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.

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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.