list somewhere with links to the articles or videos where you first learned about the technique. When you're ready to retire your current practice points, hit up your master list to figure out what you're going to focus on next.

Speaking of GMing technique, when I spoke to the sponsor of today's video in the mirror this morning, he was very insistent that I should mention that *So You Want To Be a Game Master* not only includes everything you need to run dungeons, dynamic dungeons, megadungeons, advanced dungeons, mysteries, raids, heists, node-based scenarios, pointcrawls, urbancrawls, and hexcrawls, it ALSO includes a huge Extra Credit section including a plethora of tips for running combat, splitting the party, creating scenario hooks, playing your supporting cast, rolling up rumor tables, and more.

The book is available for preorder now, and you'll find a link in the Font of All-Knowledge with more information about that.

Thanks to Son of Sofaman for recommending the topic of this video.

While you're racing down to the comments to make your own suggestions for what video you'd like to see next, make sure to sideswipe the Subscribe button, the Follow button, and any other suspicious looking buttons you might spot down there.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT – CREATING CHARACTERS

by Justin Alexander – June 2023

> **Player**: That was an amazing campaign! We're going to play Kevin's *Infinity* campaign next?
>
> **GM**: That's right! Should probably last about twenty or thirty sessions. You should all create characters and I'll see you next week for the first session!

Uh oh. You've already made your first mistake.

[PLAY INTRO]

If you're getting ready to launch a dedicated campaign, it means that you and your players are probably committing to twenty or thirty weekly or bi-weekly sessions. You're going to be playing these characters for the next six months, a year, maybe two years. Maybe more.

That's a major commitment. So you're going to want to make sure that you get things off on the right foot. Everything else you do in the campaign will be built on the foundation of that first session.

And even before that first session begins, you have character creation. So the last thing you want to do is tell your players, "Hey! Go create a bunch of random characters! Then bring 'em on in and hopefully it will all work out!"

You need a Session 0. A session that's dedicated to just laying the foundation for everything that comes after it. There's a lot of other stuff you might do during a Session 0, but for today we're going to focus on character creation.

The first and most important thing to understand is that character creation is not a solo affair: It is a collaborative process. At a minimum, it's a collaboration between you and the player. Ideally, in my experience, it's the entire group collaborating. In fact, rather than thinking of it as "character creation," it's probably more useful to think of it as GROUP creation.

Some games, like *Technoir* or the *Dresden Files*, are already designed to do character creation as a group, with specific procedures that will require the players to work together. But even in games like D&D or *Infinity*, which don't have explicit procedures, you'll find this approach pays big dividends.

Once everyone is gathered for Session 0, the first thing you'll want to do is **establish the campaign premise**: Who are the characters, what do they do, and where do they do it?

For example, the PCs are street samurai who take mercenary jobs from corporate agents in Night City. Or they're the crew of an interstellar tramp freighter in the Human Concordat. Or they're koala bears seeking a cure for chlamydia in the Australian Outback.

As the GM, you might have a specific premise in mind, which was probably included in your campaign pitch. In some cases, just picking the game you're going to play provides the entire premise. For example, if you say, "Do y'all want to play *Blades in the Dark?*" then I know that we'll be playing "a game about a group of daring scoundrels building a criminal enterprise in the haunted streets of the industrial-fantasy city of Duskvol," because that's literally the first sentence in the rulebook.

But if I tell you that we're going to be playing GURPS, the universal roleplaying game, then I've told you literally nothing about the campaign premise and I'll need to fill in a few details before we get started.

Between these two extremes you'll find games like D&D, which have some baked in assumptions about the campaign premise, like all of the PCs being wandering heroes seeking treasure, but will still require you to fill in the other blank spots.

And, of course, you can often reject these default premises and do something completely different. Maybe this is a D&D campaign where all the PCs are arena gladiators or librarians in Candlekeep or pirates in the Southern Sea.

The creation of your campaign premise can, itself, be a collaborative process. The question, "What do y'all want to play next?" is basically the most simplistic form of that. But in addition to answering the three basic questions of Who? What? and Where?, you can also create a discussion about the specific themes and even events that the players would like to explore in the campaign. If you want to see what this can look like in practice, check out the *Dresden Files* RPG that I mentioned earlier, or Luke Crane's *Burning Empires*, both of which formalize this collaborative process in really interesting ways.

Whatever the campaign premise may be, you'll probably want to flesh it out a bit with specific information.

For example, I recommend prepping a brief setting handout that will orient the players and give them the essential context they need to start imagining their characters. In fact, e-mailing this to your players ahead of time is probably ideal.

One or two pages is usually enough, and, in my experience, five pages is the absolute maximum. Anything longer than that and some or all of the players just won't read it, which obviously defeats the purpose.

Make sure that this handout includes any information that is REQUIRED for character creation. In D&D, for example, this includes gods (because clerics need to pick their deity) and languages (because everyone needs to pick those).

With everyone on the same page — pun intended — we can now move onto Step 2, which is creating the **character concepts**.

I generally just cut the players loose at this point and let them create whatever their fervid imaginations conjure up. Importantly, however, they're all doing this at the same table, which allows them to continue collaborating with each other.

If you've played D&D or *World of Warcraft*, you've probably already done this. "Hey! Who's playing the healer? Do we have a tank?" But it's really powerful to push this same collaboration into the character concept itself. "Hey! What if my character was your sister?" or "We're both playing wizards? Could we have both been apprenticed to the same master?"

Again, there are RPGs that are specifically designed to foster these connections. A tip that can be used in almost any game, though, is to simply ask the players to make sure that their character has an existing relationship with at least one other PC.

I'll be sharing a cap system that you can use to take this technique to the next level in a future video, so make sure to hit the Subscribe button now and make sure you don't miss that.

As you can see, this process usually goes hand-in-hand with whatever the MECHANICAL procedure is for creating characters in your roleplaying game of choice.

At some point, though, what you'll have from each player is a basic concept. This might be a couple sentences, it might be a few paragraphs, or it might be multiple pages of detailed background. It really depends on the player, how inspired they are, and what type of campaign it is. My philosophy is that whatever the player wants to give me is good, whether that's a sentence or a novella.

What happens next is what I call **public integration**. Basically, I'm going to take my expertise in the setting and use it to turn generic archetypes of the character concept into specific content. For example, the player might tell me that they want to play a barbarian who grew up in a frozen wasteland. And I'd say, Great, you could be a member of the Tribe of the Red Elk, which is a barbarian clan who lives in the Northern Wastes. And I'd give them some details about the tribe and I'd ask, "Does that sound like what you're looking for?"

In some cases, this will be me pulling relevant information from my notes. In other cases, I'm using the character creation process as a prompt to create new details about the setting for myself.

There are a couple reasons I do this. First, I find that the collaboration tends to encourage more deeply imagined characters. Second, my players rarely know as much about the campaign setting as I do, even if it's a published campaign setting, and so the collaboration is both a way of taking advantage of the setting to create a more interesting character and also a way of more deeply immersing the player into the setting.

This doesn't have to be super elaborate.

> **Player**: I want to play a priest of the God of War.

> **GM**: The God of War is Itor.

And that might be all you need or want to do.

Of course, you can do more than that, too. You can add details about how the church of Itor operates; what the history of the church is; what the religious uniforms of the church are; what the holy symbol of the god is; and so forth.

You might also tell the player that you don't have a God of War yet or, if you have, that you haven't created a lot of details about Itor, and then invite the player to create those details.

Although this process will almost always start at the table, I often find it useful to finish it via e-mail. At the end of Session 0, I'll ask the players to e-mail me their character backgrounds, which will give them a chance to finish developing exactly what they want, and then I'll reply with additional information.

It's important to remember throughout this process that your goal isn't to overwrite what the player wants. It's exactly the opposite. Your goal is to help them develop and enrich their original character concept, not change it.

If they say they want to play a knight and I offer them three different orders of knighthood their character could belong to, my goal is to find the one that's right for them. And if I can't offer them a choice, then I'll emphasize that by saying, "Does that sound right?"

At the end of this process, both you and the player will have a detailed background for the character that's been fully integrated into the campaign world.

At the same time that you're wrapping up this public integration, you'll also want to start your third phase of character creation, which is **private integration**.

As the GM, you want to start figuring out how to hook the character into the larger structure of the campaign.

Is there a major villain in the second act? Make it the long-lost brother of one of the PCs.

Is there a kidnap victim in the third adventure? Make it a PC's mentor.

Were you planning to have a corrupt order of wizards? Give one of the PCs a chance to join it.

And so forth. You're figuring out how to make the campaign ABOUT the characters instead of just involving the characters.

This obviously works in the opposite direction, too: Take inspiration from the players' character backgrounds to weave new threads into the campaign.

Is the campaign about a civil war to determine the king's heir and one of the PCs chose to join an order of knighthood? Then you'll probably want to figure out how the Order fits into the political tapestry of the kingdom.

Check out our previous videos on better scenario hooks and the campaign stitch for a more in-depth look at this kind of campaign planning. I'll drop links to those down below in the Font of All-Knowledge.

Last but not least, you want to **bring the party together**.

Moreso than anything else we've discussed, this isn't really a separate step, but rather something that should be taken into consideration throughout the entire character creation process.

What binds these separate characters together?

At least 95 times out of 100, you'll want to explain why the PCs are all going to generally hang out and do thing together before you start the first session. 4 out of the remaining 5, you'll probably want to have things prearranged so that they all fall in together within the first few scenes.

A really key thing to understand here is that it's not your sole responsibility as the GM to make this happen: The players should be collaborating with each other to figure it out.

You can definitely help them out, though. Establishing long-term relationships and common goals are good places to start.

It's also useful to point them at the premise: You're all occult investigators interested in supernatural mysteries? How did you all end up doing that? When did you first start doing it together?

Having all of the PCs belong to a specific organization often provides an easy answer to all of these questions. This might be a larger organization like a government agency or religious order which has assigned the PCs to work together. Or it might be a smaller organization that the PCs have founded for themselves.

Another approach is to point them at the first scene or initial hook of the campaign. When I was running the *Eternal Lies* campaign for *Trail of Cthulhu*, for example, I told the players that the campaign would begin with all of them being hired by a millionaire to investigate some weird occult stuff. They could have preexisting relationships with each other if they wanted, but the key thing was that they each needed to create a character that the millionaire would want to hire.

Similarly, when I was running the *Dragon Heist* campaign for D&D, I told the players that in the first scene all of their characters would be walking through the door of the Yawning Portal tavern in Waterdeep, where they would be meeting someone was going to hire them to do a job. As they created their characters, all they needed to do was explain how they got to that point together.

If you'd like to see detailed, step-by-step examples of this procedure put into actual practice, I'll be dropping some links to that in the Font of All-Knowledge. There's also a link to *So You Want To Be a Game Master* down there, which is my new book. For even MORE information on booting up your new campaign, you should grab a copy today!

If you'd like to join our party here at the Alexandrian, sign up by hitting the Subscribe button while you're down there and introduce yourself in the comments. We'll be leaving on another adventure soon.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table.

SCRIPT: DESCRIBING THE WORLD

by Justin Alexander – July 2023

The GM's words are the players' window into the game world. There are performance-enhancing tools you can use, of course, like pictures, miniatures, and maps, but the heavy-lifting will still boil down to what you say and how you say it.

This, of course, is storytelling, and there are a virtually infinite number of storytelling techniques you can use to vividly bring your game world to life for the players. There's no limit to where the art of storytelling will take you, but in the crucible of the table it can be useful to have a few tried-and-true techniques you can fall back on.

That's where we'll start today: Simple formulas that will empower you to create descriptions that are efficient, effective, evocative, and also EASY.

[PLAY INTRO]

[DUNGEON ROOM]

Let's start with a room in a dungeon.

When describing a **dungeon room**, start by listing every notable thing in the room and its position. "Notable" here can be broadly understood as the stuff that the PCs will check out, interact with, or which will inform their actions.

Second, use the Three of Five rule to drop descriptive tags onto some or all of the notable things.

The short version here is that you should think about your five senses and try to include at least three of them in your description. Sight is a gimme and Taste will rarely apply, so that usually means picking a couple out of Hearing, Smell, and Touch.

Remember that you don't actually have to touch something to intuit what it might feel like if you did. Touch can also include things like wind and temperature.

ADVANCED VERSION – MORE SENSES

Vestibular (Balance)
Thermoception (Temperature)
Nociception (Pain)
Ultrahuman (Magic/Tech)

Finally, if appropriate, add a verb. In other words, add action to the scene. For example, instead of saying "there's a waterfall" you could say "a waterfall tumbles down the far wall."

In other words, you're listing things in the scene — a wardrobe, a bookshelf, a goblin — and then dropping a descriptive tag on some or all of them:

A horrid stench [smell] emanates from a wardrobe off to your left. On the opposite side of the room, there's a bookshelf stuffed full [sight] of thick tomes and tightly wrapped scrolls. There's a goblin pawing through the books, knocking them to the ground [verb]. Seeing you, the goblin gapes its maw and screeches [that's a sound].

And that's your Three of Five, your verb, and your formula for describing a dungeon room.

We can also use a description formula for NPCs, whether we're improvising them or prepping a Universal NPC Roleplaying template, which I'll link to in the Font of All-Knowledge down below.

First, include an action — something that the NPC is doing.

Second, what are they wearing?

Third, include one physical trait.

For example:

Lady Silva is wearing a beautiful blue dress [clothing] that compliments her sapphire eyes [the physical trait]. She taps her finger thoughtfully on her chin while looking you up and down [an action].

If you're using the Universal NPC Roleplaying template, the NPC's action may be drawn from the Roleplaying section of the template. In other words, the action may be the NPC's common mannerism. But it doesn't have to be. The key thing is that you're establishing the NPC as someone *living* in the world. You're not describing a portrait hanging in a gallery; you're establishing them in the scene.

When encountering a hostile monster, we can use a slightly different formula to quickly bring them to life.

First, look at their abilities and attacks. Describe how one or more of these are physically manifest.

Second, describe one non-ability-based physical trait. If you're coming up dry on this, you can use ability scores for inspiration — monsters with high Strength scores are bulky or muscular; high Dexterity scores are lithe or nimble; and so forth.

Finally, add a verb. Once again, an action that puts both the monster and the scene into motion, creating a flow of time that propels the players to react to what's happening.

Let's pick a few monsters at random from the *Monster Manual* and see how this plays out in practice

First, we have a hill giant. They have a greatclub and a rock attack. You could include the club in your description. Alternatively, you could mention that they're standing near a pile of rubble from which you can later describe them snatching up rocks to throw at interlopers.

They're a giant, so… they're quite tall.

You don't actually have to make this complicated.

What could the giants be doing? Gnawing a bone, scratching their head, chatting amongst themselves, swatting at the giant flies swarming around their heads… Again, you don't have to be particularly clever. Just establish the idea and move into the scene.

Okay, let's find another monster.

How about the revenant? I can see that one of their abilities is Vengeful Glare, so let's describe them as having eyes that burn with an eerie blue light. They're undead and have an 18 Charisma, so we can add that it's an incredibly handsome figure with chalky gray-white skin. Now we can simply add an action that's appropriate to the current scene.

As with our other formulas, of course, you shouldn't get hung up on the order here. The description of the revenant, for example, can be: "A dark figure perched atop a rocky promontory, gazing out across the valley. The man's features are handsome, but his eyes burn with an eerie blue light and his skin is a chalky gray-white."

Let's put the *Monster Manual* down now and grab a completely different monster.

How about a xenomorph?

Their acid blood isn't immediately obvious, but maybe we could riff on the idea of bodily fluids by having their jaws slavering with some alien fluid. Their serrated tail whips back and forth, while the flickering fluorescent lights gleam off their black, chitinous exoskeleton.

It's pretty easy to imagine coming up with similar formulas for other elements of a particular setting or game that you find yourself struggling with, either at the table or during prep. For your own formulas, here are a few things you should keep in mind.

First, what is essential? What do the players need to do know to understand, interact with, and even remember this element of the game?

Second, what can I use as a source of inspiration? Like the Three of Five rule or using monster abilities.

Third, keep the formula short. All of these formulas include three elements, and that's not really a coincidence. You could do four or maybe even five elements, but at some point the formula simply become unwieldy.

Ideally, these formulas should be simple enough that you can remember them. As you're getting comfortable with a formula, though, you can also jot it down on a Post-It as a practice point and attach it to your GM screen.

Of course, formulas are ultimately… well… formulaic. They'll only take you so far, and they can easily become repetitive. It's also trivial to find examples where a generic formula will be a poor fit for the needs of a specific scene or character.

The role of these formulas is not to be the be-all or end-all of RPG descriptions. But if you're stuck, you can use them as simple recipes to get your brain churning. In fact, you'll often find that starting with a formula will quickly inspire you to spin out of the mold and create something completely different.

And if it does?

Mission accomplished.

These formulas are tools, not straitjackets.

And as you're looking to expand beyond the simple formulas, one thing to keep in mind is that description should persist throughout the scene.

I've mentioned in the past that the legacy of boxed text can condition GMs to think of description as something that you only do at the beginning of a scene or when the PCs enter a room. But that's an artificial limitation of published modules that you should try to move beyond as you're running the game.

This persistent description can take several forms, all of which are used in response to the PCs' actions.

First, you can add sensory details. You mentioned that there was broken glass on the floor [sight], but as the PCs move into the room you can add the description of the glass crunching under their boots — adding both sound and touch.

You described the waterfall as roaring [hearing], but you can build on that by mentioning the cool mist it throws up [touch] or the fractured reflections of light dancing across the walls of the cave [sight].

Second, you can provide additional details in response to investigation. When the rogue heads over to check out the wardrobe, you can take the opportunity to describe the intricate carvings on its doors. After seeing Lady Silva for the first time, the PCs grab their drinks and head over to talk to her. Now you can take the opportunity to add the color of her hair as she turns to look at them.

In the case of a keyed dungeon room, these additional details are often structured and prepped. Remember how we listed each notable thing in the room? When the PCs go to investigate or interact with each notable thing, that action simply triggers additional details.

Of course, the PCs can also discover entirely new things in the environment as they explore it. A secret door is a classic example here. Also, what's inside the wardrobe and causing that terrible smell? Matryoshka techniques, which I discussed a bit in our previous video on Matryoshka clues, can be a powerful way for running this. I'll include a link to that video in the Font of All-Knowledge.

Fourth, you can introduce new elements tangentially. A cold wind blows through the cracked window. An otyugh shambles through the door. A police siren wails past the apartment building. A flickering hologram manifests in the center of the chamber.

You don't have to wait for the PCs to investigate to add something new to the scene. The world, after all, is a dynamic and active place.

Finally, you can combine any or all of these techniques. For example, someone throws a rock with a note wrapped around it through the window. As Bryan goes to pick up the rock, describe the crunch of broken glass under this feet. He discovers that the rock itself is black obsidian. As he pulls the note off the rock, describe the texture of the vellum.

An image I find particularly evocative is to think of the description of the game world as being **layered**. You don't have to describe every single detail of an environment in one big glob of exposition. Make sure that the players have the KEY information they need to orient themselves and understand what's happening; but then either peel back or add on — whichever visual analogy works better for you — additional layers of description as the scene plays out, slowly building up the mental image of the place like a painter laying down paint on their canvas.

Speaking of layers, here's an extra tip when it comes to describing monsters.

The first time the players encounter a monster, you need to establish the monster's basic visual image. And, obviously, you can use the formula we just talked about to do that.

But once the players are familiar with a monster and are able to put a name to it — goblins, gelatinous cubes, blood terrors, little fuzzies — you don't need to re-establish the monster's basic description every time.

This can lead you into a trap, though, of replacing evocative description with bland labels: "You see six goblins."

What you usually want to do instead, once the players know what a monster is — in other words, when you can say "it's a worg" and they know what that means — you want to dig one layer deeper by CUSTOMIZING the monster.

These aren't just six goblins. They're six goblins dressed in opera dresses. This isn't just a worg; it's a worg with a bright red scar over its left eye. This yeti's fur is matted and filthy. This ogre's hair is tied in a topknot. This ghoul's left arm is broken and its hand flops back and forth on a loose flap of sinew. This wraith wears an iron crown of Angorak.

When the PCs run into a mob of monsters, you don't need to customize every single one of them, of course. In fact, it's probably counterproductive. As a rule of thumb, though, you'll either want to customize one of them — for example, it's a group of yetis and ONE OF THEM is wearing a sapphire amulet — or focus on what's notable about ALL OF THEM. For example, all of these yetis are missing a finger on their left hand.

If you're making one member of a group stand out, it will often be the leader. But this isn't necessarily true. For example, one worg out of the pack might be limping and ostracized by the others.

For humanoids, you might use the full formula for an NPC described above, but for monsters you often just need one salient detail to distinguish them.

If you'd like to see more great descriptions, check out dScryb, the sponsors of today's video. Their site includes vivid descriptions created by an incredible team of professional RPG designers, as well as interactive maps, character illustrations, and an incredible sonic library that includes Foundry VTT integration. Whether you're looking for a little inspiration or just the missing piece you need to make your next adventure perfect, you may find it hiding over at dScryb. I've included a link to their free resources in the Font of All-Knowledge down below.

Make an opportunity attack on the Subscribe button while you're down there. I've got some really great videos coming up, including some deep dives into my upcoming book *So You Want To Be a Game Master*, that you won't want to miss.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table!

SCRIPT: LEARNING A NEW RPG

by Justin Alexander – July 2023

So you're a Game Master who wants to run a new roleplaying game. Maybe it's your first. Or your second. Or your fifteenth. Maybe you're a little intimidated because it's more complex than anything you've run before. Maybe it's your first time prepping to run a game you haven't played before. Maybe it's just something new.

You want the process to go smoothly. And you want to make as few mistakes as possible.

The bad news is that Step 0 of running a new roleplaying game is accepting that mistakes WILL happen. And that's okay. That's part of the process.

The good news is that the Alexandrian is here to help.

[PLAY INTRO]

Step One. Read the rulebook.

Cover to cover.

I'm afraid there's no cheating around this and no shortcuts. If you're lucky, the RPG you've chosen will have a well-organized rulebook, but the process of mentally "touching" every page of the book will not only prevent you from missing a rule entirely, it will also begin constructing a mental map of the rulebook that will help you find whatever you're looking for more quickly at the gaming table.

Step Two. Make a cheat sheet.

This is my secret weapon. I'll prep cheat sheets and add them to my custom GM screen.

It's real easy to fake mastery of a rule system when you have it all laid out six inches in front of your face. The act of creating a cheat sheet will also enhance your ACTUAL mastery of the rules: You'll "touch" every part of the system a second time, and also engage with the system to really understand what makes it tick.

My goal with one of these cheat sheets is to include every rule in the rulebook. This doesn't include character options like feats, class abilities, disadvantages, or the like. But I do try to dig deep to suss out all of those weird rules that RPG manuals leaving lying around in dank corners.

You'll discover that a lot of RPG manuals are actually quite terrible when it comes to organizing their rules, so you can also seize the opportunity here to reorganize everything in a way that makes sense to you. You'll also find yourself resolving thorny issues and unclear mechanics that might otherwise booby trap you during the actual game.

I'll also give copies of these cheat sheets to the players, and also revisit them after a session or two of play: Was there stuff I missed? Stuff that could have been phrased better? Stuff that should be cut? Stuff that should be moved around for easier use?

Do it. Print a new copy. Repeat until you've refined your cheat sheet into a lean, mean running machine.

You can find examples of these cheat sheets on the Alexandrian, and I've linked to them in the Font of All-Knowledge down below.

On that note, let's talk about Step Three: Run a one-shot.

If I'm interested in running a long-term campaign in a new roleplaying game, I'll almost never start by jumping directly into the campaign. Instead, I'll run a one-shot. This will usually be a published scenario and I'll usually use pregenerated characters.

This one-shot allows both me and the players to work out the kinks.

For the players, this will make it a lot easier for them to create their characters for the full campaign. They'll understand how the game works and that will help them understand the choices they're making during character creation.

For you as the game master, this experience running the game will help you get comfortable with the new system. That'll make it easier for the first session of the actual campaign to go smoothly, getting things off on the right foot with characters and situations that you'll be spending months or years with.

It's also possible you'll discover that you don't actually like the game, in which case you can just move on to a new game, without having wasted a bunch of time and effort on something that isn't going to work.

Step Four: Co-opt player expertise.

You want to do this in every way you possible can.

This includes, "Bob, can you look up for the rules for pugilating people?"

It also includes defaulting to, "Anybody know the rules for pugilating people?" instead of defaulting to looking it up yourself.

There's sneakier stuff you can do, too. For example, let's say that the PCs are using a weird combination of abilities or wickedly smart tactics and you can't figure out how to counter them. You can just design some bad guys with the same combination of abilities or who use the same tactics and then wait to see how the players deal with it.

Basically, the game master doesn't play alone. There's a gaggle of smart people sitting at the table with you. Working together,

Step Five: Run sessions that highlight specific rules.

When a game has a lot of specialized sub-systems, it's not unusual for players to struggle with some of them. Grappling rules are a common example in a lot of systems, and also stuff like rigging in *Shadowrun* or social zones in *Infinity*.

Often the reason players struggle with these sub-systems is simply because they only come up once every four or five sessions. So y'all muddle through them once, and then, by the next time they come up during play, you've all forgotten the details of how they work and you have to muddle through them again.

So what I'll do is design specific scenarios that really emphasize these specific systems.

Having trouble with grappling? A whole scenario based around grasping gorillas and their pet pythons will usually lock those rules in for the whole group. And once you've locked that mastery in, you'll stop having to muddle your way through.

This can also be a great way to divide and conquer larger and more complicated games, bringing them online one sub-system at a time.

Step Six: Fake mastery with prep.

The system cheat sheet you prepped puts the core rules at your fingertips, but you can also fake mastery of the game through your scenario prep.

For example, take the time to look through the stat blocks for every creature in the adventure. Do they have a spell you don't know? An ability that references a rule you're not familiar with? Don't wait until you're running the game! Grab that information now and put it in their stat block!

Your goal is to put everything that you personally need on the page.

The key thing is that, over time, you are going to actually master more and more of this material: You're going to learn how the Jump rules work. You're going to learn what a *magic missile* spell does. You're going to memorize how much damage a Phase IV plasma rifle does and what the rules for plasma damage are.

As you master that material, you can then refocus your notes on just the stuff that you need now.

Step Seven: Set a time limit for looking up rules.

If all else fails and your find yourself frequently getting bogged down in the new rules, set a time limit for yourself.

A 30-second hourglass behind your GM screen works great for this: When you need to reach for the rulebook, just get in the habit of flipping the hourglass over.

If you can't find the answer you're looking for in 30 seconds (or 60 seconds or whatever feels right to you), make an arbitrary ruling and move on.

Be open and clear about what you're doing with the players. You can say stuff like, "I'm not sure what the rule is here, so we're just going to make an opposed Athletics check." Then make a note to review those rules after the session.

Before the next session, obviously, you should take the time to review the actual rules, and then discuss and correct those rules with your players so that you're all on the same page next time this situation comes up.

You might also want to add this to your cheat sheet.

In some cases, you might discover that the rules you were looking for don't actually exist. If that's the case, and you think it's something that will likely come up again, you may also want to codify whatever your solution was or figure out how you DO want to handle it in the future.

Speaking of the future, you should give some serious thought to YOUR future by hitting the Subscribe button. Don't let your future self miss all the great videos I have planned.

THIS video is brought to you by So You Want To Be a Game Master, my new book from Macmillan and Page Street Publishing. So You Want To Be a Game Master is the only true step-by-step guide to becoming a Game Master. In less than an hour, you'll have all the tools you need to run your first adventure. From there, I'll guide you one step at a time, showing you how to create your own adventures along with the practical, actionable tips and tricks you'll need to share them with confidence.

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander and I'll see you at the table.

SCRIPT: KEY TO ADVENTURE

by Justin Alexander – June 2023

The procedural genre was originally defined by a focus on technical detail — the procedure of solving a crime in a cop film or the procedure of diagnosing illness and treating injury in a hospital TV show.

Over time, however, the procedural genre has become closely associated with a specific form of episodic television with a predictable structure that is easily repeated in every episode. This makes it easy to write new episodes for these shows, allowing them to continue more or less in perpetuity. Although not referred to as procedurals, sitcoms often have similar formulas, once again putting focus on specific, procedural actions that are repeated by the main characters.

A similar kind of procedural scaffolding is very useful for designing RPG adventures: We have dungeons and mysteries and hexcrawls and so forth. They allow us to prep the specific things that the PCs will do; the procedures they need to follow in order to reach the next procedure.

Enter Dungeon Room A and fight the monsters who are there. Then go to the next dungeon room and fight the monsters who are there. It's a simple procedure!

String enough of these procedural scenes together, add a conclusion at the end, and you've got a reliable evening of gaming. You'll know what to prep, the players will know what to do, and the adventure will work.

But there's something missing. These simple, procedural elements of a story are essential, but they are not what makes for a truly great film or television series.

And the same is true for RPG adventures.

You can play through a flawless procedural adventure without a single hiccup… and it can still be forgettable. It will be… fine. But it won't be the kind of session that your players think about and talk about years later.

So how do we prep that?

[PLAY INTRO]

Creating and running an adventure is more art than science, but there are, if you'll pardon the pun, a few procedures you can use to up your odds of success.

Start by identifying the **premise of your campaign**. The premise is simply who the characters are and what they do.

Many roleplaying games actually feature a default premise. In *Call of Cthulhu*, for example, the PCs are investigators who want to learn more about the strange and inexplicable terrors of the Lovecraftian Mythos. In *Dungeons & Dragons* they're wandering heroes or mercenaries who explore the world, slay evil monsters, and loot treasure. In *Night's Black Agents* they're retired intelligence operatives attempting to destroy a vast vampire conspiracy.

Entire campaigns can be built with nothing more than a default premise. In practice, more specific premises will emerge from the characters during play. THESE wandering heroes aren't just trying to explore the world, they're specifically trying to reclaim the lost dwarven city of Khunbaral. They're no longer investigating any old Lovecraftian horror, they're specifically trying to stop Nyarlathotep's cultists. Or they were exploring Icewind Dale, but then one of them got elected Speaker of Good Mead, and the new premise is that they're civic leaders trying to strengthen their community.

Running specific campaigns, whether published or of your own creation, will often mean that a more explicit premise gets assigned to the players: This is a campaign about stopping the Cult of the Dragon. Or you're Elturian squires who are trying to become Knights of the Companion.

At the other extreme, some roleplaying games like *Over the Edge*, *Eclipse Phase*, or *Heavy Gear* won't have a default premise at all. If you're running one of these games, you're going to want to make a point of determining what your group's initial premise is during character creation, or you're going to want to specifically structure the first couple sessions of play so that they can find it organically.

Which, to at least some extent, means that your initial premise will be, "They're wastrels who are trying to figure out what to do with their lives."

And, of course, you can also do this with many games that have default premises. You can run a *Call of Cthulhu* campaign where the PCs are eldritch librarians collecting ancient tomes. Or a D&D campaign where they run a tavern.

Once you know your campaign's premise, you're ready to start prepping adventures. All you need to do is make sure that the **premise of the adventure** is directly connected to the campaign premise.

If your D&D group has the default premise of "explore the world, slay evil monsters, and loot treasure," then when you drop a scenario hook for the Cave of Wonders, you can be pretty certain they'll scoop that up and run off to find the cave. If they've committed to the premise of running a tavern in Waterdeep, on the other hand, you may be unpleasantly surprised when they just ignore it.

More importantly, the Cave of Wonders will feel integral to the first campaign, whereas in the tavernkeeping campaign, even if the players take your hook, the adventure may still end up feeling like a pointless waste of time. Like a filler episode in a long-running anime series.

This can be a real problem if you use published adventures, because those adventures will usually stick to the default premise of the game. This can result in groups sticking with that default premise, even though it will turn their campaigns into unmotivated, generic mush.

What you want to do instead, of course, is figure out how to take the premise of the adventure and make it relevant to the campaign premise. If the scenario has been prepped as a situation instead of a plot, this is A LOT easier to pull off. For plotted scenarios, unfortunately, you'll probably need to start by ripping the plot out.

Of course, you'd want to do that anyway. But that's a topic for a different video.

Either way, this can be a lot easier than it sounds. It largely boils down to asking yourself, "Why would the PCs want to get involved in this?"

For example, let's imagine a campaign in which the PC is a street rat who steals things.

If you told this PC there was a weird cave out in the desert and suggested it might be cool to go explore it… well, that's not really his jam. He's an urban street rat who steals stuff; not a wandering adventurer who explores dungeons.

But what if you instead had a mysterious patron offer to hire the PC to STEAL something from the cave?

Suddenly that cave sounds a lot more wondrous.

Moving beyond the premise of the adventure, we now want to look at its procedural elements. What are the PCs actually DOING in the adventure? We want these actions to properly align with the premise of the scenario.

If you're using a well-established scenario structure, this will largely take care of itself. In a hexcrawl, for example, the default action is to pick a direction and see what's there. That naturally aligns with the default premise of a hexcrawl, which is to explore. Similarly, the default action of a mystery scenario — to search for clues — obviously syncs up with the premise of solving a mystery.

Now let's turn our attention to the **player characters**.

We've already touched on this a bit, but obviously as the players are creating their characters, they should be doing so with the campaign premise in mind. If they're creating characters for *Call of Cthulhu*, those characters should WANT to investigate the supernatural. If they're creating characters for D&D, they should be characters who go delving in dungeons. If they're creating characters for our Street Rats campaign, they should be building them to be good at stealing stuff.

This is fairly straightforward. But you want to take this one step further and challenge the players to answer a crucial question: Why?

Why do they want to investigate the supernatural? Why do they go delving in dungeons? Why do they steal stuff?

And importantly, what you're looking for is the EMOTIONAL answer to this question.

For example, Agent Mulder in *The X-Files* believes the truth is out there and, therefore, investigates supernatural phenomena. But the emotional reason he does that is because he loves his abducted sister and wants to rescue her.

Aladdin is a street rat who steals things. But his emotional core is that he wants to be seen and respected by a society that has thrown him into the gutter.

Now, a typical RPG campaign will obviously have multiple characters. And each of those characters will likely have their own unique emotional connection to the campaign premise, but they will all have a connection. And, in fact, the different emotions that they bring to the premise will interact with each other in unexpected, fiery, and transformational ways.

You can think of this as a conduit: When the conduit is all properly aligned, the emotional core will flow from the characters through the premise, through the default action, and into the specific action of the adventure.

The impersonal becomes personal. The low stakes become high stakes. The meaningless becomes meaningful.

This is the key to great adventures.

Now the street rat isn't just doing a job for cash. He's pursuing his dreams. And the obstacles he faces during that adventure aren't just ephemeral impediments; they become fundamental challenges to who he is as a person. When he fights a monster, he's not just fighting for survival. He's fighting for his LIFE. The adventure becomes a crucible for the characters.

And your games will never be the same.

Okay, let's quickly review what we've done:

First, we've identified our campaign premise.

Second, we've connected our adventure premise to the campaign premise.

Third, we've created characters who are committed to the campaign premise.

Fourth, we've defined the emotional Why for each character's connection to the premise.

The heart of your campaign really is that simple. Everything else is just execution.

If you're looking for proven scenario structures that you can use to start building campaigns like this, you should check out my book *So You Want To Be a Game Master*, coming this fall from Macmillan and Page Street Publishing. It'll show you exactly how to prep and run dungeons, megadungeons, raids, heists, hexcrawls, urbancrawls, and more. There'll be a link down in the Font of All-Knowledge with more information! Check it out now!

Good gaming! I'm Justin Alexander, and I'll see you at the table!

Script: Bluebooking

by Justin Alexander – July 2023

GM: That's a wrap for tonight! That was a great session!

Player: I wish we could just keep playing forever!

I don't actually have a secret that will let you keep playing forever, and it probably wouldn't be a great idea even if you could.

But what IS true is that you don't have to stop playing just because the session ended. Your best games can escape the table, and develop in the most unexpected ways.

[PLAY INTRO]

Let's back up for a second.

Actually, we're going to have to back up a long way.

Way back in 1988, Aaron Allston's *Strike Force* campaign supplement for the *Champions* roleplaying game was a revolutionary text, describing techniques for running and playing RPGs that transformed the games of those who read it. It was also, unfortunately, a fairly obscure text and lots of GMs and designers have spent the past few decades reinventing Allston's wheel.

One of the unique techniques that Allston describes in *Strike Force* is bluebooking, which is named after the semi-disposable notebooks used for exams.

Bluebooking originally grew out of what Allston referred to as **paranoia notes**. That's when the GM passes a player of scrap of paper or vice versa so that they can keep their communication secret from the other players. They're "paranoia" notes because that's what they create at the table.

Rather than using scraps of paper, Allston's group would pass notepads around. And then something interesting happened: The players started passing the notepads to ach other, using them to develop privately roleplayed side-scenes while Allston's attention was elsewhere as a GM. They also started to use the pads for in-character journaling, developing character histories, in-character reflections on the events of the campaign, and the like.

The pads were then replaced with the blue books, which allowed specific books to be dedicated to specific characters, interactions, and so forth.

Eventually, whole game sessions were occasionally given over to bluebooking. In these sessions, the players put their characters through solo activities or write out conversations with each other. So, for example, you might have one player writing with the GM concerning his investigations, another conducting a romance with an NPC, and two others vacationing in Greece together.

Allston identified three specific advantages to bluebooking:

First, **privacy** (for obvious reasons).

Second, **permanence**, because the exam books provided an organized record of what had happened in the campaign.

Third, a **breakdown of inhibition**.

The last of these was particularly interesting.

What Allston found was that it was hard to conduct some game activities during active play. For instance, a male GM playing a female NPC who's having a passionate affair with a male PC may have a hard time uttering the lines of high romance in a room full of gamers. But while bluebooking the dialogue, the GM can be detached enough to write the NPCs' lines as he wishes her to say them, can take the time to make sure the dialogue he's writing isn't clumsy or inane, and can give the player-character a more satisfying subplot.

To Allston's list, I think we can add **exploring the unusual** by allowing you to play through moments and topics that you can't — or won't — explore at the table. Much like there can be stuff that a group may find uncomfortable, there can also be stuff that people in the group aren't interested in or which would be too time-consuming to play out during a session.

For example, what does a typical day in the life of your character look like when they're not adventuring? That might be really boring to play out moment-to-moment, but really interesting for your to explore interactively.

We can also add **thoughtful consideration**. Bluebooking allows you to create at a different pace than the immediate demand of live improvisation. It gives you a chance to get your character "right" in a way that doesn't always happen in the organic, real-time flow of the table.

That means you get a chance to explore your character — and their life — in different ways and at greater depth: How does your character think? What are their childhood memories? Who's important to them in their personal life and why?

This kind of creative work isn't just fun, it can also feed back into how the players portray their characters at the table.

The GM can also benefit from giving thoughtful consideration to the PCs' actions. This makes bluebooking particularly useful for complex or uncertain situations where the GM isn't sure how or what to prep: Improvising in slow motion lets the GM respond truthfully without compromising quality, depth, or long-term planning.

Finally, circling back to where we began, bluebooking allows for **opportunistic play**. E-mail and messaging and Discord servers all mean that, unlike Allston's players in 1988, you don't have to be in the same room to bluebook with people. Bluebooking allows you to continue roleplaying — to continue developing and experiencing the campaign — even when you're not in a session.

You can do almost anything with this opportunity: Run downtime between adventures. Let a PC run a solo side mission. Develop backstories. Roleplay the tavern scene where the PCs are all planning for the next session.

My big tip from having experimented with bluebooking many times over the years is that you generally shouldn't aim to hit a particular milestone in your bluebooking before the next session. Bluebooking will go slower than you think, and also be heavily dependent on how available the players (and you!) can be. Be comfortable either wrapping stuff up at the beginning of the next session or letting the bluebooking activities run fluidly and perhaps even non-linearly between sessions.

For groups who aren't interested in full-blown bluebooking, a more limited variant that can be very useful is in-character correspondence.

I often do this with my Cthulhu-related gaming, for example, as the deeper psychological exploration it encourages feeds nicely into Mythos-inspired insanity and it can also be a lovely way of thinking more deeply about historical milieus.

On that note, I also recommend checking out Michael Oracz's *De Profundis* from Cubicle 7. It's a storytelling game in which each player takes on the role of a particular character experiencing some

Mythos-related oddity and then corresponds with the other players, developing that idea over time. It's played entirely through the correspondence, offering a unique gaming experience. I've also found it to be a rich and insightful text that can be a great resource for correspondence-based roleplay in any game.

Speaking of rich and insightful texts, I have a new book coming out this fall from Macmillan and Page Street Publishing. Called *So You Want To Be a Game Master?* it offer not only a wealth of tips like those you've come to expect from the Alexandrian, but also a comprehensive, step-by-step guide for becoming a game master and running dungeons, mysteries, raids, heists, urbancrawls, hexcrawls, and more.

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