

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?

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

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 ACQUISITION 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.

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